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Intimate Historiographies:
Racial Crisis and Poetics in the American Mid-Twentieth Century

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Comparative Literature

by

Kirsty Singer

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Virginia Jackson, Chair
Professor Rei Terada, Co-Chair
Professor Jane O. Newman

2020

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DEDICATION

For Anthony,

whose love held and sustained this endeavor
and whose generous interest, rich intellect, and brilliant writing
offered a living hand, a necrosocial horizon,
and a home for the work.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AS	John Emil Vincent, Ed. *After Spicer*
CPr	Charles Olson, *The Collected Prose*
MP	Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*
MUTH	Charles Olson, *Muthologos: Lectures and Interviews*
MV	Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This To Me*
SL	Ralph Maud, Ed. *Selected Letters: Charles Olson*
SOS	Amiri Baraka, *S.O.S.: Poems 1961-2013*

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Figure 1 From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth (Nona Faustine, 2013) 2xx

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful for my fellow travelers in and adjacent to the Department of Comparative Literature. The camaraderie they offered was such that I often had cause to regret not living on campus or otherwise being more socially available. Chris Malcolm and Morgan Slade have always felt like kindred spirits. Their quiet grace, sharp discernment, and nuance in intimate as well as intellectual matters held me together throughout this process. I was incredibly lucky to have James Goebel as my cohort mate; his enthusiasm, humor, our shared love of animals and the desert, and his passionate insistence by example that politically engaged scholarship involve working with political actors and communities outside the academy lights up a bright spot that I strive to inhabit. Jamie Rogers' and Sharon Kunde's warmth and ease offered periodic welcome harbor; they set two remarkable examples of how to be an activist, a mother, and a committed scholar at once, without pretension of any kind. I am fortunate, too, to have learned, in and beyond seminars, from the vibrant thought and energies of Willie Chase, Parisa Vaziri and Ana Baginski, among others. I will not forget Joe Krall. Among my seniors, Toru Oda and Ameeth Vijay were the models of rigor sustained through anxiety and perseverance through ambivalence that I needed, and I am grateful for their candor. I don't think I can overstate my gratitude to Bindya Baliga, whose friendship made the department feel like a home and who made all ambiguities and opacities navigable; I count myself blessed that my tenure in the program coincided with her calm, ever smiling, guidance of it.

I owe much to the unwavering support of Jane O. Newman. From our very first conversation, in the CL library, it was evident that she was interested in fostering my thinking on its own terms. Her generosity, then, to a nervous first year graduate student set the tone for an ongoing, remarkably open-minded engagement with my work—notwithstanding its distance from her primary field, difference from her deeply rigorous methodology, or sometimes unconventionally emotionally invested expression. She is, to my mind, a model scholar, mentor, and academic. To her I also owe an invaluable opportunity to expand my teaching experience, for which I am additionally grateful to the efforts of Nasrin Rahimieh and Adriana Johnson. I was incredibly fortunate, too, for the arrival of Jennie Jackson at a crucial time in my course of study, as my dissertation project was taking shape and my fields being formed. Her patient interrogation of my framework made me into a literary scholar, and her warm enthusiasm showed me how best to approach and sustain oneself—and others—within the profession. This dissertation is also indebted to Rei Terada's thinking, which drew me to UC Irvine and remains a thread pulled through my own. I would also like to thank Martín Plot, whose inspiring example and engaging study in political theory at California Institute of the Arts cemented my desire to pursue further graduate study and intellectually grounded the belief in political possibility that remains at this dissertation's core.

They are strange times this project has traversed, from the heady optimism of Occupy to the present uprising for black lives in the dire context and relentless misery of this pandemic year. Strange times too to be finishing a dissertation, as the primary professional organization for my discipline writes frankly of the "decimation of the Humanities." Given the latter, it feels all the more important to express my gratitude to the UC/NCP Interdisciplinary Psychoanalytic Consortium, not only for its financial support of this dissertation but also for the warm collegial atmosphere of the Lake Arrowhead retreat, which opened up one avenue for imagining other scenes for the thinking that animates the work.

We make our scenes too, as did the poets this dissertation traces. One that remains with me occurred during a session of the graduate conference on "Attachment" that I co-organized with Chris Malcolm. Then graduate students now professors John Murillo III and Nicholas Brady insisted on a question—*can you surrender to blackness?*—that crucially reshaped the project that became this dissertation. Visiting the Philosophy Club at Manhattan College, at the

invitation of an old friend, Sarah Scott, was a timely reminder of the work's interdisciplinary reach and pedagogical value. Joshua Hoeynck's editorial attention to a version of my argument on Charles Olson, published by Vernon Press, strengthened it, and his almost single-handed labor brought into being the collection—*Staying Open: Charles Olson's Sources and Influences* (2019)—in which it has a place.

I cannot conclude without mentioning my family. My parents, Paul and Helen, made me a reader and early seeded the critical orientation on which my studies have built. My sisters' passions, and their development these past several years of what I think of as companion projects in adjacent fields, have been exciting and affirming. Niki and Fruitbat, in fur and spirit, were the most perfect study partners and antidotes to anxiety that one could hope to have; each carried me to a threshold. My partner's—my adopted—family have been a tremendous wellspring of support in every way. I am especially thankful for Kevin McCann's gently solicitous inquiries and the counterpressure of his differently formed sense of literary criticism and unabashed valuation of poetry beyond critique.

And what can I say of (and to) Anthony, who introduced me to the poets and made poetry an essential part of my life, who has been beside me for the duration of this journey—a feat of stamina in itself. I am grateful beyond word for all of it: for countless walks dedicated to working through ideas, hijacked by anxieties, or blissfully freed from both; for the cycles of feedback and revisions, returning my—our—thoughts to me in clearer form; for making time, under incredible pressure, year after year. This dissertation simply would not exist without him. It is and has been for him, for our shared life in thought, in and as feeling.

For my darling Tomaž, too, whose arrival reset all my priorities in the most helpful of ways, and whose joy makes there be a future.

And last, there are the poets—and the poetry, which exceeds my, and any, analysis of it. Among the many lines that sear me, these became as watchwords for the whole endeavor:

I can no more remember
What brought me here
Than bone answers bone in the arm
Or shadow sees shadow.
—Jack Spicer

you will stay in the midst of them,
you will know no law, you will hear them
in the narrow seas
—Charles Olson

I think about a time when I will be relaxed.
When flames and non-specific passion wear themselves
away. And my eyes and hands and mind can turn
and soften, and my songs will be softer
and lightly weight the air.
—Amiri Baraka

As I write now from a California on fire, I must extend two further thanks, to this singular and vulnerable place—Joshua Tree—and to Ken and Janet, whose desert house has been my enviable writing retreat these past five years.

August, 2020

CURRICULUM VITAE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Intimate Historiographies:
Racial Crisis and Poetics in the American Mid-Twentieth Century

by

Kirsty Singer

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professors Virginia Jackson and Rei Terada, Co-Chairs

This dissertation reframes the radical impulse of the 'New American' poetry, famously anthologized in 1960, by focusing on the racial crisis of the building Civil Rights movement and its impact on several of the generation's most influential poets. The New American poets' collective commitment to the unfolding present and their general formal preference for rhetorical candor are largely understood to refute the historiographic investments and impersonal modalities of their high modernist forebears. I show, however, that the imperative—felt acutely by Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Jack Spicer, and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)—to address the psychic avoidance of history at the root of the problem of whiteness instead demanded the reengagement of these preoccupations, as well as raising the political stakes of poetry writing as a practice. As the poets found their very senses of being at once deeply unsettled by the revolutionary anti-racism of the early 1960s and more resistant to change than they had hoped, they leaned on poetry to intervene in their own racialization and in the racialization of American poetics. For Olson, Baraka, and Spicer, I argue, the ensuing confrontation doesn't just result in new experimental forms but breaks the persistent association

of poetry with idealized genres of personhood. I demonstrate how, by adopting aspects of the popular discourse of psychoanalysis and looking to the Blues as model, these three poets reimagined and struggled to inhabit poetic impersonality as a means for offering up the psychic material of the self—its inherited preconditions and unconscious attachments—for use by readers who might then be moved to undertake their own intimate reckonings with America's historical damage.

Drawing on letters and lectures, the dissertation tracks through the work of each poet a set of unrecognized and under-remarked intertextual conversations and personal crises and, attending to developments in genre and address, and to movements between method, figuration, and abstraction, the chapters provide new insights into key turns in each poet's oeuvre. Theoretically, the dissertation brings into productive tension frameworks usually considered incompatible—offering interwoven historical and ontological analyses, psychoanalytic and historicist interpretations, and symptomatic and recuperative readings—in order to more fully see and account for the complexities and paradoxes that animated these three dissident intellectuals and found expression in their work. Treating the poets as case studies in the political value of artistic practice and the broader liabilities of idealization, I ultimately argue that their poetics were broken by the racial crisis—and poetry's resources of figuration and address thereby made available to psycho-historical work that sits uneasily at the edge of the aesthetic frame which gave it rise, pointing toward interdisciplinary possibilities for poetry writing's pedagogical use.

Introduction

Intimate Historiography—
Racial Crisis and Poetic Practice

Speaking on the "Contexts of Poetry" at the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference, Robert Creeley admits:

> I think each of us in our own circumstances has come to that point where the very definition of a poem as a possibility, not as a possibility perhaps, but as an actual construct, is something we are very unable to state like that. In other words, I cannot define a poem. It's a curious state to have arrived at. I cannot tell you what I think a poem is. I think that has to do with the fact that all the terms of consciousness are, at the moment, undergoing tremendous terms of change. We were again talking, thinking of the context now in the States. There is an alteration of a very deep order going on in the whole thrust or push of the consciousness, literally the Negro consciousness, that has been for years relegated to a kind of underside or underworld...Now this reality, which has become the dominant reality in the States today, is the Negro reality, it is not the white reality, it's the Negro reality...all the terms of consciousness that I grew up with must disappear, are disappearing momently, daily. The terms of reality are changing...I mean I think that the change which is occurring now is more significant than the Second World War by far, because it's the residue of that war in reference to the atom bomb and, equally, the shift in all terms of human relationship that have been habitualized since, oh God, thousands of years, concepts of person....Look, I'd like you to talk for a while... (CUNY Lost & Found 9-11).[1]

In this remarkable passage, Creeley begins by attempting to address the vocational and aesthetic consequences of political upheaval, and then moves, ineluctably, toward the more intimate implications of the revelation, finally lapsing into silence. Uncertainty over the question of what a poem is, and even the attribution of that difficulty to a radical shift in the "terms of reality," is not unique to Creeley or his historical moment, and may indeed be said to generate all avant-garde reformulations. What is striking here, however, is the recognition that the terms of reality are not his to renegotiate. The implications of black revolutionary politics are acknowledged, and also felt, as incapacity. Seemingly less concerned with making it new than with making it at all, Creeley publicly endorses the erasure of his most fundamental referents for thought—"all the

[1] It is to the more voluble Allen Ginsberg, in the role of moderator, that he turns.

terms of consciousness that I grew up with must disappear"—and then, moving into the present—"are disappearing momently, daily"—seems to undergo the effects of that erasure. The change is not simply social or political, but entails a more profound effect that—moving through phenomenology ("terms of consciousness") to ontology ("terms of reality"), and mediated by the threat of nuclear annihilation—renders the war that set it in motion a mere event, trivial in comparison. In spite of Creeley's focus on consciousness, this figuration, in which a "residue" exceeds the event that precipitated it, seeping into and altering everything subsequent and prior, is suggestive of the workings of the subterranean realm psychoanalysis calls the unconscious. Creeley's attention to habit, too, with its Jamesian echo and Foucaultian resonance, points to a dimension more deeply and differently engrained than that accessed by epistemology, where the opening question of how one defines or identifies a poem would seem to belong.

In this dissertation, I am interested in the ways a number of Creeley's peers used, reworked, broke, and were broken by poetry as they struggled to adapt not only their ways of knowing, or even their "terms of consciousness," but, more particularly, the unconscious ground of their being, which came to preoccupy each as a problem of American racial history. Attentive to what Creeley's close associate Charles Olson once described as history's "unrelieved" dimensions, Olson, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones),[2] and Jack Spicer each grappled with the ways American history, and its racial damage in particular, "refuses desires and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its 'ruses' turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention," as Fredric Jameson would memorably put it some decades later (1981: 102).[3] The poets at once suffered and theorized the tension Jameson describes as it erupted in markedly racialized terms between the utopian projects and new epistemologies they sought, through their poetics, to develop, and the underlying psychic baggage they nonetheless carried.

[2] Throughout, I will use Jones/Baraka for the period prior to the poet's name change.
[3] Whereas Jameson insists—against his own use of personification—that this history can only be grasped through its effects, the poets I discuss do imagine it as a psychic force as they engage with its intimate effects in the terrain of feeling.

Their broadly shared understanding of the mid-century's fraught present through the psycho-affective lens of "unrelieved" history, and the psychoanalytically inflected revisions of poetic impersonality they developed in response, together created the receptive conditions for their racial reckonings to intensify and/or produce more pointed and politically instrumentalizing imperatives to intimate historiographic practice—imperatives that they variously responded to, resisted, and mobilized, marking their poetry and poetics along the way. While the resultant poetries are formally distinct, I argue that they nonetheless constitute a tendency—a repurposing of the tools of poetic practice toward psycho-historical work—that cuts across the period's conventionally (formally and geographically) distinguished 'schools' and comprises a specific intervention in poetry's lyricization and in American poetics.

History and Psyche

This dissertation follows Olson's, Baraka's and Spicer's shared assignation of historical weight to the psyche and of psychic force to history, and looks to their poetic and paratextual oeuvres as case studies in the possibilities and liabilities of using creative literary practice to undertake political work on that facet of lived, constitutive racialization that consists of and is sustained by an historically entrenched structure of feeling—a deep attachment to the "libidinal economy" that, as Jared Sexton describes it, "underwrites and sutures" racial identifications along with the violent "operations of systems, structures and institutions" those identifications perpetuate (2016).[4] What Frank Wilderson names the persistence of "slaveness," understood as a contemporary relational position coterminous with blackness,[5] is, in the end, a consequence of what Frantz Fanon called the "affective ankylosis of the white man" (2008: 101). This affective incapacity—which underlies the incapacity Creeley's silence registers—is the result of a failure to

[4] I have in mind Raymond Williams' framework, but also, as noted, the psychological underpinnings of Afro-Pessimist thought. See Sexton, Jared. "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word." *Rhizomes* 29 (2016). Accessed at https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02.

[5] See "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" at *Humanities Futures* (hosted by Duke University). Accessed at https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/.

meaningfully acknowledge and work through the active psycho-social reverberations of historical experience; in other words, borrowing Walter Benjamin's useful, if idiosyncratic, distinction, to draw the accumulated fragmentary *Erlebnis*, or 'shock' experience, of centuries of racial capitalism into a coherent cultural form of *Erfahrung,* or effectively felt and shared historical understanding.[6] Revisited within a critical race studies frame, the lack that Benjamin diagnoses is not universal. In the mid-twentieth century (as today), the Blues was largely felt to function as a carrier of *Erfahrung* for African-Americans; it was, as the poet Sterling Brown influentially put it (without reference to Benjamin), "our history." Amiri Baraka, then LeRoi Jones (Jones/Baraka), elaborated this claim in his great sociological study *Blues People* (1963), while suggesting in numerous contemporaneous essays that the absence of such a culturally shared current of deeply felt historical understanding constituted whiteness and white people as such—an argument perhaps more strongly associated with his contemporary, James Baldwin. The recent ontological turn in critical race studies—recognition of the "social ontology"[7] of race, along with the "political ontology" of Afro-Pessimist theory—points to the fresh currency of this mid-century framework that the poets I discuss all shared. The poets' formulation of this framework in the less abstract terms of historical understanding and psychological attachment opens toward an arena for political work that argues against the allegedly reifying and paralyzing effects for which Afro-Pessimist theory, and other psychologically-focused anti-racist interventions, have been criticized.[8] Taking seriously the idea that racialization has produced

[6] See Benjamin's "On some Motifs in Baudelaire" in *Illuminations*. Ed. by Hannah Arendt. Trans. by Harry Zohn. New York (1968), as well as Martin Jay's useful summary in "Experience without a subject: Benjamin and the novel." *New Formations* 20 (Summer, 1993): 194-211.

[7] The term was coined in its racial usage by Charles Mills in 1998. See also his *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (2015); as well as John H. McClendon III and George Yancy in Yancy, ed. *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* (2004).

[8] See, for instance, David Kline's "The Pragmatics of Resistance: Framing Anti-Blackness and the Limits of Political Ontology" in *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5.1 (2017): 51-69. See also R.L. Stephens' "The Birthmark of Damnation: Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Black Body." May 17, 2017. Viewpoint Magazine. Accessed at https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/05/17/the-birthmark-of-damnation-ta-nehisi-coates-and-the-black-body/. I do not wish here to take ideological sides in this ongoing debate in Black Studies (and in the activist political sphere)

distinct genres of being human on the twin bases of inter-generationally transmitted historical experience and psychic registration of historical damage, I return to this moment and to this constellation of poetics for its insights—both in terms of possibilities and in terms of difficulties and liabilities—with respect to the latter as a site at which change might yet occur. It is in the realm of what Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda call the "racial imaginary" that poetic practice can, perhaps, aspire to meaningfully intervene (2015).[9] In the process, I analyze the poets' uses of poetic resources to undertake psycho-political work, as well as the effects their experiments had on what poetry itself signifies, and on how—otherwise than lyrically (even otherwise than aesthetically)—it might be written and read.

A Great and Local Pain: Lyricization's Breaking Point, or "History Where It Is"

> like a de-ingested shrine
> subsumed in the body as a rudderless
> coherence
>
> —Will Alexander

While Creeley is not among the dissertation's primary figures, he is central to the intersecting strands of the 'New American' poetics milieu they occupied. Baraka is Creeley's tie to the larger racial upheaval he reflects upon, and Creeley mentions him by name in the talk. That year, he read Jones/Baraka's *Blues People,* writing to its author on October 21, 1963:

> I am most interested finally—as I think you are—in that [social] sense of it, and the music makes a sharp context for thinking of that history where it is, as apart from any generalizing sense of 'understanding' in a specious and god knows ugly sense…[A]ll the

between materialist approaches to anti-racism in a post-Marxist vein, and those with a more psycho-ontological bent; anti-blackness must be fought in both arenas.

[9] As Rei Terada has argued, the imaginative figuration of feeling's interpretive hypotheses generates ontological claims (2001: 58). Given this, it is worth considering that work in the domain of figuration might help undo or loosen the hold of such claims. While it is a limitation of two of the practices I discuss—those of Charles Olson and Jack Spicer—that they did not combine their work on the historical imagination with more concrete political engagement, as Amiri Baraka did, it is this dissertation's supposition that aspects of the practices and methods they developed might yet be brought into a more substantive version of the use they theorized.

> details…keep one's own feelings 'local'—and that, to me, is a great pain…[the way] you are moving on the terms of your own feelings and involvement.[10]

Here Creeley more or less suggests that Baraka's book is, like the blues it chronicles, a work of intimate historiography, or that, in any case, its strongest passages are characterized by that impulse. The reference to "one's own feelings" further indicates the text's power to provoke in its reader a sense of implication in the history it traces, if not necessarily the assumption of a like practice of "moving on [those] terms." The abstract terms of Creeley's feelings and involvement, which he had expressed in Vancouver that summer, are more intimately, if reticently, confessed in his letter—as the presence and source of a great and local pain. Such would likewise be the effect of *Blues People* on Charles Olson, whose racial crisis my second chapter details. Jones/Baraka's book, with which my first chapter begins, was, in short, a major event in that core axis of the New American poetics that Baraka would later refer to as "the Olson-Creeley thing."[11] That event was followed and reinforced by Jones/Baraka's refusal to attend the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference to which he had been an invited speaker, along with his effective departure that year from New York City's lower east side and from the mostly white avant-garde scenes that comprised the New American poetry.

By 1963, when this racial rift became prominent, the three poets had well established, mutually supportive relationships. Jones/Baraka, who (co-)edited some of the New American poetry's most important little magazines—*Yugen* (1958-62)*, Kulchur* (1960-65), *The Floating Bear* (1961-69)—as well as the small press, *Totem* (1958-62), published Olson and Creeley, and was in casual epistolary correspondence with both. Earning Baraka's ribbing linkage of their otherwise very different poetries, Olson and Creeley were particularly close, a friendship forged through intense correspondence in 1950-51, and maintained while the two worked together at

[10] *The Selected Letters of Robert Creeley.* Edited by Rod Smith, Peter Baker, and Kaplan Harris. UC Press, 2014: 271-2.
[11] Benston, Kimberly W. "Amiri Baraka: An Interview." *Boundary 2* (Winter 1978). Accessed at http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/kimberly-w-benston-amiri-baraka-interview

the radical Black Mountain College in North Carolina where Olson served as rector from 1951 to 1956. Spicer, a little farther afield, in the Bay Area, had looser connections with the other three, but the poetry reveals his influence by Olson's and Creeley's poetics: Spicer's 1958 poem "Billy the Kid" responds to Olson's 1954 essay of the same name and argues with the older poet's archival approach to intimate historiography; a major section of Spicer's *Heads of the Town, Up to the Aether* (1960) is dedicated to Creeley. Spicer and Baraka would not meet until 1964 when, by Baraka's report, in a letter to Edward Dorn, they hit it off, as indeed their poetries and temperaments incline one to imagine they would.[12] In a gesture made more significant by Spicer's adamant localism and general refusal to circulate his work beyond a small coterie of poets he knew and admired, he gave Jones/Baraka a copy of his latest publication, *The Holy Grail* (1960). The book-length poem ends with the "uncomfortable music" of "blackness alive with itself," the racial subtext of which my third chapter unearths, focusing on the years leading up to its composition. How (or whether) Baraka read the book and what he made of such lines, or of the long poem's damning judgment of Western civilization, is not available in the record. Yet the two, each marginal in his way—Baraka racially, and Spicer perhaps on account of his ornery personality as much as his queerness—nonetheless shared with Olson, generally seen as the leading figure of the New American poetics, an otherwise less central preoccupation with American racial history.[13] Perhaps unsurprisingly, it would be left to Baraka to carry forward the intimate historiographic intervention this dissertation maps. Olson and Spicer did not make it out of the 1960's alive, and Creeley, in spite of his deeply felt registration of the racial crisis, did not, in the end, have his poetics undone or substantially altered by it.[14] His "Contexts"

[12] See Pisano, Claudia Moreno, Ed. *Amiri Baraka and Edward Dorn: The Collected Letters*. New Mexico UP, 2013: 195.
[13] Most of the New American poets were primarily focused on the politics of the day. Edward Dorn, a student of Olson's and longterm friend of Jones/Baraka's is another exception, not addressed here because his historical orientation was not intimate in the same, psychologically-inflected, sense that is central to this dissertation's argument.
[14] This is not to say that they were entirely unaffected, as I indicate briefly below.

confession is nonetheless worth dwelling with a little longer as a useful figure for the issues at stake.

Interpolating the audience of poets he had been called to address into the crisis condition he was struggling to grasp (he begins, "I think each of us…has come to that point"), Creeley's discourse is at once critical analysis, ethical performance, and emotional baring of a sudden loss of historical coherence. The point at which this non-black 'we' has arrived, introduced as a definitional crisis for poetry, has been revealed, by the time Creeley stops speaking, to be the effect of an historical tipping point, a "shift in all terms of human relationship that have been habitualized since, oh God, thousands of years." Creeley notably blurs the temporal frame of New World colonization and chattel slavery, more directly pertinent to the ascendent "Negro consciousness" he names, with that of Western philosophy's adopted lineage, reaching back to the ancient Greeks. This blurring is central to "the white reality" Creeley prepares to relinquish but to which he remains cruelly, if not optimistically, attached, insofar as whiteness is constituted by a disavowal of the concrete and violent distributions of social, economic, and political power that formed and sustain it as such, in favor of a projected basis in the grander and more abstract narrative philosophy provides—and with which poetry, by virtue of its lyricization, is bound up.

Creeley's slippage from poem to consciousness and ultimately to being, along with the retention of possibility where actuality falters, bears the mark of the historical process of lyricization that Virginia Jackson has described—the ongoing subsumption of socially specific genres of poetry into the general abstraction of the lyric frame, and the consolidation of that frame by means of specific practices of reading under the aegis of the New Criticism.[15] This shift has been accompanied by a likewise persistent idealization of poetry, and its concomitant

[15] See Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005); the introduction (with Yopie Prinns) to *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (2014); and "Who Reads Poetry?" PMLA 123.1 (Jan. 2008): 181-7.

association with a universal notion of personhood.[16] While the New American poets pointedly rejected New Critical reading and pursued well-established aesthetic and rhetorical strategies resistant to its frame (even, in many cases, experimentally reintroducing and creating identifiable genres), the poets I discuss also initially retained the idealization that was lyricization's bequest even as they radically altered the shape and tonality of the ideal in question. Amidst racial crisis and by dint of the very association with personhood that led the political upheaval to register for Creeley as an acute vocational dilemma, poetry writing nonetheless remained a politically pressing psychic lifeline, as if the lyricization of poetry—inadequate for defining a poem as "an actual construct"—might yet offer a phantom hand-hold for the poet in the "curious state" of losing his conceptual and psychic framework for reality. In other words, the substantial withdrawal of poetry from social genre and its affiliation with subjectivity made it available not only for the production of new ideals, but also as a resource for political work at the fundamental if intangible level of the psyche. So closely linked were poetry and personhood that, for Creeley, saying that he cannot define a poem becomes a way of confessing that he does not know what he is. In this regard, Creeley's poetry, the restricted epistemology and linguistic minimalism of which further intensifies around this period, can be read as the inscription of a painfully intimate practice of doing time with the negation of his now discernibly white consciousness.[17]

What Creeley discovers in and as incapacity is the fact that both his basic sense of self and the art form to which he has dedicated himself are co-reliant on his unconscious investment in assumptions generated by contingent and intertwined historical processes that have suddenly

[16] Susan Stewart, for instance, opens her *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002) with the assertion that the "work of poetry is to counter the oblivion of darkness…to make visible, tangible, and audible the figures of persons," further linking this function to "Hegel's position on the ontology of self-consciousness," such that in reading poetry's "sense impressions…we are able to situate ourselves and our experiences within what is universal" (2-3).
[17] While the formal hesitancy and spareness of Creeley's verse have been read in relation to existential philosophy (Altieri, 1972) and a crisis of masculinity (Blau DuPlessis, 2012), the above "contexts" suggest that it might also be read in relation to his realization of the apparent obsolescence of whiteness.

lost their purchase. In spite of his effort to affirm the transformation, the loss of this framework and the sense of coherence it offered appears as something that is happening to Creeley, rather than as an intellectual reorientation he has chosen. If this is thought, it is what contemporary African-American poet Will Alexander has aptly called "Thought as Philosophical Torment."[18] It is also an experience, illustrative of its historical moment, of creatureliness, in the pained sense ascribed to the term by Walter Benjamin—only in place of the human abandoned by God, there is the white man abandoned by History.[19] As Amiri Baraka would put it in a 1966 issue of *Cavalier* men's magazine, 'THE WHITE MAN IS OBSOLETE'.[20] No longer identified with the metempsychotic and dialectical movements of Hegel's World Spirit, he has become one of its cast-off forms.[21] For one whose terms of consciousness were formed in and of "the white reality," this realization called not only for new 'cognitive mapping'[22] of the altered present but for a rewriting of the very ground of his being—by one who was no longer qualified to undertake that writing and whose primary mode of writing had been likewise implicated and disabled.

Creeley's crisis is one that is replayed in two of the dissertation's three chapters, on Olson and Spicer, with a crucial difference: that it interrupts practices by which the poets had already sought to develop alternatives to the dominant terms of American consciousness as they understood them, and had done so with specific reference to race. Spicer, who felt that gays, like African-Americans, were shut outside of the "human," determined to embrace the possibilities of the condition and largely modeled his poetic "unversion" of personhood on the blues. Olson—

[18] Alexander, Will. *The Sri-Lankan Loxodrome.* New Directions, 2009: 19.
[19] See Benjamin's *Origin of the German Trauerspiel.* Trans. by Howard Eiland. Harvard UP: 2019. See also Elizabeth Stewart's argument in *Catastrophe and Survival: Walter Benjamin and Psychoanalysis* that the *Trauerspiel* dramatizes the violent excesses of suddenly precarious sovereign power, while the "split-off 'transcendental impulse' is, as libidinal energy, displaced and…slips into the realm of the creaturely" (2010: 10).
[20] Watts, Jerry. *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*. NYU Press, 2001: 330.
[21] In Hegel's theory of history, an essentially national Spirit inhabits and devours various concrete forms and the individual merely "appropriates to himself this substantial existence" (*The Philosophy of History* 1956: 74). See John Corrigan's *American Metempsychosis: Emerson, Whitman, and the New Poetry.* Fordham UP, 2012.
[22] Fredric Jameson, whose use of the term I have in mind, reflects that it "obviously stands or falls with the conception of some (unrepresentable, imaginary) global social totality that was to have been mapped," maintaining that it "will be an integral part of a socialist politics." In Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L., Eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Illinois UP: 1988: 347-60.

whose major early critical work, *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), reads Melville's Ahab as a figure for the violence of abstraction that he felt characterized whiteness—sought to develop a new, more grounded, genre of American political subjectivity through bodily engagement with archival history. Jones/Baraka had also spent the years leading up to his dramatic break with the New American avant-garde scene articulating and assuming an alternative genre of personhood: one capable of holding the felt understanding of American history he derived from the blues, but remade through a poetry writing practice that might thereby be more legible, even available, to "any sad man here, american."[23]

All three poets can be said to have understood race along the lines of what Sylvia Wynter, reframing *being human* as a praxis, calls (in her deeply interdisciplinary vocabulary) "genre-specific fictive modes of eusocial inter-altruistic kin-recognizing kind" (2007: 16).[24] Wynter, participating in a long and live theoretical tradition, turns to an idealized notion of poetry as indicative of the direction for her proposed "New Studia."[25] Calling for a praxis of "*code-made-flesh*" that would make conscious use of our "autopoetic [sic] agency" to "'find the ceremony' able to breach the divide between White and Black," she concludes, quoting Aimée Césaire, that "'only poetry'—and *its* modality of functioning… 'can give an approximate notion of'" the praxis she seeks (77-8). Yet insofar as poetry does have something to offer such a praxis as Wynter proposes, its resources must be extricated from our disciplinary framings of it and from its own history of racialization. This dissertation studies the travails, insights and pitfalls of three poets

[23] The line ends the poem, "Notes for a Speech," and Jones/Baraka's first book, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961). In *SOS: Poems 1961-2013. Selected by Paul Vangelisti.* Grove Press (2014).
[24] "Human Being as Noun? Or *Being Human* as Praxis? Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn: A Manifesto" (2007). Accessed at http://bcrw.barnard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Wynter_TheAutopoeticTurn.pdf.
[25] The tradition stretches back at least to Heidegger and Adorno but also—of specific relevance to this dissertation's focus on race—includes, in their different ways, the more recent work of Fred Moten and Frank Wilderson (both poets), who, in recent public forums, have respectively described black thought as a "socio-poetic project" (https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/blackness-and-poetry-0) and turned to poetry as a possible (although certainly not guaranteed) alternative to narrative emplotment and redemption (https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/). See also Moten's "Black Kant (Pronounced Chant)," initially given as a 2007 talk at the Kelly Writer's House at the University of Pennsylvania and published in *Stolen Life: (consent not to be a single being)* as "Knowledge of Freedom" (2018: 1-95).

who likewise vested this politically urgent task in poetry, but who did so while critically reworking specific practices of reading and writing, and forms of address, within the deeply racialized Western English-language poetic tradition and history of American poetics, at the height of the racially fraught mid-twentieth century. That their poetic inheritance was entangled with the production of the normative (white) genre of personhood they sought to address, and that this fact made poetry a compromised instrument, did not escape the poets under consideration. Rather, it is because of this very entanglement that they hoped making poetry new might serve as a proxy for indirectly remaking themselves.

Their interventions entailed a simultaneous leaning into and substantial overhaul of modernist impersonality, ideologically the writerly counterpart to the de-racinated, universalizing bent of lyricized reading. Within this frame the poetic response each developed to their own racial crises took an explicitly historical form. For Olson, Baraka, and Spicer, the poet's task was not to objectify the ideal mind by aestheticizing his psychic tensions into subtle forms of ambiguity for the reader to quietly consume, identify, and identify with; rather, he was to grapple with his psychic tensions as such and, ultimately, *as historical*, laying bare the struggle as part of an ongoing, politically urgent one that his reader, too, might (indeed must) take up. Aware of historical inheritance as a problem for both American poetics and American political life more broadly, each came to feel a pressing need to engage intimately with history as a palpably present affective force that pulled, shaped, and even, under the pressure of more acute racial crises, threatened to rent asunder the core of his being, radically reorienting and effectively breaking his poetic practice. In the process, poetry's affiliation with personhood was made to work against the idealization that gave it rise, as poetic impersonality was bent away from high modernism and toward its different meanings and usages in the musical tradition of the blues, on the one hand, and in psychoanalytic practice, on the other.

Creeley's verse, and certainly his reception, stands uncertainly at this crossroads. He brings ambiguity (and ambivalence) to form, and the effect differently implicates and stirs his

reader, but in the poems he does not, for the most part, historicize the double-binds he performs or explicitly call for the reader to take up like work. In spite of the comparative modesty of the claims his poetics makes, its relative a-historicism causes its de-idealizing impetus to largely miscarry; Creeley's oeuvre is easily rendered a simultaneously intimately personal and philosophically universal struggle—one still amenable, in other words, to lyricized reading.[26] Olson and Spicer, too, can be (and often are) read this way—perhaps only Baraka escapes the frame—but, as I will show, such readings fail to absorb the final turns their poetics take. Like Creeley, the three poets I discuss each leaned heavily on poetry's lyricization, but in their cases, it is ultimately the idealization of poetry (and not, as with Creeley, the verse form) that breaks as it is made to accompany their racial crises. As the more utopian hopes invested in their poetics collapse, their strengths and weaknesses as psycho-political practices are clarified. In particular, what the poets learn about genre and idealization has broader implications for the racial politics and questions of allyship to which they sought, in different ways and to different degrees, to respond.

Facing their own versions of the sense of incapacity Creeley expresses, Olson and Spicer both belatedly learned, or more fully absorbed, that what Olson called a "new stance toward reality" was not theirs to remake; that the historical damage of race calls for the curtailment of such utopian impulses and for the capacity, rather, to "stay in the midst" of what the old stance disavowed. While Baraka is generally seen to have successfully remade the terms of his own consciousness—marked publicly by his change of name—and to have developed a distinct performative genre or modality of blackness in the process, his efforts to share his "under standing" of historical weight across the color line largely continued to fall on deaf ears. His

[26] See, for example, Michael Davidson's suggestion that the "poetry of Robert Creeley provides…an example of consciousness caught between the lure of concrete facts and the dangers of self-doubt" (162) for critics for whom "Ambivalence, seen in Eliot as a sign of personal and cultural malaise, is now viewed in Ashbery, Creeley or Levertov, as part of an existential verification of authentic being"—a central New Critical value rediscovered through a processual Heideggerian lens (160). "Archeologist of Morning: Charles Olson, Edward Dorn and Historical Method." *ELH* 47.1, 1980: 158–179.

struggle, too, in its own way, reveals the inability of poetry—at once de-idealized (remade, for the Black Arts Movement, into a weapon) and differently re-lyricized by the means of the blues—to transcend the limits of genre and of the broken social context in which it is written and read. As these limits reappear, however, the poets' efforts are not for nothing. They did not remake personhood or definitively bridge America's persistent racial rift, but they did generate methods for differently experiencing and articulating the historical dimensions and preconditions of one's life.

Attending to the moments of acute racial crisis that serve as the breaking points of each practice, this dissertation reframes the poetics that came before, and identifies a de-idealized imperative to intimate historiographic work as what remains in their wake. While the centrality of race and racism to avant-garde American poetry—as both a source of "dead metaphors" and a driver of formal innovation[27]—has been well established, I show that, when treated by the poet as a psycho-historical *problem* rather than simply appearing as a symptom or being tapped as an aesthetic resource (although both also remain operative), race serves to reroute the function of poetry writing away from the production of idealized forms of personhood and sociality and toward the more ambivalent work of channeling and decomposing the historical material of the self for possible but uncertain psychological and educative use by readers. Spicer's figure for this labor is the dead letter officer. I borrow the dead letter, which is woven in different forms throughout the chapters, as a productive framing for the communicative condition produced by the mid-century breakdown in interracial solidarity, along with the broader psycho-historical racial rift that breakdown revealed, and for the ongoing status of historical address to Americans who, in Baldwin's apt phrase, "think they are white."[28] Each of the selected poets attempted to

[27] See Aldon Lynn Nielsen's *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* (1990). See also Rachel Blau DuPlessis' "Darken Your Speech Racialized Cultural Work of Modernist Poets" in Nielson, Aldon Lynn, Ed. *Reading Race: An Area of ACT* (2000: 43-83). The different impact on poetic practice of race being taken up and addressed as an intimate political problem for the poet in question has been limited, among the New Americans, to the scholarship on Baraka.
[28] "On Being White…And Other Lies." *Cross of Redemption* (2010): 135-8.

bring American history's dead letters back into circulation in the social body, via the poetic text, but also, crucially, by virtue of having, in some manner, psychically processed them (in) himself. These engagements varied in consistency and motivation, and I have described intimate historiography as a tendency in the poets' work because it is intertwined with other purposes, intentions, and projects which have largely garnered more critical attention. At the same time, as will be seen, in the work of Olson, Baraka, and Spicer, this tendency acquires and retains a certain gravitational pull of its own.

Ultimately, I suggest, this pull or drag on the poetics points a way out of its generative contradiction between the racialization of lyricized poetry and the retention of faith in lyricized poetry as a means of addressing the mounting racial wreckage of American politics. It does so—against much resistance—only by incapacitating poetry's idealization in order to draft poetry writing into the ongoing, slow and painful work of making its writer (and perhaps its reader) into what Olson called "fit instruments for use,"[29] where use pertains to psychic capacitation, with respect to historical understanding, for sustained engagement in revolutionary politics. While such an aesthetically based conception of psycho-political use takes it cue from the blues, the poets' work (particularly that of Olson and Spicer), emerging from and/or addressed to a very different racialized subject position, has centuries of disavowal to overcome, a fact that ultimately renders the intimate historiographic practices I trace less affirmative of their human and aesthetic vehicles and recipients. In contradistinction, then, to the more idealized facets of each poetics with which it is in tension, intimate historiography asks not only what poetry can do in relation to the political questions of its moment but also, tacitly, whether it can remain poetry as such and do it. Finally, I suggest that as each poetic practice breaks, and is broken by, lyricization, the poetry opens toward the psychoanalytically inflected forms of political use the poets theorized, offering poetry's resources to fraught, incommensurable, and ambiguous

[29] From "The Present is Prologue" (1952), in *Charles Olson: Collected Prose.* Ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. UC Press, 1997: 205.

situations of address, in which nascent and revived genres—the dead letter chief among them—insist on what they cannot assume. This has implications for reading, itself a form of use, that I elaborate later in this introduction and at the conclusion of each chapter, making intimate historiography something of an unfinished poetic revolution that we might yet take up.

Unrelieved history and intimate historiography

In short, this dissertation traces the emergence of, resistance to, rediscovery, and mobilization of intimate historiography across three major poetic oeuvres. I argue that it is a significant intention and tendency in those practices—one that begins with varying registrations of anti-black racism as a central problem for American politics but that is fully realized only in the face of more personal racial crises. The chapters closely track these developments. Here, I describe the underlying historical-political diagnosis all three poets, along with other political thinkers and actors of the period, shared, define the intimate historiographic imperative to which that diagnosis led, and sketch its broad effects on what poetry is, or might be, as a practice, and how it might be used and read. Subsequent sections of the introduction then flesh out intimate historiography's relevance to wider mid-twentieth century racial politics, contextualize its emergence from and relation to modernist poetics with a focus on impersonality and lyricization, and sketch its more contemporary theoretical resonance and political potential.

The term intimate historiography has multiple registers of meaning. It at once names a political imperative, a psycho-pedagogical horizon for aesthetics, and a set of *practices*—approaches to, methods for, and experiences of writing—that emerge through differently positioned racial reckonings with the intertwined problems of American personhood and interracial solidarity, understood in psycho-historical terms. These various modalities depart from a sense that history's "underside," as Creeley put it, must be not so much conceptualized

and narrated as inscribed and revised *in us* such that the damage of America's trajectory as a nation could be psychically registered and thereby relieved in some measure.

Basic psychoanalytic ideas were in wide circulation by the mid-twentieth century, employed by anti-racist activists in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (which the next section of this introduction will briefly discuss) as well as numerous artists, writers, and intellectuals. The application of these ideas, in the context of poetics, to thinking about American history owes much to the maverick theorizing of Charles Olson, who had been among the first three doctoral candidates in Harvard's new American Civilization program in the late 1930's. In "The Present is Prologue" (1952), one of many influential early essays, he wrote:

> There are only two live pasts—your own (and that hugely included your parents), and one other which we don't yet have the vocabulary for…What I mean is that foundling which lies as surely in the phenomenological 'raging apart' as these queer parents rage in us (*CPr,* 206).

The psychoanalytic reference positions history as an immanent and yet largely unconscious dimension of political experience—a "live past" for which a theoretical vocabulary was later developed by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and by Jacques Derrida's writings on "hauntology" in *Spectres of Marx* (1993). In Olson's framing, historical "reality"—its status altered, by relegation and disavowal, to "misery," as another essay puts it[30]—persists and insists as a fragmented structure of feeling that haunts the present, overdetermining relations and undermining interracial solidarity. Agitating the grain of the period's more optimistic hopes—which Olson nonetheless and even Baraka, at points, shared—the poets were attuned to this rift in the felt reality of history and its consequences for a functionally shared sense of meaning. They recognized the need for intimate historiographic work on the part of most Americans, along with and prior to social and political integration, if the latter were to be more

[30] From "Billy the Kid," originally published in *Black Mountain Review* 3 (Fall, 1954). In *Collected Prose* (1997: 311).

than shallow assimilation on the dominant terms of mainstream society.[31] This is one way the American problem, around anti-black racism in particular, came to be narrated in the later mid-century more broadly (as the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. put unendurable pressure on already strained alliances), and one to which the poetic practices this dissertation studies responded.

Disaffected with inattention to this psycho-historical dimension of the American problem in their different experiences of more or less assimilationist politics,[32] the three poets on whom I focus turned to poetry as particularly well suited to the psychological nature of the fracture they had discerned. In this supposition, they were not alone. The influential literary critic, Lionel Trilling, had recently observed that "of all mental systems the Freudian psychology is the one which makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind. Indeed, the mind, as Freud sees it, is in the greater part of its tendency exactly a poetry-making organ" (1950: 52).[33] Here Trilling refers to Freud's attention to the figurations, condensations and

[31] This recognition largely stemmed from brief but, for each, formative political experiences—in Olson's case, with the ACLU and Roosevelt Administration, with the early gay liberation Mattachine Society for Spicer, and in the interracial avant-garde milieu of the lower east side for the young Jones/Baraka.

[32] Olson worked briefly for the ACLU and for the Carnegie funded *Common Ground* magazine of the Common Council for American Unity before taking a position in FDR's Office of War Information. After serving as a Democratic National Committee director for Roosevelt's fourth term reelection campaign, he was offered two positions in the Administration—Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and the Cabinet-rank Postmaster General. Olson turned both down and dedicated himself to poetry. His frustration with the shallow pluralism of those governmental entities returned him to the psychoanalytically-inflected philosophical thinking of his graduate study at Harvard, where he was one of the first doctoral students of American Civilization. Spicer's political involvement was far less extensive, but no less decisive. As a young gay man, he participated in the radical Oakland chapter of the early gay liberation organization, the Mattachine Society. Bitterly disappointed with the assimilationist direction of the national Mattachine Society, he left that experience with a psycho-ontological and decidedly anti-assimilationist understanding of queerness that held blackness up as a model. Gays, he felt—like "Negros"—were not "human" and ought to develop their own mode of being and of sociality rather than hastily assimilating into the politically toxic American mainstream.

[33] Trilling, Lionel. *Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society.* New York: Viking, 1950. The idea has not lost its purchase, but has rather been developed by Abraham and Torok's attention to wordplay and sonic residues in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (1976), in Robert Rogers' *Metaphor: a Psychoanalytic View* (1978, and to be reissued in 2021 under UC Press's 'Voices Revived' initiative), and in Raymond W. Gibbs' widely cited interdisciplinary *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding* (1994), to name a few; it also underlies social philosopher (and co-founder of *Socialisme ou Barberie*) and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis' conceptualization of the role of "radical imagination" in the institution and potential revolutionary transformation of society.

displacements characteristic of dreams as indicative of unconscious thought processes.[34] The poets drew on and were emboldened by this crossover of linguistic resources. At the same time, they critiqued and went beyond the limited familial focus of early clinical practice, attending to the broader racialized dreamwork of the dominant American culture (including, in Spicer's case, the heteronormative imaginary of psychoanalysis itself[35]).

As Olson, Spicer, and Baraka turned to their writerly contexts, the psycho-political problem became a literary one as well as a problem of and for historiography and historical representation in general.[36] Reviewing Walter Noble Burns' biography of *Billy the Kid* (1926), Olson remarked that "what strikes one about the history of sd States both as it has been converted into story and as there are those who are always looking for it to reappear as art—what has hit me is, that it does stay, unrelieved" (1954, CPr 311).[37] Framed by this essay, the first books of his own epic undertaking, *The Maximus Poems*, can be considered a poetic genre of historiography as well as a genre of poetic historiography—a classificatory attribution that might be extended to intimate historiography more broadly. While prose is not dismissed out of hand—Burns' biography is presented as a step in the right direction—Olson finds poetry better suited to the density of historical material and the modes of unconscious registration he hopes to capture. At the same time, it was clear that while poetry offered ample resources, the more effective representation he sought would require a major revision of modernist modes,

[34] See Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899 / 1913).
[35] Among Spicer's early poems is "Psychoanalysis: An Elegy," in which, in response to the repeated query, 'What are you thinking?', the poet-analysand finally gives in and analogizes California, in which he is more interested, to a woman's body. This then leads to the poem's climactic wish that "the damned maps burn / Until the mad cartographer / Falls to the ground and possesses / The sweet thick earth from which he has been hiding." In *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer.* Ed. Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian. Wesleyan UP, 2008: 31-33.
[36] Baraka too, published essays on and adjacent to his methodological concerns in mainstream magazines with general readerships, a number of which my first chapter draws on, and while I focus on the role poetry plays in his cultivation of an intimate relationship to history, he saw neither the practice nor the imperative as being limited to or by their literary contexts. Spicer is perhaps the most fully invested in aesthetics and aesthetic sociality as such, but he likewise understood poetry as a para-social laboratory for political work that would ideally ripple outward.
[37] The very fact of his return to Burns' book—by the mid-1950's, over a quarter century had passed since its original publication date—is itself indicative of the dissatisfaction with American historiography Olson expresses.

undertaken with a new poetic method and purpose—one less invested in Anglophilic and Orientalist curations of Tradition than in avowing and working through the largely traumatic unrelieved "mass" of American history. This conviction was shared by each of the three poets discussed.

Varied as their influences and critiques were, they all converged on a sense that something immaterial and yet crucial, of historical derivation, underlying the persistent problem of America was being willed away—whether by explicit disavowal or rhetorical appeal—rather than effectively dealt with by their literary predecessors.[38] The three poets' otherwise distinct methods and styles converge in their substantive remaking of poetry writing as a means to address this psycho-historical dimension of the mid-century's political crisis through intimate engagements with historical material, by which they reimagined and related to themselves impersonally as historically constituted objects. In the process, they began to reorient poetics away from idealized assumptions of value realized, whether through vatic, performative, or ethically demonstrative or participatory modes (even as each remained invested in some of those modes), toward questions of capacitation—"work," and, to borrow a term important to all three, "use"—for revolutionary politics. Baraka, the subject of the dissertation's first chapter, was by far the most successful in this regard—and, not coincidentally, the most committed to testing and revising his poetics in response to political struggle. At the same time, Olson's and Spicer's political engagements, while more diffuse in focus and largely pedagogical in form, should not be discounted; they perhaps had more to work through in terms of their unconscious

[38] Olson, disturbed by his visit to Ezra Pound in St. Elizabeth's mental hospital, saw the modernist as too driven by a narcissistic ego, a problem that accounted for his fascist denial of America's interracial political reality and led to the arbitrarily selective sense of tradition that marred the otherwise exhilarating Cantos. Of Walt Whitman's earlier and more generous national embrace, the young Spicer wrote: "Forgive me Walt Whitman...You did not ever understand cruelty. It was that that severed your world from me…Not merely human cruelty, but the cruelty of shadows, the cruelty of spirits" ("Some Notes on Walt Whitman for Allen Joyce" in *MV,* 55). For his part, assessing the efforts of those most often relegated to America's underside, Baraka found the black literary tradition overdetermined by self-conscious rhetorical appeal—"very cultivated picket signs"—without a sufficiently felt sense of black experience ("a dark bag," 1963, in *Home*, 122). That experience, he felt, should be brought forward as an essential facet and historically foundational fact of American life rather than selectively mobilized and occluded as evidence of black people's—and the writers'—humanity.

attachments to the genres of personhood and poetics they critiqued. While the chapters, and the third section of this introduction, will focus on the seductions and traps to which each succumbs, here I want to further elaborate the critical horizon for creative practice and the accompanying modes of use—of poetry, of psychoanalysis, and of the self—that they, along with Baraka, nonetheless adumbrated.

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As an attempt to work through the political unconscious of the nation as it informs one's given life, intimate historiography provides for a different understanding of the way history is treated within the general reorientation toward immanence that has, for good reason, remained the dominant scholarly framework for the poetry of the period since Charles Altieri's influential essay, "From Symbolist Thought to Immanence" (1973). For the poets in question, immanence was not just a philosophical position but a substantively psychological one. Indeed, for Spicer, whose emphasis on the unknown puts him at odds with his mid-century peers, it was *primarily* a psychological position (or perhaps, even, simply a suspicion). As the transcendence he desired failed him, and history assumed the dominant force and concrete character it holds in his late poetics, his proposition that the "dead letter is exactly as if someone received it" echoes—and renders (necro-)social—Freud's description of the unconscious as a site in which "nothing that has once been formed can perish."[39] As a set of engagements with these densely haunted wormholes in the texture of the social present, intimate historiography names something other than the uses of myth to "trace man's primary relations with natural process" and to reengage with "a landscape formed by the choices of our ancestors" to which Altieri points, even in Olson's case, where it is intertwined with these other aims and functions.[40] Nor is Olson's oft-

[39] The Spicer quote is from "A Fake Novel About the Life of Arthur Rimbaud" (1960), a serial prose poem central to my third chapter. In *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* (2008: 293). The famous Freud quotation comes from the 1930 *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. and Ed. by James Strachey. W. W. Norton & Company (2010: 13).
[40] It is also distinct from the critique of history's "displacement" in the late capitalist present that Michael Davidson, seeking to write history as such back into the immanent frame, sees in Edward Dorn and hat might also be said to characterize some of Baraka's work. "Archeologist of Morning: Charles Olson, Edward Dorn and Historical Method." *ELH* 47.1, 1980: 158–179.

repeated dictum that one should "find out for oneself" just the historical materialist pedagogy geared toward the retrieval of lost resources and alternative possibilities that it is widely understood to be. History's unrelieved presence is in no danger of being extinguished; rather, the fire remains all too present, a perpetual "raging apart." The problem is that history, as Fredric Jameson put it, "will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore [it]" (1982: 102). While the mid-century's moment of particular interracial promise did indeed pass, the poets' focus on the historical depth of one's field of psychic attachment and imaginative reference remains relevant to work that can and must be done between such revolutionary openings.

In short, as an injunction to writing as well as research, one that assumes and insists on the value of creatively engaged study, Olson's urging that one should "find out for oneself" must also be read alongside what he elsewhere calls "the work on ourself." In his own version of the pairing, the young Jones/Baraka set out to "investigate" himself and his "meanings" so that he might thereby "invest the world with a clearer understanding of it self." If the primary direction of the flow of insight differs between the two—from self to world in Baraka's case, and from world (or archive) to self in Olson's—both take their personhood as a primary site of latent social-historical meaning with which the writing practice seeks to engage. Given the political understanding and application of psychic work that the three poets all shared, the characterization of mid-century literary politics as a "withdrawal into the personal" or even as way of "imagining changes in the modern habitus which did not depend upon revolutionizing American social structures," as Mark Byers, writing on Olson, has recently rephrased it, is not entirely accurate, at least insofar as it implies a divestment from concrete structural change (2018). Rather, the three assumed that the person, too, was a social—and historical—structure that likewise needed working on, through the practice of writing, as the elemental basis and condition for larger political effects to stick. To this end, each practice was informed by a psychoanalytically inflected modification of impersonality that bent the modernist mode away

from its compatibility with the fictive New Critical 'speaker' and its concomitant abstraction from social, historical and political life. Instead, each used lyricized poetry's turning away from the social field to facilitate self-objectification and analysis rather than transcendence or alibi—an uneven process I elaborate in the introduction's third section.

This shift brought each poetics closer to the horizon of historical-political feeling and understanding mapped by the differently impersonal African-American blues tradition, which was already understood (and taught to the young Jones/Baraka by Howard University professor and poet Sterling Brown) as a kind of affective historiography,[41] and, simultaneously, as "an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically," as Ralph Ellison famously put in 1945.[42] While the blues were only a major referent for Jones/Baraka (as well as a somewhat lesser but nonetheless important one for Spicer), intimate historiography shares with the blues an attention to feeling as politically interpretive and—so read, and thereby rendered—comparatively capacitating. This is not to say that the blues is psychoanalytic per se, but it is and was widely felt to provide therapeutic recognition of the mundane violence of anti-black racism and a sustaining affirmation of black life. Likewise, intimate historiography is not a 'white blues', but it does constitute an attempt, or set of attempts, to acknowledge and address a lack of the experiential grounding in history that the blues as cultural mode (as, indeed, *Erfahrung*, in Benjamin's sense) provides its connate community. As such, intimate historiography offers a critical alternative to the easy enjoyment and appropriative uses of the blues by others of his white peers that so frustrated the young Jones/Baraka, an enduring if negative motivation my first chapter details. Indeed, the historical depth of the blues that Sterling Brown taught and that Baraka elaborated in his *Blues People* was largely ignored or, at

[41] For a contemporary extension of this argument, see Brent Hayes Edwards, in *Epistrophes,* "that jazz is defined by musical immanence means not only that it is a self-reflexive medium but also that…it is…a precise historical transcript of the most complex affective experience" (2017: 15-6).
[42] Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues." The Antioch Review 57.3 (Summer, 1999): 263-276.

best, piggybacked on, by the Beat poets who were drawn to the music's richly balanced structure of feeling and famously attributed air of "nonchalance."[43] Given the initially estranged relationships to historical experience that motivated them, the three poets' intimate historiographic practices condense a distinct, more outwardly pained and agitated, current of historical feeling that departs from the remarkable, hard-won ease commonly associated with the blues. For all its differences, intimate historiography too offers the impersonalized self as a lens through which, as Jones/Baraka describes one blues singing street musician, the poet "tell[s] you about the extraordinary order of the world" as it forms and breaks him. This function is among the forms of use the poetics can claim—at least to the extent that they succeed in persuading us to read them that way.

The nineteenth century Americanist reader might sense here an echo of Ralph Waldo Emerson's metempsychotic claim that "there is properly no History; only Biography. Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself—must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know" (in Corrigan 16). This remarkable statement is at once profoundly American in its individualization of a vast field of inquiry and undertaking, and pedagogically counterposed and corrective to the equally (white) American propensity to amnesia. In focalizing an ultimately collective need through singular lives and practices, intimate historiographic poetics is, perhaps, a particularly American phenomenon with obvious political limitations. At the same time, the history of politically radical movements suggests that a more social approach to psychological work is a dangerous alternative.[44] So, too, if the use of imagination Emerson describes favors identification, it need not be so; approached psychoanalytically, conjuring and 'living' a latent dynamic might produce disidentifications, too. While only Olson, who had studied Emerson, can be said to have so aspired to totality, the desire

[43] On the "difference in psyche" between "white Beat rebellion and its African-American counterpart," see Mortensen, Erik. *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence*. Southern Illinois UP, 2011: 49. See also Baraka's own "Swing—From Verb to Noun" in *Blues People* (1963).
[44] Jonestown, while extreme, is only one germane example.

or the need to make historical knowledge imaginatively experienced, deeply felt, and thereby effective, is characteristic of intimate historiography as it is taken up by all three. That artistic practice could make such an epistemological claim seemed to be demonstrated by the blues and further cemented, with particular regard to poetry, by Trilling's interpretation of Freud's theory of mind. This dissertation keeps faith with art's capacity to effect a more deeply felt historical understanding than that obtained through critical study or other forms of learning predicated on historical distance, while training a skeptical eye on the ways that potential can be overestimated or go awry. In this respect, it might also enter productively into interdisciplinary conversation with the affective and intimate turn currently taking place in the field of History.[45]

Poiesis, often assumed to take the form of narrative, is, in any case, famously central to both historiography and psychoanalysis. There is, in the poets' impulse to create an absent experiential basis for knowledge, something akin to the psychoanalytic pursuit of a memory that has truth value for the patient, whether it describes what really happened or is, rather, simply an effective fiction. It is in this regard that the kind of intimacy involved is not only psychological in orientation but also bears some relation to psychoanalysis and, while neither the historical-political scope of the problem nor the use of writing in lieu of clinical practice are proper applications, the poets' creative, if erratic, engagements with psychoanalytic insights and methods are nonetheless productively suggestive.[46] As an effort to "go over [and live] the whole ground"—via a redirection of certain resources of both psychoanalysis and poetics toward the imaginative, felt reception of, and the impersonal, figural engagement with difficult and largely disavowed historical material—intimate historiography attends to what have variously been

[45] See Mark Phillips' *On Historical Distance.* Yale UP (2015).

[46] Attending to this psychoanalytically-oriented aspect of the work in question foregrounds a dimension of the New American Poetry that has largely dropped out of critical view since Paul Breslin's polemical *The Psycho-Political Muse* (1987). Breslin largely treats a different set of writers, in whom he finds a relatively naive and reactionary unleashing of energies associated with the unconscious. For the poets discussed here, the uses of psychoanalytic thinking and practice, however erratic and flawed, are a good deal more sophisticated and they reward a less dismissive return to that lens.

called 'internalized oppressions', 'voluntary servitude', and 'cruelly optimistic attachments', with a tacit recognition that these knots, subversions, and sites of resistance are not merely internalized but effectively constitutive.[47] Accordingly, while all historiography relies on fabrication, intimate historiography, as I find it in the work of the poets and propose it more broadly here, seeks to intervene in the ideological effects of dominant historical narratives not by supplying a new shared narrative but rather by finding, forging, and sitting with attachments that resist narrative coherence altogether, without exacting as their condition an alteration in the fundamental sense of who and what one is. For Jones/Baraka, this psychic transformation was expressed in the 'death' of LeRoi Jones and the assumption of a new name and vocation—self-proclaimed griot in the place of the erstwhile avant-garde poet. Olson and Spicer met their biological ends before they could emerge otherwise from their intimate historical reckonings, but for each, the failure and political insufficiency of an easier reinvention was registered.

The resultant textual forms of psychological engagement fall, because of the particular mode of impersonality inherent in the poets' construction of the human as historical object, between the confession and the testimony, each of which has an established relationship to both psychoanalysis and poetics. The intimate historiographic dimensions of the poets' practices can be read as attempts to engage what Shoshana Felman, writing on testimonial literature, calls the "clinical dimensions" of history. While their approaches are not particularly testimonial in the expected sense (certainly they are distinct from the recognizably testimonial poetics of Charles Reznikoff), they do share with testimony a psycho-affective orientation to history and a preoccupation with achieving a felt understanding of historical damage.[48] Indeed, the questions Felman poses of testimony were effectively asked by the three poets of poetry: is it "a simple

[47] See, respectively: David Graeber's *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (2009: 352); Saul Newman reconsideration of the Etienne de la Boëtie's sixteenth century treatise in "Voluntary Servitude Reconsidered: Radical Politics and the Problem of Self-Domination" (2010); and Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011).
[48] See Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub, MD. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1991). While the mid-century itself provided no shortage of traumatic events to which one might bear witness, the longer historical trajectories to which these poets also attended fall outside the customary temporal frame of testimony.

medium of historical transmission, or is it, in obscure ways, the unsuspected medium of a healing? If history has clinical dimensions, how can [poetry] *intervene*, pragmatically and efficaciously, at once historically (politically) *and* clinically?" (9). In Olson's terms, how can the present "misery" that "unrelieved" history has generated be represented and thereby assuaged? In spite of Olson's stated aim to "compose it all for you," the intimate historiographic portions of each poet's oeuvre rather enact the comparatively minor aim of discomposing themselves and sharing, often dramatizing, that experience. They are the human object's confession as it testifies to its historical implication. While much has been written on the mid-century's "confessional" poetries, bringing the differently opaque damage of distant, yet constitutive, historical trauma into social reality entails a more involuted situation of address. In his "Billy the Kid"—a key transitional poem that responds to Olson's "Billy the Kid" book review—Spicer touches on the difficulty of witnessing a damage that one simultaneously *is* and struggles to feel. Moving in one section from "What I mean is / I / Will tell you about the pain" to "What I mean is I / Will tell you about his / Pain," the poem concludes, "I can no more remember / What brought me here / Than bone answers bone in the arm" (*MV*, 185-191). In this respect Felman's reading of ostensibly confessional texts in which "the confession is *displaced*" points to a more useful way of framing the impersonal intimacy the poets cultivate. Shifting between the person as case study or site and the social-historical damage that singular life illuminates, such texts, in which, "the testimony differentiates itself from the content of the *manifest confession* which it uses as its vehicle," offer more apt and suggestive analogs for the kind of impersonality intimate historiography entails, and the mode of reading it asks, than does the testimony proper, with its typically thinner, documentary authorial voice.[49] While the poets in question sought to minimize

[49] Felman's chief examples are of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams.* One could read many confessional poets (and many confessions in any genre) within such a framework—as speaking not just or even primary to a personal experience but to the structural oppressions that form the matrix of that experience; but the intimate historiographic poetics I describe insist on that framing and on the historical—as distinguished from simply social—dimensions of what they 'confess,' which is not even necessarily an experience *had* so much as one sought.

the "lyrical interference of the ego," the particularity of the material's passage through the singular poet's psyche (his body and/or/as unconscious) was central to the 'clinical' intervention he pursued. His psychic "furniture," as Spicer would put it, was as much a part of the transmissive medium as the language itself.

In the poets' intimate historiographic modes of displaced confession, there is a tacit theory and application of the psychic materiality of language,[50] a domain of use that splits the difference between the now standard focus on linguistic materialism—typically read in relation to semantic indeterminacy and the "birth of the reader," as Terence Diggory, following Barthes, puts it in "Why *The New American Poetry* Stays News" (in Woznicki, 2013: 66)—and the naive theories of semantic transparence, referentiality, and intention that the linguistic turn ostensibly left behind, but which Carla Billiterri still finds operative in Olson's poetics (2009). This dissertation highlights the three poets' investments in recovering, or enabling in the first place, the historical conditions for shared interracial meaning, and their attempts to do so in and through poetic language. Given this, they could be read as caught between the desire for an impossible transparency and the forced recognition of the opacity of their chosen medium, but this transitional story is too simple and, in any case, does not need retelling. Rather, I would suggest, they shared an understanding of how materiality is bent toward and away from signifying in and across distinct subcultural and rhetorical contexts, and they played on and worked with that knowledge to insist on and provoke readerly experiences of overdetermination, along with their own. Beyond the established "writerly" orientation of the period, the poets' intimate historiographic solicitations of the reader point toward alternatives to lyric reading (and to Language-oriented writing's different framing and foregrounding of interpretation as

[50] See Eyal Amiran's attention to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's development of Freud's interest in "psychic materiality," which they use to "construct a model of thought based on the sound associations of words…[that] leads them to find psychic 'crypts,' hidden spaces created by and within language, spaces in which then repressed or censored thought may be hidden." (https://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+shadow+of+the+object+in+Peter+Pan.-a0344286248); as well as the revised and expanded argument in *Modernism and the Materiality of Texts* (2016).

what readers do), that rather emphasize the transfer of energetic charge *as psycho-political motivation*—forms of reading for which interpretation, as Baraka defines it, isn't just making meaning but "supporting a meaning, with one's own life."[51] In short, the three poets' investments in directive address and in finding more credible loci of articulation primarily reflect their urgently felt commitments to making use of the psycho-affective and performative powers language does possess.

At the same time, and balancing their zeal, all three poets trained critical eyes on the dynamics of their overlapping social milieus, and understood that desire was not simply available to be rerouted by its immediate expression in new radical practices, but was rather layered, contradictory, and often recalcitrant. As Jones/Baraka put it, "today is the history we must learn / to desire" (*SOS* 144). As a pedagogy of politicized desire, intimate historiography has a relation to Jeanne Heuving's "projective love and libidinized field poetics," which is grounded in the same period and milieu and derives its basic terms from Olson (2016: 6). However, the task of desiring history—particularly a history that has largely been a succession of traumas, or one that seems no longer to desire you, even to desire your destruction—introduces difficulties that Heuving's framework doesn't account for. Indeed, Olson, Spicer, and Baraka all begin with a sense of the psycho-historical obstacles to and inadequacy of simply extending love in the present, and each comes up against the racialized limits to or liabilities of the love he seeks to project. While Baraka largely succeeds at desiring the history he lives, he continues to find his ability to share that capacity racially limited in spite of endless efforts to reach across the color line. Olson finds that his love for a history he seeks to reclaim as "familiar" has led him to idealize his practice and racially redeem himself prematurely. Spicer's early practice is bound up with a submissive queer "erotohistoriography," to borrow Elizabeth Freeman's term, that, when race enters the scene, proves susceptible to a paranoid imaginary of nonetheless necessary

[51] From "Gatsby's Theory of Aesthetics" (1964), in *SOS*, 138.

haunting.[52] Love, desire, or even simply attachment, then, is not the central gesture of the intimate historiographic poetics I discuss so much as a horizon to be worked toward, through dense masses of damage that might alternately appear in and as the self or the world.[53] The gaps the poets seek to traverse—between historical being and political use, between interracially divergent experience and effective communication—are never quite closed; they continue to haunt and finally break their practices. For Olson and Spicer, the result is a late turn toward self-interrogatory methodological assessments, performed as citational readings by each poet of his own corpus—acts of self-analysis already integral to Jones/Baraka's early writing. In each case, the sense of intimacy at play is double insofar as the turn or return to history is at once based on a psycho-affective understanding that renders the self permeable to larger social and temporal dimensions, and serves as a way of working through the painfully personal manifestations of America's primary racial rift each must face. The latter also suggests, perhaps, a more limited, local sense of intimate historiography as impersonalized biography.

The shift toward work on the self I have sketched here raises the question of the status of the text in intimate historiographic practice. This is a subject around which there is a good deal of ambiguity in the poetics I discuss—one that the scholarly consensus on the turn to "process" over aesthetic object in mid-century poetics serves to obscure rather than clarify. The question remains as to whether the work and the experience of historical 'relief' effected in the process of writing (for which I have preferred the term 'practice') is translated and thereby rendered

[52] Freeman defines "erotohistoriography" as a method of "counterhistory" that "does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present…us[ing] the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may explicit bodily responses…that are themselves a form of understanding" *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories.* Duke UP (2010: 95-6). Her concept, while not explicitly associated with psychoanalytic work, substantively overlaps with what I have called intimate historiography, and with the orientation to felt understanding characteristic of the period and poetics I describe.

[53] While specific, these failings are not merely personal but can be read as illuminating a larger structural difficulty, which I will elaborate later in this introduction through a reading of a communique, in some sense a dead letter, from black activists in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee to their white comrades. As a political enactment of projected love, the interracial movement eventually came up against its own psycho-historical limits, revealing an incapacity for historical understanding and imagination at the heart of even the most radical white anti-racist actors.

available in the text, an assumption that collapses the distinction between the acts of writing and reading and puts considerable pressure on the transparency of genre in a context in which the basic conditions of genre have been eroded, both in the history of poetics and in the immediate social field. In general terms, the poets hoped that their writing could be both demonstrative of its method and able to more directly effect the reorientations they sought in readers, although the proliferation of pedagogical paratexts and contexts suggests no small anxiety on the subject.

At stake in the anxious centers of Jones/Baraka's early and Olson's and Spicer's late work is not only the poet's address to himself but a question about the address he feels his selected materials make to him. In this respect, intimate historiography might best be thought of as a genre of reading, of interpretation, and of the internal inscription, psychical and affective, that inheres in those acts as they are embedded within a writing process. The resultant structure of address is not properly captured by such terms as meditative or confessional, although lines amenable to both can be produced from the early and late poetries in question. What the poet addresses to the reader is the imperative he feels and one mode—with its flaws and liabilities exposed alongside its potential—of *listening* for and to the affective traces of America's historical damage in oneself. Olson's grand promise to "compose it all for you" might more aptly be rewritten as: *I'll decompose it all for you in the hopes that it will sufficiently discompose you to provoke your own decomposition.* This quality contributes to the works' pedagogical enjoinment of the reader, the sense that, beyond reading the poem, the reader too must pursue "the whole lesson…go over the whole ground" for himself; she must reach behind the poem—to the *problem*, even more crucially than the method, that agitated it into being. As conduit and corpus, the poet is not, ultimately, a person but—at the risk of introducing an overly clinical and even callous sounding distance—that historical object we sometimes call a case study. Like the materials he unearths, his oeuvre is the record of a struggle buried in and by its formal effects, a dead letter seeking readers who have ears to hear, even as his poetry is less song than

instrument of his political capacitation, however partial—and, perhaps, insofar as you can not only read but *use* it, also yours.

Note on methodology

In *Catastrophe and Survival: Walter Benjamin and Psychoanalysis*, Elizabeth Stewart writes of Benjamin's "monadic" methodology in the *Trauerspiel* that "he suggests that collective historical transformations are experienced at the same time by the individual on the level of his psychophysical life" such that "their individual sensoria and symptomatologies can function almost as historical documents…history transform[ed] also into individualized, pain" (2010: 11). A similar methodological assumption underlies this dissertation. Taking the poets themselves as documents, my approach is at once symptomatic and recuperative, interested in the effects on genre and address that political importation and racial crisis produce and in the poetics as suggestive of directions for practice, the potential use of which exceeds their particular uses (and abuses) by the poets in question. Both purposes require a wide orientation to the poets' shifting and evolving oeuvres, with attention to what they imagined themselves to be doing—as articulated in letters and lectures, review essays and novels, of which I make substantive use—and to what they effectively did. (Indeed, the proliferation and importance of such "paratextual" materials are arguably symptomatic of the poets' genre troubles.) I make no claim to a comprehensive or balanced overview of the trajectories and phases of each poetics, a task that would require three books rather than three chapters. Rather, I follow a specific thread—that preparing for and pertaining to intimate historiography as I have defined it—as it emerges, goes underground, and reappears with fresh urgency. I track these movements, which are always racialized, by identifying shifts in and interrogations—as well as conceptual abstractions and internalizations—of genre, as the poets' bearings toward history affect the kinds of authority and coherence a given articulation assumes, and the forms of address it enables and foregrounds. This hunt, as it were, is focalized in relation to the poetry through specific, theoretically charged,

figures and motifs associated with intimate historiography: in Baraka's case, that of a mouth struggling to mean and, its correlative, the ear that cannot hear; for Olson, the merging of archival traces of slavery and funereal flowers into the dream-image of a black chrysanthemum; in Spicer's work, the dead letter. The deployment, transformation, and exhaustion of these tropes initiate changes in genre, both within the poetry and adjacent to it.

Alongside and bound up with questions of genre, I pay attention to the poets' modes and uses of impersonality, which, as an available meeting point between lyricized poetry, personhood, and psychoanalysis, was referenced and reworked by all three. The third section of this introduction provides a general overview, under the rubric of impersonality and use, of the substantively shared psychological orientations toward personhood that underwrite the poets' politics and make their understandings of history intimate. In the chapters, I also maintain, while endeavoring to contextualize and explain, the specific heuristic vocabularies the poets deploy, tracking the development of major ideas through the interrogation, resignification, and replacement of key terms. Here I offer some constellations of that (largely binary) thinking for reference.

(-)	**(+)**
Baraka	
ego	spirit
narrow feeling	depth of feeling (blues)
expression	(self-)investigation
"sensitive" individual	singularity, use
Olson	
ego, mind	body, object, use
abstraction	concrete (archival) "particulars"
non-projective (intellectual)	projective "measure"
(overly spatial) "measure"	gravity
*heliotropism	geotropism *both terms are valued
Spicer	
personality (ego, attachment)	impersonality (decathexis)
rhetoric	receptivity
invention	disclosure
unvention (fantasy)	unversion (rendering inoperative / mourning)
human	dead office
grail (wish fulfillment)	poetry as (fatal) use

Overwhelming as this proliferation of endogenous critical language may be, I retain it because it is indicative of the poets' active efforts to adjust their frames as they register the problem of race at different levels, and as they move between political analysis, literary criticism, and poetics.

In addition to foregrounding the poets' engagements with psychoanalytic ideas, I bring my own psychoanalytic lens to bear on the moments of racialized transition in their poetics, as well as on the larger questions of historical constitution and interracial breakdown to which the poets responded and to which the dissertation also hopes to speak. In particular, I draw from analysts and theorists associated with the object relations branch of the field—D.W. Winnicott, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, and Alan Bass—whose models of psychic dynamics beyond the narrative structure of the "family romance" are more useful for the wider historical political inheritance to which the poets attended. Subsequent sections of this introduction will develop my application of Bass's concept of "concreteness," Abraham and Torok's "transgenerational phantom," and Winnicott's theory of "object use," to the larger problem of American racialization and persistent anti-black racism. In the chapters, I also draw on Winnicott's notion of "phenomenal death" to read Jones/Baraka's transition from one name, identity, and mode of poetic address to another; and I employ Abraham and Torok's distinction between "introjection" and "incorporation"—related to Freud's work on mourning and melancholia—to better understand the racialized dimensions of Olson's and Spicer's conceptual abstraction and reification of what had earlier been key methodological and genre aspects of their poetics.

At the same time, as noted above, my approach is not wholly symptomatic. While the dissertation's chapters focus on the contradictions race reveals in each poetic practice, my interest in reading them in relation to the period's intimate historiographic imperative lies less in their inevitable, if generative, failures than in the kind of thinking about history—and about both poetry writing and historiography as practices—that they do nonetheless succeed in making available. This thinking largely emerges through the forms of readerly address noted above, and

through the proposed practices of inflected reading—reading as listening, as embodying, as (dis)possession, and as writing—with which each chapter concludes.

Here, the thinking of Jean Laplanche on transference is worth briefly engaging. As the analysand's implicitly eroticized projection onto the analyst, transference is fundamental to psychoanalytic practice; it is the libidinal and imaginative charge that enables any efficacy the analytic work might have. In "Transference: its Provocation by the Analyst," Laplanche locates the basic transferential dynamic beyond the clinic in the enigma of the work of art or any given cultural message, whose "anonymous addressees"—its readers—likewise motivate and receive the work as its maker's underlying implicitly psychological working through (of personal and/or political dynamics). Positioned as analogous to the analyst, such addressees or recipients offer what Laplanche calls a generative "hollow" for the "dissolution" or "decomposition" of the artist or writer's personhood.[54] While this structure is implicitly assumed in the poets' impersonal orientation to the act of writing, in order to sustain whatever use there might be in dissolving their persons—not into a fatuous notion of 'universal' speaker or into the generality of language, but rather into singular instances of social-historical genres (of address and personhood)—the reader, if we follow Laplanche, must accept her shared, if not precisely symmetrical, status as "enigma" too (232). Or, in the poets' more pointedly historical terms, the reader too is a human object who might acknowledge her co-implication in the same historical processes of racialization the writer bares. Critically, Laplanche distinguishes the position of "the recipient-analyst (or simply 'art critic')" from that of the recipient (or reader) in general (1999: 228). The critic can, and arguably tends to, close down the transferential opening he otherwise holds in common with the reader as such, insofar as he is tempted to perform and presume mastery rather than extending what Laplanche calls "benevolent neutrality." In following the poets' struggles through and *beyond* their symptomatic embedding in aesthetic form, toward the

[54] In *Essays on Otherness* (1999).

methods of practice and reading they attempt and solicit, this dissertation asks what a manner of literary criticism that kept the reader's vulnerability might contribute to changing the ways we, as scholars and teachers, use texts.

Chapter breakdown

Each of the dissertation's three chapters is a case study in the impact of a racially motivated imperative to intimate historiographic practice on the poet's evolving poetics, with particular attention to the pressure it puts on genre, and its associated modalities of impersonality and address. Each poet brings a distinct structural position, perspective, and set of problematics to bear on the underlying questions of interracial allyship and historical understanding that inform and motivate—consciously and unconsciously—his poetics. At the same time, the three poets' reckonings are intertwined. The strengths and inadequacies of his white peers as political allies in and beyond poetics were an early spur to Jones/Baraka's trajectory; Olson was among the more important of these peers. Baraka, in turn, had a profound impact on the self-interrogatory late turn in Olson's poetics that my second chapter analyzes. Finally, Olson is a crucial influence on the specifically historical development of Spicer's poetics, which I also read as inadvertently responding to the terms of Baraka's revolutionary call (as Spicer more directly works through his relationship to Jewish African-American Beat poet Bob Kaufman). These dynamics of exchange are given space in the chapters, which make use of close reading to establish currents of intertextual dialogue that have not been otherwise treated in the scholarship.

The dissertation's first chapter takes up Jones/Baraka's articulation of the problem of unrelieved history as specifically characteristic of whiteness, and his concurrent abstraction of—and struggle to himself assume—the blues as a modality of intimate historiographic understanding. I show that his achievement of the latter, in his "transitional" collection, *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), entails using and bending modernist impersonality toward a blues

sensibility to which he cannot, at first, fully relate. This book, largely comprised of a series of covertly insurgent but nonetheless dead letters ("lowcoup," to borrow a term he develops later) establishes the condition of interracial address that persists throughout Baraka's otherwise widely varied career. I argue that his frustration with his white peers' incapacity to properly hear the historical-political message of the blues, combined with the hope, drawn from his own experience, that such an understanding *can* be derived through aesthetic practice, fuels a lifelong search for a blues-inflected genre of poetry that would somehow communicate the otherwise incommunicable across the persistent color line. In the process, the blues, subject to its own distinct history of lyricization, is made to hold not only African-American history but to serve, in variously realized and disavowed forms, as a container for the American condition generally. Meanwhile, at the level of poetic genre, it motivates a series of experiments with address that break, break again, and keep breaking, leaving a field of tactics that all ultimately depend—like the music itself—on the reader's or hearer's willingness to take up the intimate historiographic imperative upon which the poet continues to insist.

The second chapter reads the incorporation of an actual dead letter—Olson's own, unanswered, to Baraka—into Olson's late interrogation of his own poetics. In the process, I reframe his widely referenced middle period, with its investment in myth and in Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, as a symptomatic digression, partly recognized by Olson as such, from the racial implications of his original intimate historiographic method. Attending to key images and figures, and to genre shifts in both *The Maximus Poems* and in Olson's critical prose, I show that the first turning point—away from intimate historiography—entails a redemptive abstraction of his psycho-somatic method into the conceptual basis of a "new stance" that is bound up with his residual investment in lyricization. Drawing on a neglected late essay, I then demonstrate that the second (re)turning and breaking point that the split with Baraka provokes restores the priority of his distinct (arguably opposed) commitment to "use" of the self for historical political understanding as the central purpose of poetic practice.

In my third chapter, on Jack Spicer, I focus on the advent and aftermath of a racial crisis, provoked by his fraught intimacy with Jewish African-American Beat-affiliated poet, Bob Kaufman, that comes to a head in a series of poetic epistles and is worked through in a largely life-based work of detective fiction and social parody. This crisis, I show, results in the historical overdetermination of his famously indeterminate Outside source, and the breaking of his lyricized queer utopian epistolary poetics, which is replaced by a fatalistic embrace of the role of the poet as dead letter officer, to be used up by history's ghosts. I demonstrate the centrality of race to Spicer's poetics and argue that it is lyricization's failure and defeat, rather than linguistic indeterminacy's (re)discovery, that is the real legacy of his late work and struggle.

In the process, I read each poetics trajectory as illuminating, at a slant, a political problematic of broader relevance. While the terms overlap, the first chapter on Baraka foregrounds the limits of what can be communicated to those without ears to hear; the second chapter on Olson centers on the temptation to and liabilities of affirmation; while the third chapter on Spicer takes up the related, and overarching, issue of idealization as compensatory in the context of psycho-political need (pertaining, in Spicer's case, to his own marginalization as queer). These concerns take on a particular tenor and urgency in the context of the mid-century anti-racist struggle to which the poetics were adjacent—and to which I now turn.

Political context: the psycho-historical rift at integration's collapse

Intimate historiography as practiced by Olson, Spicer and Baraka can be read as a response to the need for new relationships to history that the racial politics of the period demanded, relationships repudiated by the dominant New Critical framework of lyricized reading and not centrally addressed in other New American poetries. Forged in the crucible of the late 1950's and 1960's racial turmoil, their writing practices not only register the mid-century's larger political shifts (or their philosophical basis—as is widely recognized of the New American poets' turn to theories and practices of immanence) but are also, ultimately, efforts to

work through and survive what I have characterized as a racial crisis that cut to the psychic core of the poets' senses of being. Among the poets in question, only Baraka was involved in anti-racist political activism, and that largely after the period on which the dissertation focuses. However, the presence of black poets—particularly that of Baraka himself, and, in Spicer's case, Bob Kaufman—in the avant-garde circles that comprised the New American poetics brought the dynamics and tensions of the decades' wider interracial movements, and their eventual collapse, into the poets' lives. There has been considerable literary history on the interracial exchange and racial appropriation constitutive of the New American poetry and wider 1950's hipster subculture, and there is a substantive of body of social movement scholarship on the complex causes of the breakdown in interracial optimism and organizing during the 1960's.[55] My interest is more specifically in the psycho-historical understanding of America's formative racial rift that emerges at points of crisis in both contexts, and does so as an imperative to what I have called intimate historiography. My chapters detail the emergence of (or return, with a difference to) that understanding for each of the poets in question. Here I locate that understanding in relation to the wider anti-racist movement by looking at a parallel development within the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) at the point of its dissolution. I read the call by black SNCC activists, in a 1966 position paper issued by the Atlanta-based SNCC Vine City Project, for their white comrades to undertake psycho-historical work on themselves, and the experiential gap between racial realities they felt that work was needed to address.[56] Their message is akin to that delivered by Baraka to his peers, felt, as we have seen, by Creeley, and taken to heart by Olson with a marked impact on his late poetry and poetics; it also encapsulates

[55] See, for example, Lee, Benjamin. "Avant-Garde Poetry as Subcultural Practice: Mailer and Di Prima's Hipsters." *New Literary History*, 41.4 (2010: 775–794); Andrew Ross (1989); Eric Lott (1993); Scott Saul (2003).
[56] Accessed through The Freedom Archives at http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC513_scans/SNCC/513.SNCC.black.power.summer.1966.pdf. Excerpts of the position paper were published in the New York Times that August 5, 1966 with a defensive editorialization that mischaracterized the critique as proposing "a hopeless, futile, destructive course expressive merely of a sense of black importance" (https://snccdigital.org/events/new-york-times-publishes-atlanta-project-statement/). For further context, see Perkins, Jason Michah. *The Atlanta Vine City Project, SNCC, and Black Power, 1965-1967.* Ohio State UP, 2008.

the message received less directly by Spicer, through his absorption of Olson's historical concerns and the confrontation with his ambivalent relationship to blackness that Bob Kaufman's presence in his life provoked. In short, the Vine City writers' analysis provides a clear and substantively shared framework for the intimate historiographic practices this dissertation will trace and points toward the broader potential utility of a variation on those practices.

Emerging in North Carolina out of the 1960 sit-in movement and maintaining a focus on direct action in the South, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee was, from its beginnings, markedly interracial. At the same time, it was avowedly field-driven, prioritizing the experiential knowledge of those working in communities over the development of a more centralized program. Designed to reduce organizational hierarchy and to remain responsive to the conditions and needs of the black Southerners among who its members worked, this had the inadvertent effect of highlighting the limitations, as well as the strengths, of SNCC's interracial approach to fighting anti-blackness. During the 1964 "Freedom Summer" drive to register voters and contest the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party primary with a locally recruited and racially integrated set of delegates, the participation of hundreds of new white student volunteers (largely from Northern states) put considerable pressure on a racial fracture effectively built into the organization. If the strategy of SNCC's field workers was generally to go into a region, empower and train local leaders, and get out—to "work yourself out of a job," as Jane Stembridge put it—it began to seem to many that this same logic should apply to the presence and participation of white people as well.[57]

In the Atlanta-based SNCC Vine City Project's 1966 position paper, the importance of phasing out white members is spelled out in specifically psychological and historical terms. Among a number of troubling "inabilit[ies]" and "insensitivit[ies]," the paper's Preface points to the "attitudes that whites, consciously or unconsciously, bring to Black communities" and "the

[57] See Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. North Carolina UP, 2003.

unwillingness of whites to deal with the roots of racism which lie within the white community." On the whole, white anti-racist activists responded to this charge pragmatically—that is to say by turning their energies to community organizing and consciousness raising among white people.[58] In focusing on poor, less educated white communities where the roots of racism were more apparent, these important efforts tended to prioritize educating others over the kind of internal work—by white activists on themselves—that the Vine City paper also identifies as necessary.

The Vine City authors begin by noting an experiential and psychological rift between black and white people, drawing on the organization's own textual materials as concrete, if comparatively minor, examples of a fundamental problem with white people working in black communities. The first such example refers to a proposed local newspaper title, one that white members largely rejected in favor of the "Atlanta Voice":

> So that white people coming into the Movement cannot relate to the "Nitty Gritty," cannot relate to the experience that brought such a word into being, cannot relate to chitterlings, hog's head cheese, pig feet, ham hocks, and cannot relate to slavery, because these things are not a part of their experience (1).

Here, the connotative dimensions of meaning are powerfully overdetermined by racialized experience. In placing slavery at the end of a long list of foods, as if it, too, were taken in by and constitutive of the body *in the present*, the Vine City authors imply that experience is transhistorical at the most basic alimentary level. Slavery appears as something that has either been digested (and even made sustaining, as a capacity to see and endure reality without disavowal or idealization) or, in the case of whiteness, not. For the white activists who "cannot

[58] Tom Hayden, a co-author of the Port Huron statement and a lifelong activist, writer and politician, began the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), through which SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) organizers sought to bring white neighborhoods into an interracial poor people's movement. (See Heather Frost. *An Interracial Movement of the Poor: Community Organizing and the New Left in the 1960s*. New York: New York UP, 2001.) Casey Hayden, who had been centrally involved in SNCC and authored the influential feminist position paper, published in 1965 as "Sex and Caste," struggled to organize Appalachian migrant women in Chicago into a welfare recipients union. (See Casey Hayden (1965). "Organizing Chicago's Southern Whites," SDS Bulletin vol. 4, no. 2. Accessed at http://content.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt4w1003tt.

relate" to these terms as psychic nourishment, they revert to elements of fantasy. Frantz Fanon's memorable description in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), of the effects of having to "meet the white man's eyes" are worth recalling in this context:

> Nausea…I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors…I discovered my own blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin'" (84-5).

Where Fanon calls for a "liquidation" of history to combat this "affective ankylosis of the white man," the Vine City writers imply that what they elsewhere refer to as "the special history of Black people" must somehow be brought into the experience of their eager white allies if this scrim of historical fantasy is to be purged from their perception and, more pointedly, from their gaze. The incapacity to "relate" that they describe is far deeper and more damaging than the mere problem of cultural sensitivity it might at first appear to be. Ultimately, the implication of an inability to separate chitterlings and pig feet from "Sho' good eatin'" is that even the militantly anti-racist white people in the Movement still cannot *not* see the black people into whose communities they pour as slaves, whose life ways and modes of sustenance are incompatible with, and not fit for, the human circulation of meaningful event and enlightened opinion by means of the written word that the local newspaper represents.

It follows, then, that the writing of people so psychically and historically apart would be not so much incomprehensible as likewise indigestible, and therefore unusable, for black readers: "One illustrating example, is the SNCC 'Freedom Primer'. Blacks cannot relate to that book psychologically, because white people wrote it and, therefore it presents a white viewpoint" (3). Somewhat surprisingly for a radical organization geared toward black empowerment from its inception, the Vine City writers effectively go on to suggest that the idea of freedom encoded in the primer and in the organization itself is essentially colorblind and ahistorical:

> There has been an escapist attitude on the part of SNCC of looking at the problem as if race did not matter. This negates the special history of Black people in this country,

> mainly the slavery period and the inhuman forms of segregation we have been forced to suffer (5).

In leveling the charge of escapism at an organization whose members were on the front lines of direct action, often absorbing serious violence in the process, the writers identify a psycho-temporal problem endemic to radical and utopian activism, wherein a politics oriented to major structural change in the present runs into its limits in the face of the great stumbling block of historical damage. They remark this realization as it pertains to SNCC's own organizational history early on in their position paper:

> In the beginning of the Movement, we had fallen into a trap whereby we thought that our problems revolved around the right to eat at certain lunch counters or the right to vote, or to organize our communities. We have seen, however, that the problem is much deeper. The problem of this country, as we had seen it, concerned old Blacks and old whites (and therefore) if decisions were left to the young people, then solutions would be arrived at. But this negates the history of Black people and whites (2).

Implicating themselves in the 'we', they make it clear that they too had hoped that history might be left behind with the older generations, as if the young remained uncontaminated by it, at least as long as they retained what are colloquially referred to as open minds. Much of the energy of the mid-century's radicalism was oriented by this faith in youth and, with it, in the pliability of consciousness. As the 1968 White Panther Party Statement, authored by New American affiliated poet and activist John Sinclair, put it:

> For the first time in America there is a generation of visionary maniac white motherfucker country dope fiend rock and roll freaks who are ready to get down and kick out the jams — ALL THE JAMS — break everything loose and free everybody from their very real and imaginary prisons…We are LSD driven total maniacs of the universe. We will do anything we can to drive people crazy out of their heads and into their bodies.[59]

Whereas the "prisons" envisioned here give way to sheer, precipitous freedom, for the Vine City writers, outside the "trap" of a concrete rights-oriented politics lies another structuring fact—history. The contrast in understanding of and approach to the psyche between the White

[59] Accessed at http://www.luminist.org/archives/wpp.htm.

Panther Party Statement and the Vine City position paper is striking. Of particular relevance to this dissertation's concerns, that contrast points toward different potential roles for and uses of cultural activity in revolutionary politics. It is worth noting here that Sinclair himself leaned on poetry and music not only to "break everything loose" but also to hold, work through, and restructure his own psychic investments; it is the latter use that earned him Baraka's praise, decades later, in an album introduction that my first chapter analyzes. This psycho-historical work is vital to grounding the freedom and reconnection with "bodies" that 1968 the statement proposes in something other than another hallucinatory vision and version of whiteness.

In any case, the Vine City paper makes clear that even radical and "visionary" white people harbor the deeper psychological baggage of an unconscious historical inheritance that continues to constitute their bodies and imaginations as white. Listing a number of racist stereotypes about black people that the white members of SNCC certainly would have sought (and hoped) to purge from their thinking, the Vine City authors simply state, "He cannot escape them because the whole society has geared his subconscious in that direction" (1). More pointedly, they remark the hypocrisy of white anxiety around black nationalism in the U.S. among the same radicals who championed anti-colonial struggles abroad:

> It can be maintained that this attitude or way of thinking has perpetuated itself to this current period and that it is part of the psyche of white people in this country whatever their political persuasion might be. It is part of the white fear-guilt complex resulting from the slave revolts (6).

In so positing a racial imaginary that has been sub- or unconsciously passed down—a kind of "transgenerational phantom," as psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok would call it in 1975,[60] (arguably, the disavowed mirror of an absent *Erfahrung*)—the Vine City writers suggest the need for an intervention that does not simply unfetter the mind but that deals with what is thereby unleashed and what is ineluctably retained, in their subtle and intimate as well

[60] See "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology" in *The Shell and the Kernel.* Ed. Nicholas T. Rand. Chicago UP, 1994.

as more rabid social forms. Their anti-racist white student peers—who are asked in the paper's Preface "to consider at every moment of your presence in the Negro community…what tensions are created by your presence"—are at once implicated in American racism and called upon to face their implication at a level deeper than that of the intellect:

> One of the criticisms of white militants and radicals is that when we view the masses of white people we view the overall reality of America. We view the racism, the bigotry, and distortion of personality, we view man's inhumanity to man; we view in reality 180 million racists. The sensitive white intellectual and radical who is fighting to bring about change is conscious of this fact, but does not have the courage to admit this. When he admits this reality, then he must also admit his involvement because he is a part of the collective white America. It is only to the extent that he recognizes this that he will be able to change this reality (6).

While they lean on the moral language of "courage," the Vine City writers can be said to identify a psychic block among white radicals that is more on the order of what psychoanalyst and theorist Alan Bass calls "concreteness." Useful in the clinical setting for understanding patients who eagerly and actively participate in their analysis without making any real progress, *concreteness*, as Bass defines it, is a defense mechanism by means of which one can simultaneously recognize and disavow an intimate threat.[61] At a basic level, it identifies a split between conscious thought processes and the deeper registers of attachment and feeling where psychic transformation might actually take place. It is, in other words, a problem of abstraction, not from content but from affect. In the political context under consideration here, it might also be thought of as a temporal splitting, between a relatively ahistorical present (for which history is mere story) and a more densely haunted one, in which intentions and acts are always superimposed upon and overdetermined by the sometimes seemingly opposite unwitting motivations and reenactments they also are. The Vine City writers effectively diagnose this tendency among their white peers, who are able to critique and work to transform present conditions while refusing to accept what reckoning with the history that led to those conditions

[61] Bass, Alan. *Difference and Disavowal: The Trauma of Eros.* Stanford UP, 2000.

means for their own "distortion[s] of personality," ability to "admit" and "change" "reality," and their capacity—beyond desire—to fully understand and relate to black people as people.

This incapacity, on the part of even the most committed white anti-racist radicals, would contribute in no small measure to the fracturing of one of the mid-century's most effective instantiations of interracial solidarity. By 1968 SNCC was basically defunct, replaced by the Black Panthers on the one hand and various other, often ethnically-specific, groups who came together more loosely under the Rainbow Coalition. Whether this restructuring was more or less politically effective or sustainable is beside the point, insofar as the question assumes having already accepted the breach in understanding, and the attendant reduction of solidarity to allyship, that the SNCC activists had to face. So long as whiteness remains—as a refusal to work through the long history of its production and the resultant psychological damage (the "distortion of personality") to those identified, however reluctantly, as white—there likewise remains a fundamental incommensurability of address, as if white and black were two distinct genres of being in which differently pigmented bodies remain trapped, signaling to one another across a thick batting.

Two decades later, an exasperated James Baldwin found himself making (still, again) a similar argument about historical understanding. Speaking on December 10, 1986, to the National Press Club in Washington DC, he responds to a journalist's question about "race relations" with a call to historical reality:[62]

> [T]he answer to these questions is not to be found in me, but in that history which produces these questions. It's late in the day to be talking about race relations, what are you talking about!? And as long as we have 'race relations' how can they deteriorate or improve? I am not a race and neither are you. No. We're talking about the life and death of this country…one of the things that most afflicts this country is that white people don't know who they are or where they come from. That's why you think I'm a problem. But, I am not a problem your history is. And as long as you pretend you don't know your history you're going to be the prisoner of it.

[62] Quoted in Pavlic, Ed. "James Baldwin's White History Week." Accessed at https://africasacountry.com/2014/03/james-baldwins-whitehistoryweek-as-long-as-you-think-youre-white-youre-irrelevant

The idea of 'race relations' Baldwin refuses is the result of decades of degradation and growing political apathy. They are but a hollow echo or farcical repetition of the difficulty in relating to black people's lives that the Vine City writers' had already observed on the part of their fellow white activists. These "relations" have become implicitly ambassadorial, as if it were the foreignness rather than the disavowed historical intimacy of the people made black and white that were the issue; their horizon is a kind of formal accommodation between entities rather than the possibility of a genuinely if painfully shared life. Baldwin's pointed selection of "pretend" in the last sentence echoes the Vine City writers' use of "courage" and suggests that the historical ignorance—or, as I have put it, the incapacity for historical understanding—that reproduces white people as such is a choice not to cultivate the capacity.

Intimate historiography—as I trace it in the practices of the three central poets, and as I hope to propose it more broadly—names an effort to address the psychic avoidance of history at the root of the problem of whiteness. As a supplement to, rather than substitute for, political struggle for socio-economic redress, it describes a form of work that the Vine City writers' experience suggests is necessary, even for the most radical allies, in order to recover and sustain anti-racist work as a shared undertaking, for all our selves. As Baldwin put it in 1963, in a talk on "The Uses of the Blues": "[Liberals and even other white leftists] much prefer to discuss 'the Negro problem' than to try to deal with what this figure of the Negro really means personally to them."[63] For his part, Jones/Baraka invested considerable energy in foisting this consideration on his white peers and compatriots. His disenchantment with and departure from the interracial avant-garde arts scene in which he first established himself as a writer can be seen as a politicizing social parallel to the experience of the Vine City writers. His intimacy and shared investments with his white peers finally revealed (albeit unevenly, and with qualified exceptions) their lack of real racial-historical understanding beyond a kind of fetishistic interest

[63] In *Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. Ed. by Randall Kenan. Vintage, 2011: 76-7.

and desire for the limited level of understanding that would remain affirmative for them. It was in response to his efforts and his parting judgment that Olson did finally consider what American history, and the figure of the Negro it generates, meant for him on the intimate psychic level to which Baldwin refers; as did Spicer, for personal reasons of his own, as he could no longer bear or sustain his split racial consciousness. They did so not because they were more courageous or less prone to disavowal than their more militant SNCC contemporaries, but because their political experiences and critical readings of American literature had led them to diagnose the problem in similarly psycho-historical terms to those the Vine City writers, Baldwin, and Baraka all mobilized. Having found, in their different ways, that a widespread psychic avoidance of history was proving consequential for a meaningfully shared and stable sense of reality, and in possession of radical critiques of personhood to which the position of blackness was a key spur to thought, Olson and Spicer were, in effect, prepared to more intimately register the problem of their own whiteness when their Vine City moments of racialized address arrived. As each salvaged his poetics by leaning toward its intimate historiographic aspects, poetry writing became a way of addressing this newly personal psycho-historical hole—with the wider, politically-keyed, understanding that doing so was necessary for making one a "fit instrument for use" in the revolutionary context of a nation in crisis. Given that in the intervening years the elusiveness of a shared and meaningful sense of reality has become perhaps *the* dominant feature of American political, social, and cultural life, the relevance for the present of these poets' efforts is all the more poignant.

Poetics and Psychoanalysis

Impersonality, from transcendent alibi to object use

In seeking to account for the psycho-historical impact of racial damage on American personhood and their senses of self, Olson, Spicer and Baraka each sought to cultivate an intimate yet impersonal manner of engaging with historical material. This work—which the

dissertation names intimate historiography—involved an explicitly impersonal use of the self as an object. Their various and overlapping ideas of use emerged through critical engagements with the function of impersonality in the modernist poetics with which all three poets were also contending. That impersonality should prove a resource for the politically distinct orientation and work they pursued is intuitive and counterintuitive at the same time. In the poetics context to which I shortly turn, the term with its modernist meaning and usage was bound up with precisely the kind of historical disavowal the poets sought to overcome. From a political point of view, on the other hand, impersonality fit into a wider critique of America's individualistic, power- and charisma-oriented, 'ego'-driven culture—a critique black activist and organizer Ella Baker shared and employed in her guidance of SNCC. In the months leading up to the Freedom Summer that ultimately precipitated the movement's racial breaking point, as black activists began to question the effects of white organizers on the black communities in which they worked, Baker, as Barbara Ransby records:

> cut through the litany of questions with a decisive challenge to the group: "The conversation sounds like this is the first discussion of white involvement. The problem is basically one of insecurity: Perhaps we have an inflated ego. Are we prepared to take the revolution one step further? We can't grow without examining our own [fears and doubts]" (2003: 325).

Here, as do the poets I discuss, Baker issues a call to impersonal self-examination as a counterforce to the political limitations of "inflated ego"—resonating with Olson's analysis of Melville's Ahab as a paradigmatic figuration of the white American psyche. Here, however, the critique and urge for self-analysis as a politically vital practice of psychic growth is largely aimed at SNCC's black members, some of whom—as the Vine City letter demonstrates—subsequently found more nuanced terms for expressing concerns that were not, in the end, reducible to insecurity. In the process, they turned the focus back toward the greater need for white members to undertake a specifically historical variant of impersonal self-examination. As we have seen, the Vine City writers, whose thinking was perhaps sharpened by Baker's arguably misplaced or ill-timed rebuke, effectively asked white members to put aside their insecurities

and inflated egos with respect to their anti-racist self-images, and to contend with the fact that they nonetheless remained "a part of the collective white America." In spite of having already applied the period's 'ego'-critical framework to dominant and normative subject positions, the poets I discuss would struggle to absorb their own critiques at the intimate, and indeed personal, level at stake in SNCC's more immediately political context.

As Charles Olson would belatedly recognize and confess, "I am that famous thing, the White Man." The admission is an unavoidable specification of his early historically-keyed insight that "man is himself an object, whatever he takes to be his advantages," and yet it would take him a decade and half to register the full implications of that early poetics thinking for his sense of self and his political use. His problem was less one of insecurity than its opposite and, more germane here, of the abstraction and idealization built into the poetics resources on which he and the other two poets drew. While Baraka also had the blues as a model for that engagement, all three turned to, reworked, and struggled with modernist impersonality, largely drawn from T.S. Eliot, who is an important if minor referent in each of the dissertation's chapters. The psychoanalytically-inflected modifications of this ambivalent resource that each developed served as the basis for their intimate historiographic practices. So too, the periodic avoidance of those practices by Olson and Spicer can be read in their reversions to impersonality's modernist modes. A fuller account of Eliot's relevance to the practices will provide useful background for the poets' investments in lyricization and their susceptibility to its liabilities, for the moments of disavowal and resistance the resultant poetic oeuvres register as they nonetheless push impersonality, and poetry with it, toward a more conscientiously engaged psycho-historical practice. Although it largely remains a tendency, partially and belatedly realized, I propose that intimate historiography—finding out for oneself, the work on oneself, and, finally, use of the self—constitutes a specific mid-century intervention in modernist impersonality and a substantive critical alternative to the latter's recent reclamation in the

scholarship. That intervention ultimately breaks impersonality's association with and use for lyricized assumptions about poetry and practices of reading.

That the New American poetics constituted an anti-academic, but not therefore anti-intellectual, reaction against the New Criticism and its particular, politically staid and conservative mode of reading is now a well established critical commonplace. It is thereby also generally assumed that the New American poets discarded modernist impersonality,[64] which largely served as the writerly counterpart to the New Critical speaker—a stance conducive to the assumption that the voice of the poem was always, in some sense, a persona, apart from the messy historical political entanglements of social persons. The three poets treated here, however, did not simply reject impersonality in favor of the more candid rhetorical modes of the Beats or some of the New York School poets. Instead, treating impersonality as a compositional praxis, they sought to turn its psychosocial divestment to radically distinct political ends—as a means of acquiring the minimal distance that historical perspective and psychological working through required. The apparent utility of impersonality for such a task owes something to Eliot's description of his own "meditative" verse as resulting from an experiential effect, a kind of "absolution…very near annihilation," although he pointedly avoids psychologizing that feeling, preferring to employ the non-human analogy of a chemical reaction in which the poet's mind is a necessary but notably *unaffected* catalyst.[65] While the mid-century poets explicitly sought, on the contrary, to be altered by their writing practices, Eliot nonetheless offered impersonality as more than aesthetic, as, underlying that, a kind of *experience* in which the poet is given over to *use* by forces indifferent to him. That experience could be reframed in psychic terms and, bound up with poetry's lyricization as it already was, easily translated into a mode of personhood.

[64] The generalization has its basis in Charles Altieri's "From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: The Ground of Postmodern American Poetics." *boundary 2* 1.3 (Spring, 1973): 605-642.
[65] From "The Three Voices of Poetry" in *On Poetry and Poets.* FSG: 2009: 107. See also "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot.* Ed. by Frank Kermode. FSG: 1975: 41.

Remade as a psycho-political rather than meditative practice, the mid-century forms of impersonality that lay the ground for intimate historiography's emergence aimed not only to make aesthetic use of intimate and erstwhile personal material but, in the process, to produce persons who were more socio-historically aware, attuned, and responsive—more "fit" for political use. The idea of self-improvement inherent to the mid-century poets' political mission and revised versions of impersonality would prove likewise amenable, indeed liable, to idealization. At the same time, the emphasis and general thrust of the practices toward psychic work and political use were rather in tension with poetry's lyricization, and its racialization. Rather than "personality" in Eliot's sense, for whom it was bound up with the threat of poets who might, with compelling performative rhetoric, "impose upon their readers their own personal view of life" (and their leftist politics),[66] the mid-century poets this dissertation treats took aim at a particular formulation of 'ego'. They mounted their critiques not against the term in its properly psychoanalytic meaning (as the achievement of an functionally integrated sense of self), but rather as a shorthand for psychic investment in the specific abstractions and normative social forces—including, for Spicer and Baraka, those organized around sexuality—that sustain racial capitalism.[67] Framed as a psychological problem writ large, tempering this 'ego' called for a practice that took the self as an object with attachments and deracinations that might be excavated, analyzed, and altered. This work, on one's embroilment in the historical-political and normative social forces of the "libidinal economy,"[68] was felt by the poets to be at

[66] Vachel Lindsay's radical politics and highly popular performative readings are one likely source for Eliot's alarm. See McAllister, Brian. "From New Elocution to New Criticism and the Dismissal of Vachel Lindsay." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 5.2 (2013): 144-54.

[67] While other circulating cultural narratives and critiques fed in, producing different emphases for each poet—Baraka had the racist discourse on black male sexuality as a referent and Spicer, with his anarchist political leanings, associated personality with commodification—Olson's diagnostic reading of Herman Melville's Moby Dick is a central and unifying source for the substantively shared critical sense of the term described above.

[68] *Libidinal Economy.* Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant. Indiana UP (1993). See also, Jared Sexton's use of the term in "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word" (*Rhizomes* 29 (2016)): **"**In a related move, Afro-Pessimism seeks to decenter, without diminishing, the analysis of political economy by discerning the libidinal economy that underwrites and sutures its dynamics. And so, in its formulation of power, and particularly of the nature and role of violence, Afro-Pessimism does not only describe the operations of systems, structures and institutions, but also, and perhaps more

once conducive to better writing and to the usefulness and value of that writing—and that of the writer himself—to the wider social-political transformation that clearly needed to, and seemed as if it actually might, take place.

Whether the forms of political use in which each was invested were to manifest primarily outside or within the context of the poetry is variable and somewhat ambiguous, but all three poets can be said to have imagined or hoped for both to be applicable. Beyond the poetic context, they sought a transformation of consciousness, a "new stance toward reality," achieved through the poetic practice. Within the poetry that resulted, political use was largely framed as a matter of provoking readers to recognize the necessity of undertaking a similar psycho-historically transformative endeavor themselves. To this end, impersonality was summoned to supplement the tools of simple didacticism and rhetorical appeal that, while nonetheless also widely employed, were simultaneously felt to be largely ineffectual, degraded by the very socio-political context in which the poets hoped to intervene. As a result, problematics of address are foundational for all three, insofar as a desire to act politically crashes up against the realization that genre's basic prerequisites—a locus of articulation, and a community to be addressed—were thrown into question, or rendered incommensurable, by the mid-century's national and racial crises. The poets had to negotiate a series of underlying meta- questions: who would they be addressing, and more critically, as *what* would they be speaking, and from where? The history of poetry supplies many resources for approaching, or for skillfully evading, such questions.

All three poets leaned on the epistolary mode at important moments if not throughout their writing lives. Already tending toward the intimately impersonal by virtue of its implicit structure—prosopopoeia (speaking as dead, or, more generally as absent) and apostrophe (speaking to one absent)—the epistolary genre was further shaped by impersonality by the three poets, who used it to cultivate alternative forms of political address that issue from the

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importantly, the fantasies of murderous hatred and unlimited destruction, of sexual consumption and social availability that animate the realization of such violence." Accessed at https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02.

subterranean realms of the psycho-historical and socially dead. Olson's *The Maximus Poems* are organized as a series of letters from an ancient persona to a contemporary place—Gloucester, Massachusetts—both of which (persona and place) have a claim to being avatars or modes of the poet, whose endeavor to body forth the historical landscape *he also is* is urged upon the fellow denizens of his local *polis,* as a means of imagining and rhetorically reinforcing a community for the object sense of self that he publicly enacts. For Spicer, the recognition and translation of erotically invested objects, initially placed inside poems that are placed inside epistolary correspondence, constitutes a queer sense of tradition that is "how we dead men write to each other"—one that is ultimately taken over by the more concretely historical burden of the "dead letter officer." The letter may be less central to Baraka's long and wide-ranging oeuvre, but it occupies a key locus in the transitional book, *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), in which the poet speaks, as socially dead, to his erstwhile friends and white peers, who are, in turn, largely assumed to be effectively absent, deaf. In each, the poet's locus of articulation is no longer ostensibly outside or above history, but within an unrelieved historical dimension of the social-political present. These reticulations of the social field complicate the priority of presence and immanence associated with the New American poetics and invite a reconsideration of the relevance of impersonality to the political and philosophical overhaul the poets undertook, and that prepared the ground for their more acute racial crises to register as an imperative to intimate historiographic work.

While, for the reasons and uses just sketched, impersonality was of no small interest to the poets in question, they were nonetheless keenly aware that its modernist articulations and instantiations, especially by T.S. Eliot, rendered it a politically compromised instrument—bound up with precisely the kind of racialized disavowal and historical abstraction they sought to address. As Spicer would wryly remark, in the context of not one but two late epistolary poems (addressed, in this case, to magazines he expected would not publish them: *Poetry Chicago* and *The Nation*), "Pieces of the past arising out of the rubble. Which evokes Eliot / and then evokes

Suspicion" (MV, 405-6). Contemporary rehabilitations of modernist impersonality notwithstanding, there was good reason for suspicion. Eliot's disavowals extend from the personal to the national, from his description of impersonality as an escape that offered "absolution,"[69] to its concomitant uses as what might be characterized as *alibi* in a number of early racial poems,[70] and as a mode of transcendence in his mature work, "The Four Quartets." Between these poetic applications, he contextualized his hostility to the dangers of personality and rhetoric in "an age of unsettled beliefs and enfeebled tradition" during a series of 1933 lectures, published as *After Strange Gods*, given to the Vanderbilt University literary scholars and poets called the Fugitives—a group whose members largely overlapped with the pro-segregation "Southern Agrarians." Speaking to the men who would shortly go on to found the New Criticism, Eliot contrasts the chaos of the present with the proper conditions, however counterfactual, for the idea of tradition toward which his impersonality strove: "the population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate."[71] A blunter repudiation of the threat of racial integration on ostensibly aesthetic grounds would be hard to come by.

Whether or not the poets were familiar with these remarks, they were close readers of Eliot's poetry. Marked by his oeuvre as they all (and so many of their generation) were, it did not escape them that there was something troubling in Eliot's attitude toward history and therefore in the mode of (dis)engagement with which he approached it. In "The Four Quartets," the desire to erect tradition as a fantasy substitute for, and ultimately a means to transcend, the disavowed history that had led to the apparently distasteful conditions of his present is apparent, however

[69] "[The poet] may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is itself indescribable. And then he can say to the poem: 'Go away! Find a place for yourself in a book—and don't expect me to take any further interest in you'" ("Three Voices," 13).
[70] See poems "excised from the Notebook" in *Inventions of the March Hare* (1996), reviewed by Michiko Kakutani in "Bigotry in Motion," *The New York Times,* March 16, 1997 (Accessed at https://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/16/magazine/bigotry-in-motion.html).
[71] *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy; The Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia, 1933.* Forgotten Books, 2018.

stunningly ensconced in Eliot's cadences. As another close reader of the book-length poem, John Xiros Cooper, has put it: "history is not epistemologically negligible for Eliot, but its status is emblematic rather than empirical, bewitchingly free of particular narratives, concrete events and necessary obligations" (1995: 171). Here, it is worth considering a single example from "The Four Quartets" —that of the "sea's throat" that Sharon Cameron takes as exemplary of a post-humanist "disintegrative" ethos evinced by Eliot's poem in spite of his predilection for orthodoxy—in order to highlight the difference between the modifications of impersonality made by the mid-century poets I discuss and the ways the modernist term has been critically reassessed and recuperated in the scholarship to which Cameron's intervention has given rise. For Cameron, the "sea's throat" is a moment of figural "incarnation" that demonstrates Eliot's use of impersonality to cultivate an experiential sense of being outside or between recognizable categories. Building on this effect, Cameron reads the poem's final redemptive movements as producing a "vertigo that undoes the possibility of foundation" (2007: 176). However, the poem's closing assumption of a transcendent mode of impersonality—a state of "indifference," "growing between" the psychic poles of "attachment" and "detachment"—must strike the historically inclined reader rather differently. To such a reader, the poem's earlier reference to "the river with its cargo of dead negroes"[72]—with which the "sea's throat" would be choked if they were not spirited away as so much mundane historical fodder—renders the later figure less an embodiment of the impossibility of foundation than a place to empty and disavow, undigested, the historical foundation of one's given life, and with it, even the acknowledgment that there is anything significant there to detach from.

In relation to the registration of such historical violence, Eliot's dis-integrative indifference may be contrasted with the following treatment in one of Olson's early *Maximus* poems. Having cited an archival entry pertaining to black captives drowned on route to a life of

[72] *Four Quartets.* Mariner Books, 1968: 28.

slavery in the 'New World'— "57 / Negroes, *optimi generis,* each valued at 160L, or a total of 9,120 L ('Schedule of Property Lost, *State Papers,* Dom. Elizabeth, liii')"—Olson ends the poem by making a demand on writer and reader alike: "You will count them all in, / you will stay in the midst of them, / you will know no law, you will hear them / in the narrow seas" (*MP,* 69-70). As a declaration of intimate historiographic intent, these lines mobilize the immanent orientation associated with the period and with Olson in particular toward specific historical material as a means of making it heard and felt in the present—relieved, as it were, of its disavowed status by the poet's attention and that of his readers. The poem's impersonal address is not transcendent with respect to history but arises as a voice singing from a hole within it. Where Eliot passes to his readers what might be less flatteringly described as an ethos of sublimating, abstracting, and finally evading history, intimate historiography attempts and solicits an ethos of closely listening for and staying with historical damage.

While announced in this particular poem of Olson's in the mode of an ethical imperative, as a practice, intimate historiography pertains not to the poet's address to self and reader. It describes, more crucially, the address historical materials (here, drowned persons) make as they are brought into the context of the writing—and, the poet hopes, the reading—of the poem where, beyond the bare facts of the property register, they might, in some sense, be heard, or simply given the asymptotic pause of an unrealized echolocation. This hearing takes place not in the poem's text—there is no personified rendering of absent subaltern speech—nor, even, in the imagination, properly speaking, but in the psyche of writer and reader, where the drowning of human voices registers as feeling. That feeling is not of foundation's lack, far less its impossibility, but of its overdetermining if largely unconscious force—the vertiginous echo of a scream in the "narrow seas" of one's solar plexus; as it moves, perhaps, "through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where…all act springs," as Olson writes at

the end of "Projective Verse."[73] The context of Olson's somatic description in this famous poetics statement is a critique of Eliot as "proof of a present danger." In spite of the reductively aesthetic reception of (and over-reliance on) "Projective Verse," the danger in question is not merely formal. As my chapter demonstrates, a wider reading of Olson's extensive prose provides ample material for a psycho-historical understanding of the body and the kinds of political acts a more deeply grounded breath might aim to accomplish. Staying with the uncomfortable feelings that historical voices provoke is what Olson describes in another early essay as "the work on ourself" (1952, CPr, 205). In short, while employing rhetorical and ethical gestures, Olson's intimate historiographic "objectism," and its variants in Baraka's and Spicer's thinking, is a psychically oriented intervention in poetic practice—one concerned with political capacitation, "how to make ourself fit instruments for use."

To this end, each of the three poets adopted and adapted different aspects of psychoanalytic theory and practice in their efforts to overhaul while making use of poetic impersonality. Consistent with his critique of Eliot, whose impersonality he found too "scholastic," Olson drew on the basic Freudian insight that repressed feelings and neurosis were held in and manifested by the body to develop a psycho-somatically engaged writing practice in which historical material—initially archival details and later myth—would be brought into the energetic field of the poet's lived, proprioceptive body and allowed to resonate and constellate with each other there. Spicer (who briefly underwent analysis and remained fascinated by and skeptical of the practice) was drawn to the psychoanalytic framing of mourning and melancholy and made decathexis central to his early practice and theorization of impersonality. Baraka—for a number of reasons, the most successful in effecting the poetic revolution they all sought—focused on the interpretive value of feelings and pursued, in his early writing, a path of rigorous, and sociogenic, self-analysis. While the formal effects of these importations have largely been

[73] See *Collected Prose* (248-9).

given due attention, the significance of their critical intervention in the disciplinary framing of poetry has been overshadowed, and re-disciplined as it were, by the critical emphasis on process-oriented (open and serial) verse. There is, in other words, a different sort of process at work here, underlying and occluded by processual aesthetics. The three poets sought not just the widening of the aesthetic frame but the puncturing of that frame and its crossing with, if not replacement by, a more applied sense of poetry writing as psycho-political "methodology." While such an intervention *is* typically credited to Baraka, in his case it tends to be treated as opposed to his early work rather than as an outgrowth of that work's psychological focus.

Of perhaps overlooked importance in this regard is the broad influence of Lionel Trilling's literary criticism. Agreeing with psychoanalysis that, in effect, "*We are all ill,*"—a premise the poets took to heart in a more politically pointed sense—Trilling, in "Art and Neurosis" (first published in *The Partisan Review,* Winter 1945), defines the artist as the man who "is what he is by virtue of his successful objectification of his neurosis, by his shaping it and making it available to others in a way which has its effect upon their own egos in struggle," and the writer as one who "by reason of the energy and significance of the forces in struggle within him provides us with the largest representation of the culture in which we, with him, are involved" (2008: 178-9). That this essay did not exert a formative influence on at least Olson's poetics is unlikely. Not incidentally, Trilling was also a vocal critic of the New Criticism's rejection of historical context, arguing in "The Sense of the Past" (first published in *The Partisan Review* in 1942), that it is the engagement with context that makes a work—even a "lyric" poem—great, and that the reader or audience has a *sense* of this historical context, or at least of the reality of its "pastness," however "unschooled" he remains in its particulars. The mid-century poets I discuss would seem to have taken these descriptions of psycho-social struggle and historical engagement *prescriptively*, and with a specific racial-political focus with regard to the forces of struggle within themselves, as they self-consciously undertook—*as task* and *method*—the criteria of greatness Trilling professes.

The resultant political instrumentalization of poetry stands in marked contrast to the idealized and ultimately redemptive abstraction 'lyric poetry' had come to stand for and, in Eliot's case, perform and epitomize. By extension, intimate historiography suggests a stance and practice divergent from modernist impersonality more broadly, whose chief proponents sought not to reform their selves for better social-political use in the revolutionary present, but to dissolve the (socially contaminated) self into an idealized tradition or non-human abstraction that could stand as an alternative, conservative or otherwise, to the social historical world. Rochelle Rives, looking beyond the accepted model of "escape" for such abstraction, argues that modernist impersonality is in fact a "theory of engagement, enabling forms of connection that both radically challenge authority and simultaneously sustain it" (2012: 3). Elaborating on this contradiction, Rives notes that modernist impersonality "promises the radical freedom of what Eliot termed 'surrender' and 'self-sacrifice'—from social constraints such as race, gender, sexuality, and more generally, 'personhood'—while…reinforc[ing] authoritarian paradigms that reproduce often violent scenarios of invasion and control" (2). Read psycho-politically, this tension can be described as a turning away from the messy scrabble of contemporary politics in order to better embrace identifications (and superegoic forces) whose social reign is contested, if not threatened, by democracy; or, in impersonality's less reactionary uses, as the forging of and investment in a counter-tradition that remains overdetermined by the dynamics of ostensibly cast-off yet powerful "internalized" or constitutive oppressions—"cruel attachments," in Lauren Berlant's evocative phrase. In contrast, the mid-century poets this dissertation treats did not pursue or imagine radical freedom from social constraints, but rather used impersonality to work through their historical formation by, and ongoing attachment to, such constraints. Indeed, they felt themselves to be intimately addressed by unrelieved historical material as generically marked—crucially, as racialized—persons.

Yet, while the difference between modernist and mid-century modes of impersonality is significant, the separation is neither straightforward nor clean. Of the three, Spicer's early

poetics most clearly participates in the modernist paradigm. As a result, it is in his work that impersonality's breaking into something else—alongside its persistence, with history itself manifesting as a persecuting, if not authoritarian, force—is most dramatic. Magnified in the racial-historical turn his poetics takes is both the emergence of intimate historiography from a therapeutic but still substantively modernist mode of impersonality—a form of work on the self that is more narrowly concerned with psychic need than political use—and, with it, the difference between being relatively freed from a category experienced as oppressive (in Spicer's case, sexuality) and being riveted to one that is, however ineluctably, sustaining (whiteness). In the psychic terms I have sketched, oppressive and sustaining are not fully separable—a fact pertinent to my chapter on the young Jones/Baraka's struggle with double consciousness—but whether one can imagine and desire an alternative or not matters to surviving the loss of a given structure of attachment. The difficulty my second chapter addresses is that Olson does imagine and desire an alternative to whiteness as he understands it, but his confidence in positing that alternative causes him to overlook the importance of continuing to struggle to release himself from the former's sway. This is the central contradiction—between the work and the tendency to assume and idealize one's 'fitness'—that inheres in the mid-century forms of impersonality that I argue simultaneously give rise to and resist intimate historiography. That contradiction generates and manifests as a problem of and for reading—for each poet's symptomatic reading of himself, and its implications for our reading of the resultant poetry.

Practices of reading: use idealized, use analyzed

While the psychoanalytic impulse and importations bent impersonality, and, with it, poetry generally, away from the idealization that was lyricization's legacy, the alteration was not total or consistent, and the poets largely remained invested not only in working on themselves but also in producing and performing alternative models of personhood. For Baraka that alternative was drawn from the blues, which offered an historically grounded mode of

impersonality, allowing him to effectively break with lyricized poetry toward the Black Arts poem as weapon—if only, as my chapter argues, to reinvest in the different mode of lyricization endemic to blues theory. In Olson's and Spicer's cases, wherever idealization dominates, reversions to disavowing and redemptive modes of modernist impersonality can be seen to occur. Insofar as the methods of writing the poets developed were intended to undertake psychic work—even allowing that that work was in relation to historical-political "distortions" and thus not properly psychoanalytic in a clinical sense (although, for Spicer and early Jones/Baraka, inextricable from more personal feelings)—the question of what was thought to constitute fitness for "use" and how it would be determined, or whether it was simply assumed, is relevant. In Olson's and Spicer's cases resistances to the work they simultaneously undertook are present from the beginning in the poets' affective orientations toward the "unrelieved" history they identified, and in psychoanalytic importations curiously shorn of the analytic component. Olson's insistence, regardless of what his archival research produces, that history, however estranged, should be "familiar" prevents him from registering its more unsettling reverberations as deeply as he otherwise might. He assumes, in spite of his own psychoanalytic analogies, too little friction in the process of retrieval. As a result the position of the analyst is dissolved into the dynamic body, and, as my chapter demonstrates, he allows racially charged wish fulfillment to supplant a more rigorous self-inquiry, producing a theoretical and formal turn away from his early intimate historiographic poetics. Spicer draws on mourning's decathexis as a way of dealing with the ambivalence toward erotic attachments that he suffered as a gay man. When he admits history into this frame, it is as a melancholic object on whose unknowability he insists overmuch, indicating initial resistance to the racial analysis of himself that he subsequently undertakes through the differently impersonal medium of fiction and then mobilizes as a political lens throughout his late poetry.

Here, we arrive at the chief locus of impersonality within psychoanalytic practice proper: the role of the analyst. While psychoanalysis of art was practiced by Freud himself, and poetry,

by virtue of its comparative density of image, figurative language, and wordplay—among the primary communicative modes of the unconscious—might well make a similar claim to generating useful material for interpretation,[74] the idea that one might effectively produce *and read* one's own displacements and condensations is another matter. Even with an understanding of the analyst's role as one of background listening and "neutral" mirroring, rather than active attention and interpretation, the disinterestedness of the analyst is central to their ability to identify sites of latent meaning and to the analysand's capacity to work through—to bring forward and divest from—rather than simply act out and reinforce damaging attachments and dynamics. Could assuming a relatively detached or impartial comportment to oneself in the para-social space of writing serve a similar function? The three cases studies in question suggest that genuinely bending impersonality toward psycho-historical work requires the incorporation of reflexive reading as a kind of self-analysis into the writing practice.[75]

Baraka's early poetry is, in this respect, exemplary. His ability to lay claim to the model of the blues—initially without the complacent comfort generated by absorption in the music that so many of his white peers seemed to assume—provided the relatively stable constant he needed to assess himself, and his fitness for "use," against. In effect, as my first chapter shows, he uses the blues as a kind of analyst figure in his early work as he engages in a rigorous 'investigation' of himself as the product of a particular set of American historical forces, into which his experience and the associated intelligence of his feelings can thereby provide insight. In other words, the fact that he does, early on, *read* himself—proves a comparative strength of his practice. Such reading is, of course, no guarantor that self-affirming idealization will be avoided or racial acting out averted, but for the poets considered here it helps to focus the anxious question of whether or not one is genuinely listening for and to history, and serves to ground the

[74] See Kenneth Burke's "Freud and the Analysis of Poetry." *American Journal of Sociology* 45.3, 1939: 391–417.
[75] Daniel Katz makes a similar observation about the psychoanalytic poetics of another "New American," Robert Duncan, noting that Duncan's *The H.D. Book* uses a "procedure of revision without 'correction'" to engage the "temporality of deferral, repetition, and delay of the analytic sessions, the structural repetitions of working through" (2018: 166).

expectations of practices that carry the double liability of high psychological stakes and a fraught, speculative social and genre context.

In any case, what emerges in each case after the poetics break is the *difficulty,* beyond the valuation, of historical listening. It is this that Olson and Spicer belatedly learn and absorb into their poetics as they face the more acute and intimate racial crises each chapter details. By the early to mid-1960's, having taken upon themselves a reworking of the unconscious ground of their being, with the hope of better accounting for and, in some measure, thereby "relieving" America's psycho-historical damage, each of the poets found his practice and, by all evidence, himself, at breaking point. While the abstraction of poetry from its political and historical contexts, to which impersonality had contributed, had largely been addressed, idealization proved the stickier half of lyricization's legacy, ever ready to sneak abstraction, and with it, racial cover, back in.

Idealization is, finally, a form a redemption. Arguing that black people are constitutively barred from redemption, Frank Wilderson, in a recent critique of the Humanities, suggests that "Black emplotment is a catastrophe for narrative at a meta-level rather than a crisis or aporia within a particular narrative."[76] Redemption is also a religious category, and it is at the meeting of the two that it sneaks into Olson's and Spicer's intimate historiographic practices.[77] Poetry's mid-century idealization made it difficult to form, and more difficult to sustain, a relationship to history that did not revert to a redemptive mode because that mode is implicit in the inflation of the vatic charge or, as Spicer has it (after Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies*), the "office" of the poet.[78] In spite of having written to himself, before undertaking *The Maximus*

[76] See "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" at *Humanities Futures* (hosted by Duke University). Accessed at https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/.
[77] It is not incidental that, in grappling with history more explicitly, Spicer produces a "fake novel" about Rimbaud and, with *The Holy Grail,* turns to romance.
[78] For an account of Spicer's studies with Ernst Kantorowicz as an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, see Kelly Holt's "Spicer's Poetic Correspondence: 'A Pun the Letter Reflects'" in *After Spicer*. Ed. by John Emil Vincent. Wesleyan UP, 2011: 36-68.

Poems, that "reality is never allowed to keep its own form & ease…but distends, until the strain is beyond yourself…And you will not express that satisfactorily until you see it as a pain, and no glory. Glory is also a generalization,"[79] Olson's poetic avatar, Maximus, can only be limited to the relative drudgery of bodying forth the Gloucester archive for so long before he is driven to the grander (and world literary) mythic synthesis and expansive "measure" of his middle period. The urge is arguably writ into the size of the task Olson sets himself—to effectively relieve American history not only in himself but for readers, and to likewise find and model a new "stance toward reality"—and the apparent suitability of poetry to such an ambition. Spicer almost subverts the grandeur of the poetic office with its revision to the "dead letter officer"—a postal servant (as were both Olson's and Baraka's fathers)—but the intensity of his investment in the Orphic makes that framing too hard for him to bear non-tragically.[80]

So Olson, who had declared man an object and developed his early poetics around excavating the kind of historical object he was, would find himself disconcertedly and publicly confessing fifteen years later to being "that famous thing, the White Man." Spicer, whose gay "unversion" of human being aspired to the position of blackness while pointedly excluding black people would find that the "Outside" he sought to channel—which he associates, in a late lecture, with the unconscious, still insisting that "an id down in the cortex which you can't reach…is just as far outside as Mars"[81]—was not so radically alien or undetermined as he had imagined it to be. When Spicer was forced to recognize what *was* knowable, history assumed the tenor of a persecuting force. His subsequent attempts to work through his relationship to history—made inevitable, in spite of his reluctance, because of the racial crisis my chapter details—feel perilously close to learning his death, his pursuit of political use no longer separable from being used up. Can history's undelivered letters be recovered, processed, and re-delivered without the

[79] From Notebook "Enniscorthy—June, 1946" quoted in Nichols, Miriam. *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside*. Alabama UP, 2011: 34.
[80] For his part, Baraka assumes the role of griot but the powers of black magic he mobilizes continue to be treated as principally directed toward and effective for a racially marked readership.
[81] Gizzi, Peter, Ed. *The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer.* Wesleyan UP, 1998: 5.

inflation or consumption of the carrier? This is another way of asking whether poetry's particular resources of address—apostrophe, prosopopoeia, even impersonality—can be reclaimed from the semi-transcendent transhistorical frame of lyric, even, especially, in an historiographic (and thus in some manner also necessarily transhistorical) context.[82] Is a poetic historiography that doesn't have recourse to a residual redemptive structure of feeling even possible?

While aiming his critique at the Humanities generally, Wilderson makes use of poetry (one of his own, occasioned by the murder of Oscar Grant) to demonstrate an alternative non-redemptive mode of representing the "historical stillness" in which, he argues, following Hortense Spillers, blackness resides. That stillness manifests in Wilderson's poem, "'Law Abiding'," by the hijacking of narrative by a personified family of bullets that, as Wilderson puts it, "could have its grief and loss processed as grief and loss more readily than the family of a Black murder victim…The future belongs to the bullet." Between the grieved dead bullet and the unmourned black person lies the poem as dead letter—a gesture toward remembering and mourning that cannot be adequately addressed. This impossible elegy uses poetic devices—including impersonality, employed with irony to conjure the bullet as transcendent and blameless speaker—to gesture toward a final human reference whose passage through the world registers only as the resistance that the circulation of force relies on to realize itself as violence. Yet Wilderson's dedication of the poem, marking the brief span of Oscar Grant's life with the conventional birth and death dates, holds a formal place for Grant's historicity even as Wilderson insists that the wider social legibility of his historical reality is a priori denied. It is in the tension between Wilderson's dedicatory wish and the testimonial function of the poem's body, as it tells you about the extraordinary order of the world, that an implicit imperative to

[82] See Elizabeth Freeman's reading of Isaac Julien's formalist sensibility as suggesting a transhistorical mode in which "the 'trans' is not short for 'transcendental' but means simply across or in between histories," an effect she associates with the S/M "oxymoron of acting out a passive position" (2010: 147).

intimate historiography resides: the discomfort this disjuncture creates demands of readers their attention to the racial history that has produced the poem as intelligible to them without having compelled them to its writing, or to a like struggle to relieve the unrelievable grief that occasioned it. Such moments are to be found in each of the oeuvres this dissertation treats, moments in which the tide of the poem pushes back against the critic's symptomatic reading for race and one instead finds oneself read, as it were, by the text, being given the writer's problem and made to recognize that it is also their own.

Here there appears a countervailing temptation to identification. After all, the poets' symptomatic readings of themselves affects their address to the reader, inflecting it with the psychic weight and pain of the work as such—the specific pathos of the poetry's "final human reference" in the poet's "form of passage through the world," to borrow Baraka's description. There is a tendency—borne out in the scholarship on Spicer and Olson in particular (and with which this writer has had to struggle)—to revert to biographical forms of reading that foreground and invest in the poet's subjectivity, (dis)identifying and defending (or attacking) accordingly. Yet, while Spicer in particular experienced and, in his late poetry, narrated his work's "final human reference" as a collapse of the impersonal mode he had sought to cultivate, I suggest that it is rather the realization of the different mode of impersonality toward which the work of all three had long tended—one that puts instrumental use over the idealized liberation with which it at times seemed (and at times was) compatible, at others not. Following this path of intimately impersonal historical use that the poetics lay out, we might take the poets' oeuvres as dead letters—not to be kept for furtive guilty consumption, but rather to be processed and put back into circulation as the calls for psycho-political work they also are.

This raises the question of where further we can take each poet's flawed effort to address the problem of his (and our) constitutive racism and historical overdetermination, what we can learn from the given method and its travails. In this respect, intimate historiography, as it occurs in the poet's oeuvres, is something of an incomplete poetic revolution, the elusive and oft-

resisted endpoint of which is the use of poetry writing for ongoing psycho-political work. The necessarily ongoing nature of the work—the *staying in the midst* of the historical damage one *is*—is essential to its efficacy; its difficulty can be seen in idealization's and lyricization's twin lures, where idealization and lyricization respectively function as theoretical and poetic versions of the promise of a "cure," and the idea of a cure nothing but the fantasy of a redemptive escape from the pain of the work. This lure is not limited to the poets in question, but reappears, as I have suggested, as a problem for the critic—one that contributes to the persistence of the aesthetic frame (easier to idealize than the politics) in the scholarship as well as the poetics. Treating each poetic method as a case study in an experimental creative methodology for undertaking psycho-political work on the historical imagination, this dissertation ultimately seeks to disentangle what is and is not useable for approaching the persistent problem of the racial limits of available genres—social and lyricized, of literature and of personhood, alike. It is, after all, because the poetries produce discernible genre effects—formations of who or what is speaking and listening to who or what, and how—that the pursuit of and digressions from intimate historiography and psycho-historical methodology this dissertation traces also matter—which is to say, have political stakes—beyond the disciplinary confines of poetics or literature.

Writing on the work of Lauren Berlant, of "the genres in which we choose or in which we are forced to live," Virginia Jackson notes that:

> In the last century, criticism might have dwelled on the pathos of uncertainty located in that "or," but I think that Berlant takes the function of criticism at the present time into the history of the present by not putting her emphasis on irony or pathos. Melancholia (for lost promises, lost genres, impossible worlds) may be inevitable, but thinking beyond the melancholic position can be an exhilarating if unstable enterprise.[83]

The poets do not necessarily escape these affective terms, but the strength of their living through them is that instead of making either melancholy or its beyond into critical values, they work within, through, and between them to generate sites of articulation that likewise neither cling to

[83] "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." *Los Angeles Review of Books.* April 12, 2015. Accessed at https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/function-criticism-present-time/.

nor abjure the 'lyric I' but lay it bare, read and repurpose it—finding, in the process, forms and practices for staying with the damage of that literary history and its wider philosophical and American contexts. Whether we can inhabit these forms more sustainably, adapt these practices with a different affective tenor, and find, in Berlant's words, "different kinds of potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates," is a question this dissertation seeks to raise rather than answer. An underlying assumption is that the *staying with* is itself is a vital corrective to recently dominant postmodern trajectories in American poetry (from Language-oriented writing to Conceptualist poetics) and in political philosophy (with its prioritization of becoming and ethics, and its persistent assumption of universal applicability), both of which have proved inadequate and problematic in the face of anti-blackness. Reading the mid-century's poetic—and, as Creeley's talk makes clear, also philosophical—crisis historically and psychologically, as do the poets this dissertation treats, I argue that staying with the revelation of historical damage and working through it without purporting to cure or redeem ourselves offers the only possibility of genuinely opening our "genre-specific fictive modes of eusocial inter-altruistic kin-recognizing kind" in a way that "breach[es] the divide between White and Black," and not just reinventing more ostensibly ethical forms of idealized (and tacitly universal, or white) post-subjectivity whose address is still effectively lyricized and whose historical ear remains functionally deaf.

History's solicitations

Intimate historiography's theoretical resonance

Taken together, I propose that the intimate historiographic aspects of the poetic practices I trace suggest an alternative path out of modernism to the ethical orientation that came to dominate both critical theory and, with the advent of Language-oriented writing, poetics. As that paradigm—with its embrace of alterity, contingency and indeterminacy—proves

perhaps over-optimistic in the ever-present face of anti-blackness,[84] it is worth returning to the earlier mid-century period in which the collapse of the History that had sustained poetics and Western philosophy alike was experienced as the "nausea" of our "being riveted to being" that "history has allowed us to know," as Emmanuel Levinas, in the throes of his own mid-century crisis, described it, before developing the ethics for which he is better known.[85] (As Jones/Baraka once put it, "feeling predicts intelligence."[86]) Returning to the knot of feeling that these mid-century poetics practices lay bare affords the opportunity to reconsider the broader theoretical problems of being and subjectivity in light of the racial specificity of the American context, a larger undertaking to which this dissertations hopes, however indirectly, to contribute. It also allows one to sit with the immediate emotional responses to the American racial crisis that the poetry in question records as it evinces a wider psychic breakdown—one that perhaps needed less philosophical reorientation than continued working through.

Finally then, I read the de-lyricization of poetry to which the poets succumb as a way of proposing, at a slant, the value for radical politics, too, of resisting the idealization and righteousness to which utopian aspirations can give rise, in favor of the messier work of staying with and working through our fraught attachments.[87] The poets did not always prioritize the latter, but it remains a possibility in their work that, with the relative clarity hindsight affords, we yet might. That the need remains present I will leave for the conclusion, where I sketch the contemporary turn to psycho-historical framings of race and the profusion of intimate

[84] See Lewis R. Gordon's "Theory in Black Teleological Suspensions in Philosophy of Culture" in *Qui Parle* 18.2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 193-214. While Gordon's critique of ethics, which draws on Fanon and Freud, is not primarily aimed at the Levinasian ethics as "first philosophy," or its Derridian and Butlerian offshoots, the racial problematic he introduces likewise complicates the premise of that other ethics insofar as deprived of Being, blackness can no more simply occupy the position of transcendent alterity without a working through of its reductive and radical historical othering. See also Gordon's *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (1995).
[85] *On Escape: De l'évasion* (1935). Trans. by Bettina Bergo. Stanford UP, 2003.
[86] "Gatsby's Theory of Aesthetics" in *SOS*: 138.
[87] See Eve Sedgwick's suggestion that "activist politics, even more than pedagogy, takes place—even at best—just at this difficult nexus"—between what object relations psychoanalyst Melanie Klein has called the 'paranoid/schizoid position' and the 'depressive position', and with her proposed "use of these pages, if anything, to aerate, expose, and ideally to disable or 'burn out' the potency of certain violent defenses" (2006: 5).

historiographic practices in contemporary poetics and other cultural forms. Here, following the alternative path through modernism's ruins that is illuminated by taking intimate historiography as a lens, I want to connect this dissertation's focal poetic practices with post-Marxist theories of history. I do so in order to step back out from poetics to the works' wider significance, and to consider what they propose for historiography—specifically for a politically engaged lay historiographic practice that might be of pedagogical use to critical race theory and anti-racist praxis.

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In foregrounding matters of desire and unconscious solicitation as central to their relationships (and the relationships of those they address) to history, the poets this dissertation reads anticipate post-Marxist historiography's attention to feeling, the unconscious, problems of representation, and its reimagining of 'necessity' as a relation to the present and a condition for thought rather than a teleological drive into the future. Beyond the otherwise somewhat needlessly proprietary claim to thinking *avant-la-lettre*, these poets' oeuvres warrant reading within this frame because they have things to teach us about the ways major theorists' moving claims and ideas about history translate into concrete practices mediated by writing. At the height of postmodernism (conventionally periodized), Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*, famously concluded:

> History is what hurts, it is what refuses desires and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its "ruses" turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention. But this History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force. This is indeed the ultimate sense in which History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification: we may be sure that its alternating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them (1981: 102).

Jameson's insistence on understanding history in terms of effects rather than reifying it as a force is consistent with his Marxist intellectual inheritance. Yet here, the ground and horizon of History—with its terrain of remembering and forgetting, intention and desire, pain and

frustration—demarcates not so much a socio-economic base as a psychological one. In this subterranean realm, effects and force are more difficult to keep apart, and Jameson's prose succumbs to a kind of secondary dispersed personification of History's "alternating necessities" which are endowed with the uncanny capacity to remember us. The result is an uncomfortable excess of recognition, as if the apprehension of the historical might be imagined as the kind of encounter one has with a person one knows they have met in the past but cannot place, a situation made the more awkward by that person clearly knowing you—or recollecting whatever version of *who you are* appeared in that lost context or scene, with which you may or may not now wish to identify. Indeed, in relation to the thwarting of collective praxis, the whole scenario takes on the color of an involuntary 'outing,' introducing paranoia into the practice of interpretation that Jameson proposes to address. In contradistinction to the method of history from below, historical representation is here fraught with the possibility that in writing, the historian will inadvertently reveal more about himself than about the period and subjects he or she purports to convey.

The endeavor to apprehend history in the sense Jameson describes forms a counterpart, as it were, to subaltern historiography, which seeks to fracture the very positing of History from the inside, speaking within its terms so that the trace of what escapes those terms might be heard in the background as a kind of interference.[88] I say a counterpart insofar as, in the cited Jameson passage, that trace is not presumed a fundamental part of the *conscious* reality of the writer or his subjects, but is rather the result of a fracturing of his/her reality and being, along with the history that gave it coherence, by the effort to hear those other temporalities—and to hear them not only as properties of the experience of the other, but as covertly constitutive of the self's *unconscious*. This inner ear to difference, too often subsumed under the relatively

[88] See Dipesh Chakrabarty's "Marx after Marxism: A Subaltern Historian's Perspective." *Economic and Political Weekly* 28.22 (1993): 1094-6.

atemporal and largely social frame of ethics, is at the core of what I have been calling intimate historiography.

Jameson's understanding of history may need no theoretical justification, but it does nonetheless call for a practice—of not forgetting, or, with Olson, of bringing into at least partial relief. Such a practice is what Jacques Derrida called for at the end of his 1993 *Specters of Marx:* "[One] should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk *with* him, *with* her…how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself" (2012: 221). This movement, from dialogue to choral (dis)possessed voicing, signals the kind of intimacy pursued by Jack Spicer in and after 1960, as he contended with his own sense that "History begins with shrewd people and ends with ghosts" by channeling "dead letters," so that they might yet be delivered, their messages received—"That is why we/I are writing" (MV, 290). In short, Spicer attempts, through poetry writing, a version of the praxis Derrida prescribes some thirty years later. Olson's framework hues closer to Jameson's—returning, in 1969, to history as "the great unadmitted limit of experience," without which there can be no genuine thought—but he too emphasizes the ear's capacity for inward listening and seeks to make space, in his writing body and bodily-psyche, and in the textual body of his *The Maximus Poems,* for the speech of those more concrete ghosts he finds in the archive. It is these aspects of the poets' practices that seem to me to see the problem clearly and respond to it meaningfully. All seek *to learn to desire the history today is*, as Baraka once put it, by first developing a relationship to history in which *its* desires, as it were, might be heard or felt.

In focusing on desire, all three poets foreground the intimate reach of history's presence, the way its solicitations and frustrations operate at the level of our libidinal binding to self, others, and world. Here it bears noting that Jameson characterizes history as that which "refuses desires" and Derrida as a figure (if not a force) that has desires of its own to speak, which we must learn to make room for in ourselves. They too, like the poets, implicitly counsel attunement to (if not embrace of) what Eric Santner, drawing on Walter Benjamin, calls the

"creaturely life" of the human, a "by-product of exposure to what we might call the excitations of power, those enigmatic bits of address and interpellation that disturb the social space' (2006: 28). While Santner focuses on the law (from which radical political commitments generally oblige us to withdraw, a la Bartleby), Jameson and Derrida here, and the poets with which I am concerned, all attend to the enigmatic signals emitted not by the symbolic order but by the dense sediment of occurrence that very order attempts to corral, overlook, and suppress. Following Spicer's late refiguring of the poet's task, we might treat these signals as dead letters, still in or thrown back into circulation, seeking readers whether or not we are their 'proper' addressees. If nothing else, poetry insistently opens address.

As a way of thinking about the transmissions put into circulation by historical experiences of events, the dead letter, too, must be opened. Conceptually, the dead letter might include messages disavowed, those delivered to deaf ears, those (like the Afro-Pessimist idea of slavery as a contemporary relational structure) that seem untimely, and those that cannot be readily understood because the density of their meaning defies the distance and coherence we associate with understanding. Such messages call for practices of sitting with those densities, over-determinations, irreconcilabilities, and fundamental antagonisms—including, most critically, that between the system of meaning that supports you and the one the ghost reveals. This is a matter differently traumatic than exposure to the law, which is punishing to be sure, but which sustains rather than dismantles the reality, however cruel, into which we have been socialized. In *Dead Letters Sent: Queer Transmissions* (2015), Kevin Ohi notes one such irreconcilable antagonism in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*—between queer and African-American relations to the destruction of patrimony—and calls for a practice of close reading that traces out those disparate threads without synthesizing them at the meta-level where the irreconcilability is the message, offering its own formal gesture toward redemption. The alternative he presents is simply sitting with the dissonance and its discomfort: a practice of negative capability in the extreme. Where Ohi proposes this as a critical method for literary

scholars, I am interested in its possibilities for a reading and writing practice that might be more widely engaged. The antagonism Ohi identifies between queer utopia and black trauma is also at the core of Spicer's work, allowing his confrontation with his poetics to open the question of what sitting with and working through such an antagonism entails, and what it suggests in turn not only for criticism but for pedagogy and practice. It is a question of not only recognizing or even affirming alternative narratives (as in history from below) but of forming—and being ourselves re-formed by—new attachments to spectral needs and personified necessities that may be incompatible with our very ground and sense of reality.

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How to desire the destruction of your reality and thereby commit yourself to use in and for the emergence of another reality is the revolutionary problem par excellence. The poets I discuss had different relations to it—Baraka could envisage his recreation; Spicer became effectively suicidal. This necessary differential continues to be met with calls for ethical submission on the part of those in dominant identity groups, on the one hand, or with universalizing generalizations on the other. With respect to the latter, Giorgio Agamben's explicitly revolutionary theorization of use, in the context of political philosophy, in his *The Use of Bodies* (2016) warrants our brief attention. Like the mid-century poets I have selected, Agamben too argues for a shift from possession to use of the self, making the latter the cornerstone of a long philosophical project. For Agamben, use, contrasted with possession, entails a looser de-essentialized relation to given structures (whether social, legal, or of identity). In this, it shares with the poetics I discuss an implicit impersonalization of and partial unbinding from historically entrenched forms, combined with the *staying with* the material those forms held that I have suggested is also necessary to avoid the assumption and idealization of a too easy and ultimately shallow transformation. Yet, Agamben's articulation of his project remains, however otherwise valuable, curiously universal and indifferent to history, beyond the history of philosophy he engages. It is only by remaining within such a disciplinary frame, for

instance, that he can unselfconsciously site and affirm Paul's enjoinment to the Roman slave *to remain a slave and use that position*—an example, made to carry much theoretical weight, that conjures while ignoring the very different history of chattel slavery that bears more decisively on our world and its potential (or not) for salvaging.[89] Likewise telling is Agamben's continued rhetorical reliance on the intervention of a messiah to effect the called-for shift, in lieu of considering historical understanding and psychological work as an alternate path for arriving at the sense of urgency he seeks to convey.

As Rei Terada writes in "On Historical Transition and Transition as Such," of artist William Pope.L's *Reenactor,*

> [The] point is that there is nowhere else to be but a world that contains illegible and impossibly dense antagonisms, and that even this cannot be "seen" or grasped as an act of thought or will…To persist…is to look around where there is little to see and nothing to gain, in a world of entities and activities most of which are not-for-you. This collapse of identity is not dissolution into a universal sub-identity (as it may be for Agamben). It's heterogeneous object status and asymmetrically experienced non-relation.[90]

In contradistinction to Agamben's more abstract corrective to Western ontology and the implicit, unacknowledged, whiteness of being that it encodes, the poets I discuss remained—in spite of poetry's own tendencies to abstraction and idealization—more grounded in the specific forms of object status and non-relation made visible by attention to American racial history and politics. Charles Olson maintained that "man himself is an object"; or, as he earlier put it in a private notebook entry, "I am a landscape, and not a man…" A landscape—specifically that of Gloucester, Massachusetts, in his case—is not that which sees, but that which is seen, the qualities and materials of which are arranged and given form and use by someone else. Spicer, too, is adamant about incapacitating his thought and will, submitting his psyche to an historically haunted Outside force to rearrange like so much "furniture." It is because of their

[89] Paul's invocation that the slave should "remain a slave" is presented as exemplary of the "Destituent Potential" with which the book (and the *Homo Sacer* series) concludes (Agamben, 2016: 274).
[90] From a working paper shared in December, 2015. For a revised, published argument on Pope.L's *Reenactor* see "Saturated Crime: Pope.L's Reenactor" in *Blind Field: A Journal of Cultural Inquiry.* November 7, 2018. Accessed at https://blindfieldjournal.com/2018/11/07/saturated-crime-pope-ls-reenactor/.

historical and psychological orientations, as much as their sometimes direct and sometimes evasive registrations of the racially specific (heterogeneous and asymmetrical) quality of the political problem they sought to address, that the poets' understandings and practices of use of the self have something to offer critical race studies and anti-racist praxis. In making this final suggestion, I turn to the forms of object status and experienced non-relation current in the Whiteness Studies branch of that field, and draw on D.W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory of use and Abraham and Torok's trangenerational phantom to propose an intimate historiographic capacitation for the ethical imperative that remains there dominant.

Intimate historiography's political promise

The forms of historical objectification the poets pursued entail, in the American racial context, a potential reversal of a particularly entrenched asymmetry: the gaze that determines double-consciousness. This brings the poetics into productive conversation with not only the post-Marxist historiography discussed above, but also with contemporary conversations in critical race studies that remain limited to an ethical framework in spite of recent critiques. George Yancy, a public intellectual philosopher and arguably the dominant force in the sub-field of Whiteness Studies, has proposed the cultivation of a white form of double consciousness, wherein white people performatively apply to themselves a version of the objectifying gaze DuBois theorized. Borrowing, as a prompt, the violent interpellation Fanon narrates in *Black Skin, White Masks,* he urges his students, and white people more generally, to employ the phrase, "Look, a white!" to reorganize their social perception and split (or double) their (self-) consciousness.[91] The problem with his proposal is that, as a psychic structure, double-consciousness produces feelings of shame and self-loathing that, in the case of whiteness, generate a range of all too familiar symptomatic manifestations. Yancy seeks to address the volatile underlying dynamic of shaming by recourse to an ethical imperative, which he borrows

[91] *Look, A White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness.* Temple UP, 2012.

from Judith Butler but has its roots in the work of Levinas—to tarry with the discomfort and anxiety of being "un-sutured."[92] Yet, much as it may mobilize desire, the ethical commandment cannot compel an otherwise absent capacity. In attending to the psychoanalytic dimension of intimate historiographic poetics, I have sought to focus on capacitation. Following the example of Pope.L's *Reenactor*, I would suggest that the experience of object status Terada also calls for might be usefully practiced with respect to historical material in the para-social space that art creates and that a de-aestheticized poetry writing practice might make more accessible.

As the unconscious of address, the gaze too is historical, bound up with the difficulties of address and listening to which this dissertation attends. The particular discomfort of the black gaze for people who, in Baldwin's phrase, "think they are white" has a long history—from the punishment of black slaves for looking at the white people they served, to Jean-Paul Sartre's inadvertent reduction, memorably critiqued by Fanon, of the black eyes (and, by extension, words) of the Caribbean poets whose work he introduced in *Orphée Noir* to expressions of revolutionary anger:

> Sartre begins Orphée Noir thus…'Did you think that when those heads that our fathers had forcibly bowed down to the ground were raised again, you would find adoration in their eyes?' I do not know; but I say that he who looks into my eyes for anything but a perpetual question will have to lose his sight; neither recognition nor hate (*Black Skin, White Masks,* 29).

In effect, in his reductive reading, Sartre assumes black anger in order to avoid enduring the disorienting *uncertainty* of being seen as white. Fanon identifies Sartre's slip as a problem of historiography, of the "born Hegelian" over-investing in his own, implicitly reassuring, narrative of historical becoming, one in which "black zeal" is merely a transitional moment on the path to a "society without races."[93] American attachment to colorblindness is, in effect, a banalized version of the same hope—less a matter of what one sees or does not see than of continuing to

[92] "Introduction: *Un-Sutured*" in *White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem?* Ed. by George Yancy. Lexington Books, 2016.
[93] See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (132-5).

avoid *being seen historically*. In "Uses of the Blues"—in many ways his own short treatise on intimate historiography, one that, my first chapter suggests, may well have been prompted by Jones/Baraka's critique—James Baldwin argues that the disavowed recognition of the slave's gaze is centrally inscribed in the American political unconscious:

> America, unlike any other Western power, had its slaves on the mainland. They were here…The American found himself in a very peculiar position because he knew that black people were people…And the attempt to avoid this, to avoid this fact, I consider one of the keys to what we can call loosely the American psychology (*Cross,* 76).

The accretion of disavowal upon disavowal implied here complicates what has become the dominant psychoanalytic framework for historical trauma—that of the intergenerational phantom, theorized by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok a decade after the period on which this dissertation focuses. Noting the effects of trauma in subsequent generations, they describe the symptomatizing presence of a secret passed down as such. Gabriele Schwab has applied this line of thinking to perpetrators as well as victims in the post-Holocaust German context,[94] but the greater temporal distance from slavery makes for a peculiarly intransigent phantom. Its active and enduring disavowal—not only by, but concomitant with the production of white people as such, and thus its entrenchment at the deepest recesses of being and identity—suggests a need for intimately historiographic work *as* (and as well as) psychic work. Without that work, our history, and particularly the trauma of slavery, will continue not only to operate as a symptomatizing secret but—and this may be the cause of its continued power to sustain anti-blackness—to appear as a secret that black people hold about the rest of us.

This pernicious dynamic can be understood in relation to the question of use, on which the poetic practices also turn, through an extension of the thinking of British object relations psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott. Central to Winnicott's work on the capacity for healthy social relations is a distinction between "object relating" and "object use."[95] His framework gives

[94] *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma.* Columbia UP, 2010. See also Frosh, Stephen. *Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions.* Palgrave Macmillon, 2013.
[95] *Playing and Reality,* 1971: 93-4.

insight into the dynamics underlying the philosophical positions and, more to the point, the social-political orientations that Agamben maps. For Winnicott, object relating is an infantile state in which the object in question is retained within the fantasy field of omnipotent control; this tendency might be understood to underlie the still-dominant political and philosophical reign of property that Agamben, among others, critiques. Object use, in Winnicott's vocabulary, refers to a developmental achievement in which the object is moved (partially) outside the volatile scrim of fantasy life, allowing its relative autonomy and other uses (uses which, to borrow Terada's phrase, "are not-for-you") to be recognized. While this is more or less developmentally achieved by any non-psychotic adult, the unconscious may be said to perpetually seek opportunities for regression. It is in our social and political life, along the lines historically prepared for us and intimately passed down as our un- or under-thought inheritance, that we most often find them. The poets I discuss understood this, and their variants of use draw together and traverse Agamben's and Winnicott's theoretical frameworks, foregrounding their potential racial-political applications in the process. The attempted shift from 'ego' to impersonal use of the self discussed in the previous section of this introduction roughly corresponds with the movement from a politics of property relations, undergirded by racial-colonial fantasies of omnipotent control, to a revolutionary politics based on mutually recognized and negotiated, semi-autonomous, interracial use.

Winnicott's language for what the psychic shift entails is no less dramatic than that employed by the poets. Endowing an object with 'use' involves imagining, and seeing it "survive," its "destruction" in fantasy. In pursuing selves more fit for use, the poets experienced and thematized themselves as being decomposed into archival matter, used up by ghosts, and drowning (that they might be reborn). That they imagined this occurring at the behest of history in the context of revolutionary racial upheaval calls for an extension of Winnicott's framework. As articulated, his theory might best serve to describe the racist production of black people as slaves, whose potential for autonomy is resented and violently punished to the extent that it *is*

recognized. If, however, we also consider the self as an object that likewise survives destruction within the model of the mother-infant dyad, it is not only that the mother survives the child's anger at being "abandoned" and its retaliatory fantasy "destruction" of her, but also that the child experiences itself as surviving the mother's "destruction" (or rejection) of it—her refusal of some desire, her brief disappearance, in short, her autonomy—and thereby learns to use (and soothe) itself, as a likewise real object and semi-autonomous being. The person who "thinks he is white" is, I would propose, one who has not learned to survive the (implicitly maternalized) black gaze in its separateness and its rejection of his desire for omnipotent control—including the anti-racist white person's desire to maintain control of their social reception and self-image. This is in no small part because that gaze is instead, at once inadvertently and inevitably, made to serve as the bearer of and unwelcome mirror for the white person's disavowed historical core. Such a person cannot ultimately use himself or be of use politically; in any case, that use is limited and notoriously 'fragile'. In their pursuits of listening for and being seen by history, the poets this dissertation treats not only figured themselves as historical objects but struggled to move toward experiencing their selves in, and enabling themselves for, the mode of object use I have described. Intimate historiographic practice, of one kind or another, may prove vital to people-who-think-they-are-white being able to take responsibility for the uncomfortable secret of our historical constitution as a damaged and damaging genre of human being and, in doing so, to open the possibility of hearing and addressing others, and using our selves, otherwise.

Chapter 1

Amiri Baraka's Transbluesency— bearing and sharing historical weight

a long long long blues full of other blues and blues inside of them

In 1998, Amiri Baraka penned a laudatory introduction to John Sinclair's *Fattening Frogs for Snakes,* a blues-based multi-media poetry collection and "Delta Sound Suite." Baraka—who had, in his seminal 1963 work *Blues People,* stated unequivocally that "*Blues* means a Negro experience, it is the one music the Negro made that could not be transferred into a more general significance" (94)—uses the blues to radically unsettle the assumed phenotypic basis of racialization:

> If you been in America and ain't sleep then…you would dig from the top, how rare and necessary is the John Sinclair work. Especially, if you know that many people think JS is, no shit, WHYTE!! // What it is, is that JS, from way back, has been in the real world. And for bunches of white guys, certainly those who qualify as Straight Up Americans, that's a trip not usually bothered with… // JS has been a WHITE PANTHER (NOSHIT) doing time for the crime of thought. And resistance to the continuing slavery of US imperialism and its prophylactic, racism. J has always been on the firing line, on the front line of saying and doing. He is a brother, in the real sense, of the flesh and the spirit… / John has always, since I been knowin him, dug the music. From the way back to the way out. Not in the "Gee Whiz" fashion of well paid critics, who are all much whiter than John. Hell, there's a buncha wooden negroes much whiter than John, if it gots to be about something as flimsy as color. (Damn, Stan, you look mighty pale around the lips! But thass what money dooos.) / Because finally, it has always been about feeling and understanding. About Perception, Rationale and the Use, we make of the world.[96]

Race, no mere accident of skin color, is redefined as a way of seeing and using the world that now appears available not only to the lower class 'Negro', who is the central subject of *Blues People,* but also to a politically committed and critically attuned non-black ally. Indeed, Baraka's feeling of solidarity with Sinclair, whom he positions as a kind of Trojan horse (appearing as but not really "WHYTE"), motivates a surprisingly optimistic and arguably problematic

[96] "Introduction" to "John Sinclair: Fattening Frogs for Snakes." August 1998. Accessed at http://www.fatteningfrogsforsnakes.com/introduction-by-amiri-baraka

epistemological subversion of race as a meaningful category. If this makes political sense in relation to the virulent socio-biological definitions he aptly dismisses as "flimsy," it also seems to move away from the accumulated historical experience central to his own earlier formulation, in which the Blues, central to the black radical tradition, fundamentally expressed the transgenerational elaboration of a people as such in response to the shared inheritance of a violently imposed ontological crisis. There he had written:

> The idea of a white blues singer seems an even more violent contradiction of terms than the idea of a middle-class blues singer. The materials of blues were not available to the white American, even though some strange circumstance might prompt him to look for them. It was *as if* these materials were secret and obscure, and blues a kind of ethnohistoric rite as basic as blood (148, my emphasis).

Sinclair would appear to constitute an exception, one whose circumstance of "doing time" and being "on the firing line" had not only prompted him to search but *to find* and effectively embody blues materials. This apparent opening—pried from the sly, critically de-ontologizing slip of the 'as if' in Jones/Baraka's earlier formulation—begs the question of what, other than lived genealogy, might be conducive to a sufficiently deep "feeling and understanding."

Sinclair arrives at a non-white perception he is not 'given' in large measure through artistic study, rendered as a kind of prosthetic substitute for the otherwise absent inheritance of deeply engrained historical experience.

> The book is not a Homage to the Blues, it is a long long long blues full of other blues and blues inside of them…John has taken the Blues, many Blues, many Blues singers, their words, their feeling, their lives, their conditions, the places and traces of where they was and is, the Delta, Chicago under the El, in the streets of any anonymous Black and Blue America, and transformed them into a poetry a narrative epoch of PLACE and REPOSSESSION…The book is a marvel, in that it is not only poem, but research, bibliography, discography, history, of the most copious yet careful and earnest kind. Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, Robert Lockwood, Booker White, Jimmy Rogers, Roosevelt Sykes, Little Brother Montgomery, Sunnyland Slim, Sonny Boy Williamson, Howling Wolf, Robert Johnson, Charley Patton and many peeps you don't even know, all be in here. Where to find their music. What their lives were like. And what is, after all, the Blues, when it move inside you forever.

In placing Sinclair's Delta Sound Suite within the blues tradition, Baraka moves it from a position merely outside (homage, or the 'gee whiz' appreciation of the well paid critic) to one that might be described as the outside of an inside: "blues full of other blues and blues inside of them."[97] Sinclair's blues is nested in an explicitly pedagogical manner that other forms of the blues are not. In short, to steer clear of appropriation Sinclair has to sing *about* the blues in order to actually sing them; he has to engage in "research…history, of the most copious yet careful and earnest kind." At the same time, if his performance is to be more than tribute, historical content is not sufficient; Sinclair must achieve "the precision of research, but in the context of song." This element of song is imagined almost as a psychic instrumentation of the body: "the sound in John, laid there, *by them*" (my emphasis). As Sinclair's subjectivity is figured as given over to the alterity of an "anonymous Black and Blue America," the perception of the world that his blues suite offers is not based in his historical experience but in *theirs,* for which he serves as a remarkably frictionless conduit. In what is tacitly framed as a mortgaging of Sinclair's ego, his poetry becomes a "narrative epoch of…REPOSSESSION"—notably an epoch and not an epic, shifting emphasis from the scale of the work produced to the duration of the act of making it, the lived temporality of Sinclair's repossession by history. Arguably constituting or pointing toward a psychic level of reparations, Sinclair's archival and artistic labor, as a commitment to study in a fully embodied sense, contributes to his political use. When the Blues "move inside you forever" you become an echo chamber, a portal to the historical depth of the real world, one who listens to and brings forward, brings back "the music and the facts, for further beginnings, somewhere in our mind." It is the music, the element of song, that ensures a lesson more than merely conceptual, a transformation of not only Sinclair's critical consciousness but his sensibility, his political bearing, his very mode of racialized being in the

[97] Sinclair's layered pedagogical blues takes its place on what *Blues People* had already established as a 'blues continuum'—a sequential development of blues-based genres that includes the early private expression of ex-slaves and the performance-oriented classic blues of Bessie Smith, as well as such reemergent forms as the Southwestern urban Rhythm & Blues and bebop. It is bebop that provides the closest link to the possibility of something with a genuine blues spirit being produced by non-black allies.

world. That he is now considered to be inhabited by and possess a *blues* understanding highlights a substantial shift in Baraka's thinking about the accessibility of the experiential materials, the lifeblood, of the blues.

In short, Sinclair's purported racial transformation (or at least the transformation of his political consciousness at a level deeper than the term generally connotes) relies on a malleability and mobility of the blues that Baraka, as LeRoi Jones, had not initially believed possible. The basis for the shift was, however, laid years earlier, toward the end of *Blues People* itself, where there is a reconfiguration of the black position in American society, from subcultural to what Baraka would later dub "outsane." As noted above, throughout much of *Blues People,* Negro culture is treated as a thing apart from mainstream America; white Americans are able to comprehend and even contribute to the wilder instrumentation of jazz, but dissociated from the Blues that provide that music's origin and sustain its depth. As the timeline of Jones/Baraka's analysis approaches his own experience, however, mainstream America—degraded into "the sinister vapidity of mainline American culture" (182)—comes to be seen less in terms of separation than deficiency. Speaking of the beboppers, he writes:

> This generation also began to understand the *worth* of the country, the society, which it was supposed to call its own. To understand that you are black in a society where black is an extreme liability is one thing, but to understand that it is the society that is lacking and is impossibly deformed because of this lack, *and not yourself*, isolates you even more from that society. Fools or crazy men are easier to walk away from than people who are merely mistaken (185).

If this changes the nature of the boppers' blues, it also comes to change Baraka's understanding of America's relationship to the blues, not only as music but as a way of experiencing and comprehending the world, as, in effect, an ontology. By the time he writes his introduction for Sinclair's album, the Blues are no longer alien to mainstream America; on the contrary, they are its defining condition, albeit in negative form:

> The Blues is everywhere in America…Tell me white cats aint got the blues. It's a lie. They might say they depressed. Or a nigger took they job. Or the iceman they real father. Or they psychiatrist feeling on they leg. But it still be the U.S. no shit blues.

Here, the blues, already in *Blues People* generative of a wide range of musical genres, is further diffused to constitute an atmospheric condition, within which Baraka maintains a difference between having the disavowed "U.S. no shit blues"—as one might have a symptom—and singing the blues, as a way of a life that sees and works within the ongoing violence of American history.

In this chapter, I argue that communicating the resistant kernel of what the Blues is and knows across this psycho-historical divide—a divide Baraka reframes in the early 1990's as internal to the blues, reimagined as the fundamental American condition—is a central preoccupation of Baraka's ongoing work, a project of what, in naming his first Selected Poems, he called *transbluesency*. The term, borrowed from a 1946 song by Duke Ellington ("Transblucency"), provides a suggestive umbrella for the series of experiments with form and address he undertook as he struggled, with growing frustration, to share the historical weight he heard in the blues with non-black readers. This desire motivated an ongoing renegotiation in his work of the racialization of the Blues as (set of) genre(s) and an ethos, and sustained a tension between the blues as a practice of staying with history and the potential mobility of that same practice. Emerging from his own early rumination on the apparent incommunicability of Blues across the color line, *transbluesency* entails pushing something that is disinclined to movement.[98] In particular, it requires the under-sung labor of converting entrenched psychological into sustained political resistance. Insisting that the Blues being black history

[98] I should also note that Jones/Baraka's early conviction that the blues cannot cross the color line the way jazz could is not uncontested. For instance, Nick Bromell argues that the absorption of formal qualities of the blues into rock and roll in the 1960's precisely highlights "the ability of this musical form to cross the boundaries of race (and nation, too) and perform its work for new audiences in different but formally analogous social conditions" (2000: 194). While Bromell's attention to concrete formal qualities of the music in a body of scholarship that has been largely preoccupied with its cultural work is certainly welcome, the idea of "formally analogous social conditions" between African-American double consciousness and the alienation felt by mid-century white youth is unconvincing and a considerably more problematic application of abstraction. In any case, if it is fair to say that the blues form crossed over into rock and roll by way of this formal resemblance, then to speak of form alone isn't saying very much and certainly doesn't effectively capture what the work of the blues might be or imply that rock and roll does the same kind of work. Here, Bromell's categorization of the quality of the blues singer's voice as belonging to the content rather than the form goes some distance in explaining the problem of treating the two as separable. The voice, of course, carries the feeling which traverses both form and content, lending each set of genres—blues and rock 'n' roll—an irreducible particularity.

means it is therefore also American history, Baraka not only adopts Sterling Brown's proposition that "The Music…is *our* history" but uses it to make a larger, revolutionary claim on America (my emphasis, *Blues People*, ix). In Baraka's work—as music moves into language, and history is explicitly referenced as well as affectively registered—the pronominal possessive is made to negotiate the scope and color of its referent, working its way toward the slightly wider aperture captured in "our mind." In short, for Baraka, the Blues is a set of genres borne of and sustained through the "changing same" of a racially specific set of historical experiences. At the same time, through his thinking about the generative conditions of the Blues, race comes to be rethought as a set of genres determined less by historical experience as such than by the historical understanding to which primarily, but perhaps not exclusively, experience gives rise. The fact that access to this shared understanding is neither simply presumed available nor foreclosed has made it difficult to think. Yet this very difficulty makes Baraka's carefully calibrated position as important today as it was in the mid-century.

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Caught between the postmodern terms of essentialism and appropriation, this position of Baraka's has been a slippery and contentious one, difficult to clearly see or fully articulate. For some scholars, blues simply remains untouchable by white would-be practitioners.[99] For others, its definitional terms are so abstracted and generalized from the music's history (and its history of musicology) that white 'bluesmen' can be found with relative ease, as with Cornel West's identification of Bruce Springsteen on the basis of his "willing[ness] to look unflinchingly at catastrophic conditions" and ability to endure "with grace and dignity" and "lyrically" express those conditions.[100] Nor have more labored deliberations over the question produced

[99] RA Judy took this position in talk at UCI on "Easy Rider" with respect to the difference between The Animals' and Nina Simone's versions of "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood." See also "The Poetic Socialities of Radical Humanism, or the Giving Blues" Accessed at https://www.boundary2.org/2014/11/the-poetic-socialities-of-radical-humanism-or-the-giving-blues-by-r-a-judy/

[100] Speaking in a moment of optimism after the election of Barack Obama, Cornel West suggested that the designation 'blues people' could be applicable to anyone who meets that description, itself largely borrowed from

particularly satisfying results. In "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?" (1994), Joel Rudinow uses Baraka's *Blues People* as the principal site of engagement as he takes up his inquiry. He focuses his analysis on the question of special experiential access to blues in two variants: as the spurious idea of "some 'Myth of Ethnic Memory'," in response to which he suggests that, "[t]he access that most contemporary black Americans have to the experience of slavery or sharecropping or life on the Mississippi delta during the twenties and thirties is every bit as remote, mediated, and indirect as that of any white would-be blues player" (133); and, in his view, as the more credible textual—and ethnic rather than racial—claim for "a secret code" into which black Americans are more often "initiated." Baraka's argument for Sinclair's legitimacy, which relies on an altogether different conception of meaning, deftly maneuvers between the two, carving out a third position. At its core is a refutation of the idea that contemporary black experience is as distant from slavery and its aftermath as is contemporary white experience. Indeed, what white Americans generally lack is not a mere series of code words but the psychic attachment to a reality in which slavery actually happened and in which the fact of that happening remains central to the organization of American social and political life—that is to say, a psychic reality in which one hundred years ago is not "remote" history at all, but a still-present that makes its mark on our unfolding lives in ways at once structural and intimate. His eventual belief in the possibility of this underlying psychic structure being communicable to non-black people is not dependent on the conscious intellectual cracking of an ethno-linguistic code but is rather a matter of what is, in effect, psychoanalytic work undertaken through the embodied pedagogy available through artistic practice.

Ralph Ellison. See "Strength in the Blues: An Interview with Cornel West," November 5, 2008. Published in *The Monarch Review* , September 9, 2012. Accessed at http://www.themonarchreview.org/cornel-west-strength-in-the-blues/ June 10, 2019.

If a certain malleability is built into his multi-genre analysis of the music's historical development, Baraka's newfound belief in the blues' *interracial* mobility is more than another of his many well-remarked ideological changes; rather than deriving from a sociological analysis, this possibility comes from his own early poetic practice. Initially shut outside of what he felt to be a genuine blues sensibility himself—as he famously concludes in his first book of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961), "African blues / does not know me"—his much-remarked political transformation is not simply a matter of identifying with his blackness but of seeking and learning to be intimately addressed by a version of the blues that *does know* his distinct mid-twentieth century American experience and can ground it—with all its promise and bitter disappointment—in America's longer racial history. As the mediating term of his de-essentialized yet rigorous psycho-political remapping of racial subjectivity, affinity, and belonging, the blues will be perpetually rediscovered and reinvented, with different interpretive lenses trained on hearing and reading its underlying message, and a range of rhetorical, linguistic and performative strategies applied to the translation and clarification of that message in(to) poetic form. Firstly, I show that as Baraka extracts from the blues a capacity for bearing historical weight, he develops his own blues-based practice and proto-genre of intimate historiographic poetics that enables him to reframe his painful feelings of double-consciousness in impersonal yet intimate terms, and to use that position to elucidate the split or disavowed double-consciousness of the nation. As, beginning in the late 1960s, his poetry absorbs the provocative mode of his early essays and he continues to experiment with genres for sharing historical weight with readers, hoping to provoke them to undertake their own intimate historiographic reckonings, the record of his own early struggle to productively assume that weight gives an indication of what learning to hear and sing the blues might more substantively mean for those Americans whose psychic being is structured by a disavowal of "our history." What finally matters is not that non-black people can or can't play authentic-sounding blues music, or that they may have faced any number of the contemporary catastrophes global

capitalism has produced, but whether they do or don't grasp the psychic reality of the historical experiences that first gave and continue to give rise to the blues—haunting and living histories that fundamentally define, as they disfigure, America. "Our mind," then, ultimately imagines the genuine alliance of an American 'we' that is not colorblind but for who collective belonging is not "about something as flimsy as color," the members of which have put in the historical and psychological work and done the time—as the embodied pedagogy artistic practice can provide, alongside bending the rhythms of one's daily life as Jones/Baraka himself did in moving uptown—to ensure that their claims to the blues, or to meaningful allyship, aren't likewise flimsy.[101]

On the whole, this dissertation extends Baraka's insistent claim and sometime conviction that the felt historical understanding held in the blues can and must move inside non-black people, but that its reception requires, along with political action, intimately affecting—perhaps aesthetically-mediated—historical study. Each of the chapters tracks its respective poet's recognition of this necessity, and his struggle with its implications for both his poetics and his racialized personhood. I begin with Jones/Baraka because of the clarity, focus, and longevity of his investment in intimate historiography as both imperative and practice. In the section that follows, I attend to the genesis of his intimate historiographic project in Jones/Baraka's formative interracial experience in New York's City's Greenwich Village and Lower East Side, between 1957 and 1962, when he was both actively engaged with the largely white avant-garde poetry scene as a publisher of several important small magazines, and establishing himself as a jazz music critic. The tensions of this period find expression in his early mid-1960's essays,

[101] Baraka is perhaps less skeptical of collectivity than today's Afro-Pessimists, who seek, "in Wilderson's parlance, 'to shit on the inspiration of the personal pronoun *we*' (143) because coalitions require a logic of identity and difference, of collective selves modeled on the construct of the modern individual, an entity whose coherence is purchased at the expense of whatever is cast off by definition" (Sexton, "The Unclear World," 2016). Then again, what "our mind" proposes may be more along the lines of the "motley crew" or "gathering of those whose *gathering* is what matters, like the gathering of momentum or the gathering of a storm," as Sexton later describes the Afro-Pessimists themselves. Mind less unified through identification than constituted, beyond the boundaries of its practitioners, through their sonorous labors.

which I read as mapping his enduring thinking in relation to a set of critical binaries: conceptuality and feeling; movement, and sitting or staying with; becoming and being (as they pertain to Baraka scholarship). In the third section, I read the poetry of this early and transitional period (from his first book, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, composed between 1957 and 1961, and his second collection, *The Dead Lecturer,* published in 1964) as the record of Jones/Baraka's transformation through resistance—what might be called his transistance—into blues-bearing *griot,* the traditional West African troubadour-historian whose role he would claim to inherit and apply in the American context, reshaping the function of poetry in the process. These early years underlie the comparative cross-racial optimism expressed on Sinclair's behalf a quarter century later, even as they do so indirectly—a kind of disappointed desire that remains a secret spur to thought.[102] It is the presence of just such a latent hope that gives particular meaning to Baraka's own blues—and to that oeuvre-embracing term *transbluesency*, which is more akin to a life than a thought experiment, let alone a concept—by inflecting them with a persistent, if at times secondary, address to the (white) American subconscious. Focusing on his efforts to put to work and de-individualize the double-consciousness he experienced, and his growing attention to the split or disavowed double consciousness of all Americans, I hope to reassess the racialization of that poetry, which is generally read as strongly influenced by the 'white' aesthetic of his Beat and Black Mountain peers. In the fourth section, I consider the importance of Baraka's attention to historical weight in relation to affective liabilities in the scholarship on his work and the history of blues-derived

[102] In this respect, I treat whiteness less as something he absorbed or with which he shared intellectual orientation than as a spur or burr, his proximity to and acute awareness of which shaped his understanding of the blacker arts he pursued, or, at least, of the blues spirit he felt underlay and distinguished them. I view this cross-racial reference point as a strength rather than a liability of his thinking, in contradistinction to studies that have evaluated Baraka's work against a simplistic notion of authenticity. In his reading of *Blues People* for instance, John Gennari finds, accurately enough, that "the book always defines black music by its relationship to white culture" but then seems to misconstrue this as a problem inasmuch as it "forces Baraka to acknowledge interracial contact as a defining feature of a music he wants desperately to claim as an emblem of racial authenticity" (2003: 256-7). Leaving aside authenticity, this oversimplifies Baraka's understanding of race, even in the early 1960's. Baraka is quite clear in *Blues People* that "interracial contact" (a rather innocuous and, for much of the history described, remarkably euphemistic phrase) is foundational to the making of African-Americans as such and as black in the first place.

theorization. Developing Baraka's attention to the negation of whiteness as part of the necessary message and work of the blues, I examine how—following his 1965 break with the largely white avant-garde and his founding of the Black Arts Movement (both in response to the assassination of Malcolm X and the wider fracturing of the mid-century's interracial alliances)—he sought to seed a revolutionary imperative to psychic work in his later poetry, producing new blues-inspired genres in the process.

Felt intelligence

Baraka's particular attention to the blues as the locus of both a seemingly incommunicable kernel of black experience and the fundamental condition of Americanness was forged in his own early experience, during the late 1950's and early 1960's, of listening to the blues and jazz within an integrated avant-garde milieu. The double consciousness that his early entanglement with white peers exacerbated in him led Jones/Baraka to develop and invest in a psycho-ontological understanding of the Blues as that which constituted his blackness, while simultaneously growing skeptical of the political valence of the Blues as genre(s). Blues both posed the problem and—when analyzed and abstracted into a mode of personhood that could be articulated in other ways—provided the beginnings of an answer that would at times seem to leave the Blues as such behind altogether. That a Blues understanding or ethos *should* come across remained a priority, a wish, and, at times, even a possibility. While abstractions from blues music to ethos or mode of being are common, Jones/Baraka's simultaneous investment in and intimate grasp of the difficulty of genuine cross-racial communication makes his sometimes oblique but always active and deeply felt thinking on the subject uniquely valuable for giving insight into the thorny and oft-mangled question of who can sing or even genuinely hear the Blues and what is at stake in their (in)capacity to do so.

That the Blues might not always be the best vehicle for spreading a blues ontology is a realization the young LeRoi Jones has Clay in *Dutchman* (1964) signal: "Old bald-headed four-

eyes ofays popping their fingers…don't even understand that Bessie Smith is saying, 'Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass.' Before love, suffering, desire, anything you can explain" (1964: 34). Here, mere aesthetic appreciation of the Blues is caricatured against the background of a larger failure to read the sentiment and structure of address that de-universalizes the lyrics' content. In Clay's explication, the anasemic kernel of the Blues is a defiant anger funneled into the casual colloquial form of a taunting invitation to worship that which remains ungovernable. Reading the complexity of address in this passage, Ben Hickman notes that, "in the captivating logic here, if you hear her saying it, she is no longer saying it to you; but if you miss it, 'it's you that's doing the kissing'" (2015: 118). I think something even more thorny than Hickman concludes is at play insofar as hearing Bessie Smith 'say it' does not necessarily mean she is no longer saying it to you, any more than being so "in the know" (118) makes the white listener black. The underlying defiance Jones/Baraka insists on is at once historical and psycho-ontological; as such, it is, in a sense, anterior to epistemology, and is not so easily placated or overcome. To borrow the terms Hickman uses to describe Smith—as "something stranger than a witness and an ally" (118)—the white radical, like the hip white listener, is caught and called out, whether he is aware of it or not, by Smith's ability to sit and to sing with the weight of history. Simply bearing witness to her song, or even to her anger, does not make one an adequate ally with respect to the deeply felt understanding of history on which she draws—the intimate and atmospheric history that historiography usually keeps at bay, the history that sounds before anything you can explain, that forms you before anything you can feel, know, or desire.

Implicit in Jones/Baraka's frustrated assessment is a more nuanced political analysis that he will develop in his subsequent music criticism and essays: that any description of the attitude the Blues assumes toward its immediate subject—its wry observations of thwarted yet nonetheless re-asserted desire, its refusal of victimization even within injurious relationships and situations—must not overlook the Blues singer's awareness of the larger racial conditions that structure the more quotidian travails of black lives. In positioning the Blues as sustaining,

in its underlying righteous anger, a critical political consciousness that derives from the historical understanding the musical tradition carries, Jones/Baraka also complicates the standard description of the Blues as an affective balance or dynamic tension between suffering and joy, desire and disappointment, pride and despair. Insofar as it is a wider temporal perspective that sustains these feelings in their carefully calibrated bond, they retain a subversive potential; they give evidence of an intelligence that is not merely surviving but biding time. Analyzing Jones/Baraka's writings on Billie Holiday, Farah Jasmine Griffin notes that in his "Dark Lady of the Sonnets" (1962), he finds in Holiday's voice an embodiment of "the condition of black people in this land: dispossession, suffocated desire. He especially hears this in the later records, which other critics dismiss" (2003: 316). Where other critics see Holiday's artistry as marred by her suffering in these late records, Jones/Baraka reads the alteration of her voice as an artistic development, a pointed and purposive reflection of her ruined life that she allows to be—even insists on having—heard as such. As Griffin sees it, "Baraka wants to have it both ways here: He wants a Lady who 'wills' her own failure, and yet he wants to hold on to the inevitability of that failure in a context that denies black humanity and possibility" (316). This is not, however, the contradiction it may at first appear to be. If the tragedy of her private life is unavoidable, her expression of it as an artist remains a choice to allow her performance to embody and reflect that partly impersonalized experience as the fate, and the sound, of a black woman. The music's feeling carries a political intelligence. As Jones/Baraka puts it in the poem-cum-poetics statement "Gatsby's Theory of Aesthetics"—written in 1964 and published in *Black Magic* (1969), linking his earlier poetics with his Black Arts turn—"'Feeling predicts intelligence'" (SOS, 138). Feeling, in other words, as the psychic material on which the understanding draws, is already interpretive.[103] The affective disposition of the *listener*, like that of the singer, is thereby also indicative of his capacity—and willingness—to understand what is

[103] As Rei Terada argues in *Feeling in Theory*, it is the imaginative figuration of feeling's interpretive hypotheses that generates ontological claims (2001: 58).

at stake in a given missive. As Griffin points out, Jones/Baraka closes his liner notes on Billie Holiday by confessing that, "'Sometimes you are afraid to listen to this Lady'" (316). This is a profound recognition of her power to conjure from the historical depths and deliver the trauma she finds there with an intimacy that resists her hearer's dissociative defenses. It would become Jones/Baraka's own goal, one vital to piercing through the meaningless affirmation and chatter he experienced as he moved amongst the mid-century's fragile interracial alliances, and a defining quality of the form of address he sought to make central to his analyses of and improvisations on the Blues.

In asking why the Blues weren't properly understood by non-black aficionados, Jones/Baraka found himself analyzing and attempting to repair a profound denial of the traumatic core of American history on the part of those racially identified with that history's protagonists and perpetrators. As he came to see it, the narrowly narcissistic, paranoid and resentful feelings that feed "the small filth of the small mind"[104]—or what he would later call "the U.S. no shit blues"—both produce and indicate an impoverishment of the intellect and, more importantly, of the perceptual faculty itself such that black and white Americans effectively no longer live in a shared world. In short, amidst the turmoil of the early 1960's, Jones/Baraka came to feel that meaning itself was in jeopardy—a particular, racialized, variant of a more widely felt mid-century sentiment. This threat, as both anxiety and diagnosis, personal and social failure, is threaded throughout his early poems. The crisis is most explicitly marked in "Footnote to a Pretentious Book," from *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), where:

> There is no one to entrust with
> meaning. (These sails go by, these small
> deadly animals.)
>
> (*SOS,* 79).

These lines serve, among other things, as an indictment of his years of writerly correspondence with white avant-garde poetics peers. They also recall the ending of the earlier poem

[104] "A Poem for Democrats," *The Dead Lecturer* (in *SOS,* 75).

"Betancourt," from *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961), written from the perspective of the poet looking back at "the sea. And some / white fast boat"—and at the U.S. from revolutionary Cuba, an important early moment in Jones/Baraka's politicization. Three years later, the small animals' deadly "sails"—parenthetically and synecdochically sharpened and rendered explicitly predatory—serve as an historically potent image of what the earlier poem famously describes as that "slightness / of feeling" proper to those "fools / who hang close / to their original / thought."

As he prepares to move uptown and invest his artistic and political energies in the black communities of Harlem and Newark, New Jersey, his avant-garde peers—who are explicitly called out in other poems from *The Dead Lecturer*—are implicated in the rigid thought and feeling, the criticism of which he had perhaps initially imagined they shared. In 1961, turning away from narrow thinking had been largely framed as an aesthetic matter, a revelation of "what a poem is." By 1964, however, aesthetics could not be kept apart from racial politics, and at stake in what Fanon had similarly described as the white man's "affective ankylosis" was not only worthwhile poetry but the historical understanding or lack thereof that undergirds racial meaning and its crises. In "turning away" from historically narrow thinking and the violence it has imposed, it is toward the richer felt intelligence he hears in the Blues, figured in "Betancourt" as the sea—the vast, slow backdrop of the ocean with its historical depths—and in "Footnote" as the subjunctive wish for "some blue expanse / of world" that Jones/Baraka turns instead. That feeling, with the comparatively vast and impersonal perspective it brings, would have to be extracted, as it were, from the music itself and translated into more explicit terms, a project that set into motion an improvisation on the Blues that would privilege its implicit content over the subtleties of its generic form and style.

This undertaking—at once analytic and absorptive—is also a labor of internalization. It is by reading and translating into the more explicit medium of language the latent meaning of the Blues that Jones/Baraka is not only moved by them, but makes space for them to move inside

him. This is slow work, freighted with psychic resistance. Given the emphasis in Baraka scholarship on 'turning away' as perpetual self-reinvention, it bears noting that he also initially turns away from movement—"from what / it was / had moved / us…"—or at least from the easy movement speed implies. What he seems to find in the camaraderie of Rubi (to whom "Betancourt" is dedicated) "is slower. / Infused (somehow) / with sound / & distance. Slow." In "Footnote," too, easy changes are interrogated—"'Changed my life?' As the dead man / pacing at the edge of the sea. As / the lips, closed / for so long, at the sight / of motionless / birds." Perhaps reflecting, in 1964, on the resistance he finds in himself to acting on his 1961 revelation in revolutionary Cuba, the later "Footnote" acknowledges that "It is slow unto meaning for / any life." Where most accounts of Baraka's political and poetic development implicitly have him overcoming the problem of meaning's slowness, exacerbated by its racial rift, by moving into a more or less exclusively black world, the possibility and necessity of interracial meaning remained a concern for Baraka, one that required more than the consciousness raising and polemics associated with his Black Arts turn.

In locating disavowed feeling as the crux of the problem, and in so thoroughly plumbing the depths of his own, Jones/Baraka brought poetry writing into the terrain of psychoanalysis, while remapping the latter along an impersonalized racial-political axis in the process. The psycho-historical redefinition of meaning that he undertook as a corrective focuses on feeling as the root of a conceptuality that has thinned out, detaching itself from lived experience. In an essay published in the winter of 1963 in *Kulchur*, called simply "Expressive Language," Jones/Baraka attempts to re-suture meaning to life experience. He writes that, "in 'pluralistic' America, one should always listen very closely when he is being talked to" (*Home,* 170-1*)*:

> I heard an old Negro street singer last week, Reverend Pearly Brown, singing, "God don't never change!" This is a precise thing he is singing. He does not mean 'God does not ever change!' He means, 'God don't never change!' The difference, and I said it was crucial, is in the final human reference…the form of passage through the world. A man who is rich and famous who sings, 'God don't never change', is confirming his hegemony and good

> fortune…or merely calling the bank. A blind hopeless black American is saying something very different. He is telling you about the extraordinary order of the world.

Mobilizing a kind of linguistic Cratylism[105], wherein it is style—centrally dialect, and the more elusive matter of tone—that has a natural connection with the world beyond the text, Jones/Baraka's argument goes beyond attention to the vernacular: even mimicking vernacular phrasing, a rich and famous man is still a semantic world apart from the street-singing Reverend. The tonal difference (a difference of feeling made identifiable only by the presence or absence of an exclamation mark) is between hard-won reconciliation and self-congratulatory complacency, the latter effect enhanced by the verbal blackface. Years before indeterminacy became the ethical currency of the literary arts in the American Academy, here is Baraka arguing for the hyper-determinacy of language by the life of its user—an embedded theory of textuality in which what surrounds a given articulation is not a site of interpretive freedom but the socially lived body of the writer, singer, or speaker.[106] This is less a naive theory of language than the recognition of linguistic usage as what Brent Hayes Edwards calls "the kernel of a politics, of a strategy of cultural resistance that refuses incorporation into…the transparency of standard usage" (2017: 250). Insofar as Baraka not only validates vernacular speech but also instructs readers on how to listen, his analysis is also an intervention in interpretive practice.

Using street-singing as his example, Jones/Baraka explicitly pushes against the idea of approaching art or daily life as mere performance or text, and instead seeks to interpolate readers into a kind of lay psychoanalytic view, in which one is almost diagnostically attentive to the whole life behind the present utterance. In Jones/Baraka's rendering, the meaning of the uttered phrase is inseparable from the use the speaker has made of his life—whether he has invested in the denial of life having value beyond its exchangeability for property ("calling the

[105] In this respect, Jones/Baraka might productively be put in conversation with the writers discussed in Carla Billitteri's *Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and Charles Olson: The American Cratylus* (2009).

[106] In the American racial context, the indeterminacy of language may have seemed less a vital refuge from fascist overdetermination than potential grounds for a disingenuous alibi.

bank"), or values his passage through the world as such, wherever it leads, as the Reverend Pearly Brown does by the ongoing translation of his black life into and as street-singing. In other words, one's life may have a narrow egoistic range of reference or a broader one, accordingly illuminating merely its own place in an unjust order masquerading as ordinary and inevitable, or the entire structuring force in its astonishing violence. With this "final human reference," Jones/Baraka effectively proposes, *avant-la-lettre*, a literary version of Giorgio Agamben's form of life, as a reorientation of philosophy to use, away from the bankrupt regime of the proper (object, property, noun). Impersonalized as a "form of passage through the world," the semantic value of a life lies in its bearer's capacity to feel outward, as it were, in both temporal and psychosocial senses, while retaining the specificity of their particular vantage point.

The mode of impersonality that is envisioned here is not that of poetic modernism, in spite of Jones/Baraka's early interest in and use of T.S. Eliot, to which the next section of this chapter attends. As Baraka would describe Eliot's influence in 1978, it was "[n]ot precisely what he said so much as the tone of it—the complete cynicism and detachment…Experience hadn't mashed him, twisted him completely. He had survived his experience, it seemed to me."[107] Whatever appeal Eliot's "complete cynicism and detachment" may have held for the young poet coming into his own anger, Jones/Baraka did not follow suit. Whereas Eliot seeks and creates in poetry a refuge from the social devastation he laments, the Blues sense of tradition into which Baraka leans is a more clear-eyed carrier of American and Western history's repressed and disavowed undertow. At the same time, the importance Baraka gives to Eliot *surviving* his experience makes it clear that his own modified impersonality likewise differs from the "disintegrative ethos" that Sharon Cameron traces through American literature. (Nor is it the abjuration of the 'lyric I' pursued by the Language-oriented writers, both of which risk becoming self-affirming evasions of historical use and passage for the white would-be-ethical post-

[107] In Benston, Kimberly W. and Amiri Baraka. "Amiri Baraka: An Interview." boundary 2, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Winter, 1978), Duke UP: 307. Accessed at https://www.jstor.org/stable/302321.

subject.) Rather, impersonalization here derives from a process of referring to, without dissolving into, an historical-political understanding of the subterranean dimension of constitutive and refractory feeling mapped by psychoanalysis. The Blues singer can tell you about the extraordinary order of the world by narrating his life experience and the insights he gleans from it not because he avoids psychologizing economic conditions but because he understands the economy as a sedimented symptom of the defensive white psychic formation he daily faces. In this regard, the Blues singer holds in incipient form the insight articulated under the rubric of Afro-Pessimism, which, as Jared Sexton puts it, "seeks to decenter, without diminishing, the analysis of political economy by discerning the libidinal economy that underwrites and sutures its dynamics" (2016). Insofar as the Blues is effectively interpretive, to interpret it in turn without attending to the full weight and complexity of its referent—both the lyricist/singer's black life, and the longer history of African-American experience the arch-genre holds—is to be guilty of shallow reading or mishearing at best. To be a blues-savvy reader, on the other hand, is to hear the tonal bending of words as well as that of notes, where the blues tone is an enlargement of the referential field not only from text to life on the one end, but also from the fate of the self (hegemony and good fortune, or the reverse) to the extraordinary order of the world on the other.

These relative capacities to hear and interpret were understood by Jones/Baraka in psycho-ontological terms, as more and less 'given' to blackness and whiteness respectively, though not necessarily or irrevocably determined by them (or, in any case, by their association with skin color). In fact, by the early mid-1960s, Jones/Baraka was already knee-deep in a critique of feeling pitched not only against the shallow enjoyment of jazz and blues music by white aficionados, but also, intramurally, against James Baldwin. While only the most acerbic of his remarks on Baldwin during this period are recirculated in the scholarship, Jones/Baraka's 1963 "brief reflections on two hot shots" (the other being the South African writer Peter Abrahams) makes a substantive and theoretically sophisticated critique of what he reads in

Baldwin at that time as an individualization of feeling (whether this is fairly aimed at Baldwin or not is another matter).

> individuality is not merely the cross one select number willfully bears among the broken heads and lives of the oppressed. We need not call to each other through the flames if we have nothing to say, or are merely diminishing the history of the world with descriptions of it that will show we are intelligent. Intelligence is only valuable when it is contained naturally in the matter we present as a result of the act (of writing…of feeling). A writer is committed to what is real and not to the sanctity of his FEELINGS (*Home,* 138).

Individualization as such is not incompatible with the Blues, but it is not the understanding Jones/Baraka derives from them.[108] His brief denouncement of Baldwin was not so much a refusal of what Ed Pavlic describes as James Baldwin's urge to keep a "counterintuitive blues-based constant…as part of the revolutionary design" (2017: 74-5), as it was a different vision of what that ought to look like *in writing*—one that was specifically concerned with how the Blues were to be articulated to white audiences. The Baldwin he lampoons as the "Joan of Arc of the cocktail party," straw man or otherwise, seems to him to share Abrahams' naive desire for what the latter nostalgically describes as "'isolated islands where black and white could meet in neutral territory'," and where, in Jones/Baraka's judgment, "they could be sensitive in peace" (*Home*, 141). Having frequented those 'islands' or bars in New York City and found them wanting, Jones/Baraka had no patience for rhetoric that seemed to entertain the fantasy of common ground, of which he had been disabused at no small personal cost. Against what is essentially a critique of Baldwin's rhetoric as a writer (one tinged, no doubt, with homophobia and envy of his rival's success), Jones/Baraka further articulates his own blues-based theory of impersonal felt intelligence, under the theoretical vocabulary of singularity and use:

> Unless a man will tell you something, pass on some piece of information about the world, and by so doing show you that part of the world he moves in, there is little value in what he is saying. It is like a high diver perfecting all his moves in the house…An idea must be specific and useful, and must function in the world; it must be, even, an interpretation of that world that permits a man to use himself. The singular man uses, first, himself (*Home,* 139).

[108] Famously, for Ralph Ellison, "the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" (1945).

This understanding of use entails a practice of writing that shares historical experience of the lived present rather than making moral appeals. As he lays out the difference (140):

> Being sensitive means primarily that you do not like to see lynchings. But the vacuum behind such a circumstance can be, and usually is, immense. Men like Baldwin and Abrahams want to live free from such "ugly" things as "the racial struggle" because (they imply) they simply cannot stand what it does to men.
>
> FACT: There is a racial struggle.
> FACT: Any man had better realize what it means. Why there is one. It is the result of *more* than "misunderstanding." Money is not simply something one gets for publishing novels or selling paintings.
> FACT: "People should love each other"...has very little meaning to the world at large.

Having been steeped in a social milieu in which such cheap appeals were likely common and meaningless currency, Jones/Baraka was seeking a way to move beyond lamenting his own position as the token black man charged with explaining the Blues and its historical depths to tone-deaf audiences. He had come to the realization—at which Baldwin was also arriving—that blackness and whiteness were constituted by distinct relations to historical address, that they were, in effect, genres of respectively hearing or disavowing the reality and presence of the past.

In other polemics of the period, it is clear that Jones/Baraka understood the capacity or refusal to read the present historically in psychological terms as fundamental as those of the family drama and personal traumas that form the center of Freudian psychoanalysis. Applying the basic model of the psyche to racialized categories, in "american sexual reference: black male" (1965), Jones/Baraka declares that "white men are first of all Selves and Egos and this is their only identity; as anti-spirits. They have no other place in the world" (*Home*, 233).[109] This categorical claim is prior to any individual neuroses or imbalances and the diagnoses that might

[109] Earlier in the essay (or written speech), he is unsparing in sketching the dire psychological consequences of the kind of being in the world he nonetheless advocates: "Very few people in this society are interested in such a place as the real world. Because were they really interested in reality, not as sociology or style, but as intellectual and emotional fact, then the suicidal core of this society would swell and explode, and, hopefully, perhaps even the owners might be faced with the fact of their evil just before they did themselves in" (*Home*, 185-6).

attend them. In Baraka's psycho-political framework, Ego and spirit imply differential relations to the formative and ongoing process psychoanalysts refer to as "reality testing," versus what might instead be described as fantasy confirmation.[110] If spirit is preferred here to Unconscious as Ego's counterpoint, it is because Jones/Baraka's claim is not that black men actually are the bearers of the unrestrained libidinal energies attributed to them but that they are better able to refer the felt intelligence they collect as sentient beings to the larger order of the world and not merely or primarily to their own immediate interests.[111] In "le roi jones talking" (1964), he makes a similar point in the form of a (pointedly gendered) challenge: "you will find very few white American males with the slightest knowledge of what manhood involves. They are too busy running the world, or running from it" (*Home*, 187-8). The psycho-political and psycho-ontological framework Jones/Baraka sketches here (and retains, in deriding the "US no shit blues" with a caricature of personal therapy) offers an alternative to that provided by Franz Fanon insofar as it is black psychic formation—precisely because of its relationship to violence—that is better attuned to the historical reality of the present; whereas it is whiteness that might be said to float in a zone of non-being, with no conception of the real forces that gather within and around its violently enforced delusions and defenses—forces that the Jones/Baraka of the Revolutionary Theatre and beyond seeks to mobilize. This mobilization is more than political incitement. It is a conjuring from the psycho-historical depths. As such, it is an extension of the intimate analytic work that writing also implies.

In "Gatsby's Theory of Aesthetics," writing becomes a space for an analytic practice that does not replace more intimate psychic work with cultural diagnosis, but uses the one to better

[110] In "The Use of an Object," D.W. Winnicott posits that an important developmental stage away from primary narcissism and towards genuine autonomy occurs when an 'object' (including other persons) is "destroyed" in fantasy but seen to survive that destruction. One might extend this insight to theorize that the vast destruction of others in reality upon which whiteness is founded and predicated precludes making such a vital division between fantasy and reality, damaging the real autonomy of both self and other in the process. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 50 (1969): 711-716.

[111] The idea of white men as anti-spirits also offers a striking reversal of Hegel's historiography as the unfolding of World Spirit.

undertake the other—an idea he draws from his understanding of the Blues. Here Jones/Baraka advocates for a model of poetry-writing as less the expression of a speaker than a politically and psycho-analytically *diagnostic* activity: "I write poetry to investigate my self, and my meaning and meanings. / But also to invest the world with a clearer understanding of it self, but only by virtue of my having brought some clearer understanding of my self into it" (*SOS*, 138). Jones/Baraka's use of "investigate" suggests that it is the study, rather than the resulting object, that calls for formalization—a rigorous tracing out of the complex knot of feelings around which a sense of self congeals as it responds to and illuminates the disavowed and repressed ligature of the entrenched world order. For him, the act of writing constitutes an *investment* in the social world with the expectation of *its* wider felt realities coming into clearer, sharper focus in return. In other words, it is firstly through writing that he engages in and demands to be part of the ongoing process of reality testing that shared worlding should be. The conclusion of "Gatsby's Theory" points ironically to the failure of the present order of the world to provide that possibility, again offering the practice of writing as corrective: "The only time I am conscious of my limitations is when I am writing. The rest of the time, there is no standard, at all reasonable, for judging, in fact, what limitations are" (139). This is the lesson he takes from F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel. Rather than taking perverse inspiration from "the danger of unmediated self-invention" that Jay Gatsby embodies to craft his own form of "self-invention…that…others the culture through dialogue," as Walter Muyumba somewhat tentatively suggests, Jones/Baraka proposes a corrective theory of writing as self-investigation and limitation that might curb the excesses of self-reinvention that the extraordinary ordering of the American world permits from some subjects (himself somewhat wryly included) but not others (2009: 143). Baraka's poetics here could be said to anticipate (and inform) Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda's recent suggestion to white writers that they strive to "inhabit, as intensely as possible, the moment in which the imagination's sympathy encounters its limit. To see what that shows you that you have not yet seen" (2015: 17-8). This approach stands in marked contrast to the metempsychotic

imagination of the Romantic tradition, famously articulated by Keats and made the basis of History as Hegel's World Spirit, in spite of a shared starting point in negative capability. Beginning with the uncertainty of his own painfully ambivalent feelings and identifications and drawing on a basic insight of psychoanalysis, Jones/Baraka anchors his proposed practice in the bodily psyche, that site where history's marks reverberate, as receptive instrument: "Whatever part of us does register: whatever. The head feels. The heart feels. The penis feels" (SOS, 139). The skin, too, though he does not put so blunt a point on it.

"Gatsby's Theory" opens by proposing to revive meaning's possibility by redefining basic terms of literary engagement for writers and readers alike. No longer the freely imaginative movement of a mind, "Interpretation" becomes "supporting a meaning, with one's own life. That is, under, standing. And using that position as map, or dictionary. Depending on whether you move or sit" (SOS, 138). On the face of it, this is a clear statement of the intertwining of aesthetics and politics, which Baraka's lifework bears out both on and off the page. There is, however, a secondary meaning: that interpretation, which begins with feeling and cannot be reduced to conceptuality, however sophisticated, likewise entails the capacity for and the labor of supporting a meaning with one's psychic life. Such "self imposed meaning" is less found, or made, than taken up, the fullness of its weight assumed.[112] Broken into its components, Jones/Baraka's more than conceptual *under*-standing imagines a different kind of physicality that Keats's irritable reaching, taking the capacity for sustaining oneself in uncertainty in the direction of emotional work, rather than unleashing it in another kind of flight from the world's narrow conceptual infrastructure. Here, imagination is redirected along social-historical lines, toward the creation of an impersonal sense of self as sediment, whose value lies in studying and singing that material into a state of purposive turbulence, a clear-eyed effort to muddy and

[112] Such "self imposed meaning is, the only thing worth living for" (SOS, 139). In "Gatsby's Theory" that meaning is treated as "arbitrary" insofar it stands against any larger systemic rationale, but the meaning the Blues bears and that Jones/Baraka chooses to place himself under is less random, or even racial, than it is historical.

ultimately reroute the social waters: "when I say something it's all of me / saying, and all the things that make me, have formed me, colored me / this brilliant reddish night. / .../ ...this is a messenger calling...today is the history we must learn / to desire" ("Numbers, Letters," SOS, 144). Jones/Baraka has become, in short, the street-singing blues musician, whose lyrics bear and bare his life *as historical*.

It is worth underscoring here that in effectively exchanging metempsychotic flight for somatically-based psycho-political analysis, Jones/Baraka also imbues literary practice with different assumptions about freedom and movement. As Jones/Baraka's definition of interpretation cues, his understanding of movement is not the opposite of stasis, but on a continuum with the equally valid act of *sitting* as a form of pausing, staying with, gathering one's energies and undertaking psychic work. Arguably, for some, such sitting is a necessary precursor to ensure that one's movements and mappings remain grounded in the kind of meaning Jones/Baraka has in mind. The shared value of moving and sitting as dual modes of under-standing is again affirmed at the end of "A Poem Welcoming Jonas Mekas to America," the second poem in *Black Magic* (1969). There Jones/Baraka describes "Looking past things, to their meanings... / ...Looking out, or in, the precise stare / of painful reference" (SOS, 121). The poem commences a social accounting of historical damage as it manifests in a pair of present bodies: "Things we must have some use for. Old niggers in time on the dreary street. Man, 50...woman, 50, drunk and falling in the street." As it attends to these social facts and insists on their use-value for thought, it brings into literary being the blues gesture the poet finds himself unable to make in the moment:

> I could say, looking at their lot, a poet has just made a note of your
> hurt. First star, high over the factory. I could say, if I had any
> courage
>
> but my own. First star, high over the factory. Get up off the
> ground, or
> just look at it, calmly, where you are. (SOS, 121)

In this literary transcription of a failed social act, the poet's isolation from the courage that collective tradition imparts—the Blues as "our history," the instability of which he is yet to exploit—effects a redirection (and apparent degradation) of subjunctive address (and social possibility) into self-conscious description ("lyric" poetry). Removing the self-addressed lines, the remaining structure echoes the blues repetition of a single scene-establishing premise—*First star, high over the factory*—before introducing the subtle subversion of the blues lyric turn, in this case by shifting perspective downward, in a deliberate inversion of the famous Oscar Wilde aphorism. Instead of lying in the gutter looking at the stars, the poet is, under the night's first star, turning his gaze to the street, and enjoining his reader and the poem's black subjects alike to do the same. So separating himself as poet (and playwright) from the light wit and aestheticism associated with Western decadence, Jones/Baraka leans on the distinct, minor transcendence of the Blues tradition. That tradition is not one of idealist flight; nor does it condone the banal pragmatism of the American bootstraps ideology or its racial uplift variant, heard in the caesura between "Get up off the ground" and "just look at it." Between them, the poem implies that before effectively moving on, one might need to remain "where you are" in order to study the bleak reality of the present.

By locating both the scene and the accompanying instruction to "just look at it, calmly" in a poem, where the "you" addressed shifts between the persons in the street, the poet, and the reader, Jones/Baraka accomplishes the submerged blues lyrics' work of social identification and the affirmation that provides, without losing the tension produced by the real difference between the material conditions of the man and woman in the street and his own, or those of his prospective readers. As with the "precise stare / of painful reference," looking out and looking in cross one another without merging. Where *you* are may not be drunk and falling in the street, but there is no other legitimate movement you can make that doesn't carry the weight of *their* being so, as also part of where (and what) you are. Baraka might be said here to use the ambiguity and attendant implication of poetic address to translate a formal feature of the blues

into a political claim that renders explicit and mobilizes the felt understanding he hears in the music. In the structure of the basic Blues chord and accompanying lyrics, the shift—whether psychic or physical, subtle or surprisingly sharp in its alteration of terms—always bears the weight of the repeated premise or given condition (and note). What matters is that this weight—which is always structural and historical as well as tonally reinforced and intimately felt—is shifted. By choosing not to simply produce a blues effect but rather to highlight his desire for one, Jones/Baraka also foregrounds the difficulty of achieving this minor movement

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Jones/Baraka's early attention to the psychic weight of history as it bears on the present, and the mode of impersonality he cultivates through that attention, has tended to be overshadowed in the criticism by his changing ideological affiliations and the idea of a perpetually reinventing self that they suggest. As a result, while the political significance of Baraka's insistence on *be-ing* as "verbal noun" has been recognized, it is not substantially distinguished, as a philosophical position, from becoming.[113] There is comparatively little sense, in the scholarship, of the way *be-ing* can be said to pull in the opposite direction, to suggest the sedimenting of psychic and historical matter, the accumulation and persistence of which also preoccupies the poet.[114] To some extent the scholarly focus on invention and the avoidance of the ontological is a result of a collective effort to recover Baraka from early dismissals and caricatures of his Black Nationalist period. Foregrounding improvisation as a mode of "self-othering," Walter Muyumba, for instance, finds that Baraka's praxis negotiates the dialectical tension and "swing between the individual and the group," producing an aesthetic rather than

[113] See Nathaniel Mackey, "Other: From Noun to Verb" in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (1998). Mackey, whose work has been taken up by a number of other scholars, contextualizes Baraka's political commitment to black empowerment in relation to a broader linguistic tendency in Black English to "accentuate[] action among a people whose ability to act is curtailed by racist constraints" (515).

[114] In his 1991 statement on "The 'Blues Aesthetic' and the 'Black Aesthetic': Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture," Baraka himself spins all his verbal energy into a cyclical ontology in which the relationship of the blues to historical material is among its major strengths: "The past (black night's your mother) is also the future"; "The world is…a carrying, the weight, the changes"; "old going out into black and coming black through blue"; "So blues is the past, the blown all what got blew" (107). In *Black Music Research Journal* 11.2: 101-109.

ontological understanding of blackness (2009: 17, 141-3). Similarly, for Kimberly Benston, Baraka generates a "self-consuming artifact that none the less presses the cause of an empowered, if migratory presence (2000: 203). For both scholars, blackness is bound up with movement and becoming, a kind of exemplary variant of postmodern post-subjectivity that reaches back *avant la lettre* even if its recognition as such does not. As a political intervention, this is both insightful and important and, with respect to Baraka, apt; indeed, it is not without reason that the sharpest scholarship on Baraka's work has focused on his relationship to jazz rather than blues. Borrowed from a 1946 Duke Ellington track ("Diminuendo in Blue/Transblucency"), Baraka's *transbluesency* might even seem to be simply another name for jazz—the form of black music that in Baraka's own accounting does effectively move across the color line, and constitutes the more apparent influence on his poetry from the mid-1960's onward. Yet, in focusing on the "self in process" as elaborating a non-essentialist basis for blackness, these efforts to counter an earlier generation of reductive scholarship have let the broader social implications of *be-ing*'s comparative historical weight fall out of view.

I would suggest that, even as jazz proves the more widely applicable formal model, on a deeper psychic level, Baraka's *transbluesency* names a desire and set of endeavors to communicate precisely what seems to him incommunicable in the blues, and that recent jazz-based criticism can tend to forget, or at least to leave in the background: the staying with and absorption of a history of damage and disappointment that gives the movement and improvisation within black modernism its particularity and its weight. If the marked influence of jazz in Baraka's work can indeed be said to underscore the value of improvisatory movement to African-American culture, the blues undertone and intelligence that lends a fitting sense of friction to the freedom of that verse might serve to ground that value in a prior capacity for sitting with the damage of American history. It is this capacity—for sitting with historical weight until it provokes within one a paradoxically calm rage, a political sense at once intimate and impersonal—that Baraka aims to enlarge, alongside and as the condition for the protean

freedom of the improvised black self with which he has been lately associated. Leading to his ongoing efforts to share, indeed at times to hurl, the psychic weight of history at readers, prodding us to develop the ability to bear it, Jones/Baraka had first to cultivate this capacity in himself by finding a way to redefine, remake, and finally internalize his own genre of the blues—or, perhaps more properly, a literary practice and proto-genre of intimate historiography based in his creative analytic understanding of the blues.

Baraka's early blues

Double consciousness and the weight of history

Coming, himself, from the outside of an inside—the middle class rim of racial insight—Baraka fleshes out his own praxis of investigative feeling, as he writes his way into and through the blues. His early poems are so shaped by his efforts to feel his way toward and think with the blues that critical treatments of these poems as largely comparable, on the basis of form, to those of his white peers seem somewhat myopic.[115] Baraka himself would later insist that, from the perspective of a 'Black' or 'Blues Aesthetic', affective orientation was as important as form: "the feeling is the form and vice versa" (1991: 106).[116] As content goes, plenty of white poets made reference to the blues—indeed it is something of a mid-century right of passage—but none grappled with it in the way and for the reasons Jones/Baraka did. The often quoted opening couplet of "Notes for a Speech"—that "African blues / does not know me" (SOS, 45)—does not simply dispense with the matter but rather opens the enduring problematic with which the

[115] For instance, while there is much of value in his attention to what Jones/Baraka does absorb from white peers, William J. Harris's claim that "In *Preface,* Baraka's poetry, influenced by both Olson and Williams and by Baraka's own speaking voice, is virtually indistinguishable from white speech" strikes one as curiously hyperbolic (1985: 58). It relies on a particular version of what counts as black speech, and ignores the poem "Hymn for Lanie Poo" that both employs a blacker idiom and problematizes the compulsion to performing a racially identifiable vernacular: "These wild-assed trees / will make charming / wicker baskets. / / (now, I'm putting words in her mouth…tch)"; "Beware the evil sun… / turn you black / turn your hair" (TB 6-7).

[116] This idea, without the explicit emphasis on the affective dimension, is also behind the Black Mountain aesthetic, as famously articulated by Robert Creeley and disseminated in Charles Olson's "Projective Verse": *Form is never more than an extension of content.*

poem, and Jones/Baraka's first book, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961), ends: "You are / as any other sad man here / american" (SOS, 46). For Baraka, it would become a question of finding what kind of blues might know him and the broader conditions of the fleetingly interracial and bitterly disappointing mid-century moment and milieu he occupied.

Finding this blues would require reframing his experience of double-consciousness. While it is easy to read Jones/Baraka's personal break with his first family and his move uptown as a way of overcoming a dislocated sense of identity borne of his extensive social congress and intimacy with white people, his struggle with the self-loathing double-consciousness engenders did not so much leave behind the condition as set to work within it. This, in fact, is what the blues itself does, as Baldwin recognized around the same time. In "Uses of the Blues" (1964), Baldwin locates the music's psycho-ontological origins in the negative dialectical *persistence* of double-consciousness—as a problem of care and creativity—rather than as something transcended[117]:

> I'm talking about what happens to you if, having barely escaped suicide, or death, or madness, or yourself, you watch your children growing up and no matter what you do, no matter *what* you do, you are powerless, you are really powerless, against the force of the world that is out to tell your child that he has no right to be alive…In every generation, ever since Negroes have been here, every Negro mother and father has had to face that child and try to create in that child some way of surviving this particular world, some way to make the child who will be despised not despise himself (2011: 73-4).

Here the redoubled pain of seeing double-consciousness afflict those you love is made central to the conditions of social death and gratuitous dehumanization from which the blues continue to arise. Jones/Baraka had to face the profound sense of impotence Baldwin describes and to undertake the labor of love survival under such conditions demands *for himself* in his young adulthood before he could extend his address outward. As he puts it in an early poem from *The*

[117] This essay of Baldwin's may well respond to Jones/Baraka's 1963 critique, in "brief reflections on two hot shots." In addition to its titular focus on use, Baldwin directly addresses the shallow over-eager welcome of his moral upbraids by white people who invite him to their social gatherings and events. In any case, this essay certainly sees him explicitly undertaking the kind of effort to contextualize and use his own experience to illuminate the broader racial conditions of the world that Jones/Baraka prioritizes.

Dead Lecturer (1964): "die soon, Love. If / what you have for / yourself, does not / stretch to your body's / end. / (Where, without / preface / music trails" ("Balboa the Entertainer," SOS, 51; first published in *Poetry* April 1962). Here, Jones/Baraka's own *Preface* is referenced as omitted, or not emitted, not *heard* beyond the bounds of the body-turned-instrument. This disappearance, however, is an act—the act of pushing 'what he had for himself' *through* himself and through his feelings of disgust and dis-ease, as his own 'epoch of repossession' and first act of 'black magic'. The preface remains inside the feeling body (and, in print, as the opening sequence to both volumes of selected verse) as the necessary work that allows him to sing otherwise than suicidally.[118] His *transbluesency* is thus first a psycho-political passage through himself and across the chiasmatic boundary of his own overdetermined skin. As such—and as traced by the titles of his first two collections: *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) and *The Dead Lecturer* (1964)—it is also a passage through suicidality into a more impersonal voice, one differently capable of making political use of his experiential materials from the other side of a psycho-ontological death.

This process unfolds through the assumption of affective and then more explicitly historical weight, moving through the blues as feeling to the blues explicated as "our history." This sense of weight, thematized as such throughout his work, serves to counter the strange evasive lightness of interracial discourse and meaning, an effect of (even progressive) white disavowal, that so troubled him. In his first book, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note,* Jones/Baraka lays bare and works through a host of ugly, borderline suicidal feelings engendered by his position within the mid-century avant-garde milieu—feelings of ambivalence, disgust, self-loathing, despair, disdain. The Blues loom large over the book, almost as a psychoanalyst figure, patiently listening and periodically punctuating the text with a simple,

[118] It might be thought of as what Will Alexander, in his poem "Thought as Philosophical Torment," describes as "a de-ingested shrine / subsumed in the body as a rudderless coherence." *The Sri Lankan Loxodrome*. New Directions Press, 2009.

deflating and reorienting question—yes, but what do *you* have to say? As he repeatedly conjures and attempts to answer this interlocution, Jones/Baraka recontextualizes and reframes the question, impersonalizing its address and widening its scope. Doing so enables him to replace the suicide the book's title invokes with a ritual death that gives form and weight to the feeling of psycho-ontological distress from which he suffers. Moving into *The Dead Lecturer*, Jones/Baraka reinhabits his own double-consciousness as a national condition rather than a personal failing, speaking from the site of a social death that sees the extraordinary order of the world, and haunts its inhabitants with his own simple, insistent and destabilizing question—yes, but can you hear?

The increasingly social address of his work and his sustained political activity is better understood as an outgrowth of this more intimate work than as its aesthetic repudiation or transcendence, a shift that keeps the centrality of the blues to Baraka's poetics in the foreground. Approaching his own double-consciousness as a problem of care led Jones/Baraka to understand persons—singularities rather than individuals—as historically structured beings, whose psychic material was to be given over to analysis and the insight it afforded rather than to self-referential knots of guilt, denial, and despair. This early blues-based insight is not about movement and self-reinvention, but about sitting with the psychic damage of history, undertaking a practice of studying feeling and feeling study that would ground his intellectual engagements and activist interventions in a less volatile and ego-driven foundation. This in itself is vital political work. Crucially, Jones/Baraka not only undergoes but also reads that *transistance* as a vital passage for anyone genuinely engaged in revolutionary racial politics and, ultimately, as necessarily taken up on both sides of the color line for that revolution to succeed. Bringing his felt intelligence to bear on analyzing the interracial crossroads at which he found himself, the essays and poetry leading up to and surrounding his break suggest a keen awareness that, whatever more black-affirmative surroundings might do for him personally, meaningfully addressing American racism as an historical and ongoing reality would also

require sending back out the double-sight in which he had been so painfully schooled, making non-black others see the damaged world and themselves through black eyes. As his work takes on a more instigative tenor during and after the late 1960's Black Arts period, the record of his path to that insight leaves indications of how those he provokes might meaningfully and sustainably answer his own interrogative blues call by likewise reorienting and widening the referential field for their feelings through praxes of historically-keyed impersonality and intimate historiography. In the readings that follow, I propose to reread his early verse as not only searching for and arriving at a mode of blackness but also as a more widely instructive blues-derived praxis of coming into clear-eyed political understanding and revolutionary resilience in an anti-black world.

Jones/Baraka's 'Preface'*: weighting feeling*

References to the blues abound in Baraka's early poetry as he struggles to reframe the psychic conditions of his life. Brought into his verse—which is dialogic from the beginning—the blues serves as the voice of the kind of historically rooted, affectively rich and genuine meaning that Jones/Baraka finds elsewhere lacking. It repeatedly poses the question of what his own more meaningful response and contribution—the insight and feeling proper to his moment and condition—might be. Among the more extensive early engagements is "Look for You Yesterday / Here You Come Today" in *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note.* The poem's title is drawn from the lyrics of Count Basie and Jimmy Rushing's 1938 blues number, "Sent for You Yesterday." With the unsparing dialogism characteristic of classic blues, the poem's framing dyad registers the singer's disappointment and yet allows the encounter to occur, belated as it is. The most obvious reading of that encounter, as it is reimagined in the poem, is that it occurs between Jones/Baraka and his own blackness. While, on its surface, the poem largely unfolds along these interpretive lines, a secondary sense of the framing lyrics begins to reverberate as the lines repeat and the question they pose in Jones/Baraka's rendering—*what you got to*

say?—echoes throughout the poems of *Preface*, haunting the collection with the larger question of *history's* meaningful psychic arrival in the present.

Initiating without completing the task *Preface* as a whole undertakes, Jones/Baraka begins in this poem to cultivate the impersonal distance required to feel the weight of anti-blackness as an intimate historical condition rather internalizing it as something he has personally failed to negotiate. The ambiguity with which he regards his relationship to the blues at this early juncture, and which will be the grounds for his creative contributions to the genre's malleability, are here on display. At the opening of the poem and punctuating it throughout, Jones/Baraka wryly weighs the "envious blues feeling" that constitutes "part of my charm" in the interracial avant-garde arts world he then inhabited. The paradox of an envious blues feeling self-consciously captures the young Jones halfway between the Blues being to which he aspires and the double-consciousness that he is struggling to feel and to think through in a less narrowly egoistic form. In any case, the phrase rings ironic, as it is hard to imagine an emotion farther from the Blues than envy; situations that might, in a lesser soul, excite envy, certainly, but in all the lyrics that conjure cheating lovers and richer more powerful folk, the predominant sentiment is not jealously or envy of others but a proud assertion of the singer's own sufficiency, even superiority, and the foolishness of the addressed beloved or listener who fails—who has always already failed—to recognize it.[119] Here Jones, as the poem's first person, largely plays the tone-deaf and tardy fool—a stock character in the world the Blues imagines, but not its convener. At once genuinely feeling his insufficiency and dramatizing the position as he prepares to leave it behind, he walks a fine line between cultivating a more distant analytic perspective on the circumstances of his life through criticism of self and scene, and collapsing back into the self-loathing, eventually amped up to the key of self-ridicule, that criticism also

[119] Rather than any supposed universality, I would wager that it is the Blues singer's seeming imperviousness to such petty yet powerfully compelling feelings—of the sort Baraka would later characterize as the "U.S. no shit blues"—that constitutes a large part of the genre's cross-racial appeal.

threatens to generate: “me / incapable of a simple straightforward / anger”; “Haven’t I learned my lesson”; “Each morning I rise / like a sleepwalker / & rot a little more”; and, as the poem turns to mockery, “I have all my pubic hair & am lonely”; “Where is my space helmet, I sent for it / 3 lives ago…when there were box tops.”; “Where is my Captain Midnight decoder?? / I can’t understand what Superman is saying!” (SOS, 14-7).

It is at this juncture that the title lyrics enter the poem, and do so in quotations, *as lyrics*, accompanied by a challenge that effectively dismisses the preceding text:

> “Look for you yesterday
> Here you come today
> Your mouth wide open
> But what you got to say?”

Following the second repetition of the title lines (including their presence in the title itself), the final couplet that closes the verse makes that wry, often devastating, blues turn. One imagines the addressee about to explain, excuse, justify their tardiness, being cut off, informed in so many (or a few choice) words that to spew a half-exculpatory self-defense is to say nothing of value, substance or meaning. Interrupting the poet’s own diagnosis of his relative frivolity, this voice casts his exercise in self-mockery in the same unflattering light as the feelings ridiculed. In effect, the blues themselves arrive to redirect Jones/Baraka’s clumsy pursuit of his own belated arrival as would-be blues singer. More than three quarters of the way through the poem, the poet has, in the estimation of this blues voice, not yet said anything worth saying. He remains identified, if ironically, with a downtrodden Lone Ranger—fictive enforcer of the new colonial law and order of the American West.[120] It is the mythic figure’s Native American sidekick, “Tonto way off in the hills / moaning like Bessie Smith,” with whom the poem ends, giving the last word (or sound) to the blues. Yet, in keeping the poem as the performance of this encounter,

[120] The Lone Ranger later becomes—in *What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger to the Means of Production?*—the obscene smirking face of capitalist oppression. That the man on whom the Lone Ranger was based was likely African-American only adds to the layers of irony at play. Morgan, Thad. “Was the real Lone Ranger a Black Man? The amazing true story of Bass Reeves, the freed slave who protected the Wild West.” https://www.history.com/news/bass-reeves-real-lone-ranger-a-black-man. Published February 1, 2018. Accessed May 13, 2019.

the poet suggests that his failed effort to say something meaningful is nonetheless worth recording. The question, and the image it carries of a mouth struggling to mean, recurs in various subsequent poems, with the structure and scope of address shifting each time. In effect, this early poem at once incorporates and initiates a refrain by which Jones/Baraka agitates his way from the position of the lyrics' addressee toward that of the singer—that is, one whose feeling for himself and capacity for care does not lag behind or disavow an understanding of his historical constitution and structural position. Jones/Baraka will not teach himself to moan like Bessie Smith. Instead, he will stop enviously chasing the blues sensibilities possessed by others and come to his own feeling and understanding of the blues, to his own genre, if you will, of blues being. That reinterpretation ultimately frames the dialogue between yesterday and today less in terms of his personal identification with the blues as a marker of blackness than as a shorthand for interrogating his fellow Americans' relationships to historical understanding, bringing to the fore the latent address he hears in the grain of Smith's voice.

The opening of this dialogue toward a broader social realm begins with the next poem in the sequence. In "To a Publisher…Cut-out," Jones/Baraka again takes up the feelings of hypocrisy engendered by his position as a kind of interracial trickster figure, anatomizing his personal weaknesses and his "childe's play," but he moves through them, using them to introduce a larger problem of care for the nation's future. This political expansion is signaled ironically by a clichéd American vision of conquest: "I long to be a mountain climber…Out of sight & snow blind / the tattered / Stars and Stripes poked in the new peak…That / Kind of care" (*SOS*, 20). Here he performs as wish a laziness not available to him: the paradoxically thoughtless care—the blind obligatory gesture—of which he accuses the titular publisher at the poem's opening: "The blight rests in your face. / For your unknown musiks. The care & trust / Undeliberate" (SOS, 19). The poem's concluding vignette leaves little question as to the future that kind of care portends: "As if each day, after breakfast, someone asked you, / 'What do you want to be when you grow up??' & / Day in, Day out, you just kept belching" (21). The blues

question of the previous poem—"Your mouth wide open / But what you got to say?"—echoes here in its new domestic setting, rendering America as a kind of insolent child who cannot imagine, let alone become, anything but the indigestion of its past: land-grab repeated as flag-planting; diversity as inclusion without genuine effort at understanding. Care remains an unresolved problem, perhaps an impossibility: "As if any care could see us through. Could defend us" (19). With the burp's crude air, Jones/Baraka initiates another recurring motif—a thematization of political maturity and historical understanding along a scale of lightness and weight that is carried through the remainder of *Preface* and into his next two books.

The (perhaps ironic) title of his magazine, *Floating Bear*, notwithstanding, lightness is generally felt and figured as a negative quality throughout *Preface.* In "Vice," again recalling the blues interrogator of "Look for You Yesterday," Jones/Baraka rues that "whatever it is I have to express / falls out of my mouth like flakes of ash" (SOS, 30). Here, "Everything seems to be light green…a color of despair or wretchedness" and the poet sees himself "still alive, (& green) hovering above all the things I seem to want to be a part of" (30-1). The "floating dreary / disgust" of "Betancourt," too, sets the tone for that poem's crucial revelation (38). The revolting sense of being politically adrift that Jones/Baraka's visit to Cuba brought into relief is most fully and explicitly plumbed in "Way Out West," where the value of myth and tradition as stand-ins for history are weighed against the blunt realities of the passing present. As scholars have noted, "Way Out West" brings Sonny Rollins' 1957 album, with its black cowboy cover (a Lone Ranger figure), into conversation with T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Tempting as it is to see this staged encounter as a crossroads at which Jones/Baraka chooses the blacker path (chooses, in effect, to become Baraka), doing so entails first sitting with

the cultural and affective weight of both influences, and for all the irony and dark humor of his verse, Jones/Baraka's own signifying remains heavier than the cool image on Rollins' record.[121]

Like Prufrock, Jones/Baraka anxiously weighs the value of his passing life in the context of meaning's—for him, racial—rift, a condition the black artist can riff on, but not suture. However, his framing of that anxiety's provenance eschews lyricized poetry's universalizing abstraction in favor of the distinct impersonality of the blues as an intimately analytic lens on the psycho-social determinants of meaning, value, and causality. He remains grounded in the problem as one of historical, rather than philosophical meaning. Responding to Eliot's insistence in "Prufrock" that "There will be time, there will be time, / … / Time for you and time for me, / And time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of a toast and tea," Jones/Baraka declares himself "Unable to mention / something as abstract as time" (SOS, 26), which is revealed, intertextually, as a deeply bourgeois rather than universal preoccupation. As a more concrete carrier of time, what Eliot (here, and elsewhere) dances around is an attention to history as the set of forces within which people, "Like old / junkies on Sheridan Square" live their lives, and as the ground of his own implicated psychic formation (SOS, 26). In Jones/Baraka's poem, the shift from time to history translates as weight. So, in place of Prufrock's light drifting from room to room, we are given a body, "bowing low in thick / smoke from cheap incense; all / kinds of questions filling the mouth, / till you suffocate & fall dead / to opulent carpet" (26). Here the mouth is stuffed with the questions it can't satisfactorily answer, but it is not at all evident that the body in question, with its "disorder" and "lies," refers only or even principally to Jones/Baraka's own (SOS, 27).

That body's condition—of the uncomfortable feelings and as yet inchoate insight that double-sight affords—entails a peculiar indiscernibility between lightness (abstraction,

[121] Michael Jarrett reads this cover as "an allegory of allegory" that "winks at I. A. Richards' distinction between the 'tenor' and 'vehicle' of a metaphor (comparable to Saussure's distinction between 'signified' and 'signifier')" and, with its "'unnatural union' of jazzman and desert—or of saxophone and cowboy—recommends that invention proceed through mavericking" (243). Michael Jarrett. "The tenor's vehicle: Reading way out west." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 5: 3-4 (1994): 227-246. Accessed at https://doi.org/10.1080/10436929408580139.

disavowal, meaninglessness) and weight (impact): "thick / smoke from cheap incense"; the "Insidious weight / of cankered dreams" (26-7). The latter signals prognostications that have lost their potency ("Tiresias' / weathered cock")—so rotted is the future with the "moldy breath" of murderous "centuries / with musty eyes"—and yet retained their capacity to damage. Intimately felt as it is, the failure here is already national as well as personal. Picking up the unconscious racial subtext at the end of "Prufrock"—"When the wind blows the water white and black" (1991: 7)—Jones/Baraka's poem ends with a condition of grotesque lightness where weight had been, or should be: "Walking into the sea…waves tearing the tongue. // Closing the eyes. As / simple an act. / You float" (SOS, 27). This image is at once the bloated (used-up if also useful) corpse of Anglo-American modernism that Eliot represents, and that of the body suffocated by its own incapacity to more meaningfully answer, rather then merely mirroring, "the intricate disorder" of the times (26). This final image also suggests the perverse arrival at its end and opposite of the poem's initial promise (and, indeed, of the mid-century's interracial alliances)—the "simple act" of "opening the eyes" to the remapped racial frontier the poem's title, "Way Out West," cues (SOS, 26). Here, the weight that has been sucked out of the body in the poem is shifted, affectively and interpretively, to the reader, who is saddled with the intimation that both Eliot's dismal portraits of American and Western decline, in their dissociative cadence and theatrical masking, and Rollins' bronze buckaroo (if not the music for which it fronts), are too easy-going and ultimately abstract—lacking the painful weight of history he sees as central to the blues.

In "The Bridge," which enacts a more confident bending of and rejoinder to Eliot (as well as Hart Crane), Jones/Baraka finds a positive counterweight to the nation's cankered dreams and to the unbearable lightness that is associated, throughout *Preface*, with his sense of displacement as a black writer in a largely white avant-garde milieu. That counterweight comes from the blues, as a kind of simultaneous externalization and calmer reinternalization of the psychic turmoil he suffers: "when / you hear them. & know they are all in you, the chords / of

your disorder…Sifting in, down, upon your head" (SOS, 28). Here the blues begin to more powerfully effect the impersonalizing shift that will sustain Jones/Baraka in his uncomfortable feelings and reorient them along the wider psycho-political and intimately historical axis he also theorizes. As he imagines leaving behind his "would be disguises," he does not ride the bridge back to the familiar—"what we wanted to call 'ourselves'"—but sinks under it, into the water. This sinking rewrites the ending of "Way Out West," where the watery death is figured as a body floating to the surface. Answering at once to Eliot's 'This music crept by me upon the waters' (1991: 62)[122], and to Prufrock's famous closing lines, the 'human voices' that wake Jones/Baraka, causing him to drown, are those that sing the blues. Their weight, even unto drowning, does not feel unwelcome insofar as it allows him to feel the social death that has already been imposed upon him. Grounded as they are in the ontological trauma that made America what it is, their music is not the siren-song of mermaids that lures Eliot into philosophical transcendence of the historical damage he observes; nor is the impersonality they bequeath to Jones/Baraka the "indifference" as "liberation / From the future as well as the past" that "The Four Quartets" vests in aesthetic renewal (1991: 205). It is rather a release from the psychic obligation to adjustment that society demands, one that will ultimately enable him to psychoanalytically reorient the politics of aesthetic practice and to reengage the future from a more genuinely felt relation to the historical past. Here the suicidal current in *Preface* resurfaces as the relief borne of finally experiencing a death that has, in effect, already happened—along the lines of what D.W. Winnicott would call 'phenomenal death'[123]:

> when you touch the water, & it closes, slowly around your head.
>
> The bridge will be behind you, that music you know, that place,
> you feel when you look up to say, it is me, & I have forgotten,
> all the things, you told me to love, to try to understand, the

[122] The line is from the middle of "The Waste Land," as the poem builds toward the fourth section, *Death By Water.*
[123] See D.W. Winnicott on 'phenomenal death' in "Fear of Breakdown." In *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* (1974) I: 103-7. There he write, "Most of my ideas are inspired by patients, to whom I acknowledge my debt. It is to one of these that I owe the phrase 'phenomenal death'. What happened in the past was death as a phenomenon, but not as the sort of fact that we observe. Many men and women spend their lives wondering whether to find a solution by suicide, that is, sending the body to death which has already happened to the psyche" (106).

> bridge will stand, high up in the clouds & the light, & you,
>
> (when you have let the song run out) will be sliding through
> unmentionable black.
>
> (SOS, 29)

The "unmentionable black" with which the poem ends is neither simply blackness nor death, but, I would suggest, their psycho-political and still-present historical point of convergence; this act of drowning, vital and even therapeutic as it is for the poet, is haunted by that of all the African captives thrown off slave ships en route to the America he now belongs to and addresses. "Death," Winnicott writes, looked at "as something that happened to the patient but which the patient was not mature enough to experience, has the meaning of annihilation" (106). As a black man in the mid-twentieth century, Jones/Baraka was not alive to experience the social death of slavery that still fixes his social meaning. His ritual death by drowning acknowledges that annihilation—not eradicating it, but giving the partial relief he needs to live on and speak from within the condition. In this context, the parenthetical song—the blues—is what sustains him between his divestment from a life overdetermined by society's impossible demand that he participate in its versions of love and understanding, structured as they are by disavowal, and one overdetermined by the force of that society's repressed foundations.

"I am not moved": care and address in the passage between two deaths

"The Bridge" is dedicated to John Wieners and Michael McClure and, with its second person address, there remains the possibility that some of his white friends might have, or yet learn, the capacity the hear these blues, and to sense the depths of felt understanding to which they might deliver one, as the bridge that the poem is bends away from its expected return to solid ground. If this hope is not sustained, his erstwhile friends remain important interlocutors

in and beyond his next book, *The Dead Lecturer* (1964).[124] After the death enacted in "The Bridge," the now Dead Lecturer speaks to and of his avant-garde peers with the weary generosity and blunt compassion of the blues voice he addressed to himself in *Preface*. Jones/Baraka's white peers appear throughout *The Dead Lecturer* as "lost white children" ("Black Dada Nihilismus," SOS, 100). They are framed as belonging to a racialized social class that includes rich painters, speculative hipsters, and enthusiastic readers of pretentious books, and positioned less as prospective allies than as pupils who would do well to learn that "A compromise / would be silence. To shut up, even such risk / as the proper placement / as verbs and nouns" ("Short Speech to My Friends," SOS, 70). Still, as Jones/Baraka largely abandons his pursuit of interracial camaraderie and moves toward attempting instead to provoke, from a distance, something like psycho-political soul searching among his white peers, an early poem in the *The Dead Lecturer* nonetheless holds space for what he had once sought, clarifying its qualities and conditions. In "*This is the Clearing I Once Spoke of*," Jones/Baraka seems to recount the scene "The Bridge" performs:

> The talk scared him. Left alone, with me,
> at some water...
> ...Stand there
> counting deaths. My own, is what I wanted
> you to say...
> (SOS, 54)

As the poet reflects on this moment, it encapsulates the felt understanding and care he has elsewhere found lacking: "All of it a creation. / More than / ideas. The simple elegant hand, a man / will extend" (SOS, 54). Moving from suicidality to blues, the poem emphasizes the patient sitting-with that political growth requires:

> We sat looking, and the wind changed

[124] In his chapter on "Baraka's White Friend Blues" in *Beautiful Enemies* (2006), Andrew Epstein details Jones/Baraka's turn away from his white avant-garde peers, framing it as a "conflict between friendship and autonomy" (195) and between a desire for racial authenticity on the one hand, and an attachment to "his own aesthetic sensibility, his homosexual yearnings, and his intellect" (219). In addition to reinforcing the idea that Jones/Baraka's finer aesthetic sensibility and higher intellect resulted from his association with white peers, this is to reductively personalize a fundamentally political if also intimately felt problem.

> our fire, it was blue, and sang slowly.
>
> …The way love
> will move… (SOS, 54).

This love stands in stark contrast to the more common shallow relations he turns away from.

Echoes of such slower, patient love are interlaced throughout *The Dead Lecturer* with the declaration of limits, thematized as a refusal of movement, an intransigence necessary to demanding genuine care and distinguishing it from mere desire or the weak gestures toward 'undeliberate' care disparaged and despaired of in "To a Publisher…Cut-out." In the middle section of *The Dead Lecturer*'s "Rhythm & Blues," Jones/Baraka addresses himself to the meaningless affirmation and easy satisfaction of other such parties: "For them who pat me in the huddle and do not / argue at the plays. For them who finish second and are happy they are Chinese, / and need not run those 13 blocks. / I am not moved. I will not move to save them. There is no 'melody.' Only the foot stomped" (SOS, 83). This refusal to move or be moved is as essential to the sensibility Baraka derives from the blues as the perpetual movement associated with his later work. His ability to redefine himself—and blackness more broadly as the potential for such creative reinvention—is bound up with an insistent skepticism of the easy self-reinventions of others, those that don't account, in their sense of being, for his black gaze and perspective on the world: "I am what I think I am. You are what / I think you are. The world is the / one thing, that will not move. It is / made of stone, round, and very ugly" ("Audubon, Drafted," SOS, 94). This is not a double standard but the redress of a fundamental imbalance, meted out with the sly displacement of terms and steady, wry reframing that is characteristic of blues lyrics.

As the voice of *The Dead Lecturer* assumes a more calmly impersonal and confidently pedagogical manner, the historical weight and slow care Jones/Baraka has come to associate with the blues provides the measure and resistance that his role as a descriptive prophet of history's stubborn presence now requires. At the same time, the double-consciousness it has

resignified becomes a condition and an affect the poet diagnoses and wields as powerfully as he suffers it, as he uses the understanding achieved through the writing of *Preface* to define and map the American psycho-political condition he will later call the "US no shit blues." It is at this juncture that Baraka's understanding of the racialization of the blues begins to open up. On the cusp of his move uptown, his political commitment to what will become the Black Arts Movement, and his associated identification with blackness—and contemporaneous with his writing of *Blues People,* the central argument of which maintains the Blues as being fundamentally "Negro music"—the Blues actually *expands* as a signifier in his poetry. This expansion is initially negative, in that a non-black American blues is seen to exist in a state of disavowal, but this negative existence is sufficient to serve as a site for Baraka's attempts to extend the address of the genre.

The Dead Lecturer*: sharing weight*

Jones/Baraka in and as *The Dead Lecturer* assumes a differently national perspective—one less agitated and entangled, as compared to *Preface*, than deliberately moving between more distant analysis and intimate conjuring as the work both inhabits the blues sensibility the poet has cultivated and diagnoses its wider absence. This newfound control is particularly marked in "A Poem for Neutrals," addressed to Japanese-Americans and set between New York City and Kyoto.[125] From this half-withdrawn vantage, Jones/Baraka gestures toward a broader American blues, steeped in irony: "…Farmers / and Americans, / say they are blue. Some natural phenomenon / some possible image / of what we shall call history. / A jungle / of feeling" (SOS, 55). This national blues passes through nature and aesthetics on its way to "what we shall call history," defined in cliché terms of racialized primitivism that also sincerely describe the density of history's psychic presence. American history is indeed both barbaric and a teeming tangle of

[125] This perspective and tone is prefigured in "Betancourt," written with the widened perspective of Jones/Baraka's visit to revolutionary Cuba.

feeling—much of it disavowed, as if it had come from the skies rather than the web of social relations in which farmers and Americans (sharecropping perhaps in the background) are mired. The image of history that persists "In their minds" is of "the broken / tree, wet blood in the romantic's bulb. our sudden / and misconceived beauty. Inept tenderness" (55). The softly alliterative sequence maps the displacement of the violence of lynching onto non-human forms, a process the poet links to the clumsy latter-day compensation of an eroticized fetishism, laying bare the contortions of white split/disavowed double consciousness. How to enter and blue this image?—to shift these relations from "Inept tenderness" and anxious chatter to a more honest reckoning with the historical trauma that underlies and animates the dense web of dissociated malaise that comprises the vague 'blue' of the present.

Here the poem's address is not to those it describes, and its immediate answer is to abandon any hope that "the loud and drunken / pilgrim" will change, an act of psychic divestment from the inadequacy of their "history of motive, / as secure as the economy" (SOS, 55). His own education in this clear-eyed pessimism is described as a growing to "stone." Following this weighting of the "neon landscape" with which the poem opens, its (numbered) second part addresses the Japanese, interpolating them, in the aftermath of World War II, into the cruel reality of American racialization.

> … Yellow skin, black
> skin, or the formless calm of compromise. They will not come
> to see, or understand you. They will call you "murderer,"
> as new songs for their young… (SOS, 56).

The poem ends with songs of its own, as "All night blue leaves ring / in Kyoto. And the windows of 5th street / scream" (56). This kind of blue is the cry of "the poor [who] hate their shadows, and force their agony to dance" (56). These ending terms echo and are reworked in "*An Agony. As Now*," which follows "A Poem for Neutrals" in *The Dead Lecturer*. This justly famous poem makes blindingly clear and palpable in its insistent tortuous syntax the psychic struggle double-consciousness imposes. Thematizing and condensing the feelings *Preface* worked through, its

placement after "A Poem for Neutrals" invites that struggle to be read as more widely applicable, to the racialized and "the poor."

Through an intricate structure of open parenthetical descent, "*An Agony*" plumbs the intimate depths of the psycho-political "enclosure" the flesh is made into under conditions in which (historical) "innocence is a weapon" and an "abstraction."

> This is the enclosure (flesh,
> where innocence is a weapon. An
> abstraction. Touch. (Not mine.
> Or yours, if you are the soul I had
> and abandoned when I was blind and had
> my enemies carry me as a dead man
> (if he is beautiful, or pitied.
>
> It can be pain. (As now, as all his
> flesh hurts me.) It can be that. Or
> pain…
>
> (SOS, 57)

As the poem unfolds, or rather infolds, the voice endeavors to push away from this state toward something more like blues—with the repetition of "or pain" giving way to that of "the yes."

> …Or pain. And the other. The
> *yes*. (Inside his books, his fingers. They
> are withered yellow flowers and were never
> beautiful.) The yes. You will, lost soul, say
> 'beauty.' Beauty, practiced, as the tree. The
> slow river. A white sun in its wet sentences.
>
> (SOS, 58)

This labor constitutes a psychological intervention in aesthetics. Reanchoring poetry to a sense of nature *as historical*—practiced, trained, the result of gradual sedimentation and accrual—slowness is key to beauty's redefinition as psychological *practice,* rather than as the property of an object. No simple self-realization or reinvention, such praxis remains a fraught undertaking as the effort at affirmation it entails takes place under "A white sun in its wet sentences," and succumbs, at the poem's end, to that blinding scorching heat. The "human love" the speaker must "live inside"—that "you recognize as words or simple feeling" when it has, in fact, "no feeling"—implicates the reader in the painfully ironic *mis*recognition of humanistic sentiment,

and speaks to the intractability of the wider socio-historical enclosure that overdetermines the flesh and psyche of anyone or any "thing" inside it (SOS, 58). If Baraka extricates himself from subjection to the acute suffering he describes, he is well aware that the condition continues to govern the American social world as *its* psychic reality. Between "A Poem for Neutrals" and "*An Agony. As Now*," Jones/Baraka suggests that one must pass through a stage of withdrawal, of psychic divestment from the falsifying promises of "human love" and "compromise" on offer in the body politic, particularly at the personal level. This mode of impersonality does not forsake intimacy in its contextualization of thought and feeling, or in its address.

Drawn, as it is, from the blues, Baraka's impersonality demands an alternative to the lyric reading compatible with the modernist impersonality of a poet like Eliot. While it is a cliché of lyric reading that all poetry is comparatively intimate or can be so read, Eliot does not address *you* or refuse to let the reader separate his person from the poems' speaker—quite the opposite—the way Jones/Baraka does. Lyric intimacy, on the model developed by the New Critics and recently rearticulated by Susan Stewart among others, uses the neutral construct of the speaker to eradicate the space that social intimacy requires, replacing it with what is more accurately characterized as imaginative identification. Eliot might even be said to explicitly withdraw from social intimacy in order to avoid self-implication (or render it seemingly irrelevant) as he judges society. On the other hand, following the alternative mode of hearing and reading that he draws from the blues, Baraka continues to intimately address the reader and to implicate himself, even as he, too, simultaneously withdraws from social *affirmation* to the vantage of 'dead' lecturer, shifting his analytic lens in the process—from personal to impersonal, affective to historical, judging to seeing, doubly conned to doubly conscious.

Nowhere is this shift, and the historical work it takes, more clearly and powerfully demonstrated than in "A Poem For Willie Best," who the reader is reminded was the Hollywood character actor, Sleep'n'eat. This remarkable poem opens with a singing face—recalling the blues-aspiring mouth that so haunted *Preface*—or, in any case, with one "struggling to sing," as

his, or "your own," "flakes of skin and mind / twist and whistle softly / as they fall" (SOS, 59). In this first section, Jones/Baraka uses the second person to interpolate the reader into the experiences of struggling to mean—to have something adequate to say in the face of America's racial history (and its further exploitation as entertainment)—that are described in his first book (recall "Vice": "whatever it is I have to express / falls out of my mouth like flakes of ash"). Enacting a reincarnation of Willie Best, Christ-like, on the cross, the next section descends into history and the body from the violent abstraction and denial of pain that racial caricature performs (SOS, 60):

> …A point, the
> dimensionless line. The top
> of a head, seen from Christ's
> heaven, stripped of history
> or desire.
> Fixed, perpendicular
> to shadow. (even speech, vertical,
> leaves no trace. Born in to death
> held fast to it, where
> the lover spreads his arms, the line
> he makes to threaten Gods with history.
> …
> The point, become a line, a cross, or
> the man, and his material, driven in
> the ground…

In the third section, the cross becomes the crossroads, the emblematic site of the blues. Wary of the interracial reception of this music that is 'our history' as affirmative, even redemptive, Jones/Baraka dryly notes, "At a cross roads, sits the / player. No drum, no umbrella, even / though it's raining. Again, and we / are somehow less miserable because / here is a hero, used to being wet" (61). The poem's next crucial move is to make this multiply signified junction—the cross of torture and redemption, the crossroads at which the blues takes place, and the interpretive choice between mythologizing enjoyment and the less comfortable historicization he undertakes—the imaginary location of the reader: "One road is where you are standing now / (reading this, the other, crosses then / rushes into a wood" (SOS, 61). Following the path into the woods, already imaginatively haunted by the acts of racial violence it might have concealed,

bodies dragged and dumped, the reader is drawn into "a literature, of / symbols," consisting of minstrel stereotypes ("5 lbs neckbones. / 50 lbs hog innards. / 10 bottles cheap wine. / (The contents / of a paper bag, also shoes, with holes / for the big toe") and emblems of colonial violence (300 men on horseback, 75 bibles, 47 howitzers). Collectively resignified as "his gift" and "holy saviours," these are real American resources that, as the section concludes, "should be / invested" (61-2). This assertion, dripping with irony as the economic language necessarily is, is also a genuine bid "to invest the world with a clearer understanding of it self," as "Gatsby's Theory," written around this time, in 1964, and published in the later *Black Magic* (1969), will again propose. The reader at once *is* and, in reading, is *at* the crossroads where the called-for psychic reinvestment in historical understanding might (or might not) take place.

As the poem continues, Jones/Baraka's implicating address of the reader becomes more insistent, more intimate: "I must tell you / that my body hurts. / … / Can you hear? Here / I am again. Your boy, dynamite. Can / you hear?" (63). This shift is interlaced with the (extra-)legally overdetermined unfolding of a sickeningly familiar, almost stock, historical scene of sexualized racial accusation: "This is the lady, / I saw you with. / … / This is the lady I wanted / some how to sleep with."; "Yes, I'm sure / this is the lady. You / slept with her. Witness, your boy, / here, dynamite. Hear? / I mean / can you?" (63-4). The repeated question invites a sorting of readers into those who have ears to hear and those who do not. With punning synesthesia—"the song / of the highest C. / The falsetto," converts sight, 'see', into a piercing note with "an elegance / that punishes silence" (62)—Jones/Baraka makes it clear that hearing these blues means seeing, (and hearing, (and feeling—an internalizing sequence), and, finally, refusing to quietly disavow, the historical and ongoing violence of American racism. The poem ends with the singer still sitting, "wet at the crossroads, remembering distinctly / each weightless face that eases by. (Sun at / the back door, and that hideous mindless grin. / (Hear?" (SOS, 66). The thematic of weight is used here to effect a reversal of the racial gaze and its imposition of double consciousness, as the reader must see herself as potentially among the weightless faces that are distinctly

remembered in their cruelly casual ease—and perhaps even wearing the "hideous mindless grin" that no longer belongs to the minstrel. In effecting these reversals, this passage suggests an important corollary to and inversion of Franz Fanon's assertion that "The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (2008: 90). While this is the basis of the violence of abstraction to which the poem responds, by its end, it is the (implicitly white) passers-by who lack historical weight and substance. With the poem's final parenthetical word and sound, "(Hear?"—at once question, plantation master's command (y'hear?), and act of placing (*here*)—the reader is drawn into a dizzying sonic spiral that aims to "provoke / some meaning, where before / there was only hell. I said / silence, at his huddled blood" (SOS, 65). The poem's haunting images and pointed implication deliver the reader to another, affective, crossroads: content to sink back into one of the pits described in the first section, "whose bottoms are famous. Whose sides / are innocent broadcasts / of another life," and into which the rain-rinsed blood of the minstrel drains (59); or moved to undertake their own practice of sitting with historical weight as constitutive of the only being any of us can meaningfully claim.

Toward the 'Black Magic' *of psycho-ontological work*

That there is no easy intellectual substitute for this affective work, this intimate historiography, Jones/Baraka makes clear in "Footnote to a Pretentious Book." There the metal trap of "*An Agony. As Now.*" reappears as "steel that falls / as a thin mist into my consciousness. As a fine / ugly spray, I have made / some futile ethic / with" (SOS, 78). As the poem takes the interrogative and subjunctive turn with which it concludes, it marks the limits of ethical idealism in relation to anti-blackness as the lack of a substantive horizon for meaningful social relations and change[126]:

And meaning? These words?

[126] The parallel extends to Jones/Baraka's final ironic word. Gordon makes the provocative suggestion that "each of us should ask ourselves, which would bother us more—our community (whether professional, personal, or public) considering us 'unethical' or 'stupid'?, noting that intelligence is prized more than ethics in our age" (208). See Gordon, Lewis. "Theory in Black." *Qui Parle* 18.2 (2010): 193-214.

> Were there some blue expanse
> of world. Some other
> flesh, resting
> at the roof
> of the world …
> you could say of me,
> that I was truly
> simpleminded (SOS 79).

The poem effectively adumbrates the argument Lewis R. Gordon makes in "Theory in Black" about "the futility of pushing ethics" in the context of racism. There Gordon writes that we live:

> …in a world that demands the change of individuals instead of a changed society. The response in the modern world has been the prioritizing of ethics as the condition of the better possibility of a more just world…[The problem is that e]thics and the ethical depend on a set of relations of recognition between human beings…Racism, however, locks a group of beings below the self-other dialectic…This mean[s]…that talk of the ethical conditions of social justice and politics misses the point. The legacy of colonialism is the necessity of a politics for an ethics (2010: 207-8).

For Jones/Baraka, that politics is implicitly psychoanalytic as well as actively revolutionary. The blue expanse of resting flesh he seeks is a greater unfolding of the psycho-political work he has pursued and seeks now to extend—praxes of historically-attuned self-investigation that might eventually make genuine interracial recognition possible by re-tethering meaning to sufficiently shared ontological ground. As Gordon notes, regarding his own reprioritization of a psychoanalytically-oriented politics: "Freud…too, argued that it would be better for society to construct livable conditions for healthy life than to focus on idealized concepts of ethics and justice, two ideals productive more of anxiety and neurosis than of social well-being" (208). As I have shown, Jones/Baraka sought—perhaps perversely, in the idealized medium of poetry (among his other modes of writing and political engagement)—to turn away from idealized concepts, instead digging into and sitting with the messier realm of ambivalent feeling he had been bequeathed by history.

While his work would increasingly take the tack of pushing white neurosis to its breaking point, this shock therapy ultimately remains invested in bringing those who can be reached back

to a version of "the real world"—one in which the social, economic, and psychological conditions of the present are felt with the depth and weight of historical reference—so that a more livable future might be constructed together. He had, after all, glimpsed that possibility in the clearing at the bridge—a moment of care, slowed down to the tempo of the intimate labor required to sustain radical politics, a sitting with the ontological insecurity that revolution provokes. The penultimate poem of *The Dead Lecturer* extends this wish, as it presses hard sight toward the question Jones/Baraka himself felt called to answer at the beginning of *Preface*: "…I stare at the radical / world, / wishing it would stand still. / Tell me, / … / What is tomorrow / that it cannot come / today?" ("Valéry As Dictator," SOS, 112-3). Here the horizon promised by radical politics (and aesthetics) is not something to be moved toward, but rather something to be drawn out of a more honest engagement with the presence of the past—those innumerable yesterdays when allies were looked for and found absent, or tardy at best. As lecturer turned dictator—under the name of one who likewise approached poetry as an instrument and exercise—Jones/Baraka addresses those "herds / of suffering intelligences / bunched, / and out of / hearing…" whose "naive cluck / of feeling" must be "shatter[ed]" lest their arrival, as revolutionary comrades, be perpetually deferred (SOS, 112-3).

By *Black Magic*—published in 1969 but containing poems written just before his 1965 move uptown as well as those that epitomize the Black Arts period—shattering the endless deferral of historical reckoning and substantive change that prevent any meaningful American future from taking shape has become the poet's explicit charge. It is the work—beyond biding time—of a politically reinvigorated blues. This task is further understood and framed as a form of historiography. In that book's opening poem, "Three Modes of History and Culture," Jones/Baraka sketches and evaluates distinct historiographies of African-American politics, turning away from the first two toward the charge he now takes upon himself—that of sharing as demand the psycho-historical weight narrated by the prior modes as event and adaptation. In the first mode—at once black affirming and pessimistically anti-progressivist—black history is

told as a movement from one form of exploitation to another, and a 'mad' "[t]hriving to balance the meanness of particular skies" (SOS, 120). The second, more culturally-oriented mode groups a range of musical genres that enabled that survival and unlikely thriving—"Brick songs. Shoe songs. Chants of open weariness," and the minstrel era of "ripping meat hug shuffle fuck"—together with "The Party of Insane / Hope…Where the dead told lies / of clever social justice," noting that he's "Come from there, and belched it out" (SOS, 120). While this suggests a repudiation of both (interracial) protest politics and the earlier work songs that fed into and fostered the blues, that partial rejection, thematized as indigestion, is in the interest of a psychically-oriented politics that Jones/Baraka nonetheless derived from the blues as he sought a better answer to their insistent question: *what you got to say?* This third mode—enacted in *Black Magic*—is alluded to at the end of this opening poem by way of the future Jones/Baraka imagines it eventually making possible:

> I think about a time when I will be relaxed.
> When flames and non-specific passion wear themselves
> away. And my eyes and hands and mind can turn
> and soften, and my songs will be softer
> and lightly weight the air.
> (SOS, 120)

If that future time is the time of the blue expanse and resting flesh conjured as a wish in "Footnote," the mode of historiography that would lead there must traffic in the impersonal, intimately historical and deeply felt intelligence the poet has cultivated, and use it to more heavily weight the air others breathe with the furtive flames of psycho-ontological warfare.

Critical Feelings

Movement and affirmation

Keeping his attention to the psychic dimension of historical weight in view is important for preventing a certain affective slippage that allows Baraka to fit too easily into the wider currents of literary postmodernism in relation to which he cultivated and maintained a vital and

racially specific critical distance. More importantly, the pleasure of a more detached conceptuality allows the white critic to over-identify with, rather than being intimately addressed and unsettled by, the material about which he writes. This liability appears even in the sharpest scholarship. For instance, in describing Baraka's mature performative mode of presenting his work, Kimberly Benston imagines the poet's body "'[c]ommunicating itself as if propelled like a viral or sexual congress through a perpetually dancing organism" (2000: 202). Such images of ecstatic motion glide and gloss over the resistance that effort has sometimes met, not so much in the syntax or "signifying conventions" deployed in Baraka's writing as in the bodies and psyches of the wider half-white audience the poet continued to address.[127] In spite of his insightful discussion of Jones/Baraka's frequent invocation of the scream as central to the racial charge of Baraka's developing poetics, Benston continues to allow the excitement of Baraka's post-projective performance to infect his own writing, even while noting that the livelier, and less tense, readings are increasingly performed to primarily black audiences (214-22). It is in this context that a particularly symptomatic moment arises. Before undertaking his comparative analysis of performance styles—from the "eloquent rectitude and solicitous decorum" of the 1961 Living Theater reading of "Notes for A Speech," to the liberated voice as "ludic instrument of mimetic festivity" in a New York Art Quartet performance of "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS"—Benston signals a professional shortcoming, "our own entrapment here, in the order of print" (2000: 214). In attempting to gesture beyond it, he introduces a personal

[127] Lighting on another such moment, Ben Hickman, whose interest likewise lies in the racial complexity of Baraka's address, takes issue with Benston's characterization of Baraka as the exemplar of a kind of postmodern post-subjectivity: "Baraka would reverse the process, endlessly repeated in post-Renaissance metaphysics of the text, by which representational abstraction detaches itself from communicative purpose … [Instead he seeks a] self-consuming artifact that none the less presses the cause of an empowered, if migratory presence…" [Benston 202-3 in Hickman 116]. Having thus grafted the phrase cited above to an earlier passage, Hickman opines that reversing Western metaphysics is never Baraka's intention and complains that to read him this way is to "make a Language poet of Baraka" (116). Here Hickman is simply wrong, and his counter-assessment relies on an unnecessary de-intellectualization of Baraka's legacy that seems ignorant of many explicit statements about Western metaphysics that Baraka made over the years. Yet, while Hickman's critique of Benston is wrongheaded, he identifies a certain lightness in Benston's description that arguably *feels* off because it does initiate an effectively celebratory engagement with a politics that rather aims to disrupt, discomfit and discompose.

note that raises other questions of audience and reception that the more neutrally black and white order of print serves, however inadvertently, to efface: "no, I haven't yet gotten up to dance while writing these notes—though my students have been jumping in the hallway to the mixed sounds of Baraka's taped voice and my own floating out of the office door for the past few days!" His academic readers are then invited to think of the citations and commentary that follow as "challenges to your inventive ingenuity and ethical bearing" (214). Here I wonder whether Benston's own playful mimetic half-identification with Baraka—who does declare, "I got up and danced while writing these notes, screaming at Elvin to cool it" in the earlier cited "Coltrane Live at Birdland" (in Benston 211)—is the ethical bearing we, too, are encouraged to assume. I wonder, as well, whether Benston's students at Haverford College were indeed jumping in the hallway and what it should mean for them to do so.

Between such enthusiasm and the dull (latently hostile) gatekeepers of propriety that Baraka, as a performer, and now Benston too, in writing, ostensibly leaves behind, the productive discomfort of a white audience that receives and comprehends the implications of the distinct message that Bessie Smith, or say, the Black Revolutionary Theatre, has *for them*, drops out of the picture. Even in his attention to the phenomenology of the scream as voiced in performance, Benston focuses on its energizing contagion to black audiences rather than developing the psycho-ontology of the scream as heard, or read and imagined, by those whose faces it is intended to tear open. The relative ineradicability of this psycho-ontological antagonism may be the 'hardest fact' of all. As a seminal and still exemplary work of jazz-based performance-oriented criticism, Benston's slippage—wherein confrontation is conceptually acknowledged but affectively elided, and ultimately pushed to the most indisputably racist margins ("Barakan voice remains at once adversarial—'DEATH TO THE KLAN!'—and attuned to the challenges of revitalizing our will to social transformation" (226))—illustrates a more pervasive tendency to foreground black affirmation, while reducing the white negation that accompanies it to an innocuous aside.

This effect is not unique to the otherwise astute jazz-based Baraka scholarship but rather partakes of a tendency built into theoretical work on Blues music itself. Insofar as "the music can provide the model for criticism because the music *already is* criticism," as Brent Hayes Edwards describes a wider understanding of black music that Baraka shares, how one hears the music matters for the use—critical and/or creative—that one makes of it.[128] As I have argued, Baraka's relatively complicated relationship to the music—his early alienation from and concurrent uptake of the blues in the context of an uncomfortable (because too comfortable) interracial scene, combined with his analytic, socio-historical approach to absorbing its message(s)—gave him a different perspective on what the music had to say, and to whom. Explaining the music's primary address to black people, Edwards quotes jazz musician Sidney Bechet as explaining that "White people…they don't have the memory that needs to understand it. But that's what the music is…a lost thing finding itself."[129] Yet the young Jones/Baraka's insistence that Bessie Smith was telling her white listeners to 'kiss her black unruly ass' attributes to the music more than the newfound self-possession of a freed people to which Bechet refers; for him, the music is also the self-aware revolutionary demand that an ill-founded thing—AmeriKKKA—lose itself.[130] This fundamental antagonism has long been submerged in the criticism proper and in the criticism the music is presumed already to be.

Blues and Black affirmation

Critical abstractions of the Blues have largely moved away from the friction and weight, and from the social violence, that inhere in the musical genres. In asking why this should be, one need look only to the rhetorical purposes of such criticism and theorization, which have been centrally preoccupied with affirming blackness—in the first instance, as a public counter-

[128] See *Epistrophes* (2017: 10).
[129] Ibid, 11.
[130] As Bechet describes the Southern (and not just Southern) fear of losing the Negroes as slaves, "It was a crime; it was all political; it was the end of America" (in *Epistrophes*, 11).

discourse to racist stereotyping, and more recently, as a mode of intellectual reclamation and institutional support among black academics. In the process, these writings have progressively taken lyrical flight—a certain energetic descriptive abundance, combined with abstraction—in the style and genres, as well as the focal content, of their prose. Before considering why Baraka's more direct, confrontational style should seem to have fallen away from the auspices of the Blues under which his thinking germinated, I will briefly trace the trajectory of this critical tendency toward affirmation, beginning with Ralph Ellison, whose early and famous description in "Richard Wright's Blues" (1945) addresses the psychic work of sitting with trauma, while also setting in motion the subsequent focus on affirmative healing, marked by the sign of the lyric:

> The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.

Here it is the haptic dimension that meaningfully distinguishes the minor transcendence proposed (and associated with art) from the abstract "consolation of philosophy" by locating the site of transformation in the musician's flesh. Yet the pain and brutality that is kept alive remains privately felt in the mind—or, transitionally, between the singer and his instrument—while the sound extends its healing work outward under a lyrical rubric. For a number of subsequent writers, this wider healing dimension and the affirmation that accompanies it takes on paramount importance. This remains true of Fred Moten, in terms of the tone of his writing and speaking performance and in his insistence, against the social discourse of black pathology, that "there's nothing wrong with us" (2013: 52).[131] While Moten's *fugitivity* and *blur* take the blues note and the tradition of blues as movement to a higher level of philosophical abstraction and intervention than had his predecessors—making each into an ontological figure and

[131] See Heather Love's analysis of the book's structure of address in "Praxis and the Undercommons." March 4, 2019. *Critique and Praxis* 13/13. Web. Accessed 31 August 2020.

methodological principle—the affirmative tenor of his "Black Optimism" has a long history.[132] In 1976, Albert Murray, for instance, characterized the blues as "good-time music" that engendered in listeners a disposition that was "elegantly playful and heroic in its nonchalance" (*Stomping The Blues,* 1976: 45). Yet, importantly, for Murray, listening to the blues isn't just about listening. It is also a physical performance: "the also and also of dragging, driving, jumping, kicking, swinging, or otherwise stomping away the blues as such" (1976: 257) He assumes an experience of pain that must be energetically converted with the body, retaining the haptic dimension Ellison describes and bringing it into a ritual social setting. Singing or playing or even dancing to the blues can, in this respect, be seen to share with psychoanalysis a certain functionality—that of a practice of transformative feeling that must be undergone via transference onto a safe impersonal interlocutor (here, a crowd) to take effect. While such an understanding may be implicit in Murray's description, it was what he saw as a misperception of the blues as sorrowful that he more explicitly sought to correct, and so it is the ebullient lyricism and sense of play that are his strongest legacy. A few more theoretical iterations down the road, it is the more painful impetus of "the blues as such" behind blues music that might seem rather at risk of being forgotten.

With his more explicitly academic notion of the "blues matrix," Houston Baker, Jr. translates into a theoretical register Murray's more concrete attention to joyous movement,

[132] Like many earlier blues theorists, Moten prioritizes the socially vibrant experimentation with fugitive joy that the blues draws out of the disappointing and still oppressive experience of relative freedom in slavery's wake in the context of anti-black racism's ongoing damage. Moten's *blur* proposes, in effect, that blackness resounds in the register of the philosophic as the blues note does in the ear trained to Western classical music. It bends or, as he puts it in one interview, *sends* singularity—a term and distinction he may well inherit from Baraka—away from the assumption of discreteness. (See Fitzgerald, Adam. "An Interview with Fred Moten." *Literary Hub.* August 5, 2015. Accessed at https://lithub.com/an-interview-with-fred-moten-pt-i/.) While Moten remains committed to black social and aesthetic life, this blurring operation troubles the association of blackness with black people, such that in his engagement with Western philosophy, he finds an "eruption of blackness" in Derrida or Marx or Freud that appears more clearly by "rubbing" them together with other figures (Adrian Piper, DuBois, Baraka), allowing him to read them as "a part of the black radical tradition." This is not the quite the same crossing that enables Cornell West to declare Bruce Springsteen a bluesman—in Moten's work the bluesman is not the given philosopher in whom he recognizes the rub of blackness, but himself (or the radicalization of singularity we now know by his name)—but it shares a certain optimism and openness that can't but underlie his appeal to non-black scholars and artists.

creativity, and signifying: as Murray had put it, "laughing and talking and shucking and stuffing and jiving and conniving and making love. So sometimes it is also about the also and also of signifying and qualifying…as if the orchestra were woofing at you…as if you were being challenged" (1989: 257).[133] Baker influentially makes of this vibrant social scene "a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit" (1987: 3). So doing, he relocates the blues (back) from the dance hall to the railway crossroads. At the same time, he turns the conjuring of black social life into an address to black critics, whose identity authorizes their participation in what is also (in his improvisation on the argument of *Blues People*) a "phylogenetic recapitulation—a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation—of species experience" (5). Here, history, too, is playfully remixed and, more critically, in Baker's exhilarating Deleuzian skirting of the ontological, he bypasses the negative experiences the blues was ostensibly created to finger or to stomp out. Absent are brutal experience, anguish, disappointment, stasis—affects that might be associated with the historical realities of slavery, Reconstruction, and ongoing racism. Noting this affective slip, Jeffrey B. Ferguson offers a sobering critique of Houston Baker, Jr.'s otherwise compelling elaboration of the blues matrix at the railway crossroads.

Pursuing the lyrics of Robert Johnson's "Crossroad Blues" beyond Baker's authorizing quotation, Ferguson points out that it is the singer's fear of being lynched that lies at the heart of the song, rather than the embrace of "the juncture's ceaseless flux" that Baker seeks to extract from it. In the passage cited by Baker, the singer is anxiously stuck, trying to get out of where he is and failing, as social recognition and assistance are denied him: "Standing at the Crossroads, tried to flag a ride / Ain't nobody seemed to know me, everybody passed me by." Ferguson concludes: "Rather than the tricky escape of the multiply-signifying trickster, 'Crossroad Blues' evokes more centrally those problems in life that cannot be escaped, that must be faced,

[133] The challenge Murray has in mind here is that of young heterosexual romance.

however much one wishes for the scene to change" (702). Implied in his critique is the possibility that, in translating Murray's descriptive register into a theoretical one, Baker might be said to have made the minor transcendence of the song's art into something more akin to philosophy's consolation, or its promise, overlooking in the process the material realities that have been sedimented into brutally concrete and systemic form all around us. In short, Ferguson's critique points to the limits of focusing on the affirmative dimension of the blues when that focus is cut off from its own historical matrix, and the corporeal and social contexts therein, by the passage of time, the seductions of energetic improvisatory prose, and the abstracting engine of theory. If the violence eclipsed is so omnipresent and potent in the life of Baker's intended readers as not to bear dwelling on, the same cannot be said for most non-black readers or critics—a problem he is not obliged to consider, but one that did continue to concern Baraka, and might again concern us now with the vital spread of Black Studies.

At the same time, if the alternative to Baker's "tricky escape" or "productive transit" at the site of the "juncture's ceaseless flux" were simply the blues singer trapped by the inescapable violence of his environment, the tradition's power to sing and fight back would be missed. In asking what kind of movement does occur within the caesura of that anxious trapped feeling, I would suggest that, as he sings, Johnson's standing becomes an act of sitting with the wider violence of the racist world that pervades and subtends the ordinary anonymity of the railway junction. Within that 'under-standing' occurs both a psychic alteration in the singer and a redirection of perception and address. The apparent personalization of the insult he suffers—as Johnson faces not only his abandonment by strangers but the denial of recognition by those who might have reason to know him—is turned, in the manner Jones/Baraka's "Expressive Language" describes, into an impersonalization of the singer, from slighted ego to one who tells us about the extraordinary order of the world. This is effected by a kind of writing—a movement of sober recording—in which the singer, indirectly, lets those who *seem* not to know him know that he now *really knows* them. Johnson's spare narration of his act of unreciprocated looking is

unsettling precisely because it makes the persons beheld see in themselves what they do not wish to see—namely that their passage through the world relies on a fiction others do not share, even as those others are subjected to the violence of its terms. This movement of (in)sight and psyche is, as we have seen, central to Jones/Baraka's "A Poem for Willie Best," in which the cross roads is not a figure for movement's freedom but of pained stasis, of being nailed to racial stereotype and bleeding out one's life. When movement enters that scene, it is as "the dance of the raised / leg. Of the hand on the knee," and finally of the steady gaze that follows and remembers each passerby. Instead, then, of the Blues at the crossroads giving rise to freer movement, it is this minor movement of the minstrel's eyes that gives rise to song as he sits, watches, and makes note of all those who still fail to hear.

Toward a white-negating blues: transbluesent crossings, psychic hauntings

We might now re-ask the question—*what kind of movement is this sitting-with?*—in relation to Baraka's later work, which is generally read, in its mobile performativity, as a realization of the jazz aesthetic in poetry and an exuberant expression of blackness. Yet there is an insistent rage in much of Baraka's work, the effect of which is not exhausted by the alternative critical emphases on the function and value of polemic either. In the readings that follow, I will consider how Baraka's poetic strategies are variously keyed to provoking psychological movement in his hearers, storming our imaginations with what he described in "The Revolutionary Theatre" as "[t]he force…of twenty million spooks," bent and sent back in, in order "to destroy [us] and whatever [we] believe is real." From such statements, it is clear that Jones/Baraka would have agreed with Afro-Pessimist scholar Jared Sexton's suggestion that, for most Americans, slavery hasn't happened yet in a psychologically meaningful sense.[134] It is, I would suggest, precisely slavery as psycho-ontological event that constitutes the

[134] See "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." In *Tensions* 5 (2011). Accessed at www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/jaredsexton.php.

incommunicable kernel of the blues that Jones/Baraka nonetheless sought to send across. Provoking its effective occurrence was a significant facet of his lifework, undertaken with the "black magic" of poem and polemic intertwined. In the process, he comes to locate and foreground in the blues the negation of whiteness alongside the more commonly emphasized affirmation of blackness. This negating work of the blues is the precondition for the apparent mobility of racialization he attributes to the person of John Sinclair as a figure for the revolutionary horizon, however distant, of a livable American future. In closing, then, I'd like to turn briefly to a few of Baraka's poems from the 1980's forward, beginning with "In the Tradition," listening for what they negate in order to affirm, for all that is not universal in them, and for the ways pain is both frankly and covertly addressed to those who inflict it, rather than offered for identification.

Recalling his approbation of Sinclair's *Delta Sound Suite*, the sprawling performance text of "In the Tradition" (1982) is something of a pedagogical blues itself, much of it addressed to white America—indeed, the poem might be subtitled "the U.S. no shit blues." While its style clearly draws on jazz improvisation, it is supported by an underlying rhetorical structure that can be mapped in blues form, a sequence of repetitions and wry turns punctuated, at varying length, by overwhelming lists of evidence for its claims about the essential blackness of any meaningfully American tradition. If the enumeration of black creativity gives the poem its affirmative power, it is this antagonistic rhetorical structure that lends that tradition its heavy political weight (SOS, 207-18):

> "hey coah-ch / trembling fate wrapped in flags"
> "hey coah-ch / wanna outlaw the dunk, cannot deal with…"
> "hey coah-ch coah-ch / bench yourself in the garbagecan of history"
>
> "our fingerprints are everywhere / on you america"
> "our fingerprints are everywhere / Cesaire told you / that"
> "hah, you bloody & dazed, screaming at me to stop yet"
>
> "hah, you rise a little I mention we also the tradition of amos and andy…"
> "But just as you rise up to gloat I scream COLTRANE! STEVIE WONDER! / MALCOLM X! "ALBERT AYLER! / THE BLACK ARTS! / We are the artists"

> "Dont tell me shit about a tradition of deadness & capitulation…"
> "dont tell me shit about the tradition of slavemasters…"
> "say something american if you dare"
>
> "even here in White Racist Land It can Bloom"
> "though flawed by our oppression it can / bloom bloom…"
> "thank you arthur for playing & saying, reminding us"
>
> "we go into the future / carrying a world / of blackness
> "yet we have been in the world / and we have gained all of what there / is and was"
> "and now we find ourselves in chains / the tradition says plainly to us fight…Sing!"

The dyad with which the poem ends—Fight! Sing!—encapsulates the dual agency Baraka hears in and draws out of the blues as the bearer of black—and therefore American—history. This is not a mere celebration of the African-American tradition but the pointed destruction of white fantasies of cultural preeminence and a rewriting of what American, with no qualifying prefix, means. It is not for nothing that two of these compressed stanzas essentially tell white American readers to sit back down ("bench yourself" and "just as you rise up to gloat I scream"), while others seek to provoke further humbling study, disabusing such readers of their frequently ignorant cultural assumptions ("our fingerprints are everywhere," "say something american if you dare"). The overarching message is to get to work, not as the coaches we might have imagined ourselves to be, but as janitors tasked with the care-work of clearing out the garbage we harbor, and even are. In this poem, the message is dispersed and the psycho-ontological stakes are couched in polemics. As such, they are susceptible to reading as figures of speech and rely on inundation for their effects. In other modes, Baraka is craftier at slicing through the defenses that argumentative address excites and striking the psychic nerve for which he aims.

In a very different, invented (rather than subtended) blues genre—one that leads to what he will playfully call the "lowcoup"[135]—Baraka returns more closely to the form, as well as the

[135] The "lowcoup" first appears as such in *Funklore* (1995), where it is defined as "an Afro American verse form, as Haiku is Japanese!" (SOS, 348). It continues the wry blurring and subverting of meaning that can be found throughout *Wise, Why's, Y's*, albeit in terser form, e.g.: "Craziness is no / Act / Not to / Act // is crazinezz" (348). This exemplary "lowcoup" associates the genre with poems from *The Dead Lecturer,* chief among them, "Snake Eyes," which ends "We take / unholy risks to prove / we are what we cannot be. For instance, / I am not even crazy"

spirit, of the blues, directly addressing black people while seeking to haunt white readers with a sound-bending interrogative subtext. Subtitled and dedicated "*Black Mountain Blues* / Bessie Smith," "History-Wise #22," from *Wise, Why's, Y's: The Griot's Song* (1995), harkens back to Jones/Baraka's own roots, both in Smith's blues and as a young poet adjacent to Black Mountain poetics. The poem is rife with such wordplay, spinning railway into "Col- / trane" and driving it Underground as the "real / *sub* / way" (SOS, 245). The centrality of the figure of the train to the poem suggests an encounter between the site of the college in North Carolina—an agrarian village until the coming of the railroad in 1879—and the rural town of ill repute described in Smith's "Black Mountain Blues," first recorded in 1930, three years before the arts-based institution opened. The coincidence certainly partakes of the "irony of the world" Baraka regularly anatomized and, if we follow the invitation to listen to the song, imagining it addressed, in part, to the Black Mountain poets, the effect is a reversal of the racial gaze of the kind Baraka so often sought to produce. The song's lyrics describe 'Black Mountain' as a place where "people are bad as they can be"; in the opening verse "a child will smack your face / Babies cryin' for liquor, and all the birds sing bass."[136] Imagining the radical arts college associated with a number of his former white colleagues—chiefly with Charles Olson, who served as rector of the institute and who Baraka continued to defend—in these terms at once de-idealizes it and draws it into the fold of racially stereotyped blackness. It is the verse that marks the narrative climax, bringing the singer's description of place into the now of action—as she announces her plans for the "sweetest" Black Mountain man who cheated on her—that is particularly instructive with respect to the intent of Baraka's poem:

> I'm bound for Black Mountain, me and my razor and my gun
> Lord, I'm bound for Black Mountain, me and my razor and gun
> I'm gonna shoot him if he stands still, and cut him if he runs

(SOS, 109). The subsequent poem in *The Dead Lecturer,* "A Poem for Speculative Hipsters," anticipates the tone and gestures of *Wise, Why's, Y's* and *Funklore's* lowcoup and associated verse forms, undercutting the assumed division between Jones/Baraka's early work and his mature ostensibly blacker aesthetic.

[136] Accessed at https://genius.com/Bessie-smith-black-mountain-blues-lyrics

Here, neither standing nor moving will avail whoever, in Baraka's poem, stands in for the "sweetest man in town" —the white would-be radical, perhaps?—nor absolve him of his predictable, even inevitable, betrayal. As part of the poem's covert subtext, this constitutes a clever and uncompromising message, along the lines of the "kiss my black ass" the young LeRoi Jones had attributed to Smith's singing.

In any case, as Baraka explains in an interview, the song paired with each poem is intended to "show you the kind of feeling that the words are supposed to be attached to" (Salaam 226, in Schultz 28). With respect to Smith's "Black Mountain Blues," that feeling is one of casual toughness, of giving it back as good as you've been dealt. Baraka attaches this easygoing, almost good-natured vengeance to a resignification of the train—that great engine of 19th century movement and progress—as its characteristic noise is bent from a simple imitation of the steam locomotive's release mechanism to the haunting voice of history. The voice as agent of reparation becomes the undertow of this history itself, channelized through the impersonal singer, and its target all those—well-intentioned or otherwise—who don't hear, or who lazily misinterpret, history's present-day political implications. Underscoring its double, and pointedly split, address—to black and, indirectly, to white readers—the poem affirms that, "The black night / fills // our ears," and proceeds to contrast this with those who mishear: "'Choo Choo' is the translation / in somebody else's / Station // # // Whooooooeeee Whooooooeee / Whooooooooeoooo Whooooooooeeoooo Whoooeeeeoooo // is its real / sound" (SOS, 246). The haunting question, *Who?* bends to *We*, as white swings to black, seeking to leave behind the non-black reader's mistuned, white noise-dulled station in the process.[137] The movement is not unidirectional; eschewing complacent assumptions of progress, the sound is made to swing back and forth, a pendular weighting of the heard and felt space between the poles. The result is the

[137] Baraka's frequent critique of Christianity and play with its terms is likely another layer of meaning; the Station might also refer to the Stations of the Cross, and that cross roads at which Willie Best is pinned.

addition to the interrogative sequence of a pointed second-guessing—*Who? We. You?*—that undercuts any easy crossings from one category of addressee into the other.

The poem ends with another blued word, referring back to the title of the series, *Wise, Why's, Y's,* and marking "History-wise #22" as a kind of meta- or in any case central instantiation of the whole sequence:

> Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyssssssssssss
> Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyssssssssssss
> Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy
> &c.
>
> (SOS, 247)

Here the *Why* that might well be addressed to white readers and their historical counterparts bends toward a hissing affirmation of black wisdom. The larger sequence, *Wise, Why's, Y's,* has been described as an Afro-Modernist epic, one that "provides an African American history lesson" and "a commentary on the writing of history itself, presenting history as a 'spiral' (rather than linear narrative), singing African Americans' diasporic history from West Africa through the Middle Passage and slavery and into the present" (2012: 27). Kathy Schultz also points out the significance of Baraka's explicit references to the Griot tradition, whose historiographic function is linked, in West African cultural understanding, to the supernatural (43). Here I would add that the history Baraka traces is also that of the making of whiteness, and his shamanic charge is not only the spinning of a spiritual home for African-Americans but also, as "History-Wise #22" performs, the psychic piercing and haunting of white Americans, with an ear toward their potential unravelling. It is, then, a history lesson, a commentary on history writing, *and* a praxis of and incitement to intimate historiography. It is, after all, in the punning but also witchily serious spirit of these poems that Baraka pronounces his old comrade John Sinclair no longer WHYTE for having undertaken his own version of such a praxis.

If Baraka's WHY pushes white people's guilty and shallow "history of motive" to the point of collapse, it is the first question, the *Who?*, that exerts the real psycho-ontological pressure. It is used in other poems with the explicit intent to provoke the destruction of what

readers believe is real—most controversially in the 9/11 poem, "Somebody Blew Up America." To take Baraka in good faith and to take seriously his lifelong efforts to tell us about the extraordinary order of the world as he felt it is to read this send-up not for the elements of racial stereotype and conspiracy theory to be found among its contents, but for the global effect of its psychically destabilizing and reality-shattering question, *Who?* Here history is compressed into an outpouring of material that moves from insistent interrogation to haunting cry, "Like an Owl exploding / In your life in your brain in your self / … / Who and Who and WHO who who / Whoooo and Whooooooooooooooooooooo!" (SOS, 432-3)—with an echo that reaches back through the black radical tradition, recalling Langston Hughes' "Let America Be America Again" and activating, too, the owl of Phillis Wheatley's "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth" that gives American liberty the lie even before its establishment as a nation.[138] Ultimately, the poem is uncomfortable not because of this or that accusation, but because the final answer to its repeated question is *You*, insofar as you are all the things that have made you, formed you, colored you, as "any sad man here, American." The poet aims to incite you to undertake for yourself—in writing or otherwise—the deeply felt, intimately historiographic *work* that produced Jones/Baraka's more searching ambivalent early books as well as authorizing his more insistent and differently haunting mature singing from a black (w)hole. In the end, he wrests from the blues an idea, a practice, and a call for intimate historiography as necessary to the negation of whiteness, to meaningful political allyship, and to the possibility of racialization as malleable in spite of its deep historical entrenchment.

[138] See https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147907/let-america-be-america-again and https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47706/to-the-right-honorable-william-earl-of-dartmouth.

Chapter 2

Charles Olson's "what insides are"— history, gravitational and unrelieved

History by numbers, letters, feelings, colors

"My dear LeRoi: / Use a world so large." With this grand imperative, a troubled Charles Olson began, in 1964, his last letter to the man who would soon be addressed as Amiri Baraka—though not by Olson, whose epistolary attempt to prevent the break that followed did not succeed. Olson's letter was a response to the publication, in 1963, of Jones's *Blues People.*[139] Olson first takes his friend to task for seeking to "represent other human beings…speaking for the Negro," but what seems to have really bothered him is the implication that African-Americans, categorically, have greater political purchase on what Jones/Baraka would continue to refer to as "the real world." Olson, having long sought a new "stance toward reality" himself, writes of "being struck all over the place":

> how much you speak of as Negro has been only my own experience likewise—so I am solely persuaded that your position that the Negro solely ought to act as an end and change of what is manifestly no good is in fact any man's who wishes to have had a life in society which was more legitimate (*SL*, 306).[140]

The repetition of categorical exclusions at once ironically echoes Jones/Baraka's purported new stance toward politics and betrays Olson's indignation at the insult he seems to have suffered from a work that was not personally addressed to him. At stake in the letter, aside from Olson's bruised ego, is how America's racially divided history affects the feasibility and reach of political camaraderie. As Olson writes, a fresh interracial rift is appearing in the texture of the mid-century present; it is beginning to seem as if the newfound solidarity forged by anti-racist activists as well as in the countercultural circles of ambitious young poets had never fully

[139] Also mentioned is a piece published that same year in Midstream magazine, "What Does Nonviolence Mean?"
[140] Ralph Maud, ed. *Selected Letters: Charles Olson.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000: 305-6.

taken.[141] Olson is anxious to establish that the antagonistic streak of Jones's radicalization is the product of intellectual misunderstanding rather than divergent experience.

Against the historical-ontological distinction Jones/Baraka seems to be drawing between black and white experience,[142] Olson insists on a racial-political gap that is merely quantitative: "the power of the Negro is in fact the power of numbers." He then makes a rather cutting accusation: "Maybe in fact I do think you use history…*as it was* almost to whip up your own interest or entrance into contemporary political action (?)" (*SL*, 306). The speculative diagnosis closes with a parenthetical question mark. For the letter's recipient, struggling with the tension between his class- and race-based affinities and the double-consciousness it exacerbated, this line surely hit a nerve. Both men, after all, believed that history ought to be engaged on the basis of its manifestation in the present. The disagreement, however, is not ultimately over theories of history but something considerably more intimate, less abstract. Much as he wishes to label Jones/Baraka's new feeling for politics limited, subjective—subject to correction as an error would be—Olson senses and fears its diagnostic power as a direct threat to the dominion of his own. "Feeling predicts intelligence," Jones/Baraka would write, and Olson could not have disagreed.[143] Are the feelings behind Jones/Baraka's political turn not then his closest access to the real workings of history in the present? Whose feeling for reality is more discerning? Less swayed by personal psychic need? It is a zero-sum game.

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[141] Tensions were surfacing around the same time over white participation in the Civil Rights Movement. Emerging in 1963 at a coalition meeting in Greenville, Mississippi, the issue came to a head for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in 1966, when the organization took a Black Power direction under Stokely Carmichael's leadership.

[142] In these texts, Jones/Baraka stakes out an Afro-Pessimist position *avant la lettre*, similarly positing a psycho-ontological divide of historical provenance, the ongoing reinforcement of which has profound political consequences. His articulation differs from that of contemporary Afro-Pessimists in the assignation and valuation of ontological weight. Whereas Afro-Pessimist scholars come after and share the poststructural critique of ontology, locating black life in what Franz Fanon called a "zone of non-being," Baraka claims for "blues people" the coherent integration into a larger world that ontology generally describes.

[143] The line is from Baraka's "Gatsby's Theory of Aesthetics," originally published in 1969 in *Black Magic* (*SOS: Poems 1961-2013*. New York: Grove Press, 2014: 138). The importance of feeling as first responder had long been reinforced for Olson by Alfred North Whitehead: "There is nothing in the real world which is merely an inert fact. Every reality is there for feeling: it promotes feeling; and it is felt" (*Process and Reality*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010: 310).

Having made the allegation, Olson feels compelled to clarify that he is not denying the continued presence of anti-black racism. Taking a seemingly conciliatory turn, he acknowledges the intimate relation between history *as it was* and their contemporary world:

> I don't for a minute think the White Man you describe isn't the same filthy bastard I know who is completely unable to live either, and is easily as dangerous as you describe him; and in fact the Negro you describe is in fact also the retained brother—retention brother—of this other fellow (*SL*, 306).

Put into question, however unwittingly, in Olson's concretization of "retained brother" as "retention brother," is whether too many Americans, Jones/Baraka now among them, won't let go of history *as it was,* or whether it's not that history's ghosts won't let go of present persons. If the latter, can it really only be certain present persons, but not others? Missing from the equation, between "the White Man you describe" and "the same filthy bastard I know," is where Olson himself lands, unless already beyond such filial claims and possessions. Putting an audacious seal on his apparently authoritative transcendence, Olson continues: "But that the violence so engendered is not as interesting as the world-wide violence and shit and that why in fact should the Negro be any specialist in redeeming that fact???????" (*SL*, 306).[144] More belligerently, and leaning on the conjunction that has, in the twenty-first century, become a symptomatic racial structure in its own right—*I don't, I'm not…But*—Olson again fails to actually ask the indicated question. Insofar as the question is a grammatical figure for reality-testing, Olson's difficulty employing it is symptomatic of a larger refusal of what black radical politics might mean, not only for his own politics but for his very being. Instead, undercutting the acknowledgement of slavery's contemporary resonance he had just given, he reduces its scope to the merely domestic as the contest shifts terrain: from a matter of temporality to *interest* and, behind that, the interpretive breadth and priority of each man's feelings and experience.

[144] Germane here is Olson's admission, in a letter to Cid Corman, that "'I have a damn irritating style of punctuation and placements…I do it gravely, as part of, my method, believing that, resistance must be a part of style if, it is part of the feeling'." *Letters for Origin,* 1969: 40.

Why, Jones/Baraka might have asked, should Olson have the stronger claim on what is politically relevant or the greater capacity to parse history *as it was* from history still present?[145] The very idea of an irreducible contest between perspectives, rather than an acknowledgment of real incommensurability, is, as Tim Woods has suggested, incompatible with Olson's own empathic insistence on history as lived in and by each body it inhabits and forms (2015: 241-2). As Olson had put it in writing to Cid Corman in 1951:

> that one time which matters YOUR OWN
>
> (the LIE of history is that a man can find or take any relevance out of the infinite times of other men except as he pegs the whole thing on *his* time: and i don't mean times, that sociological lie, I mean *your* TEMPI — mine.
>
> (*Letters for Origin,* 83)

The individualization of temporality the passage insists on would seem to make space for the disparity of historical meaning Olson suddenly discovers between Baraka's experience and his own. Yet, Woods' reading of the claim in relation to Walter Benjamin's 'time of the now' suggests (against the thrust of his own analysis) how such an understanding could also be mobilized—as it is in Olson's letter to Jones/Baraka—to adjudicate the harnessing of one's own potential powers as an historical materialist, and that of others. In doing the latter, and accusing Jones/Baraka of relying on sociology, Olson ironically overlooks the fact that the very different relationship to history that *Blues People* exhibits might well, in the terms of his own framework, testify to its embodied authenticity.

The ontological stakes of this dispute are at the heart of Jones/Baraka's "Numbers, Letters," the title, composition date, and content of which suggest it may be the reply Olson thought he never got. Written in late 1964, as Jones/Baraka was parting ways with the largely white avant-garde scene in which he had been immersed, Olson's attempt to write off his hard-

[145] Having published an essay on his 1960 visit to post-revolutionary Cuba in which he explicitly criticizes American political myopia, Jones/Baraka would have had good reason to balk at Olson's suggestion that he had failed to consider the larger context of world-wide violence. See "Cuba Libre" in *Home: Social Essays*. New York: Akashic Books, 2009.

won black stance as misguided seems to have been, in some manner, on the younger poet's mind. After a self-interrogatory opening, the poem's address shifts to urgently confront an unidentified interlocutor:

> I cant say who I am
> unless you agree I'm real
> ...
> so here's some feeling for you
> see how you like it, what it
> reveals, and that's Me.
>
> Unless you agree I'm real
> that I can feel
> whatever beats hardest at our black souls
> I am real, and I can't say who
> I am. Ask me if I know, I'll say
> yes, I might say no. Still, ask.[146]

Unapologetic in its delivery of feeling as revelatory of being, the poem solicits its recipient's agreement with Jones/Baraka's rhythmic registration of black experience as such,[147] "souls" positing a qualitative (and DuBoisean) difference that exceeds the mere "power of numbers" Olson's letter had offered as consolation prize. The assertion initiates a turn of address, dropping the prior relation of dependence and assuming a self-affirmative stance that softens need into reproachful request: *Still, ask*. Having so chastised its reader, the poem builds toward an accretive consciousness that further justifies its author's claims, and contravenes the instrumentality of which Jones/Baraka had been charged: "I am a meditative man, And when I say something it's all of me / saying, and all the things that make me, have formed me, colored me / this brilliant reddish night."[148] With this, Jones/Baraka professes a negatively capable psychic depth, an historical modality of being that exceeds and informs the political identifications he pursues in the present. Summoning its own more immediate (and theological)

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[146] Amiri Baraka, *SOS*: 143-4.

[147] The problematic history of rhythm and racialization is elucidated in Michael Golston's *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (2007). For an account of rhythm's subversive reclamations, consistent with Jones/Baraka's use in this poem and elsewhere, see John Mowitt's *Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking* (Duke UP 2002).

[148] Amiri Baraka, *SOS*, 144.

mode of epistolary delivery than that offered by the postal service, Jones/Baraka's poem culminates in a generous missive: "this is a messenger calling…today is the history we must learn / to desire. There is no guilt in love."[149] Did Olson receive this gentle reminder to return to and push forward what his own foundational method understood, even as his ego balked and his theorization sometimes strayed?

Whether or not "Numbers, Letters" was addressed to Olson, it was out of an enduring sense of kinship with the elder poet's major breakthrough that Jones/Baraka continued to extend the generosity love enables to his old comrade's legacy, defending Olson's efforts and his reputation against his Language-oriented detractors as late as 2000. He did so for good reason. More than the mere formal innovation captured by the wide distribution of a diluted "Projective Verse," Olson's early work—as a practice of intimate historiography—had proposed a radical political vision for what poetry should be and do, one that had begun to crack lyricized poetry's idealization. As the servant of a sorely needed American revolution, poetry was to become a way of making oneself, through writing, into a more "fit instrument for use," as Olson had put it in 1952. The initial project of *The Maximus Poems* had approached this task historically, dredging up from the Gloucester archive a long version of "all the things that make me, have formed me, colored me," effectively anticipating and extending that proposition beyond the temporal confines of a—his—single life to the broader socio-economic and ideological structures into which it—and he, Olson—was born. In the first major sections, Maximus is less figure or persona than prosopopoeiac magnet for those historical ghosts that Olson takes to constitutively inform his object self; he is a dispatcher of forgotten documents, dead letters revived as they are taken up and folded into his own. The non-fiction works of Jones/Baraka's to which Olson so strenuously objected had simply suggested that he should also expect to find the dissonant echoes of said ghosts in the historically dense textures and intimate enclaves of the present.

[149] Amiri Baraka, *SOS*, 144.

Instead of following his project forward in this way, however, Olson had begun reaching ever farther backwards, into the hazier realms of myth.

Since 1960 Olson had moved beyond, and arguably away from, his initial radical poetics of embodied historiography. Having satisfied himself, as I will suggest, that he was now "fit," the poems shift from historiographic to mythic, as the underlying theoretical drive of his poetics likewise becomes less historical-political than philosophical. This change has consequences for genre (or its approximation) and, more importantly, for the implicit politics and function viz-a-viz the history of poetics built into the work—a fact that gone largely unrecognized. Indeed, the second major section of *The Maximus Poems* is typically viewed as a continuation or expansion of Olson's projective aesthetic—its exercise upon more ancient mythic materials (the "archaic postmodern") rather than on the more limited Gloucester archive with which he began. Respectively seduced by or ensconced within an aesthetic frame, neither Olson nor his academic readers seem to have noticed the sea change this tradeoff in source materials was.[150] In this chapter I will suggest that this turn, supported by a theoretical investment in Carl Jung's archetypal reading of mythology and Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, was in fact a turning away from the real political intervention, in both poetics and historiography, that Olson's early work had made. It is, after all, precisely the abstraction from historical context in favor of the grandeur of universalizing claims that characterizes poetry's lyricization and thereby underwrites both its perpetually suspect relationship to politics and its racialization. Eager as he was to find a "new stance" that would allow any man "who wishes to have had a life in society which was more legitimate" to feel that he had in fact done so (note here the psychic dance of the past subjunctive), Olson lost sight of the very limits—the pointedly embodied and historical limits—upon which he had so powerfully insisted.

[150] While he tends to be treated as a unity, and excoriated or lauded as such, Olson was, in fact, that rare thinker who does not essentially make the same argument over and again (albeit in new contexts and with growing nuance) but rather, maverick that he was, freely contradicted and inadvertently undermined himself as his ambition outpaced what anyone could reasonably accomplish.

Jones/Baraka had not lost sight of these limits or their implications. "Numbers, Letters" wasn't published until 1969 in Baraka's *Black Magic;* if, in some manner, it was addressed to Olson, the intensely alive poem may also be a dead letter. Yet, Jones/Baraka's absent reply seems ultimately to have conveyed the poem's belated message after all, as Olson perseverated on its pressured silence. The break with Jones provoked years of intermittent self-searching for Olson, leading to a critically unremarked final turn in his thinking that was also a return to his own poetic pedagogy of the psyche—a practice of learning to desire the present from within historically forged limits rather than seeking their transcendence. Tracing the broad lines of his struggle to arrive back at this position illuminates the racial-political implications of the modes of thought, practice, and poetics that Olson engaged over the years, as they cleave to and reveal themselves in structures of feeling.

Critical feelings

Months after writing to Jones, Olson worries to Ed Dorn that "because he didn't answer that letter I feel of course a proper white square" (*SL*, 322). It is hardly how Olson, with his bold hopes to square the circles of American politics and lyricized subjectivity, had hitherto imagined himself. As he begins, with Dorn's commiserative ear, to process the political ground he has lost, the psych-ontological ground that has been swept from under him, he divulges a few telling memories—material, almost, for extempore psychoanalysis:

> That [it is color] seemed everything I knew myself when, joining kindergarten, for some reason a girl about Kelly's color was sent to show me the toilet; and competently did, so far as I remember taking me to the boys' part (but here my memory wavers, as of another instance, when 9 when my father took me to Plymouth—for sd 300th anniversary of the Pilgrims' Landing—and like a good Catholic boy I sought to attend Mass, and we did find a church…and I did go in…yet to this day I don't know if it wasn't a Protestant-Episcopal place) (SL 322).

Here, weakly remembered, wavering, is America encapsulated, between the racialized lavatory and the denominationally indifferent God. Here, too, is a resistance to categorization that runs

deeper than and perhaps underlies Olson's epistemological attention to particulars, a critical orientation that is central to his refusal of the violently reductive abstractions on which racism relies. Yet the racial difference persists in his memory, even as the associative movement of recollection draws it into apparently murkier terrain. Here one might wonder after other psychic resistances preserved in Olson's nested tale of these two good-enough efforts: it is as if his *not* remembering, *not* marking as significant, might effectively make race no longer matter. Olson writes to Dorn that Jones's had been "the heroism appropriate to the boat we're all in" (an operation no less representative than that for which he had chided Jones/Baraka) by virtue of his being black without claiming that blackness. Still, as Olson plumbs the historical depths of his memory, the assumption of the idiomatic shared boat begins to slip away. The girl's memory of her experience is not available, but one might suppose it accrued along lines of feeling other than her adequacy to the task. Behind her are other girls, and others—until the slave ship's hold comes into view. As he struggles to understand Jones/Baraka's contention that the historical construction and damage of race does, in fact, still matter, Olson strains at the difference between the Western epistemological reliance on abstract categorization that he wants to cast off and the historical-ontological force of those categories' psychic life in the experience of persons. Can one be refused without denying the other?

The problem Olson faces is encapsulated in his inversion of John Smith's epigram, "history is the memory of time," into the more Emersonian "my memory is / the history of time"—which Olson described as one of the "hooks & eyes" of *The Maximus Poems*. Long before Olson's Herodotean insistence on finding out for oneself, Ralph Waldo Emerson (who Olson studied as a young Americanist at Harvard in the 1930's) had written: "there is properly no History; only Biography. Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself—must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know."[151] No poet can claim

[151] Corrigan, John Michael. *American Metempsychosis.* New York: Fordham UP, 2012: 16. See also Fredman, Stephen. *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (1993).

to have attempted this imaginative supplementation of experience more thoroughly than did Olson. At the same time, in anchoring his poetics to the body of the poet, Olson's projective method puts pressure on the easy slippage from seeing to living in Emerson's metempsychotic epistemology. As "himself an object," Olson's man cannot so readily become spirit in the democratized Hegelian structure that Emerson invokes; he is, rather, one of its ultimately cast-off forms, seeking to understand the current that has molded and swept it ashore. As Olson learns, the attempt to deepen, through historical participation, one's lived experience—to approach something more like *Erfahrung,* in Walter Benjamin's sense—may reveal more than it can immediately heal. If the exercise were to be undertaken by all America's damaged persons, the apparent social tensions of the present may prove merely the surface of wider divergences, rivulets that run back until what emerges is the historical-ontological rift of which Jones/Baraka speaks.

The anxiety and question that this intimation poses of Olson's being is still with him later that year, when, at his legendary reading at the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference, he declares himself, with pained irony, "that famous thing, the White Man" (*MUTH*, 171).[152] Speaking into Jones/Baraka's dramatic and palpable absence from the Conference, Olson seems now to recognize himself as "the retained brother" of that violent historical creation from which he'd worked to distance himself. As Ann Day Dewey writes, while "the field allowed [Olson] to conceive a direct, material connection between art and history that reflected his political experience…this immediate connection to historical process also renders the poet vulnerable to social forces beyond individual control" (2007: 18). Olson's admission emerges from an unfavorable comparison with the younger Beat poets, "men who have done what I couldn't do," as if their less sheltered experiences (for which reading in coffee houses and spending time in jail serve as shorthand) had enabled them to transcend the category, and it is only he who is

[152] Olson, Charles. *Muthologos: Lectures and Interviews*. Ed. by Ralph Maud. Vancouver: Talon Books, 2010.

"stuck with the very thing that's claimed" (*MUTH*, 171, 149).[153] Feeling acutely his relative failure to free himself from this inherited burden and achieve the political accord he so desired, Olson confesses, "I didn't want to lose my world…I so crave power that, between power and love, until this moment obviously I've chosen the wrong one" (*MUTH*, 170). If this is a fair self-assessment, it remains unclear what choosing love might yet accomplish; its horizon hovers between the supposition that "maybe tonight is the night I alter myself" and his reading, moments later, from "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 2": "people / don't change. They only stand more / revealed" (*MUTH*, 170-1). The tension in which Olson is caught—between being riveted to what one is and the possibility of becoming something else—is especially thorny with respect to race.[154] Had Olson's poetic practice, as a kind of supplementary historical experience, promised to liberate him from whiteness? Ten years later James Baldwin would tell an audience that the problem with "quote unquote white people" was that "they don't know who they are or where they come from."[155] If whiteness as a belief system depends on historical disavowal and abstraction, surely Olson had worked harder to counter that than had most of his contemporaries. Tracking Olson's early determination to look into the face of whiteness in "The Kingfishers," Ralph Maud asks, "How persistent must one be? How long is enough?," finding the answer given in the poem: "as long as it was necessary for him, my guide."[156] By 1965, Olson perhaps hoped to have arrived, only to find himself back at the beginning.

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[153] The Beats did not, of course, transcend whiteness either, and their appropriations of jazz have been critiqued in relation to Norman Mailer's "White Negro" (cf. Mortensen 2011 and Martinez 2003) for which Baraka's own chapter on "Swing—From Verb to Noun" in Blues People (1963) is an important precedent.

[154] The racial limits of philosophies of becoming (perhaps misapplied at the level of human persons) was exposed in the aftermath of the Rachel Dolezal controversy. At the other end of the ontological impasse in which Olson finds himself is the early work of Emmanuel Levinas on "being-riveted to being." In *On Escape* (1935), having dismissed becoming as merely another modality of being and hence a ruse rather than a meaningful alternative to the barbarism of (Western) Being, Levinas concludes that "the only path open for us to satisfy idealism's legitimate demands without nevertheless entering into its erring ways is that on which we measure without fear all the weight of being and its universality (Trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003: 72-3). The path Levinas lays out here, which indicates the work required to substantiate and enable the irruption of his subsequent ethics, bears more than passing resemblance to Olson's late gravitational grounding of measure.

[155] Addressing the National Press Club in Washington D.C., December 10, 1986. Transcribed in Ed Pavlic, *Who Can Afford to Improvise?: James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners*. Oxford UP, 2017: 125.

[156] *What Does Not Change*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998: 87.

The irony of Olson's letter is that, in seeking affirmation that his political being coincided with his guiding principles, he undermined the solidarity he had genuinely worked for and accomplished. More than a momentary lapse in rigor, Olson's mislaid epistolary expectations were part of a larger shift in his approach to history, and in the relative priority of theorization and praxis in his creative development. As his source material went from archival to mythic, effecting a change in proto-genres within the larger structure of *The Maximus Poems* from what I have called intimate historiography to a kind of mythopoiesis, his reading patterns and the genres of his prose para-texts can be seen to follow suit. In the mid-1960's, his prose, too, shifts from largely American historical book reviews and reading lists to sprawling, abstruse mappings of mythical trajectories and proposed connections.[157] Insofar as Olson "dissolves individuality into [preexisting structures of cultural tradition], presenting reality as the interaction of these structures and individuals as functions of these interactions," as Dewey argues, the structures drawn on have a substantial effect on the poet's conception of self and reality—of his 'world.' (2007: 37). If his later interests in myth and philosophy do not render lyricization inevitable, they are, with their history of fostering abstraction, certainly conducive to it. In Olson's case, I will show that these interests do drive a re-lyricization of his poetics and that this is bound up with a racialized need for ethical affirmation and with a concomitant idealization of his poetics as not just politically committed but also thereby transformative, "visionary."

In particular, the movement from his early pragmatic sense of what needs to be done to a bolder speculative articulation of what that can and therefore presumptively does accomplish is at once traceable within and enabled by the framework Olson borrowed from Alfred North Whitehead. As Miriam Nichols demonstrates, Olson found in Whitehead's transcendental empiricism a cosmological model of creativity that is "*genetic* and *affective,*" able to account for

[157] Compare, for instance, "The Contours of American History" (1963), or even the wilder "A Bibliography on American for Ed Dorn" (1955) to "The Vinland Map Review" (1965) and "Continuing Attempt to Pull the Taffy Off the Roof of the Mouth" (1969), in *Collected Prose:* 324-5; 297-310; 326-35; 373-4.

both the historically constitutive and for what is continuously formed, through affinity and aversion, in the present.[158] Over the course of his oeuvre, Olson pursued two distinct approaches to the "genetic": the archival and the archetypal, each lending an accompanying structure of feeling to present relations. While there were certainly other influences at work—Carl Jung, to whom we will return, chief among them—Olson's expansion beyond the traceable lines of historical experience that the archive could provide into the more totalizing realm of the "postmodern archaic" was partly facilitated by the explanatory power of Whitehead's system. It lent Olson's practice a metaphysical infrastructure, tempting the universalization and idealization of a politics that might otherwise have stayed with the necessary matter of its limits, and the value of abiding their effects. In this regard, Sherman Paul's description of the shift from archive to archetype between the first and second books of *The Maximus Poems* is particularly suggestive: "history has brought him to an impasse…the poems now find primary articulation in terms of myth and geology (earth-history)…For what history denies, myth justifies."[159] Paul does not pursue the intimations of his phrasing, but we might pause and consider that in the political economy of Olson's practice there was perhaps a psychic component to the more abstract appeal of the archetypal model of "genetic" constitution. As Olson's sense of history pushed back toward a temporality in which it became possible to speak of "the race," singular, the poles of genetic being and affective becoming with which he engaged drifted farther apart, freeing one another from the tension their closer proximity engenders. Olson's letter to Jones disturbs that drift, and renders particularly visible the affective expectations that the archetypal turn in his thinking had enabled.

[158] Nichols, Miriam. *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside*. Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 2010: 27.

[159] Paul, Sherman. *Olson's Push: Origin, Black Mountain, and recent American poetry*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1978: 181. For Paul, Olson's historiographic impulse has accomplished what it can: "to have refounded his city," if "not, as he wished, compelled it to change, but…demonstrated a stance more favorable for the future" (180). History has denied "the potencies of Mother Earth" and it is these that Olson's turn to myth better enables him to elucidate.

Olson's 1964 letter to LeRoi Jones closes with a conciliatory disclaimer: "Not at all to argue. Solely to try to get in there where in fact I feel completely free too and want to get back to you with, love, Charles" (*SL*, 306). The earnest sentiment begs the question of whether he *should* feel completely free, whether completely free, in whatever sense Olson intended in the letter, is something Jones/Baraka feels 'too', in the first place. Whether Olson effectively achieves a more legitimately grounded freedom or, rather, replicates the totalizing projections he sought to curtail has remained a live question in a body of scholarship that is markedly bipolar. This split reception suggests that Olson sits on an under-thought critical nerve: the distance between the capacity to produce a motivating discourse or regulative ideal, and the difficulty—the psychic labor and real cost—of inhabiting the struggle toward it. In this respect, he serves as a case study in a far broader tendency, among theorists and scholars as well as poets and activists, to idealize and, especially in writing, to lyricize (or wax lyrical about) the new horizons we produce and pursue. In any case, if the Olson writing to Jones in 1964 wanted to feel completely free, he had earlier privileged less pleasant feelings. In a 1946 notebook entry, he writes: "reality is never allowed to keep its own form & ease…but distends, until the strain is beyond yourself…I am a landscape, and not a man…And you will not express that satisfactorily until you see it as a pain, and no glory. Glory is also a generalization."[160] Echoing Paul's assessment, Miriam Nichols demonstrates that Olson sought to "'ride'" this "devastating loss of self, a flattening out of vertical man into the horizontal space… back into active agency," through his "studies in Whitehead and comparative mythology."[161] Michael Boughn offers another

[160] This "Enniscorthy" notebook excerpt is quoted in Nichols, Miriam. *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010: 34.

[161] □*Radical Affections*, 2010: 35. Nichols offers an astute analysis of Olson's own Keatsian critique of Hegel's dialectic and his relation of that critique to Whitehead's "three stages of feeling" (*Radical Affections*, 34-8). At the same time, her investment (which I otherwise share) in the affordances of Olson's praxis—*knowing how,* in her terms—leads to a dialectical slippage in which Olson seems to have overcome the distance between epistemology and ontology. At this point, her argument seems to concur with Olson's feelings of transcendence; valuing his "practice of outside" (cosmicity) over a "practice of inside" (concerned with the psyche), Nichols concludes that "it is not human sociality that Olson is ultimately after" (56-8). Without the resistance offered by human others, Olson would appear to have squared the circle, achieving the satisfaction, glory, and release of a

germane (and stirring) articulation of what Olson's engagement with Whitehead accomplishes: "Olson moves beyond modernity's space/time binary and establishes a continual dynamic of manifold congruences that express the open where spacetime emerges as/in liberty, undetermined."[162] Yet the conceptual, political, and psychic tensions these dialectics appear to resolve resurface in Olson's late essay, "The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought," where his epistemological gains—and the senses of agency, access, and freedom they enable—are qualified by the psycho-historical limits of a "gravitational" force, with all the felt weight that implies.

Olson's writing in "The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought" is particularly dense, self-referential, and allusive. In the remainder of this chapter, I will unfold its argument intertextually, moving between assertions made there and earlier moments in Olson's lectures, essays, and poems with which it is in implicit or explicit, but, in any case, substantive conversation. The next two sections largely concentrate on the years between Olson's 1964 letter to Jones/Baraka and his 1969 concession to the revised understanding of history that conflict demands of him. In them, I elaborate the aspects of Olson's thinking that he ultimately comes to temper, and highlight the vicissitudes of his struggle to do so. The third section takes up Olson's own thematization of his return to earlier insights to supply the needed corrective. Following his lead, the final two sections look further back, to the 1950's, prior to Olson's full absorption and heavy application of Whitehead and Jung (although he was interested in their work by the early mid-1950's). It is during this more historically-grounded initial period that Olson develops the core elements of his praxis to which "The Animate" will largely return.

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god-like perspective. In contradistinction to this, Olson ultimately resumes a more negative dialectical relation to the pain of being "a landscape and not a man" by reclaiming "man as...plant" in "The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought." As a man rooted in and largely comprised of his landscape's material, Olson comes to realize that *knowing how* also has its limits.

[162] "Olson, Empire, and the thinking of America" (2015: 30). Accessed via academia.edu/26138117.

Call him Icarus

As its title—"The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought"—indicates, the 1969 essay opposes two modalities of thought: one vital, rooted in a new sense of history as "*primordial*—element of experience"; the other, lacking this anchor, prone to "over-Extension…unessential and secondary." While the binary itself will be familiar to students of Olson's work, it is now his own poetics and that of his contemporary peers that is subjected to this second level of his critique of abstraction: "all most Recent thinking," he writes, "has had this 'exaggeration' of kinetic or mechanical, 'measure'" (*CPr,* 368-70).[163] Measure, in in the "cosmic" sense it has acquired through Olson's reading of Whitehead, is a "systematic procedure" that assumes a material continuity between being and environment, inside and outside. For Olson, it affirms the possibility of harmonious relations, and furnishes a principle of radical translatability between life and language that could help bring them about. As Olson underlines in the chapter on "Measurement" in his copy of Whitehead's *Process and Reality:* "The mathematical relations involved in presentational immediacy thus belong equally to the world perceived and to the nature of the percipient. They are, at the same time, public fact and private experience."[164] Such measurement will not be entirely abandoned, but Olson finds it must be treated with renewed caution, lest his discovery of a new method for living in congruence with the world be mistaken for a guarantee of its being effectively carried out.[165]

Under specific scrutiny are two prior orientations of Olson's thought, both of which are bound up with the polymath's investment in epistemological power: the "space-activities" to which his studies in "Cosmology-Mythology" had led him, and the heliotropic core from which

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[163] Olson, Charles. *Collected Prose.* Ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 1997.

[164] *Process and Reality.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010: 336. The passage is identified by Robin Blaser in "The Violets: Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead (1983)" in *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser.* Ed. by Miriam Nichols. Berkeley: UC Press, 2006: 196-228.

[165] As Blaser relays, Olson wrote on December 13, 1969: "The spiritual is all in Whitehead's simplest of all statements: Measurement is most possible throughout the system. That is what I mean. That is what I feel all inside. That is what is love." With the gravitational corrective traced here, Olson seeks to ground such measurement in the psychic work that enables it to be pursued in genuine terms.

they radiate.[166] If the suggestion that he has overstressed "space-activities" lends no mean support to Heriberto Yepez's contention that Olson produces a version of imperialistic "spatialized time,"[167] the crux of the revision lies in the moderation of "heliotropism," which Olson had presented, only nine months prior, as "the meaning…of 'tropism' in ourselves" (*MUTH*, 247). In his ambitiously titled 1968 Beloit lectures on "Poetry and Truth," heliotropism takes center stage, enabling Olson to lay claim to measurement not merely as scientific possibility but as intrinsic capacity for total insight, into "every other human being, and every thing in creation" (*MUTH*, 247). This is, in effect, lyricized poetry's claim to the universality of a rarified mind taken to a greater extreme than the New Critics would venture. Briefly swapping this cosmological lens for a personal one (the political potency of which is underscored by the lectures' subtitle, "The Dogmatic Nature of Experience"), Olson lets slip that the heliotropic ideal that Whitehead's metaphysics seems to validate emerges from an early experience of social power. As he explains the genesis of this key concept to his Beloit audience, Olson shares a memory from his adolescence of smoking cigarettes while "babysitt[ing]" girls older than himself as they greeted sailors from a Canadian ship called the *Heliotrope* (*MUTH*, 247). The story betrays something of the patriarchal power and the libidinal excitement of the young boy called into it behind this penultimate turn.

At once confessed and ostensibly neutralized through heliotropism's philosophic and spiritual abstraction, this experience paves the way for interpretive ingress into other lives: "I equally wish, I equally feel, hopefully, that you may trust me enough to believe that I also have the authority to discuss any piece of your own past as well as my own. I say that without, I hope, any either offense or gall" (*MUTH*, 248). Having been silently rebuffed by Jones/Baraka for presuming continuity between black experience and his own (uneasy recollection of which is

[166] Olson writes, "Cosmology-Mythology has led me—Dogtown, Hesiod, Maximus Poems IV V VI—to believe ends and boundaries...are 'space-activities' in, Creation; now I am proposing an even more fundamental 'tropism"' (CPr, 368).

[167] Yepez, Heriberto. *The Empire of Neomemory*. Trans. Jen Hofer, et al. Oakland, CA: Chainlinks, 2013: 79.

suggested by Olson's markedly hedged phrasing), he seeks now to justify similar access by alternate means. To that end, Olson translates Whitehead's materialist leveling of subject and object, private experience and public fact, into a kind of language-oriented impersonality: "One must ask that any act of yours or my life or anyone else's be not actually that life but its act or production, and that that is something which is essentially our language" (*MUTH*, 248). The interpretive practice Olson proposes here is largely continuous with, on the one hand, the New Critical separation of the person of the poet from the poetic 'speaker' and, on the other, the abjuration of the 'lyric I' in favor of linguistic material by the subsequent language-oriented writers, who made such openly shared interpretive authority the cornerstone of a readerly ethics.[168] More surprisingly, it stands in stark contrast to the idea of limits and body-based object status at the core of his own "Projective Verse." In spite of the aim already present there to achieve projective size, the impression remains that however enlarged beyond the personal, the poetry would remain tied to the singular historical body that had produced it, and should be read as such. Yet Olson's simultaneous investment in lived experience, and his pursuit of the larger-than-aesthetic aim of a new political stance toward reality, push the conflation of poetry and person—which centuries of genre abstraction and 'lyric' idealization had enabled[169]—to historic heights. In the process, his claims make visible what can be problematic (the 'speaker' as deracinating alibi and falsely universal point of articulation), or naive (easy substitution of reader's participation for writer's implication, of ethics for politics[170]), in those adjacent methods of reading as well. With what he structures as an obligatory request, Olson, in effect, imagines a process of linguistic extraction from life without meaningful remainder—one that leaves no room for the contextual volatility of address, or the inchoate space in which Jones/Baraka locates himself in "Numbers, Letters": "I am real, and can't say who / I am." On what grounds

[168] Cf. Izenberg, Oren. *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life.* Princeton UP, 2011.
[169] See Virginia Jackson's "lyricization" thesis, succinctly presented in "Who Reads Poetry?" *PMLA* 123.1 (Jan. 2008): 181-7.
[170] Cf. Hickman, Ben. *Crisis and the US Avant-Garde: Poetry and Real Politics.* Edinburgh UP, 2015.

could a past that hasn't fully yielded itself to language, that may in fact contain traumatic or otherwise unspeakable regions, be transparently read and authoritatively discussed by someone else, or assumed "only my own experience likewise"? Politically valuable as relinquishing egoistic attachment to one's life experience may be as a writing practice, the compensatory counterpart Olson envisions presumes too much in return. Heliotropism is measurement run away with itself, claimed not as a horizon of understanding to move toward, but as that horizon's radiant possession in absolute power.

It is this slippage—from objectism back to lyricization, from thought to assumption, from the political to the spiritual, and from "love" to power—that Olson, in "The Animate versus the Mechanical," sets out a year later to address. Beginning with the premise that "geotropism [is] as much a part of a plant's sensibleness as its heliotropism," Olson builds on the botanical principle to declare: "now I am proposing an even more fundamental 'tropism': that one cannot 'think'…without…gravity. The great unadmitted limit…of experience" (*CPr,* 368). While this late modification to his poetics is not entirely about Olson's conflict with Jones/Baraka or the unease about his whiteness that has weighed on him since, arriving on the back of years spent intermittently brooding over his rift with "Leroy," and closing, as the essay does, with a gravitational qualification to "freedom," that racial conflict is not an insignificant substratum. Given Olson's persistent desire for cosmic vision, and the emergence of the heliotropic from an experience of male authority, it is striking that he came to recognize the real limits to that dream in navigating another marker of social dominance—and fitting that it should be the color of his skin, that "meeting edge of man and external reality…where all that matters does happen" (*CPr*, 161). Olson's is still the human universe and, even as it approaches the freer horizons of soul and spirit, it ultimately bends to the laws of the psyche, lodged in a body that is always lived as (if also more than) socially and historically formed. As Olson works through the racial crisis his rift with Jones/Baraka provokes, it comes to illuminate a larger tension in his poetics between knowledge and experience, epistemology and its unconscious limits, and between his most

ambitious visions of social transformation and aims more modestly psychoanalytic.[171] Both poles remain essential to Olson's undertaking, but his late insistence on the fundamental importance of the latter is instructive in terms of the political valence of the relationship between theory and praxis.

Testing "measure"

Olson spent the years between his 1964 letter to Jones/Baraka and his 1969 revelation in "The Animate versus the Mechanical" grappling with the extent to which experience can be known, "measured," and shared, and how much value to accord what might escape that process. In spite of his realization at the Berkeley Poetry Conference of the political limits of his personal experience, Olson continued to prioritize the latter, staking out a position in notes written on March 16, 1966 on "Experience and Measurement" that would culminate in the heliotropic insistence of the Beloit lectures, only to be substantially qualified in "The Animate" a year later. In 1966, Olson remains more interested in "the condition herein called & knowable as *through itself*," or "Meaning…[which] is very different from simply the experience." He further declares, "I have spelled this out—& spilled purposely what is known as the 'Secret'—to put an end forever to what I consider no longer interesting: that any art of science shall any longer be allowed to get away with such exactness and time as life takes, and not be or address itself to, at least measure, and to meaning."[172] In retrospect, his insistence in these notes that only measurement, as the extraction of meaning from experience, remains "interesting," would prove too easy and one-sided a resolution.

In his poetry of the same period, Olson appears less certain, and it is here that he lays out, alongside more intimate political reflections, the terms of a poetic calculus that "The Animate"

[171] By focusing on the psychoanalytic aspect of Olson's poetics, I hope to highlight another, less utopian approach to the transformative potential of language than that engaged by Carla Billiterri in her symptomatic reading of Olson's "Cratylic poetics" *(Language and the Renewal of Society.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009: 132).

[172] *OLSON: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives* 3 (Spring 1975): 60-2.

revisits and revises. On February 11, 1966—a few weeks after Jones/Baraka's "Black Art" was published in *The Liberator*—Olson penned a *Maximus* poem of particularly enduring power, the opening of which stages a reckoning with the value and costs of his poetic method.

> I have been an ability—a machine—up to
> now. An act of "history", my own, and my father's,
> together, a queer [Gloucester-sense] combination
> of completing something both visionary—or illusions (projection? literally
> lantern-slides, on the sheet, the front-room Worcester,
> on the wall, and the lantern always getting too hot
> and I burning my fingers—& burning my
> nerves… (*MP*, 495)[173]

As the animate versus mechanical status of projection is put into question and returned to a childhood origin of interest and injury, it is apparent that Olson's confidence in the genuinely transformative status of his method has been shaken: "visionary—or illusions"? There is here a tacit recognition that in spite of the psychosomatic intervention his core projective verse had made in poetics, his own practice may have slipped away from the historical work he had called for and succumbed to lyricization's idealizing and self-affirming lure. The dangers of over-enthusiasm are very much to the point. The intimate historical searching of Olson's practice has burned his nerves—perhaps a particular liability when finding out for oneself jeopardizes the psychic ground of the political agency it was to cultivate, as must eventually occur when one is constitutively formed by whiteness. Following this opening moment of self-reflection, the poem works its way through Olson's relationship to his father and his native landscape to arrive at the same story he had relayed to Ed Dorn in his letter lamenting Jones's rejection: of being taken to Plymouth for the tercentenary of the Pilgrim's landing, a trip for which Olson's immigrant father "paid / with his life" (*MP*, 496).[174] As the poem's focus turns from Olson's father to

[173] Olson, Charles. *The Maximus Poems.* Ed. by George F. Butterick. Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 1983.

[174] The importance of this high-stakes memory for Olson having been thus underscored, its repetition perhaps points back to and suggests a likewise formative significance for the story of casual school-ground racism to which it had been adjacent in the letter. In his reading of the poem, Charles Stein suggests that it might register "a moment of realization during which a 'repressive' projection is recovered and, through the process of projection in the poem, a 'visionary' experience redeemed from neurotic confusion" (*The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum,* Station Hill Press, 1979: 32).

Jones/Baraka, Olson betrays a continued investment in imagining the radically divergent historical experiences they inherit as analogous "wave[s] of migration…now like Leroy and Malcolm / X the final wave" (*MP*, 496-7). However, neither "migration" nor the temporal marker that suggests integration rather than the middle passage as its referent effectively render the American shore a common ground.[175]

In spite of this stubborn resistance to the foundational difference the poem registers under erasure, other aspects of Olson's confidence in the epistolary claims that brought his friendship with Jones/Baraka to an end begin to give way. His attempt to parse what historical contexts remain more and less politically "interesting" echoes here with a bitter, almost sarcastic, intimacy, as the objects under appraisal devolve from violences domestic and global to the personal lives of Olson and Jones/Baraka: "how many… / meaningless waves of hurt and punished lives shall America / be nothing but the story of / not at all her successes / —I have been—Leroy has been / as we genetic failures are / successes, here / it isn't interesting" (*MP*, 498). As the political indictment builds to a crescendo, the poem's form and content bend, as Lytle Shaw notes, to Jones/Baraka's black militant poetics; reminiscing about his father's gun, Olson shapes the poem's typography to the curve of its lovingly recalled handle.[176] Himself "an ability, a machine," Olson regrets his inability to pass down this other piece of machinery and the political instrumentalization of poetry it implies, perhaps the more necessary inheritance, to his son(s). Baraka had just written, "Poems are bullshit unless they are…Assassin poems, Poems that shoot / guns."[177]

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[175] For further discussion of Olson's use of immigration as a leveling concept, see Lisa Siraganian's chapter on Olson and Baraka in *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012.

[176] See Lytle Shaw's *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013: 97-100. The homage to Olson's father that occupies the next section of the poem might also be read as an implicit tribute to Baraka's revolutionary stance; the image formed by its swirling text is as likely to represent handle-and-trigger as "the iconic figure of a man" (Siraganian, 157).

[177] Baraka, *SOS:* 149.

Olson, of course, does not abandon his own poetics, in spite of the crisis marked here. In the final section of the sequence he moves toward a renewed if uncertain hope that his own approach remains relevant. He insists that his poetic production:

> is a discrete & continuous conduction
> of the life from a sequence of events measurable
> in time none of this is contestable,
> there is no measure without it or
> with anything but this measure:
> —it does, my Beloved's head grows to Heaven
> does my Life grow
> out of my "life" Likewise—likewise?
> is the Modus
> absolute? [I say it,
> as a Prayer (*MP*, 502)

As he doubles down on the "measure" he will later temper, the affirmation nonetheless leaves him with an urgent question. The "life" is incontestably there in the record, but whether it has risen to the level of a "Life," a worthy "Image of Man," remains up in the air in a manner less assured than the Beloved's heliotropic head. At stake is whether Olson's poetic method has led him, as the powers still attributed to the heliotropic in the Beloits might suggest, to affirm more than he knows.[178] It is both a liability endemic to poetry's lyricization, which inflates one man's feeling and insight to a universal ideal, and a risk entailed in privileging the extraction of knowledge and meaning from one's lived experience, the subterranean lineaments of which—lines both psychological and historical—perpetually veer into blind spots of repression and reflexive disavowal. Olson, for whom the level of insight offered by the production of a man's life depends on the state of his psyche, is not unaware of the possibility. As he had put it ten years

[178] I borrow this phrasing from Jean-Paul Sartre: "in saying *I,* we affirm much more than we know" (*The Transcendence of the Ego,* Routledge, 2004: 9). Sartre's phenomenological effort to "make of the *me* an existent that is rigorously contemporary with the world" largely aligns with Olson's "objectism." For Sartre, "absolute consciousness, when it is purified of the *I*, is no longer in any way a *subject*…it is quite simply a precondition and an absolute source of existence" (29-30). Olson's heliotropism might be drawn from his experience of tapping into this source. Sartre's philosophical elaboration, however, clarifies that such an experience cannot be "kept" or applied to the intersubjective business of reading, as Olson proposes in the Beloit lectures.

prior, in *The Special View of History*, "as a psyche man is only an order comparable to kosmos when he or she is in love."[179] Had he conflated love with power?

It is this that Olson feels again compelled to question in himself, as he begins to move away from the measurement that "The Animate" will consign to secondary status. Asking, in an earlier passage of the poem, "But, / does this Vision hold in faith / (as well as in credulity) and in my own experience crucially in necessity," he prompts himself to:

> test, stiffly the modus
> of this visione which
> not as modulus, this
> , that is, measurement
> "throughout the system" (*MP*, 501)

The final underlined phrase, which will be repeated with a crucial difference in "The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought," is Olson's gloss of the Whitehead's claim, in *Process and Reality,* that, "Measurement is now possible throughout the extensive continuum" (332). Latin for measure, modulus indicates the ratio between force and effect that has long been central to Olson's poetics; one need only think of "Letter 9" from *The Maximus Poems*: "I measure my song, / measure the sources of my song, / measure me, measure / my forces" (48). Mathematically, modulus also signifies absolute value, achieved by taking the square root of a number squared; it is value that is exclusively positive, registering sheer magnitude at the expense of maintaining relationship to other real numbers—a fact that may have begun to acquire a less abstract significance. Now, feeling the need to test the modus, the way or mood that animates the method, Olson is, in effect, asking himself if he has proceeded in the right

[179] □*The Special View of History.* ed. Ann Charters. Berkeley: Oyez Press, 1970: 54. Olson continues, "that only love is order in the vertical of the self," suggesting another precedent for gravity's rediscovered orientation and force. Here Olson also uses the plant imaginary to which "The Animate versus the Mechanical" will return. In this "most vertical of all the several quanta of experience, the person's own private quantum," Olson claims that "we no longer have to do with multiples as heterogeneous but in the most wondrous sense, the homogenous...desire (Eros) was most like kin. It is with EROS that mythology is concerned" (53-4). When Olson returns, in "The Animate," to the vertical of the self, he discovers an historical reverberation deeper than mythology, and perhaps, a love distinct from the homogenizing force of desire.

spirit, for the right reasons, and not—as he had accused Jones/Baraka of doing—allowed his beliefs to be swayed by his own personal psychic needs: faith or credulity?

An addendum to the sequence composed the same week tells something of the condition in which Olson finds himself after this anxious self-interrogation: "Bottled up for days, mostly / in great sweat of being, seeking…to construct knowing back to image and / God's face behind it turned as mine / now is to blackness image shows herself / …love's / blackness arrived at going backwards" (*MP*, 503). Olson's stated desire "to construct knowing back to image" draws on a formulation that recurs throughout his oeuvre: "of rhythm is image / of image is knowing / of knowing there is / a construct." As Charles Stein demonstrates, this serves as a kind of shorthand for poetry as the projective elaboration of Jungian psychology, in which rhythmicity provides a "means of leading the psyche back to an undifferentiated condition," and image refers to the archetypal forms that one communes with in that state.[180] In invoking the formula's reversal, Olson seeks to reground his projective activity in the deeper unconscious structure of his self. In the context of the poem, "blackness" suggests both the inner psychic recesses and, if only subconsciously, the traumatic racial impasse to be found there. In any case, what one arrives at *reading* backwards is a poem saturated with traces of fraught love for a lost friend whose own turn to blackness continues to provoke Olson's self-doubt.

If Jones/Baraka himself recedes into the background of Olson's preoccupations over the next three years, the reevaluation of his poetics that their rift had prompted leads eventually to the final gravitational counterweight to heliotropism's high lyricization that Olson finds his poetics needs in order to remain politically vital and secure in the psychic soundness of the knowledge it generates. Riffing off the mathematical terms the poem puts into play, gravity, as described in "The Animate versus the Mechanical," entails a different calculus, drawn from a basic law of physics that describes the *dissipation* of forces over distance, and hence the

[180] *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum,* 61-3.

reinscription of limits on what Olson (or anyone) can hope to know and accomplish. Measure and its space-activities, now lumped under the dubious heading of "the mechanical" are, he finds, "'astronomical' (Clio, by inverse square of the distance) instead of Uranian: distance by inverse square of the event. The 'event' being now most decisively gravity. The great unadmitted limit—actually Hermetism or alchemism, thus Ouranianism—of experience" (*CPr*, 368).[181] To translate the physics, the problem with Olson's pursuit of measure has been that, in promising radiant extension "throughout the system," it lead him to read in the wrong direction, treating the space-activities of mythology as capturing the essence of history rather than as a secondary formation relative to the real if elusive kernels of lived occurrences.

In this respect, Olson's now "mechanical" investment in measurement and myth can be seen to have succumbed to what psychoanalyst and theorist Alan Bass calls "concreteness": a "compromise formation between any form of differentiation that represents the threat of too much tension and a set of fantasies that replace this unconsciously registered differentiation within consciousness."[182] Not inherently pathological, concreteness is at once a basic human tendency and cultural function, inclusive of fetishism and conceptuality, and a particularly salient characteristic of those patients who prove resistant to psychoanalysis as an effectively transformative method, who seem almost to enjoy engaging in the process as it plays out on the surface of an untouched psychic core—as Olson fears, in some measure, he has been doing. Whether Olson's turn to myth from the minutia of the archival record has such a psychogenic component cannot be definitively known, but he appears, in any case, to have recognized it as a digression or demurral from the greater complexity of evental reverberations he set out to

[181] The Ouranian, a realm that lies behind and initiates myth's genesis, offers a potent figure of limitation-by-generation—and the reverse, the generativity of being limited. Ouranos (Uranus) or Father Sky is the primal Greek god, both son and lover of Gaia, whose creative-erotic energy draws him down, nightly, to mate with her. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Uranus imprisons his children by this union in Tartarus. He is ultimately punished for this act of banishment—castrated by his youngest and most ambitious son, Cronus, at Gaia's request. The result is not impotence but another mode of creation, as Ouranos's blood and severed member spawn Giants, Furies, nymphs, and the goddess Aphrodite. It is tempting to imagine that, subtextually and subconsciously, Cronus corresponds with Jones, given his role in Olson's life and poetics.

[182] Bass, Alan. "The Problem of 'Concreteness.'" *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 66. 1997: 646.

register and engage. Having written to Jones that the only politically salient difference between black and white experience was "the power of numbers," Olson's new numerology admits a finer grain of *historical* experience, one that, while perhaps merely *felt*, likewise reverberates beyond its epicenter: "event…[is a] *primordial*—element of experience, so much so that it 'carries' throughout the system—the system being 'Creation'—as 'element' (or 'weight') as profound as any mechanically measurable or demonstrable 'truth'" (*CPr*, 368). This historical experience—that which makes man an object in a non-reductive sense—at once imposes limits on the extension of measurement and its attendant lyricized expectations for reading, and might itself be said—in the language of Olson's early description of being a landscape—to extend (or be carried, borne) until the strain is beyond your self, and beyond your ken.

"to construct knowing back to image"

The restored priority of experience over measurement and of the psychic over the epistemological will ultimately take Olson back to his mid-1950's burst of creativity, from which the term "gravitational" itself derives. Some fifteen years prior to its revelatory rediscovery—as Olson prepared his 1953 Chiasma lectures for Black Mountain College, which were to represent Carl Jung's thought in light of its use-value for his poetic and pedagogical purposes—he had written: "the vertical force in us, the gravitational, that prime of all our tropisms, the archaeology we are, creates the mythology of which we are the inheritors."[183] That "prime" is the libido, as it mediates between the unconscious realm of archetypal images and the social-historical world of human culture.[184] Having spent the intervening years elaborating the mythology, Olson's judgment that he has lost touch with its animating psychic force is reinforced in "The Animate" by his recollection of yet another test: "the water or turgor 'test' of

[183] Quoted in Fisher, Allen. *Imperfect Fit: Aesthetic Function, Facture, and Perception in Art and Writing Since 1950.* University of Alabama Press, 2016: 100.
[184] See Stein, *Black Chrysanthemum,* 56.

the Gods as whether they are or are not telling 'truth'—tested and failing. They are abandoned by 'God' from 'his House of Mountain' for precisely '9' *Years*— / (Come back" (*CPr,* 369-70). The timeframe neatly captures the interval of Olson's mythological-cosmological middle period, from Dogtown in 1959 up to the his present return—time served—to the divine realm. The source is a familiar one: in the *Theogony,* Hesiod describes the use of Styx water as a guarantor of oaths; whoever pours it and swears falsely is paralyzed for a year—hence Olson's "turgor" (as something more than, if also, a phallic test of desire)—and then excluded from the assemblies of the Gods for another nine. The passage begs the question of what oath Olson feels he's broken: has he been, like bullfighter Merry—whose story he told LeRoi Jones (along with Michael McClure and Donald Allen) during a trip to Dogtown in November 1959[185]—recklessly drunk on his own inflated pride? "Limits," he had once written, "are what any of us / are inside of" (*MP,* 21). As "the eldest daughter of back-flowing ocean,"[186] Styx serves as both diagnostic and remedy; in Jungian terms, she constitutes a figure for psychic regression, the flowing in and back of libidinal energies to the realm of archetypal images that is periodically necessary to maintain the responsiveness to the external world of one's projections.

It is not, however, precisely to Jung's collective unconscious that Olson will return, but rather to the historical unconscious he himself had posited, drawing on and applying basic Freudian insights.[187] Characteristically, he gets there by following yet another intellectual affinity. In this late period of reckoning and reevaluation, Olson finds another resonant figure for regression in Henry Corbin's description of the mystical Islamic concept of *ta'wil:* "to *cause to return*, to lead back, to restore to one's origin and to the place where one comes home, consequently to return to the true and original meaning of a text."[188] Among the term's multiple

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[185] http://myweb.northshore.edu/users/ccarlsen/poetry/gloucester/olson_maximus_from_dogtown.htm

[186] Line 782 in Hesiod. *Works and Days and Theogony.* Trans. by Stanley Lombardo. Hackett Publishing, 1993: 83.

[187] Of interest here is the fact that Olson, two years before inviting Jung to Black Mountain College in December 1952, had described him as "a lazy fraud…a mere g.d. swiss soft pink hill of learning" (in Mellors, 2005: 96).

[188] Corbin, Henry. *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (29). For the identification of these relevant passages of Corbin's, this discussion is indebted to the work of Tom Cheetham, generously made available online at his henrycorbinproject.blogspot.

layers is the suggestion of a textual retrospective, which doubtless appealed to Olson at this mature stage of his life. It further resonates with that early proposition of Creeley's that form should be an extension of content, while giving that content an esoteric—for Olson, psychic—source: "he who practices the *ta'wil* is the one who turns his speech from the external (exoteric) form…towards the inner reality."[189] Introduced by Olson in a short essay entitled "'Clear, Shining Water' de Vries says" (written on July 1, 1968, between the Beloits and "The Animate"), the *ta'wil* gives rise to the late gravitational reorientation of his thought and shows him a way back to his own "practice of inside"[190]:

> Wishing, in that sense, to start at the bottom—or, in fact, to get there (that is, by the etymological part of *ta'wil* the other part, if I take Corbin right…is topological—and this present instance seems very much perhaps *the* (vertical) topological matter, of all matters which can find a basis for a physics of psyche at this revolutionary point (*CPr,* 364).

Olson's gravitational "physics of the psyche" ultimately combines the inward movement of *ta'wil* with a vertical vision of the cosmos, drawn from another of Corbin's works, in which "the higher degree resembles Paradise for the degree below it." Corbin interprets this mystical Islamic "vision of an incessant rising from Hells" as "an alchemy of Resurrection…a series of unfoldings, of divestments and revestments, to which one must consent on pain of falling backward, beneath oneself."[191] Most striking in Olson's combination of this cosmic schema with the *ta'wil* in order to effect the final gravitational revolution is that it imparts a reversal of the heavenly or heliotropic movement, suggesting consent not to the series of metempsychotic unfoldings but rather to the pain of falling deeper into himself—down beneath the differently dogmatic conditions of his lived and inherited experience.

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[189] Ibid.
[190] Miriam Nichols see Olson's poetics as "a 'practice of outside' (cosmicity) as opposed to what has become the more common 'practice of inside' (psycho-sociology, psycho-philosophy)" (58). This argument complicates that division.
[191] Olson references a footnote to the following passage from *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis* in an addendum to "The Animate," in order to "make absolutely sure that this discussion is on the table intended by it" (*CPr,* 371-2).

More than a simple reversal, the gravitational movement of Olson's *ta'wil* will modify the sense of image to which knowing is to be returned, and it is here—in image, or a particular constellation of them—that we find the significance of the distinct imaginaries of poetic practice and modes of reading Olson engages over the course of his oeuvre. In Jungian psychoanalysis, image refers to the archetypes of the collective unconscious, but in Olson's lexicon, it is a more complex multivalent term. Prior to "The Animate," image is already at once source, mechanism and goal, insofar as the poet seeks to manifest interior images (archetypal and otherwise) by projecting his *imago mundi* into the world, becoming, in the process, a worthy Image of Man. There is, in this sense, a drive to coincide with image, bringing interior and exterior into the congruence that Whitehead's measurement implies is, in fact, a possibility. This comparatively seamless relationship to image forms part of Olson's explanation of heliotropism in the Beloit lectures, where he describes man as "photo-copic":

> that we are darkness…if you stop to think of yourself as an impediment of creation, I mean, I think you follow me that the unknown is rather your self's insides…we become sure in the dark, that we move wherever we wish…I mean, my feeling is a sun of being which sits in this mass of blackness…the experience of image or vision is as simple as that. It's simply an entrance into our own self of what are dogmatic conditions, which we inherit by being alive and acquire by seeking to be alive (*MUTH,* 247).

This is, in part, a cosmic restatement of the animating paradox of "Projective Verse," in which if man "stays inside himself…by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way…giv[ing] him size, projective size" (*CPr,* 247-8). Yet heliotropism, and the freedom of movement Olson's feeling acquires, radiates beyond what projective size might otherwise have implied. The experience of image as an entrance into the metaphysical universality of createdness posited here is reinforced by the mechanism: photo-copic implies an ability to reproduce with minimal alteration, and hence a relatively frictionless transfer between inside and outside—or from self to other.

At the same time, read historically rather than spiritually, the genetic aspect of the self is more discomfiting than liberating. Olson goes on to describe fatherhood as a "shutter on the

light": "I mean this terrible thing, to have passed life on to somebody else, because what you've experienced…that the thing grows from you, and that you, without knowing it, you watch this thing come up like a tree or any kind of growth. I mean, we only did grow" (*MUTH,* 248). As he moves toward thinking in terms of gravity or geotropism—shutter as well as light—there is a flickering recollection of the pain of being a landscape as what being a parent means. Along these lines, "'Clear, Shining Water' de Vries says," describes a sacred spring, the 'Well of Fate' in Norse mythology, found at "the roots of the World-Tree"—an apt image for Olson's rediscovery of his own poetic roots in a slow, labored practice of capacitation and care. In Olson's telling, "the tree was continually threatened" and the three goddesses, "*Urth, Verthandi,* and *Skuld*, or Past, Present, and Future," serving "as its waterers and carers, worked at its roots daily to preserve its life" (*CPr,* 365-6). This tending, maintenance work is of fundamental importance. Paving the way for what is to be the gravitational "further and last twist," Olson notes that Urth—corresponding to Past, as Fate or personal destiny—is also probably etymologically related to "*vertere*, and do[es] mean millstone turning" (*CPr*, 365). As tropism resumes its weighty burden, the genetic aspect of being gives rise to an experience less of coinciding with image in a cosmic capacity for visionary vision than of supporting, carrying, even feeding image—a potentially Sisyphean labor, or, as Olson puts it, a "GRAMPIAN KNOT (I mean of course GORDIAN)" (*CPr*, 365). With this slip, Olson recalls the mountain range that divides the Scottish Highlands from the Lowlands, as he prepares to again pursue "the way of / the lowest" (*MP,* 19). By "The Animate," Olson is ready to declare that "We are here and hereby *under* image" (*CPr*, 369). Insofar as he seeks to become an "Image of Man," to project his *imago mundi* into the world, he recalls that he must labor under the psychic and historical weight of being what he is—and accept its limitations to his desire for complete freedom as what distinguishes love from power. As the essay concludes:

> man as Love (plant, heliogeotropic) grows up and down, man as separateness (animal) disposes of himself by *sitio*—chooses his place but which even thought it gives him

> freedom disposes him likewise by gravity (statolith)—starch, turgor—'weight'-of-mass)—equally tropistically. Heaven and Earth" (*CPr*, 370).

This reassumed burden of gravity and its mundane toil restores to the self's unknown insides their haptic heft—and their history.

Under the 'Black Gold Flower'

What it means to be *under* image—to read image for its historical-material basis rather than its spiritual extension, that is to say, to read it otherwise than lyrically—is perhaps best considered in relation to the figure of the Black Chrysanthemum, which comes to stand as a cryptic key to Olson's poetics. The "Black Gold Flower," as it is translated at the end of "Maximus, from Dogtown—II," has its source in the Taoist classic *The Secret of the Golden Flower* and more particularly in Jung's introduction to the text, which treats the flower as an exemplary mandala, an archetypal sign of self-realization and unity. So impressed by this was Olson that his own mandalic Black Chrysanthemum actually came to him in a dream, on the night of June 17, 1958, accompanied by a phrase that would become a shorthand for heliotropic measurement: "Everything issues/comes from the Black Chrysanthemum & nothing is anything but itself measured so."[192] The image and phrase were subsequently embedded in *The Maximus Poems,* the most direct appearance being toward the beginning of Book IV, in which Olson turns inland from the harbor and begins his mythic and cosmological explorations of a Gloucester irrevocably connected to the American mainland. Here, in "Maximus, from Dogtown—II," which opens hypnotically with "the Sea, turn yr Back on / the Sea," the Chrysanthemum's blackness is associated with coal, a form of carbon—rendering it the (al)chemical basis of all living things, a kind of universal flesh. At the same time, it is associated with the very ocean that the poem purports, in some ways, to have left behind. Still, in both the first and second Dogtown poems, Olson is at pains to emphasize the presence of the ocean beneath the land: "'under' the dish / of

[192] In Butterick, George F. *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson.* Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 1980: 240.

the earth / Okeanos under / Dogtown" (*MP*, 172). It is down and back to this subterranean realm that we shall follow the flower.

As Olson approaches what Sherman Paul calls the "impasse" to which history has brought him, the final poems of Book III—among which are "Letter, May 2, 1959" and "Maximus, to Gloucester, Sunday, July 19"—give a sense of the emblematic flower's historical subtext, and its relationship to mourning. Written a year after the dream in which the Black Chrysanthemum appeared, "Maximus, to Gloucester, Sunday, July 19" annotates Olson's experience of the annual memorial celebration of Gloucester fisherman lost at sea. The poem begins with a kind of false or misguided ritual of mourning in which the members of the procession, "not knowing what a fisherman is," pay homage to "that bad sculpture of a fisherman," "a bronze idol," before proceeding to the water's edge (*MP,* 157-8). There, the pomp gives way to the truer act of remembrance—the casting of flowers into the departing tide by the dead men's friends and relatives. Here, the black-gold flower surfaces in Olson's fantasy as an image of redemption:

> the flowers
> turn
> the character of the sea The sea jumps
> the fate of the flower The drowned men are undrowned
> in the eddies
>
> of the eyes
> of the flowers
> opening
> the sea's eyes

The disaster

is undone (*MP,* 157)

If "polis is / eyes," it is not only those "eyes in all heads, to be looked out of" but also this vortex of submerged inner eyes, eyes of the undead, of history's disasters waking within our waking dream to size us up (*MP,* 30-3). This uncanny measurement is not, perhaps, how Olson interprets his own dictum, at least not at first, as the increasingly abstracted vision's mobilization seems to have inflated his confidence rather than shaking it. It was left to Jones/Baraka to do the latter.

At stake in this redemptive fantasy is the status of the fisherman, with which Olson identifies himself, as a particular historical image of man. At the end of the poem's first section, Olson's riposte to the misguided statue-worshippers is that, "A fisherman is not a successful man / he is not a famous man he is not a man / of power, these are the damned by God" (*MP,* 158). In contrast, the fisherman "has another advantage: it is said, / 'You rectify what can be rectified'" (*MP,* 159). It is Olson's belief and hope that he is among those who can be repaired viz-a-viz the damage of America's history. The claim is not, however, entirely secure. In "Letter, May 2, 1959," Olson previews the memorable opening of Dogtown-II, while admitting the inextricability of sea and land, waste and produce, violence and redemption: "Our backs / turned from the sea but the smell / as the minister said / in our noses / I am interfused with the rubbish / of creation I hear…the finny tribe come easily / to the hook / Fishermen / are killers" (*MP*, 154-5). Having earlier spoken in more politically pointed terms of "the rubbish / of white man," the poem's reference to killers is both less flippant and less abstractly theological than it might otherwise seem.

In this respect the 1959 poems speak back to and bear traces of an earlier sequence—"The Song and Dance of" and "Maximus, to Gloucester (Letter 14)"—both composed in 1953, around the time of Olson's initial identification of "the gravitational, that prime of all our

tropisms." These poems shed further light on what lies buried beneath the Black Chrysanthemum's emergence. "The Song and Dance of" presents an earlier instance of floral ceremony: "it's flowers / presented by little girls / to killers" (*MP,* 58). Here the killers in question are those men of power, "Leaders / of people," from which Olson will seek to distinguish Gloucester's drowned fishermen. In relation to them, he is less sanguine about the possibility of redemption: "The upshot is / ...the race / does not advance, it is only / better preserved" (*MP*, 59).[193] As a "genetic" version of the earlier dictum that "people / don't change. They only stand more / revealed," this pessimistic pronouncement begs the question of whether the fishermen, themselves "killers" of a sort, can be so easily separated from the men of power who paved the way for their livelihood. It's a question that "Maximus, to Gloucester (Letter 14)" explicitly takes up through its engagement with the famous slave trader John Hawkins, whose name became "a sound of terror / in the narrow seas" and whose "family / span America from the finding / to the settling of those fishermen, / Dorchester Company, Cape Ann" (*MP,* 68). Underneath the question of what can and can't be rectified in the present lies the relative (dis)entanglement of the fishing industry and the slave trade. Between "The Song and Dance of" and"Letter 14," Olson tries out various configurations of the uncomfortable proximity between the two economies.[194]

Proceeding, in "Letter 14," along hereditary lines, he seeks to separate John Hawkins from his father, whose relations with West African and other native peoples were more honorable: "trading / on his father's welcome // It was the son / was knighted, the father / I restore" (*MP,* 67). Yet the proposed restoration quickly falters in the face of the historical record and the section closes with one of John Hawkins' more disastrous voyages—an attempt to sell

[193] At this juncture, we are given a compound image of differently preserved deaths that culminates with a sharper variant of the chrysanthemum's later and more redemptive ocular blossoming: "with shells for eyes / As she lies, all / white" (*MP*, 59).

[194] On the one hand, one finds, looking "Northward, / no pearls as necklaces on the necks of, no value / to be trod on, no slaves // Only the meretricious…Venus / does not arise from / these waters. Fish / do" (*MP,* 61-2). At the same time, the invocation of Hawkins produces a reversal: "Fish stayed / (as so little else) / stay to this day / production, the labor of // But Negroes, / it turned out / were pearls // what could be sold" (*MP,* 66).

slaves at Vera Cruz that was routed by the Spanish, resulting in the death and abandonment of many of the men aboard his ships, among which, the poem records, were "57 / Negroes, *optimi generis,* each valued at 160L, or a total of 9,120 L ('Schedule of Property Lost, *State Papers,* Dom. Elizabeth, liii')" (*MP,* 67). Turning next to John Hawkins' son, Olson recounts yet another attempt to prey on Spanish commerce, undertaken with his father's ship *The Repentance* (rechristened as *The Dainty* by Queen Elizabeth), a detail Olson notes with sarcastic relish. This likewise ill-fated voyage ends with more men buried at sea (as was John Hawkins himself). The scene Olson sketches offers little to redeem: "with 14 shot under water / seven to eight feet in the hold, / the pumps smashed, many killed, / more wounded, the rest mad drunk" (*MP,* 69). Having perhaps jettisoned the more optimistic project of restoring the (grand)father, "Letter 14" closes with the declaration of a different intent: "You will count them all in, / you will stay in the midst of them, / you will know no law, you will hear them / in the narrow seas" (*MP,* 69-70).

One must ask what it would mean for Olson's developing poetics if the Black Chrysanthemum were understood to be comprised of all these men's eyes, inscribing a traumatic racial impasse and the "rubbish" of white men's greed at the animate core of Olson's self-flowering. In this respect, it bears noting that earlier in "Letter 14," before the Hawkins lineage is pursued, a precursor of the emblematic bloom—a "ripe sun-flower"—appears, introduced as part of a definition of tropism. This literal heliotropism is adjacent to an historically-grounded meditation on measurement that traverses its Western epistemological poles from Da Vinci to eugenics:

> which showed any of us
> the center of a circle
> our fingers
> and our toes describe
> ...
> doing,
> her bidding: 'Buttocks
> in & under, buttocks'
> seeking
> like Euclid,

the ape's line
...
a sash-weight does hang
from between the legs
if you are drawn
if you do unite
if you do be
pithecanthropus.

(*MP,* 64-5)

By its entanglement with these lines and their sources—which include Reginald Ruggles Gates, a committed eugenicist[195]—sun-flower shares in the "blackness" of the poem's primary concern with the slave trade. If the Black Chrysanthemum's message is that "nothing is anything but itself, measured so," this earlier sun-flower imparts a different tonal edge to the dictum—one that doesn't necessarily render whiteness as a category more fundamental than the "biomorphic" individuality Olson is invested in realizing, but does suggest that the tension between the categorical and the particular is itself "primordial."

Instead of staying with this problematic, the increasingly abstract career of the Black Chrysanthemum appears to transcend it and to enable Olson's poetics to follow suit. As the historical sunflower gives way to the cosmological chrysanthemum, the desire to redeem resurfaces, as we have seen in "Maximus, to Gloucester, Sunday, July 19." Elements of slavery's violent economy and the infrastructure it supports appear in more abstract mythic terms, largely filtered through a series of fragments from Heraclitus. At the beginning of the poem, Olson describes the procession's misled obeisance to the fisherman's bronze statue with the phrase, "'—'as if one were to talk to a man's house, / knowing not what gods or heroes are'—" (*MP,* 157). For the reader who recalls that, in "Letter 14," John Hawkins' violent acts were undertaken "for America, // for some of those who built / white houses" (*MP,* 67), the insult tends to invert: we are left as if talking to heroes, not knowing what houses are. Whether Olson intends this irony is

[195] Gates argued, even after World War II, that racial groups constituted separate species. Another source is the work of Bess Mensendieck, whose bodily exercises for women rested more loosely on assumptions about the "civilized form" of the Greeks (Butterick, *A Guide,* 1980: 92-3).

unclear, but he seems rather to imply that, at least as far as fishermen are concerned (who are, after all, not heroes or gods), there is something else to be reached inside the houses. Towards the end of this first section of the poem, as he prepares to disabuse the crowd of their idol-worship, another Heraclitean fragment on exchange—"'as gold for wares wares for gold'"(*MP,* 158)—at once evokes the economic engine of the falsely triumphal history Olson would contest, and posits the alchemical in its place, suggesting a potential transubstantiation of the fisherman's psyche. In any case, it is Olson's own translation of the historically concrete into mythopoetic and cosmic philosophical registers that enables the emergence of the Black Chrysanthemum—first as drowned men's eyes waking to redemption, and then as guiding emblem of a heliotropic movement beyond the discomfiting historical limits he had heretofore traced.

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Given that "Maximus, to Gloucester, Sunday, July 19" is explicitly about proper mourning, we might further ask what kind of mourning the redemptive force of the Black Chrysanthemum enacts. I would suggest that it is readable as an intellectual form of what psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok call incorporation, a fantasy procedure by which the person, unable to adequately articulate their grief, "take[s] into [their] mouth the unnameable, the object itself."[196] This short-circuiting of mourning is distinguished from introjection, an ongoing process of "finding the words." Olson has, of course, studiously undertaken the archival-projective practice of unearthing and embodying the available language for America's historical losses. Yet, the Black Chrysanthemum nonetheless seems to preside over an incorporative shift—an impression that grows stronger if one looks to the 1966 notes on "Experience and Measurement" in which the Black Chrysanthemum appears as "the unknown but known

[196] Abraham, Nicholas and Maria Torok. "Mourning *or* Melancholy: Introjection *versus* Incorporation" (1972), in *The Shell and the Kernel* 1. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994: 128.

organism, or animateness, which governs all."[197] The paradoxical epistemological status of the animate will eventually come to require gravitational obedience in and to the historical materiality of the body that bears the weight of events it carries without being able to fully comprehend or articulate their meaning. In the 1966 notes, however, "flesh" is rather abstracted and spiritualized through a sequence of etymological associations, in languages ranging from Latin to Nahuatl, that culminates with Olson describing his experience "under the mushroom" (actually LSD) as "literally tak[ing] a bite straight out of the creation."[198] This cosmic cannibalism—elsewhere glossed as "hunger after one's own kind," one's kind being everything in creation—realizes the conversion of the "raw" experiential core of life (*in itself*) into meaning (*through itself*), resulting in an almost deliriously transcendent absolution that echoes the close of T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" ("All shall be well, and / All manner of thing shall be well"): "that everyone & everything is nothing but itself so that all—everything—is therefore well."[199] Here objectism's break with Eliot's modernist impersonality and the historical disavowal it encodes is thoroughly undermined, as Olson begins to read himself and to re-theorize and approach his poetics in implicitly lyricized terms.

The cosmic bite also sublimates what had been among Olson's earliest political preoccupations: the importance of the physiological body in effecting a new stance toward reality; and the desperation at the core of America's foundation, powerfully relayed in that "First Fact" of *Call Me Ishmael* (*CPr,* 11-14)—a gruesomely detailed account of cannibalism resorted to at sea by the crew of a destroyed nineteenth-century whaling ship (the consumption of black and then white bodies, by and under the command of Captain and First Mate, gives the lie to both whitewashed heroic tales of the New World's discovery and to the racial stereotypes that continue to thrive on its shores). This "root act," reenvisioned through Jung's archetypal

[197] OLSON 3 (Spring 1975): 60.
[198] OLSON 3 (Spring 1975): 60-1.
[199] Ibid, 60.

psychology and Whitehead's materialist metaphysics, becomes a salutary feat of insight that positions Olson as eater (subject) rather than consumed (object). This inversion of Olson's avowed objectism points to what has been (or better threatens to be) lost that Olson refuses to relinquish. Having encountered the entanglement of his ego-ideal and genealogical-political descent, both invested in Gloucester's fishermen, with America's founding racial violence, he is called upon to mourn the loss of his enabling if ambivalent constitutive attachment to whiteness and, simultaneously, to absorb the blow to his self-regard and the psychic ground for agency that this entails. It proves too much to take on at once. Given the racial-political context in which he admits, at the Berkeley Poetry Conference, to not having wanted "to lose my world," it stands to reason that the thing that would be incorporated rather than more painfully introjected should be the marked body itself. It is perhaps in relation to this psycho-ontological crisis that we can understand the inclusion of "my color" before "my self" in the short list of Olson's final (dis)possessions that comprises the last of *The Maximus Poems*.[200]

As the wound is reopened and Olson finds his way back to working through this complicated loss—a kind of psychic death—another image emerges and frequently recurs in the poems that can be said to thematize a different relationship to the body—one in which it is again made the site of a painful practice. Arising between the inland turn to Dogtown and Olson's claims for the "dogmatic" nature of heliotropic experience is the figure of Tyr and Fenris (or Fenrir), a wolf (dog) who must be tricked into restraint by Tyr's sacrifice of his hand, which he places in the animal's mouth.[201] The myth speaks to the importance of imposing limits on destructive forces, as well as the painful physical sacrifice that must be made to ensure their efficacy. In terms of its possible subconscious resonance for Olson, the beast might be taken to allegorize what Olson elsewhere calls "unrelieved" history—history that is, in other words,

[200] See Butterick, *A Guide*, 1980: 751-3.
[201] The story appears a few times in Maximus poems from 1964, the year of Olson's falling-out with Jones (*MP,* 399-403; 414; 430).

disavowed. In order to limit history's destructive presence, a part of the self (of any person who would be an image of man) must be given over to its digestion. To be under image is to feed and be partially broken down by its historical source material rather than, as in the photo-copic mode, simply reproducing in order to facilitate its mobility.

Corporeal decay is likewise alluded to in a line from "Maximus, from Dogtown-II": "the greater the water you add / the greater the decomposition" (*MP,* 180). Olson will, in fact, define gravity in similar terms in a further addition to "The Animate." There, reflecting on the comparative inertia of gravitational waves relative to electrical ones (and finding this fact "not so much negative as evidence requiring a wholly different attitude"), Olson remarks: "they can't be bent or focused—because they already are…in time. And…don't conduct because like the figures under the hill they do something else, directly" (*CPr*, 371). In contradistinction to electricity—which both signifies the "continuous conduction / of the life from a sequence of events measurable" (of the 1966 Maximus poem), and better captures the projective transfer of energy from poet to reader—gravitational waves *decompose*. This is an operation carried out on the writer—the softening of what gets buried in their body. The phrase "figures under the hill" likely references T.S. Eliot's "dancers…under the hill," from an earlier section of "The Four Quartets" than that echoed in the notes on "Experience and Measurement." In Eliot's poem, the passage leading up to this figure deals explicitly with "the limited value / In the knowledge derived from experience" insofar as "We are only undeceived / Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm." In seeking to counter this protective mechanism by admitting "the known but unknown" that is merely felt, at his best Olson redefines what knowing means, elevating embodied experience over the myths and systems we too easily construct to cover over more painful or damaging realities: "anything inexperienced in the weight or matter of the organism is not transacted—traversed—thus 'carried', or 'known' in a decisive, and…ethical (in the meaning *ethos,* or cave-of-being) sense" (*CPr*, 369).

Proprioceptive reading, "BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES"

At once a substantial revision of his recent thought and a homecoming to core aspects of his earlier practice, "The Animate" points back to another use of psychoanalysis than the Jungian mythology of Olson's middle period (even as Jung's psychic regression helps him arrive there). Reflecting the retention of a more Freudian strain, the seat of gravity's psychic magnetism is none other than the body.[202] Olson had been thinking along such lines in "Proprioception," published in 1961 by Jones/Baraka, which takes as its premise that "one's life is informed from and by one's own literal body" (*CPr*, 182).[203] This is not simply the body of and as measure, but the body as a site for psychic work. Employing what Charles Stein sees as a creatively concrete misreading of Jung's comparison of archetypes to organs, Olson maps the primary terms of psychoanalysis onto the body's basic structure[204]: "consciousness as ego" is assigned to "the surface (senses—the 'skin'…)"; "the 'Unconscious'" is associated with "the cavity of the body, in which the organs are slung: the viscera, or interoceptive, the old 'psychology' of feeling" (*CPr*, 181). The proprioceptive domain of "the body itself"—or "what gets 'buried', like, the flesh?"—establishes a meeting place for these other two facets of the psyche: ego (and its interests), and feeling.

What is to be accomplished in this "intermediary" region is the bodily-psyche's "movement of its own tissues" (*CPr*, 182). The psycho-historical sense of what needs decomposing is established years earlier in "The Present is Prologue" (1952), where Olson enjoins his readers to "Get on with it…the work on ourself, how to make ourself fit instruments for use" (*CPr*, 205). He speaks of:

> two live pasts—your own (and that hugely included your parents), and one other which we don't yet have the vocabulary for…I can invoke it by saying, the mythological, but it's

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[202] Beyond the centrality of founding father, Sigmund Freud, to *Call Me Ishmael*, Olson had read some half dozen Freudians including Erich Fromm, ego psychologist Eric Erikson who, incidentally, coined the phrase "identity crisis" (Maud 256, 161-2)—and the prodigal son, Wilhelm Reich, who appears in a particularly despondent late *Maximus* poem: "Reich was / right, the / race does seek / to resemble its own / experiments" (III. 219).

[203] At the Berkeley Poetry Reading, Olson confesses himself baffled as to what he had meant in *Proprioception*, describing the essays as "incongestible," but perhaps worth being "dug up as signs" (in *MUTH*, 170).

[204] *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum,* 44.

> too soft. What I mean is that foundling which lies as surely in the phenomenological 'raging apart' as these queer parents rage in us (*CPr*, 206).

The geographical-experiential inheritance that Olson struggles here to articulate (and that the mythological, as a falsely universalizing mode of the "genetic," will temporarily displace) ultimately becomes "gravitational 'history'." Disavowed rather than truly repressed, as a foundling is not unborn but uncared for, its effects reverberate throughout and ravage the felt world.[205] The passage draws on a line from D.H. Lawrence's novella *The Man Who Died,* in which Jesus wakes to the revelation that "nothing is so marvellous as to be alone in the phenomenal world, which is raging, and yet apart."[206] Tellingly, Olson collapses the two terms into a single, more dramatic unit: whereas Lawrence's Jesus is able to pass through the raging world, from which he stands apart in a state of "pure aloneness," "whole within his skin"; the subtly altered sense of Olson's "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [Withheld]" "that I am one / with my skin" contains within it an understanding that the world's "raging apart" is also constitutively within him (*MP*, 185). The movement of these tissues calls for an embodied practice of close historical reading that is the root and complement of projective verse. Such an intimately implicating and politically active reading practice stands in marked contrast to the protocols of lyricized reading and, embedded within a writing practice as well as potentially applied to the poetry so produced, effectively breaks lyricization's hold on what a poem is and is for.

What we might finally call proprioceptive or gravitational reading is perhaps most fully articulated in a 1954 book review essay on Walter Noble Burns' *Billy the Kid*. Addressing himself to the problem of representation, Olson commences with the "live past" we possess as Americans: "Here's this country with what accumulation it has…And with some proportion of

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[205] Olson's foundling might be said to bear some relation to the concept of the transgenerational phantom developed by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok during the 1970's. See Abraham, Nicolas, "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology." Trans. Nicholas Rand. *Critical Inquiry* 13.2 (Winter 1987): 287-92.

[206] Lawrence, D.H. *St. Mawr & The Man Who Died.* New York: Vintage Books, 1953: 180.

misery—for which read 'reality,' if you will wait a minute and not take 'misery' as anything more than a characterization of unrelieved action or words" (*CPr*, 311). Echoing the concerns with reality, pain, and form that preoccupied his 1946 journal entry, Olson describes a psycho-affective bequest distinct from Jung's collective unconscious, one that is historically specific to place. The poet's task, as Olson sees it, is to relieve this historical unconscious and restore the ontological weight and usable substance of reality. He further declares: "Any transposition which doesn't have in it an expenditure at least the equal of what was spent, diminishes what was spent. And this is loss, loss in the present, which is the only place where history has context" (CPr, 311). While Olson concludes by promising to "compose it all for you," the idea that a single man's efforts could possibly approximate "what was spent" in the history of "sd States" remains profoundly unconvincing (CPr, 314, 311). What amounts to a categorical imperative to minimize loss in and of the present is best understood as proposing a life practice that would have to be widely taken up to have any meaningful political impact—hence Olson's investment in pedagogy. The method he prescribes here is at once archival and psychoanalytic. Rejecting the legends and heroes of myth as "stuffed logs," to be "got rid of," Olson advocates for staying "as close as the record will enable." At the same time, "only the millenia will do. The single event or person won't…even, say, if it is as apparently large and unreflecting as the Civil War, even that dense. Nor any single place or time: they yield, our places and our times are so unfixed" (*CPr*, 312-3). While the vast scope of the task eventually lends itself to the shorthand mythology offers, the crucial insight is that this unwieldy totality, "the mass of it which is it," partakes of the displacements and condensations of the Freudian unconscious. If at times Olson does spatialize history, he also understands that the body, as the seat of the unconscious, always already spatializes history, and this spatialization must be engaged if it is to be altered.

To approach the "slow, very damn slow" labor of moving the tissues of this psycho-historical mass, Olson turns to image: "So you better figure on man's interiors. If it's images are called for, they come from there. And he's got em. The Americans have" (*CPr*, 313). The images

found there—or *felt* there as they are found in the archive—are not archetypes in Jung's sense; rather, they are psychic condensations of historical matter to be dredged up through an attentive, actively engaged, and responsive body. In "Billy the Kid," Olson gives one example of the kind of image he has in mind:

> It was like the man who studied the Cherokee. And was himself, without being coy, a woodsman, camper enough to comprehend how such an Eastern Woodsland people had made meaning of their lives, took a river to belong to a man because he could fall back to it, and it was black. Death was black, and a man painted white lines on his face so that if he had to look into water, had to meet an enemy or the river, he had those lines to mark him, had the sign of himself a man has to have when he confronts the face of mere nature. His river could know him. And my friend, with all the intentions, and getting the movement of the man through the woods, ended up with a short short, a Mohawk scalping the Cherokee who falls back into the river which, of course, runs with blood! (CPr, 312).

Relaying an incident that likely occurred in the late eighteenth century, if at all, as if it had been observed recently by "my friend," the image conflates historical moments and persons in a manner like that of dream substitution. As its increasingly intimate structure mirrors the fatal attraction of the river, the image might also be said to operate gravitationally, drawing the reader into it and implicating them in its violence. Like the passages of cannibalism at the beginning of *Call Me Ishmael*, the image conveys a feeling of historical overdetermination, leading the reader down a vertiginous path that confronts the psychic structure of the self with a weight its form cannot hold without falling—first under the image's spell and then under the sway of its historical density. In this respect the image solicits what might be called psychic decomposure—discomposure tipped toward decomposition. If the images that surface in *The Maximus Poems* are generally less compact in their operations, the presentation of historical material nonetheless often achieves a similarly unsettling effect. The details given point to further details seething below their surface, with the voice of Olson-as-Maximus offering periodic harbor. The *gravity* of Olson's polis is an intimate mode of historiography that unfolds, in the present time of one's reading and writing life, the body's largely unconscious symbolic and material inheritance.

"Billy the Kid" concludes with the consequences of disembodied, ahistorical, non-gravitational reading: "The point missed is, that when men aren't sure just what insides are, or just where they are, such men are not easily read. Or are misread" (*CPr*, 313). Fascinated by Walter Noble Burns' attention to the Kid's final moment—his pausing to ask "Quién es?," "why El Chivato asked anything, this once, instead of barking, with his gun"—Olson begins the review's final section with the stern reminder that, "The time hasn't come when we are that sure, that we can ask a question, and live" (*CPr*, 313). Here we find ourselves back at the beginning, listening in again to Olson's letter: "My dear LeRoi…Maybe in fact I do think you use history…*as it was* almost to whip up your own interest or entrance into contemporary political action (?)" Olson's uncertainty about his capacity to meet the challenge posed to his political ideals, his poetics, and, most critically, to his psychic life by Baraka's militant turn is reflected in the late parenthetical conversion of claim into question as a nervous afterthought. As he sits with Jones/Baraka's silence over the ensuing years, he inquires into the relationship between his own feelings, needs, and theorizations, not only living through the answer but growing by it, back and deeper into the archaeology of his American psychic landscape and the crucial innovations of his early poetic method. More vital than another ultimately lyricized version of poetic indeterminacy or power, Olson's practice points to a way of holding historical overdetermination in a manner that might help limit projection onto others, by using the body to mediate and mitigate the psychic strain of recognizing what, historically speaking, one's insides are. Read in this light, *The Maximus Poems* are not the epic undoing of Western subjectivity or the absolute "Image of Man" that Olson sometimes hoped they might be, but the more modest and no less valuable record of one body shifting its historical weight and the real, if painfully minimal, feeling of freedom that affords.

Chapter 3

Jack Spicer's Dead Letters—
"the wrong notes," or "the reader…is a ghost"

In 1959, only two years after publishing his formative collection *After Lorca*, a book woven substantially of letters, Spicer wrote to Stan Persky: "Letters are a trap for me as a person and, I suspect, for me as a poet. They're impure. I'd give a great deal (have given a great deal) not to have written the Alexander ones. Warnings to myself, mostly" (Spicer Archive, Bancroft). The letters to which Spicer regretfully refers are his half of a correspondence with the young poet James Alexander, letters he regarded, and read publicly, as poetry. These letters were to prove a turning point in Spicer's poetics, his politics and, arguably, his life. They mark the end of a relatively brief if intense flirtation with poetry as the path to a queer aesthetic utopia, and the beginning of a broader, and increasingly pessimistic, preoccupation with history and politics. Spicer's characterization of the practice of writing poetry changes, over this period, from the pursuit of magical erotic correspondences hidden beneath the surface of everyday life to a necessary if ultimately futile form of psychic torture at the hands of history's unrelieved ghosts. While his subsequent poetry leans on other-than-epistolary genres, the idea of letters—formulated in the James Alexander correspondence as central to the circulation of poetic messages—remains a trope from which he will not escape. I will argue that this has much to do with the emergence of racial content that had largely been sublimated in his early poetics. As he was increasingly forced to consider racism in its own right and as a problem he shared, the crucial if occluded role of blackness in his poetics broke his utopian investment in lyricization and reframed (arguably derailed) the reparative psycho-political labor with which the epistle had been charged. His late poetics offers a glimpse of an alternative, intimately historiographic, form of psycho-political work and use for poetry writing, formed around the figure of the Dead Letter Officer, before succumbing to a reflexive elegization of lyricized poetry's more Romantic promise—and of the poet's self, which he is unable to separate from the historical damage he

must process. As his writings track his struggle with his constitutive racial baggage, his poetics shed light on some of the challenges, contradictions, and possibilities of a much larger political imperative.

Unversions

Blackness had long served as an analogical reference for Spicer as he worked through his own sexual oppression and weighed the political paths thinkable from within it. In what Kevin Killian describes as a "despairing, Faustian short story," written by the young Spicer as an undergraduate at UC Berkeley in the 1940's, the poet's enduring erotic, psychosocial, and historical preoccupations and dis/affinities are on candid display in pointedly racialized terms:

> There is a ruddy boy in the corner that looks like a minstrel show. I wonder if he's ever dreamed of a Ledaean body. His name is Jefferson Davis and his face is on every Confederate three dollar bill. Soft he dances and wistful smiles for the customers. He smiles with his face so he has to put a lot of hatred into his feet. He hates everybody while he's dancing. / Somebody tells me that these people are human. That's silly. They are not human they are homosexual. Jews are not human either, nor Negroes, nor cripples. No one is human that doesn't feel human. None of us here feel human (in AS 23).[207]

Genres of being are posited here on the basis of an ambivalent web of feeling comprised of the young poet's experience of radical exclusion on account of his sexuality, and his assumed insight into and identification with the "ruddy" boy whose dehumanization and shame associate him with blackface and blackness in the racial imaginary of Spicer's gaze. The allusion to Yeats's famous poem, "Among School Children," and, through it, to the myth of Leda and the Swan, not

[207] See Kevin Killian's "Spicer and the Mattachine" in *After Spicer* (2011). The story continues, "Do humans spend every hour looping after sex, collecting a trick at night?…How can I reach out for one of these people when I know they are damned and evil fairies who disappear after you have stopped touching them" (in AS 23). Lamenting what he sees as the desperately hyper-sexual quality of one of the few available affirmative contexts for gay men, Spicer ratchets up his anticipated disappointment with the "one-night stand" into a threat of derealization, evincing a psycho-ontological anxiety that continues to animate his poetry. His allusion to Yeats's famous poem, "Among School Children," not only highlights a feeling of damaged innocence and connects that feeling to the larger social pressures under which it forms, but also puts that damage into an explicitly racial American context where some lives are more vulnerable than others; perhaps the "white hood" of the "kind old nun" in the second line of Yeats's poem struck another chord in Spicer's subconscious.

only highlights a feeling of damaged innocence and connects that feeling to the larger social pressures under which it forms, but also puts that damage into an explicitly racial American context.[208] The question of whether the ruddy boy can even dream of, let alone possess, a body desirable in "Ledaean" terms (one, too, that exists prior to its violation) suggests the mythic status and violence of whiteness as an ideal. Given the historical name of the president of the Confederacy, the ruddy minstrel is made to embody a zone of racial imbrication in which anti-blackness taints and rends those who think they are white—and thereby human—as well as those who are abjected as black. This thinking, with its possibilities for and limits of affinity between socially marginalized groups, continued to inform Spicer's politics and his poetics. Indeed, as Killian suggests, "there's perhaps a more fully articulated politics in Spicer's writing than has hitherto been perceived" (AS 32). That politics, constantly renegotiated as it is articulated, is rooted not only in the social analysis indicated above but also in a formative foray into political activism.

As Killian's essay details, Spicer was involved very intensively for much of 1953 with the new Oakland chapter of the Mattachine Society, a pre-Stonewall gay liberation organization. The Oakland chapter had sprung into being in heated response to the arrest on "morals" charges of the black Quaker pacifist Bayard Rustin. Rustin had been scheduled to speak in Berkeley, and it was suspected that with his arrest authorities had targeted his well-known homosexuality to stifle his political work in the anti-war movement. Quickly the new Oakland chapter developed into a pocket of radicalism and playful experimentation within the more conservative Mattachine. While the leadership of the Mattachine Society pushed for assimilation, and shied away from any association with radical politics because of the anti-communism of the day (the first McCarthy hearings were held that year), Spicer and others urged that the group interrogate assimilation as a goal in order to study how other minority groups (such as the Irish) had

[208] Perhaps the "white hood" of the "kind old nun" in the second line of Yeats's poem struck another chord in Spicer's subconscious.

successfully integrated, and with what consequences. Questioning whether inclusion in mainstream society and its understanding of 'the human' was worth the cost of admission if it meant the loss of a distinct perspective on reality, Spicer was especially keen to conduct more searching analyses of what alternative psycho-social terrains their collective experiences might open onto, developing his own pop psychological, biographical and sexual questionnaires for members to complete (AS 29). In bi-weekly—sometimes nightly—secret sessions, often packed with enthusiastic members, the Oakland meetings of the society developed into what Killian describes as proto- consciousness raising meetings. With participants sharing personal and sexual experiences as well as ideas about gay identity and psychology, they also, according to one observer (Spicer's close friend, the poet Robin Blaser), resembled later modes of "group therapy." The Oakland chapter, with its more openly leftist politics—including calls to boycott local gay bars that discriminated against blacks—quickly became problematic to the national organization's leadership, as well as to the anti-communist neighboring chapter across the Bay in San Francisco. The result was a purge of Spicer and friends, and the subsumption of the remaining Oakland membership into the tamer San Francisco chapter. Having failed to make an inquiry into queer genres of being an important part of the organization's agenda, and disillusioned and frustrated by his ejection from what had been a period of fervent political activity and commitment, Spicer turned to writing to further develop the psychological dimensions of his political thinking.

He began by penning "The Unvert Manifesto" and associated "Excerpts from Oliver Charming's Diary," a work of hybrid genre that serves as an exploratory statement of his poetics. Race remains a central site of negotiation and ambivalence. Modeled on the "Abomunist Manifesto," composed by Jewish African-American Beat poet Bob Kaufman—a romantic rival whose presence would prove decisive for Spicer's racial psychology—"The Unvert Manifesto" further elaborates the mimetic kinship Spicer saw between queerness and blackness while simultaneously drawing categorical exclusions around the groups. Declaring that "an unvert can

only love another unvert," Spicer insists that "Negroes are not allowed to be unverts," the spurious reason being that "the Negro understands [unversion] too well" (74-5).[209] In what amounts to an imaginary insistence on a 'separate but equal' social status for the two groups, whose overlap he is particularly keen to deny in spite of his anti-racist politics, Spicer exhibits what might be described as an aversion to being seen and understood more powerfully than he sees himself. This disinclination, or fear—when translated into the historical register that his late poetics will discover (hidden in plain sight, as it were)—is arguably structurally constitutive of white discomfort with the black gaze. In any case, if Bob Kaufman could not be loved, he could certainly be copied. In his own manifesto, Kaufman puts the kind of misery Spicer too was plagued by in bold ironic terms: "ABOMUNISTS DO NOT FEEL PAIN, NO MATTER HOW MUCH IT HURTS"; "IN TIMES OF NATIONAL PERIL, ABOMUNISTS, AS REALITY AMERICANS, STAND READY TO DRINK THEMSELVES TO DEATH FOR THEIR COUNTRY" (in Vincent, *AS,* 94). Emil Vincent argues that Kaufman's brilliance is to demonstrate that "a subject position can be both impossible to occupy and fully occupied. Kaufman's main insight…is that negative capability…is not just an aesthetic but also an ontological effect" (*AS*, 93). Inspired by Kaufman, and by the blues (for which the same insight could well be claimed), Spicer would attempt, in the "Unvert Manifesto" and beyond, to theorize and develop that effect as a political capacity and stance—from and for a subject position to which other options *were* increasingly available—through a psychologically-oriented aesthetic praxis.[210]

Accordingly, the Manifesto opens by defining the "unvert" as one who "chooses to have no place to turn" (MV74).[211] This choice entails an endeavor to embrace subcultural practices

[209] See Maria Damon (1993) for a shrewd analysis of Spicer's ambivalent dis/identifications with other marginalized groups.
[210] While Spicer's poetics is more frequently associated with Federico Garcia Lorca's *duende*, the blues and jazz were also an important aesthetic and political referent. On Spicer's identification with the music, see his early (mid-1950's) poem "Song for Bird and Myself" for Charlie Parker. In *My Vocabulary* (69-72).
[211] The act of choosing to have no place to turn, and instead inhabiting one's creaturely condition as such, recurs throughout Spicer's poetry, as in "Fifteen False Propositions Against God": "Ready to start a revolution. / No you should stay there with your roots in the ground / Ready to drink whatever water / The rain is willing to send you. The rain / The cow / And my true body, a / Revolution."

and strategies—minstrelsy chief among them—with which Spicer is, at the same time, plainly uncomfortable. The struggle manifests in the "Diary" with distinct personifications for each side of Spicer's split mind, a structure that persists throughout his poetry, producing an unequal—and aspirational—division between person and poet, letter and poem. In the "Diary," "S." stands in for Spicer the person, promising and regressive at turns in his poetic and political attitudes. Oliver Charming, the diarist, is the enlightened voice, able to recognize and diagnose S. as "secretly an unvert—or at least a spoiled unvert"; throughout, he attempts to foster S.'s latent potential by "bringing in subtle pieces of unvert propaganda." The central message Charming seeks to convey is the value of using conventional genres subversively. In one conversation entered in the diary, S. attempts to dismiss camping as "at the very best, a minstrel show impeccably played by Negroes in blackface," only to have his "embarrassed and overintellectual" critique undermined by Oliver. In another, "S. says that it is inconsistent for an unvert to have a psychiatrist. He does not understand unversion. The relation between the analyst and the patient is the firmest and most hallowed, if the most conventional, sexual relationship in the modern world. This is precisely why it must be shaken. It is our task to experience and unvert all sexual relationships" (MV 79).[212] Rather than discarding available forms, as an ethos, unversion insists on staying with the given while loosening its normative force.[213]

Chief among the hallowed conventional genres Spicer, as poet, seeks to simultaneously inhabit and disrupt is lyricized poetry, along with the textual relationship between writer and reader it enshrines. Both the manifesto and the diary (an odd pairing of genres that respectively

[212] Elsewhere the psychiatrist in question, who Oliver must remind himself is "the Trotsky of the movement," tells his patient that dreams are "the proper and strategic place" for unversion and councils him against trying to force such acts upon reality—a counterrevolutionary message indeed. Spicer clearly has in mind the surrealist ambition for the "poet of the future…[to] go beyond the depressing idea of the irreparable divorce between action and dream" (Breton 235). In another contestation of the narrative and interpretive orientation of psychoanalytic practice, Spicer's early poem, "An Elegy for Psychoanalysis" urges its inquisitive form beyond the erotic mapping it invites, "Until the mad cartographer / Falls to the ground and possesses / The sweet thick earth from which he has been hiding" (MV 33).

[213] A similar position underlies Judith Butler's early work on gender performativity, as well as Giorgio Agamben's recent theorization of use.

point to modernism's projects of aesthetic renewal and poetry's older association with overheard utterance) were written while Spicer worked in the Rare Book Room of the Boston Public Library, where he spent a good deal of time with the Emily Dickinson archive. There he had access to the correspondence and editorial process described in Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005). Spicer's "Diary" develops the idea of unversion as a wry alternative *to and of* the lyricization of her work that he likewise perceived. Characterized as a "grand degradation between men and angels"—an admixture of psychoanalysis and lyricization, social critique and anarchistic utopianism—the poetics Spicer pursues would seek to interrupt the underlying libidinal basis of social attachments with a playful interference that produces its own form of affinity: unversion "consists of linking the sexual with the greatest cosmic force in the universe—Nonsense" (74). In effect, unversion proposes to do to persons what poems do to language—unbinding them from well-worn ruts, loosening the psychic economy and its figurative imagination—in order to activate genres of being at a certain slant to, if not outside, the 'human', as defined and colonized by Western thought and political economy.

Acknowledging (and mocking) his own idealization of poetic practice as the *invention* (as well as the degradation) of angels, Spicer attempts to distinguish it from lyricization's idealization of the poet and/as 'speaker' with a jab at Dickinson's most famous editorial curator. At one point, Oliver discovers that the angel he has been trying to invent, "turns out not to be an angel at all but an old bitter man named Thomas Wentworth Higginson who wishes to seduce me" (MV 84). The anecdote at once draws—and highlights the slipperiness of—the distinction he seeks to make. As Spicer half realizes, his drive to idealize the psycho-political work he at once recognizes as necessary and cannot sufficiently value in itself without the redemptive horizon of a poetry that remains transcendent—and thereby lyricized by other means—will prove his weakness. This drive is bound up with a desire, more or less articulated in the Manifesto's categorical exclusions, to keep queerness apart from blackness. That is to say that Spicer's

unversion of lyricized poetry maintains its own structure of racialization, one based not on erasure and repudiation but grudging affinity and partial disavowal.

Like much of Spicer's early work, the Diary seems to glimpse the centrality of racial history to the problem of normative American personhood in which he seeks, at a slant—using poetry, to intervene, but his engagement with it remains cursory, often flippant. S. earns his status as a secret unvert by assigning a pupil "to clip examples of racial prejudice from Tarot cards and give their exact date."[214] Trivializing as it is, the exercise gives the lie to the more comfortable idea of historical damage as contained by discrete events, infecting a popular (and beloved by Spicer) practice of poetic mysticism with the specter of unrelieved history in the process. "Something," Charming remarks, is going on between S. and history." The vagueness of 'something' about captures it; the relationship of Spicer's poetics to historiography at this early juncture is partakes of a similarly riven, half-conscious, structure to what might fairly be called the Manifesto's and the Diary's "racist anti-racism." History, too, will prove to be a seduction, and one that ultimately solicits more from Spicer, particularly with respect to his racialization, than he is adequately prepared to face, work through, or "unvert."

The possibility that his efforts to work through and loosen, rather than simply disavow, the psycho-historical grip and damage of the 'human' might fail, and break him in the process, does not wholly escape Spicer. It registers abstractly in the Diary's persistent ambivalence, however tongue in cheek its presentation, toward unversion's revolutionary claims. The Diary ends with Oliver Charming on trial for 'angelism', a disease, "like leprosy," that parodies and counters lyricized poetry with the grotesquely decomposing effects of self-unversion:

> if the leprous person by having his face eaten away could make his bones seem so beautiful that all men would kiss them, if leprosy exposed the heart and the heart only, man (and nature) would not consider leprosy a crime…But, your honor, you know, I know, all men know, there is nothing broken flesh can expose but more broken flesh (MV 93).

[214] S. is made an "agent"—and then an "angel"—of Kubla Khan, a reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's visionary poem on the imagination.

If angelism, or poetry, defaces the poet and breaks down the flesh of the social at the intimate site of his personhood, at stake is whether anything of value or beauty is revealed in the process. Spicer would not have us side with the lawyer, but neither will he remain so sure of the contrary. As this chapter unfolds, I will show that Spicer's combined idealization of his unverted poetics and his nagging uncertainty as to whether that idealization is warranted—whether, in short, there is anything but broken flesh all the way down, in the national body and in his own psyche—keeps him—even as he goes on to produce some of the most haunted and original poetry of his era—from pursuing the more radical psycho-political and historiographic implications of his poetic practice. Instead, he plays around its edges, until the recognition of his own lingering under-examined racism forces a confrontation with historical damage that he does not endure. The Diary's closing trial narrative is left hanging with "S." sworn in as witness, and asked if he is acquainted with the defendant, Oliver. No answer is given, or verdict delivered in the case, but the presiding judge, a Mrs. Doom, insists that "[t]he attorneys will refrain from personality" (MV 94)—seeding the next major development in Spicer's poetics and marking the more enduring concept of impersonality with its unversion, its political subtext. Spicer's "unversion" of poetry will come, in this next stage, to lean heavily on impersonality, and on the epistle, terms so bound up with poetry that their use may well be counted as choosing to stay with and subvert it from within. Yet impersonality, even unverted, retains certain political liabilities and Spicer is periodically seduced by its lower modernist angels. In tension with it, the letter largely functions as social-historical anchor in his work, one ultimately less amenable to transcendence than Spicer hopes.

"how we dead men write to each other"

Epistolary form and practice lie at the core of Spicer's mature poetics, in the double sense that letters both ground his serial poetry in ways both formal and thematic, and promise to support an idealized mode of aesthetic sociality that proves, if not quite false, considerably

more fraught than he initially imagined. In his seminal 1957 collection, *After Lorca*, Spicer elaborates the condition of the "unvert" and the peculiar erotics of "unversion" as the poetic correspondence between "we dead men" (*MV,* 134). More than a convention of literary sociality, his insistence on the 'office of the poet'—antecedent to the Dead Letter Officer—as a kind of death expresses a need to have a condition of dehumanization lived as a daily experience acknowledged in a form extreme enough to accommodate its psychic impact, and to thereby enable a necro-social life within social death. *After Lorca* is comprised of letters to Federico García Lorca (and, in one case, *from* the dead poet), interspersed with verse 'translations', with which Spicer takes considerable liberty, along with original poems (unidentified as such) haunted by Lorca's tone and style.[215] While the translated and original poems perform the idealized forging of unlikely anarchic affinities—in which Lorca's Spanish lemon "may become this lemon, or it may even become this piece of seaweed, or this particular color of gray in this ocean" (MV, 133-4)—the letters take up the more mundane task of elaborating the psychological pedagogy Spicer sees as necessary to achieving such a receptive, unverted state.

Spicer's instrumentalization of letters to this end is well captured in his description of them. As a profane if expedient substrate for the poems, they are to "establish the bulk, the wastage, that my sour-stomached contemporaries demand to help them swallow and digest the pure word" (*MV*, 110). In this capacity, they at once describe and contain excessive attachments—"Most of my friends like words too well"—and the writer's sense of self-importance (chiefly, in this case, Spicer's own powerful didactic impulse), freeing the poems of these prosaic weights, which together comprise "the big lie of the personal" (*MV*, 123, 150). Giving the lures of rhetoric and subjective intention textual space without acceding to their

[215] Lorca's conjured presence serves to authorize Spicer as a young poet, while the letters provide a platform for his own values as a writer—and as a vocal member of a writing community—to be fleshed out. In her essay, "Spicer's Poetic Correspondence: 'A Pun the Letter Reflects,'" Kelly Holt grounds this set of functions for Spicer in his undergraduate studies of the Medieval *ars dictaminis* with Ernst Kantorowicz at UC Berkeley, elucidating how he draws on these earlier models to develop his own senses of local and transhistorical poetic *communitas,* in which letters bridge the "temporal world of private matters" and the "immaterial, eternal, and collective" stuff of poetry (*After Spicer,* 65).

dominance, the overarching message of *After Lorca*'s structure seems to be that one cannot entirely escape one's suspect desire for power, but one can at least put it in its place, mark it as a thing of less value than the capacity for receptivity that poetry, defined in contrast, demands: "We will use up our rhetoric here so that it will not appear in our poems. Let it be consumed paragraph by paragraph, day by day…It is precisely because these letters are unnecessary that they must be written" (*MV,* 110). The letters both theorize and model a practice of psychological management, establishing his poetics as processual in a psychological as well as formal sense.[216]

Beyond a differential valuation of genres, poem and letter also point to distinct modes of personhood and sociality—the one idealized and the other transitional, in its service. In one of the letters, Spicer models the transformation from living social person to the dead office of the poet with what amounts to a repurposed psychic economy of mourning:

> Dear Lorca,
>
> Loneliness is necessary for pure poetry. When someone intrudes into the poet's life (and any sudden personal contact, whether in the bed or in the heart, is an intrusion) he loses his balance for a moment, slips into being who he is, uses his poetry as one would use money or sympathy. The person who writes the poetry emerges, tentatively, like a hermit crab from a conch shell. The poet, for that instant, ceases to be a dead man.
>
> …
>
> Even the objects change. The seagulls, the greenness of the ocean, the fish—they become things to be traded for a smile or the sound of conversation—counters rather than objects. Nothing matters except the big lie of the personal—the lie in which these objects do not believe.
>
> That instant, I said. It may last for a minute, a night, or a month, but, this I promise you, García Lorca, the loneliness returns. The poet encysts the intruder. The objects come back to their own places, silent and unsmiling. I again begin to write you a letter on the sound of a poem. And this immediate thing, this personal adventure, will not have been transferred into the poem like the waves and the birds were, will, at best, show in the lovely pattern of cracks in some poem where autobiography shattered but did not quite destroy the surface. And the encysted emotion will itself become an object, to be transferred at last into poetry like the waves and the birds.

[216] Beyond *After Lorca*'s generic separation of these two impulses, Spicer's continued inclusion of both gentle admonitions and hostile and spiteful remarks in his poetry suggests that he ultimately places greater importance on using poetry-writing to *pursue* the patience and detachment of "we dead men," over cultivating a pure record of his periodic attainment of that coveted condition. As such, he approaches the political potential of poetry differently from both his Beat peers and the language-oriented writers who followed. His poetry fails to be "demonstrative" in the sense of language poetry's "ethical formalism" or in the more rhetorical manner of much contemporary work.

> And I will again become your special comrade.
>
> Love,
> Jack (*MV*, 150)

Here, the problem of desire channeled by the ego's vanities and attachments takes center stage, in order to be repudiated and controlled. The focus is, again, on the writing of a poem as both desired and achievable object, but the background longing for another kind of sociality (and another kind of economy) is plain, reinforced by the political signaling at the letter's close that indicates Lorca's importance not only as gay poet but also as socialist martyr. Just as the poet "encysts" the intruder, letter-writing captures and focuses the person's attention, drawing it away from a social world fraught with degrading and futile power-plays. Associated with the prose of the letters, psychoanalytic practice is at once deemed necessary and made a site at which Spicer's distaste for the all too human dynamics he must engage is focalized. In other words, he recognizes a political need for working through his psychic attachments, but finds the whole tangle of desires that constitute social and political life too repellent to endure without the compensation of a purified poetry and the redemption it promises. This intolerance, exacerbated by if not born of his racial ambivalence and his own double consciousness with respect to his sexuality, will (combined with the advanced alcoholism of his final years) prove fatal when it is "someone" whose racialization bears the mark—and bares the intimate presence—of history that "intrudes" into Spicer's psychic and poetic life.

History begins to appear in symptomatic flickers in a collection of letters addressed to a living muse the following year. The *Letters to James Alexander*, which constitute an experiment in communication as "dead men" between two living persons, further concretize these distinct modes of personhood while collapsing together the genres associated with each. Building on Spicer's undergraduate studies at UC Berkeley with Ernst Kantorowicz, each writer of the

hybridized poem-letters has two bodies[217]: in Alexander's case, the shift from one to the other is marked by the use of different forms of his given name, "Jim" or "James"; in Spicer's case, both signatories are "Jack," but likewise implicitly split into social person and poet (or into what Stan Persky, in an apt if somewhat schizoid gesture of his own, elsewhere labels "Dirty Jack" and "Radiant Jack"[218]). As Spicer's observations of his psychic motivations grow more finely tuned, what had been kept clearly distinct in *After Lorca* becomes blurred: the impurity of the quotidian epistle and its perpetually dissatisfied desires bleeds into the poetry (and into the pure poetic relation) as the erstwhile genres, turned gestures, become more tightly intertwined within their hybrid frame. The experiment, which seems to have been both exhilarating and ultimately frustrating, was perhaps over-optimistic. Spicer's characterization of the poetic office as the province of "dead men" suggests that he was not initially very sanguine about the likelihood of living persons achieving the relation he found with Lorca. The idea, however, remained a temptation, and not just because it allowed him to indulge while disavowing the sexual and deeply personal aspects of his attraction to various muses.[219] Spicer's need for a less volatile mode of social relations became stronger as he became more consciously aware of the political liabilities of some of his personal hostilities—in particular, his racialized hostility toward Bob Kaufman. Before turning to the James Alexander letters, some brief biographical background, along with its literary reworking in Spicer's novel, *The Tower of Babel*, offers useful context for

[217] See Kelly Holt's "Spicer's Poetic Correspondence: 'A Pun the Letter Reflects'" in *After Spicer*. Ed. by John Emil Vincent. Wesleyan UP, 2011: 36-68.
[218] Correspondence quoted in Nealon, Christopher. *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*. Harvard UP, 2011: 113-4.
[219] By his mid-thirties, Spicer seems to have developed an image of himself as unlucky in love and ultimately undesirable—a complex that only exacerbated the difficulties already imposed on him by the broader (and at least partially internalized) atmosphere of homophobia. Spicer's sexual frustration and jealousy were no trivial factor in his poetics, as Kevin Killian's and Lew Ellingham's biography elucidates. Indeed, it's likely that the primary and most immediate frustration behind the regrets Spicer relays to Persky about the *James Alexander Letters* derives from his young muse becoming an object of sexual desire to others in their wider social circle. The letters, and especially Spicer's having read them aloud at a Valentine's day reading, would have exposed his own romantic as well as poetic attachment, leaving him to suffer the disappointment of losing his seeming soul-mate in a particularly humiliating manner.

reading the racial content of the letters, as well as for understanding the pressure that was put on their composition.

The letter as racial trap: blackmail, chain mail, and spooks

1958 proved a pivotal year for Spicer, one of poetic, personal, and racial crisis. That year, Spicer had fallen in love with painter Russell Fitzgerald, a brief period of genuine happiness marred by Russell's utter obsession with and persistent fetishization of Jewish African-American Beat poet, Bob Kaufman. When Russell's efforts were finally rewarded by a one-night tryst with the largely straight-identified Kaufman, it marked the beginning of the end of his relationship with Spicer. During this period, Spicer undertook the writing of his novel, a work, ostensibly, of detective fiction and social satire. As John Emil Vincent (2011) persuasively argues, Spicer used the "exercise of the novel" to work through his jealously of Kaufman, on whom a key character is based, making the work less an unfinished detective story than an effectively realized act of wish fulfillment. The novel also works through Spicer's ambivalent relationship to the racial politics of his milieu, and this larger context lends it a more complex psychological function.

The novel's protagonist, Ralston, is an odd avatar of Spicer himself, on whom he is clearly if also satirically based. He is a distorted image of Spicer's fears of what might befall him if he were to lose his poetic and, I would add, political, integrity; Ralston is, in the signification given the term by one of Spicer's early poetry collections, an "admonition" to himself. Like Spicer, Ralston has just returned to San Francisco from the East coast and is hoping to find the poetic spark he feels he has lost. He encounters a cultish group of young poets, the ringleader of which is a charismatic African-American poet who, though officially named Washington Jones, goes by the grimly ironic handle, "Judge." Judge is shortly to be accused of assaulting a woman by the name of Sonia Liebowitz under circumstances that make misidentification (or even deliberate false accusation) seem entirely plausible. Ralston is drawn into the ensuing legal

negotiations, asked to testify as a character witness for Jones by Arthur Slingbot, an older and somewhat self-important anarchist figure modeled on Kenneth Rexroth. Uncomfortable with the request, as he scarcely knows Jones, Ralston agrees instead to investigate the incident, a mission he pursues somewhat half-heartedly, but with no less diligence, it is worth noting, than he applies to his intended poetic pursuits. In the end, his efforts prove moot, as Jones is found to have 'fallen' from a balcony to his death before Ralston's amateur investigation has made much headway, or the threatened legal case been pursued. Here the novel more or less ends, earning it the designation of unfinished from Kevin Killian and Lew Ellingham, who introduced the 1994 Talisman publication. As Vincent points out, however, there is little interest developed in Washington Jones's fate; rather than finding out whodunnit, Vincent argues that it is the death itself—and with it, subconsciously, the removal of Bob Kaufman's erotic threat to Spicer's happiness—that provides sufficient if not entirely satisfactory narrative closure for its author.

The novel, however, is more than a disturbing act of wish fulfillment. Along with its psychological functions for the author, it is also a work of social satire and of more nuanced, ambivalent, and intimate political analysis. In it, Spicer takes aim at what he sees as the anti-racist pretensions and performances of his peers in the larger Beat milieu, from the "damnably annoying" "rather authentic blackface" of Slingbot's jazz posturing to the widespread fetishism of Zen Buddhism (*Tower,* 87). At the same time, the novel grapples with its protagonist's (perhaps its author's) constitutive racism. A particularly revealing parenthetical passage departs from Ralston's focalized narration to share something of his background: his early witnessing of a racist incident on a Los Angeles bus (a "Virginian" loudly complaining about the African-American passenger seated next to him) and the complex of wounded whiteness that arises for Ralston from the social shaming the offender meets with in response. Ralston, it seems, does not actually side with the "Southerner" and so is not himself 'a racist' in the strong sense, but he is uncomfortable to see the incident treated with more than the "embarrassed silence" he had come to expect from his childhood in Houston, Texas. In classic neurotic fashion, he worries

that the residual "Southernness of his accent" will mark him as a target in this new social order—one in which the racist is subjected to his own treatment (the other passengers commence to grumble loudly about the "damn Okie") and hounded off the bus, while "the Negro" remains, "smiling." The experience elicits and crystallizes Ralston's own constitutive racism in the form of a "guilty secret" and its attendant paranoia, which he accepts he must suffer as the burden of a "Southern background to overcome," proceeding to overcompensate by "lead[ing] the attack on all things Southern." In short, Ralston is presented to us as precisely the sort of figure whose anti-racism is anxiously driven by social conformity and is therefore liable to reactionary reversion. As a result of this complex, Ralston, who fears Slingbot will sniff out his Texan childhood and "blow up the story until he's convinced everybody that I'm a special emissary from the Ku Klux Klan," experiences the request to intervene on behalf of Judge as a kind of "moral blackmail."[220] Whether Spicer is conscious of the pun or not—as poet, linguist, and something of a wit, he generally was—the word *blackmail* marks what is to prove an enduring racialization of mail and messages in his poetic oeuvre (*Tower,* 86).

In the novel, the principal letter-writers are Ralston's psychiatrist wife and his old friend Henry, a one-armed composer and avowed recluse who only socializes by epistle. The most important missive, however, is delivered by the young Rue Talcott, Ralston's beguiling, if frustrating and disavowed, erotic interest (a figure modeled on both Russell Fitzgerald and James Alexander). The message arrives as a poem folded into the mouth of a dying black fish, the first of two poetic opportunities Rue offers Ralston, both of which the latter squanders. The scene comes after Rue, having just met Ralston at the local bar, takes exception to the suggestion that he and his countercultural friends are trying too hard to make their lives unusually meaningful when "billions of people are being born, and marrying, and dying in much

[220] Here, Ralston summons the example of a visit to UC Berkeley by "an inoffensive Southern poet (a friend of Tate and Ransom)," whose reading Slingbot succeeded in having boycotted by the entire poetic community. Spicer, an avowed anarchist and agitator himself, was hardly above or against causing a scene, or a "storm," as Ralston here accuses Slingbot of doing; nor was he interested in the New Critics' brand of "academic" poetry. Nonetheless, he appears to deem the intervention overblown.

the same way" (*Tower*, 19). Rue's response is to tear up Ralston's square magazine, the *Partisan Review*. After this first bit of drama, Rue, dressed down by Ralston as a "silly little boy," leaves in a state of agitation, and then shortly returns with the fish, bearing in its gaping mouth one of his own poems as a kind of peace offering and poetic gauntlet. With the dying fish as carrier, its final breaths closing over and releasing the folded poem, the gesture also makes for a surreal condensation of 'black mail', or, in any case, seems to be so received by the vaguely paranoid Ralston. He, in his turn, rips up the paper without reading the younger man's poem, an act of petulance from which his character never really recovers. Ralston will shortly be visited by a bad dream in which, according to his own interpretation, the fish becomes a whale that destroys his "urge to discover for himself a new kind of poetry," represented by the titular Tower of Babel ("an obvious pun," in Ralston's assessment). The dream ends with him attempting to gather the torn scraps (appearing as seaweed) in order to make a fire, and he wakes "remembering very clearly that 'To Build a Fire' was the title of Jack London story about a man who froze to death" (45). Too little too late. It is a vision of the poetic impotence that will haunt him for the remainder of the novel.

In addition to its surplus meaning as courier, the fish is itself a kind of visual pun, if a slightly less obvious one, that forges a symbolic link between the novel's conjoined concerns with poetry and race. In addition to conjuring the "beautiful black fish" from one of Spicer's original poems in *After Lorca,* limning the gesture with erotic energy,[221] it makes a macabre condensation of Judge's predicament—*off the hook* just long enough to make his claim to innocence before he expires. In case this racial-political connection were too subtle to have drawn the reader's attention in the first place, the fish is reintroduced at several key politically-charged points. In one scene, Ralston, discomfited by the incident with the fish, visits Henry, who tells Ralston that if anything like that were to occur again, he should recite the Declaration

[221] The poem is titled "Aquatic Park" and is the one in the collection that Spicer dedicates to himself (*MV,* 131).

of Independence under his breath as a charm against it. The irony of the somewhat stodgy and secretly "Southern" Ralston being counseled to wield patriotic propaganda against the countercultural threat of the scene's jazz-enamored youth couldn't be thicker.[222] The second time the fish is brought up, it is by Judge, when Ralston meets he and Slingbot to discuss the possibility of committing himself as a character witness on Judge's behalf. Instead, it is Ralston who wriggles himself off the hook of this act of "moral blackmail," just as he will continue to evade the potentially transformative erotic pressures mobilized by Rue's poetry.

The linkage between the pursuit of racial justice and the pursuit of eroticized poetic inspiration is not incidental. Ralston, who seems to know that he should not have torn up the poem and to believe that Judge is probably innocent, spends the remainder of the novel going through the motions with respect to both quests, as the two plot lines are developed in tandem. In spite of the focalized narration conveying largely his perspective, his apathetic behavior receives little justification beyond meeting his own selfish and self-protective needs. The novel is thus also, I would suggest, an exercise in self-debasement, and this psychological trajectory arrives at its own anticlimax. As the protagonist, Ralston's triumph at the close of the novel is markedly hollow and petty. Having caught the news of Judge's demise from a newspaper headline, he attempts to warn Sonya and Rue, two likely suspects. Failing to sufficiently impress them with the gravity of the situation through the stoned haze in which he finds them, Ralston simply leaves. He is, in any case, glad to be done with the whole scene and ready, at last, to return to writing "his own"—stuffy academic, we are earlier given to expect—poems (152-3). Satisfying as this may seem to Ralston in the moment, to any serious student of Spicer, it is a red flag of defeat—one marked in the novel by Ralston's subsequent realization that he has managed to lose the sheaf of Rue's poems that had been entrusted to him and which he never bothered to read. In any case, writing one of "his own" poems was the very last thing Spicer, the mid-

[222] Spicer, in fact, revisits passages from this section of the novel some seven years later in his last bitterly despairing serial effort, "Ten Poems for *DownBeat*."

century's most ardent advocate for impersonal, dictated poetry, wanted to do. Spicer dramatizes as much, a few months later, in the James Alexander letters, where he reports, in charming pedantic fashion, that he has ceremoniously dumped a "very good Jack Spicer" poem in the trash because a true poem should not bear such an obvious stylistic authorial imprint. If Ralston is partly based on Spicer, he is based on Spicer at his most self-loathing and depressed. The novel's closure, satisfying or not, derives less from Washington Jones' death than from the termination of Ralston's two half-hearted quests—the political quest for justice for Judge, and the "metaphysical" quest for true poetry—in failure. By the novel's end, Ralston seems to have learned nothing from his various adventures and retreats comfortably into the reactionary solace of being himself, his constitutive racial baggage and his relatively weak poetic imagination both intact. If the novel's primary message to Spicer's peers is that the Beats aren't doing it right—neither poetry nor politics—he seems tacitly to admit that he isn't, or hasn't been, either.

By following the desires and discomforts of its befuddled and conflicted protagonist, the novel on the whole treats the terms of Spicer's poetics with a kind of speculative interest in their value. In one particularly striking moment of fictional self-evaluation, the novel puts forward an imaginary poetry workshop comprised of elements of Spicer's poetic beliefs as a kind of thought experiment. The workshop, designed in the novel by Arthur Slingbot, entails—apropos its convener's name—a period in which participants vent their personal problems and aggressions with a mechanical intensity that drives them back into sheer noise, "nonsense" (38). Nonsense was a key value in Spicer's poetics, notably featured in "The Unvert Manifesto," and publicly exercised through his regular and enthusiastic participation in "Blabbermouth Night" at a local literary bar, The Place. The potential of the poetry workshop's purgative sessions is recognized in the novel by Henry, the epistolary recluse, who judges it to be inadvertently insightful on Slingbot's part, owing to his having "finally read a book on psychology." While Henry maintains that Slingbot's sessions are not therapy for the personality but for the poems, the suggestion that

they might also point toward something broader is implicit in Henry's very denial, particularly as it is coupled with the assertion that "all personalities are sick in our society."[223] Between the personal therapy the sessions are not and the poetic therapy they ostensibly are, the need appears for something like *political therapy* to which properly impersonal poetry might indirectly contribute.

Yet, by the novel's end, it will have become apparent to Spicer that racial baggage cannot simply be purged or dispensed with as easily as Washington Jones's character. As Vincent convincingly demonstrates—by reading an obscure group of poems entitled "An Exercise," written shortly after the novel's completion—Spicer's guilt at having so readily and violently disposed of Kaufman's surrogate continued to haunt him, invading and informing his poetics. In Vincent's shrewd reading, the sequence explores the generic characteristics of the detective story in the context of the ontologically murky terrain figured by the ghost, and sketches a psychic quagmire of uncertain yet ineradicable guilt, responsibility, and vengeance in which no one is either properly accused or fully exonerated. While the racial dimensions of the rivalry remain in the background of Vincent's essay, I would suggest that beyond the particularity of Spicer's dealings with Kaufman, the psychic condition in which he finds himself caught in their aftermath is that of whiteness itself.

The racial tenor of Spicer's guilt in dispensing with Kaufman's fictional surrogate may well have been intensified by another exercise in phantasmatically removing his rival, an "admonition" written for him in 1958, in the manner of his recent collection *Admonitions* (1957). Each poem in *Admonitions* is addressed to a friend or someone in Spicer's immediate social milieu (with the additions of himself, Billy the Kid, and a "Postscript for Charles Olson"), and each is intended as "a mirror, dedicated to the person that I particularly want to look into it," as he describes the collection to his publisher in a prefatory letter. As reflections, they are

[223] Spicer may have had in mind Lionel Trilling's assertion, in "Art and Neurosis," published in *The Partisan Review* in 1945, that "*We are all ill.*"

deliberately "distorted": "one does not make a mirror to resemble a person, one brings a person to the mirror." Intended to provoke uncomfortable self-reflection, like the poetry workshops imagined in Spicer's novel, the poems employ "the obscene (in word and concept)." Disclaiming the facile route to intensity that obscenity might otherwise appear to be, Spicer writes that it is "precisely because the obscenity is unnecessary that I use it, as I could have used any disturbance, as I could have used anything (remember the beat in jazz) which is regular and beside the point" (*MV,* 157). Spicer's late addition for Kaufman was never published—for good reason. It reads, in its entirety (Bancroft, Spicer Archive):

> No Negro
> Walking in the jungle of his lack of passion
> Can believe the beautiful banyan root of dream
> See
> His lynchers coming at him stark naked
> It is terrible to be human, I
> Told your voice. It is terrible to be anything
> they wanted you to be
> Make a noise like a sunset. Get lost.
> Your black color
> Won't frighten the worms you could not have invented.

If the middle of the poem (lines 6-8) gestures toward the sort of grudging ontological allieship he had long imagined—in his early short story, where he includes himself and his fellow queers among those who are not human, and in "The Unvert Manifesto" where African-Americans are singled out for the ambiguous privilege of "understand[ing] unversion too well"—this time the oblique lament, about Kaufman's popularity among the Beats, is surrounded by nasty racist references to lynching and corporeal decomposition. These obscenities—insofar as they describe the all too regular 'disturbances' with which black life is beaten, hounded, and haunted—cannot remain indifferently "beside the point." Instead, they make brutally clear the racial limits of "we dead men" as a more abstract utopian signifier. The problem is one Spicer perhaps hoped to ignore after the failed exorcism of the novel, but race was to return symptomatically in his next set of letters, as that which mediates the still desired transformation from person to poet.

*

Given that all of this is being worked through in 1958, it should be no surprise that Spicer's correspondence with James Alexander, commenced toward the end of that year and addressed to the person who more or less rescued Spicer from the tortured triangle with Russell and Kaufman, is rife with racialized metaphors. Indeed, a certain sublimation of racial meaning seems to have been at the core of Spicer's attraction to James Alexander, or, in any case, played no small part in sustaining it. James Alexander was a young Hoosier, who arrived in the Bay Area in the summer of 1958 with a romantic backstory (a youth allegedly spent hopping trains) as well as raw poetic talent and an enthusiasm for the scene. Spicer quickly took him under his wing, welcomed him into the Poetry is Magic workshops he was holding, and gave him a copy of *After Lorca*. The two hit it off, indulging the fantasy that James Alexander was a reincarnation of Rimbaud, and Spicer his Verlaine. During this period, James Alexander began writing a long poem that Spicer was to enthusiastically declare 'dictated.'

Alexander's early serial effort, "the jack rabbit poem," employs an extended racial metaphor, meted out across percussive jazz-inspired cadences. Its theme—the torture one can inflict upon oneself through neurotic obsession and paranoia—is one Spicer, routinely burdened by the ego he so struggled to "block," would have felt keenly at any time, but particularly in the aftermath of the protracted Russell Kaufman affair. In this context, the racial dynamics of the poem would only have added to its appeal. The poem opens with the titular rabbit's "black art" of high-speed train travel to:

> Timbuctu, the sand of
> and negro dark
> and negro dark
> attracted

From there it narrates an ill-advised journey into the "nightmare dark" and "thorn jungle" of a wounded ego and "its own neurotic tangles." Indeed, so central is race to the psychological struggle the poem espouses that Spicer seems more justified than self-absorbed in feeling it to have been intuitively about him in his predicament—as he put it, "Jim wrote *my thoughts* and

sent them to me."[224] (The fact that James Alexander claimed to have had no such thing in mind only served to reinforce the poem's dictated quality and the two men's special connection.) The last section of Alexander's poem recounts the release from this condition of being "stuck / like a leach / to yr self" in terms that are, again, racialized:

> like a knight
> in armor only
> all fouled up in
> cang of yr armor camail
> camail like a noose
> and white
> white charger charging
>
> out from under

The energetic refusal of the ego's death-bound degradation—a condition that, in spite of the lynching imagery, is apparently self-imposed—is marked as white. The passage is one of many that clearly made an impression on Spicer; it is echoed, absent its racial subtext, years later in *The Holy Grail* (1962).[225] Building on its logics, in the last section of Alexander's poem, the beleaguered rabbit is instructed to redirect its thinking outward, toward freedom, even more emphatically encoded with whiteness:

> ...yr way out
> be this, analytical
> but tend toward white day light white
> white sap of go
> white charger charging
> down streets
> all day.

[224] Spicer's relationship with James Alexander is detailed in Lew Ellingham and Kevin Killian's excellent biography, *Poet, Be Like God*.

[225] There, a section from "The Book of Percival" reads: "If someone doesn't fight me I'll have to wear this armor / All of my life. I look like the Tin Woodsman in the Oz Books. / Rusted beyond recognition. / I am, sir, a knight. Puzzled / By the way things go toward me and in back of me. And finally / into my mouth and head and red blood / O, damn these things that try to maim me / The armor / Fooled / Alive in its / Self." (MV336). The final lines are echoed toward the end of the book, where the more metaphysical focus does not entirely erase the subconscious racial residue: "The blackness remains…blackness alive with itself / At the sides of our fires. / At home with us" (357).

The poem's standard racialized trajectory, from a bad place of blackness to one of white salvation, likely contributed to its subconscious resonance for Spicer at the time. Simultaneously, and in opposition to the poem's coding of the tortured ego as black, the structure of the poem's journey 'down the rabbit hole' would have appealed to Spicer's valorization of dictated poetry as an Orphic venture fraught with psychic peril. Blackness thus serves to represent both obsessional neurosis and creative risk. Its slipperiness in this respect is unsurprising; blackness is nothing in the white imagination if not fungible. It will acquire additional functions in Spicer's letters.

When James Alexander moved back to his parents' home in Indiana towards the end of that year, the two poets began and kept up an intense correspondence—earnest and playful poetic inquiry, limned, at least on Spicer's end, with erotic desire. In Spicer's letters to James Alexander, blackness is periodically called upon to mediate what is to prove a last-gasp elaboration of his early utopian investment in poetry as the mode proper to an idealized, "metasexual," queer love.[226] The first letter commences by describing Fort Wayne, Indiana, where Spicer's paramour has recently returned, as a place where he claims no buses arrive "except those that carry direct mail or cargoes of Negroes en route on the Underground Railway" (*MV,* 205). This mythical Fort Wayne is now also a place where poetic correspondence will arrive, its delivery forged in apposition to the mundane operations of the postal service (while making use of them), and to the high stakes and historical weight of African-American freedom and slavery compressed into a single dissonant image. In ways he could scarcely have anticipated, the image also neatly encapsulates the way Spicer's own poetics is caught, in this period, between its epistolary ground and the historical preoccupations—the unrelieved "Pieces of the past arising out of the rubble" (*MV,* 405)—that will shortly come to consume it, and him.

[226] This is not to suggest that Spicer gives up on queer love; indeed his "Love Poems," in *Language* (1963-5), testify otherwise, however characteristically sarcastic they are in parts. It does, however, I would argue, cease to be as central to his understanding of the nature of the messages he is bound to receive.

Throughout, the letters use race as the background—another regular disturbance, as it were—against which to imagine queer freedom. Having ended his novel with a growing conviction that politics and poetry were mutually implicated, but with no real answer as to how better to address the psychic terrain in which they converged or its pointed racialization in his imaginary, Spicer's flirtation with James Alexander seemed to provide an escape, and a second chance to resurrect and further develop his ideas about poetic personhood and psychic management. Accordingly, the letters concern themselves with the sociality and disposition proper to poetry. Their tone is, on the whole, playful, as Spicer pursues a whimsical translation of the post office into the magical realm of poetic ontology:

> I don't know if there is room in the world for a postoffice but you come across 'em often enough, if you don't make the mistake of pretending that they're in a fixed place (like the moon) and if you don't let their continual changes bewilder you.
>
> It's rather like hunting mushrooms. They grow in certain places and you can never be sure where their (certain) places will be after the next rain but you get a sense of where they won't be and don't go there. Unless, of course, they tell you.
>
> The letters, poems, kisses (since the original game of postoffice is stuck in the mysterious regions of childhood) are directed by a fantastically inefficient system up to the place where poetry comes from and then back down again to the person whose poetry, or letters, or love was meant to receive it. It is a lot different from Air Mail.
>
> And it is almost impossible to list the random places from which they will deliver their letters. A box of shredded wheat, a drunken comment, a big piece of paper, a shadow meaningless except as a threat or a communication, a throat (MV 207).

Or, perhaps, a folded piece of paper in the mouth of a dying black fish—but no such symbolism intrudes here. In the queer utopian fungal underground the letters figure, the provenance and appearance of messages is mysterious, and yet each finds its intended recipient. This amorous network instantiates the kind of idealized poetic sociality that Spicer pushed for in the Bay area poetics milieu he occupied, forming tight circles of local poets who were to publish poems in tiny journals circulated only amongst themselves. Yet, as the *Letters to James Alexander* also develop the psychological conditions for membership in his imaginary society, they are punctuated by a very different, wider and more troubled, politics that flickers up in racialized terminology employed as metaphor.

After the somewhat flippant opening invocation of the Underground Railroad in the first letter, a subsequent letter finds Spicer writing, in a reprise of arguments from *After Lorca*:

> We proclaim a silent revolution. The poems above our heads, without tongues, are tired of talking to each other over the gabble of our beliefs, our literary personalities…[W]e, as their victims, as their mouthpiece, must learn to become complete victims, complete pieces of their mouth. We must learn that our lips are not our own. A revolution is a *savage* education (MV 209, my emphasis).

The suggestion that our lips are not our own is, in itself, a valuable political insight as well as a poetic claim—one that anticipates Spicer's growing attention to our responsibility to history's unheard dead, a revolutionary reorientation that is necessary if America is to have a viable future. Here, that later recognition is occluded if not repressed, surfacing in a single word's evocation of the more brutal economic sense in which those deemed "savage" were made to learn that their bodies were not their own. The usage of the word may be so commonplace as to largely escape notice—indeed such racialized terminology is part of the groundwater of the American vernacular—but it is not therefore meaningless. In Spicer's case, the word harbors behind it a more overtly racialized idea—an earlier aspiration, conveyed in the third of his "Imaginary Elegies," written in the late 1940's, to model his poetics on the image of a "black and blinding cannibal with sunny teeth / That only eats itself" (*MV*, 29).[227] As a figure for an impersonal poetry that relies on the rigorous removal of personal psychic attachments, this negating auto-consumption expressed through, and perhaps also of, racial stereotype makes for latently political and politically ambiguous vision of the poetic education Spicer has in mind. Compounding the buried metaphor of this half-thought "savage" re-education of the white imaginary, the next letter to James Alexander opens with Spicer "lying here on the grass of the University of California, a slave state but one which today seems particularly beneficent" (*MV*, 210). The phrase draws another troubling if unsurprising analogy—in this case, "slave state" likely referring to the political oppression Spicer did suffer at the hands of the University during

[227] In his introduction to *Reading Race: An Area of ACT,* Aldon Lynn Nielsen draws attention to these lines from Spicer's elegy, as well as to the critical silence on the subject (2000: 5).

the Cold War climate, when he refused to sign UC Berkeley's new "loyalty oath" (which we, in the UC system, still sign today) and was denied a research position as a result.

These easy metaphorizations of the history of anti-black racism ultimately do not prove so easy to contain, as Spicer comes to be more genuinely haunted by the specters of his own racial imaginary. In this regard, the following letter—which features a more substantive cultural historical referent, as Spicer, again, seeks to elaborate the distinction between person and poet—is particularly revealing. Writing to James Alexander of the latter's wristwatch, which Spicer has received and now wears with a good deal of affection—"I talk to it (mostly about you and what it was like to be worn on your wrist)"—he uses the occasion of the watch to extend the political distinction drawn in *After Lorca* between "counters" and "objects" to "pawnshops and postoffices" as the "two kinds of places in the world." This new binary serves to set up a critique of his own recent poetry:

> I don't like my poetry either. I read a new poem last Wednesday and nobody said much of anything and I asked why and Duncan said it was because it was a very good Jack Spicer poem and I threw it in the garbage sack not tearing it because it was a very good Jack Spicer poem. The watch was ticking on my wrist all the time and was not a Jack Spicer wristwatch and would never be a Jack Spicer wristwatch and that should be the way with the poems.
>
> It's rather like a medium (a real medium) who gets a spirit, call her little Eva, to control her. Pretty soon, after a few sessions, she'll get to know what little Eva is going to say and start saying it for her. Then it's no longer a seance but fakery and time to change spooks.
>
> That's what your watch tells me. TIME TO CHANGE SPOOKS!
>
> I don't know what your table tells you, but if you came back to California we might arrange a favorable exchange of spooks (MV 211).

Whether this exchange renders California a post office or a pawnshop is for the reader to decide. More significantly, 'spook' is not merely a synonym for spirit or ghost; it was also in use as a derogatory term for African-Americans—as in the early mid-century white supremacist gang, the Spook Hunters, based in Los Angeles, where Spicer grew up. Reclaimed, the term also features in LeRoi Jones' description of "The Revolutionary Theatre" as summoning, to its own end, the force of "twenty million spooks storming America with furious cries and unstoppable weapons"

(1964, in *Home,* 214). The term's use renders Spicer's invocation of mediumship, hugely popular in the nineteenth century as part of a wider Spiritualist wave, decidedly racial.

Nineteenth century Spiritualists embodied the full range of positions on slavery, summoning spirits to deliver abolitionist messages or to reinforce convenient stereotypes of the 'grateful slave', according to their own politics.[228] Spicer is, of course, specifically interested in the idea of a genuine encounter in which no such mimicry would occur, rendering his own racial meaning more ambiguous, even ostensibly irrelevant. Along these lines, it bears noting that the figure of "little Eva" is drawn from the first of Spicer's "Imaginary Elegies," written some ten years prior (in the late 1940's), where he laments:

> It is as if we conjure the dead and they speak only
> Through our own damned trumpets, through our damned medium:
> 'I am little Eva, a Negro princess from sunny heaven.'
> The voice sounds blond and tall (MV 27).

Spicer's desire for *historical* alterity, expressed both here and in the letter, partakes of a fantasy instrumentalization of mysterious blackness, a fantasy, almost, of a more genuine blackface in which the enslaved and degraded, too, among America's dead, might be truly heard through the purified channel of the poet, himself effectively rendered a 'dead man' by psychic divestment from the present world. As the contradiction between the genuine desire and the racialized form of its imagining begins to crack open, especially in the work that comes after the sequence of letters to Alexander, a more deeply unsettling sense of historical haunting, tonally distinct from Spicer's more abstract youthful fascination with ghosts, overtakes the meaning of the 'Outside' as the unknown source of poetry.[229]

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[228] See Cox, Robert S. *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2003.

[229] Spicer's 'Outside', which remains deliberately unspecified, is a shifting and multivalent signifier. Norman Finkelstein (2011) has perhaps most thoroughly elucidated the spiritual dimensions and religious influences it carries. In *The San Francisco Renaissance* (1989), Michael Davidson points out that in Cold War America, there was no shortage of social "models of the 'outside' (Communists, blacks, eggheads, ethnics, and queers)," and suggests that Spicer reclaims the exclusionary term as a site of community and dialogue among various oppressed groups (155).

"At the black throat of the tunnel": Spicer's historical turning

Along with his own racial reckoning, the shift in Spicer's poetics from queer utopia to unrelieved historical haunting that the Alexander letters simultaneously intimate and seek to contain has to do with Spicer's absorption of Charles Olson's influence—not formally, but rather with respect to the older poet's preoccupation with history. In the 1958 serial poem, "Billy the Kid," written during the height of Spicer's fraught relationship with Russell and just before his *Letters to James Alexander*, Spicer undertakes a intertextual argument with Olson's archival method, and with his own more youthful investment in the eroticized "real objects" that his correspondence with Lorca had sought to body forth in new form. In particular, the poem responds to Olson's 1954 book review essay, "Billy the Kid," to which Spicer continued to return; its traces are to be found across his oeuvre, as late as *Language* (1963-5), where Olson's "no string tie" is facetiously recalled in Spicer's "let's tie the strings on this bit of reality." Where Olson's essay lays out the importance of archival detail to genuine historical understanding, Spicer's "Billy the Kid" declares, with melancholic reluctance, the impossibility and limited value of such concrete access:

> Collage a binding together
> Of the real
> Which flat colors
> Tell us what heroes
> really come by.
> No, it is not a collage. Hell flowers
> Fall from the hands of heroes
> fall from all of our hands
> flat
> As if we were not ever able quite to include them.
> His gun
> does not shoot real bullets
> his death
> Being done is unimportant.

Nothing, Spicer seems to insist against Olson's bold aims and declarations, will be relieved. Likewise, where Olson's essay uses the image of a river to share his conviction that sufficiently

dense condensations of historical material can, while vertiginous, be genuinely grounding, Spicer's sense of semantic vertigo stops short of landing. He is left suspended in the hell of ontological abstraction (MV 186):

> 'Alias,' I said to him. 'Alias,
> Somebody there makes us want to drink the river
> Somebody wants to thirst us.' 'Kid,' he said. 'No river
> Wants to trap men. There ain't no malice in it. Try
> To understand.'
> We stood there by that little river and Alias took off his shirt
> and I took off my shirt
> I was never real. Alias was never real.
> Or that big cotton tree or the ground.
> Or the little river.

Moving from paranoid projection (the kind of limited interpretive feeling that Baraka might categorize as "the US no shit blues") to de-realization, the entire scene is whisked away in a stubborn, or panicked, refusal of Alias's deescalating counsel and the erotics it makes space for, instead highlighting the intractable machinations of the psyche and its ontological power.[230] There is, it seems, for Spicer's Kid, nowhere to go but further into abstraction.

Yet abstraction here exacerbates rather than detaching him from feeling. The next section begins, "What I mean is / I / Will tell you about the pain / It was a long pain / About as wide as a curtain / But long / As the great outdoors." The section ends with a near repetition that simultaneously gives the pain a more specific attribution and hypostasizes it, by capitalization, into an entity in its own right: "What I mean is I / Will tell you about his / Pain" (MV 187). Refusing to remain bound to proper pronouns, pain, like Olson's "misery," grows and endures in the time-space of the West and the 'manifest destiny' with which it is associated. Spicer becomes this unrelieved feeling's ambivalent recipient and carrier, unsure of its relational status to him and yet compelled by it nonetheless. It is at this point that the poem takes its fatal turn toward haunting: "Nothing can kill / Anybody." Steeped in the world of the undead and

[230] One might ask who the Kid suspected of making him want to drink the river, who would want to thirst him, and what that would mean. Spicer might be making a sly reference here to Olson himself, to his suggestion that the river—the river that in spite of its indifference runs thick with the blood of history—be drawn up through the body from the interiors of the American psyche where the mass of it still resides.

unrelieved, the poem offers, under a sense of threat, the Kid's restless spirit a bodily relation: "Billy wants you to dance / Billy / Will shoot the heels off your shoes if you don't dance / Billy / Being dead also wants / Fun." (MV, 189). For Spicer, what must be offered to the unrelieved is not merely the poem as a form of attention to historical detail or even the poet's body and breath assumed capable of absorbing and withstanding what it takes in, but the poet's bodily psyche, feverishly tortured in the process.

The stunning penultimate section of Spicer's "Billy the Kid" finds the poet torn between the question of constitutive history that Olson's essay and method pose, and his own attachment to an unknowability that is increasingly a source of anxiety and discomfort rather than erotic mystery. As if in response to the fatality of asking a question that Olson sees in the Kid's death and that 'we' have not yet learned to survive, Spicer writes:

> So the heart breaks
> Into small shadows
> Almost so random
> They are meaningless
> Like a diamond
> Has at the center of it a diamond
> Or a rock
> Rock.
> Being afraid
> Love asks its bare question–
> I can no more remember
> What brought me here
> Than bone answers bone in the arm
> Or shadow sees shadow–

There is little here of the radical unknown so associated with Spicer's poetics. In its place, an unspecifiable because unremembered determinism bears down on the living, conveyed through the coerced dance with the outlawed dead we have just left (and failed to leave) behind. If this is melancholy, it is the shadow of unrelieved history that has fallen on the ego, crushing it into smaller particles of its same substance: objectism at its mineral extreme. The answer given to "Love's bare question" (so bare, in fact, that it is not actually asked, but only implied) not only marks the limits of memory, but does so by insisting on a lack of differentiation from the past.

"What brought me here" is a past that cannot be remembered—not because it is so distant, but rather because it is so close as to be indistinguishable from the present. It is as if aborted differentiation, or stuttering repetition aware of itself as such, were the only progress to be made.[231] The possibilities for movement and choice, those operators of the future, are grimly restricted:

> Deathward we ride in the boat
> Like someone canoeing
> In a small lake
> Where at either end
> There are nothing but pine-branches—
> Deathward we ride in the boat
> Broken-hearted or broken-bodied
> The choice is real. The diamond. I
> Ask it.

If Spicer has "learned how to ask a question and live" it is not without the history that he cannot remember having reduced his life to something between merely *living on*, in Adorno's sense, and slow-motion suicide (in Spicer's case, by alcohol). "Broken-hearted or broken-bodied" offer two modes of inhabiting the irrevocable deathward movement of a present that cannot separate from its past. The poem's identification of the human condition with being trapped in a small lake with no outlet (not even the river Styx) and with the diamond unable to break from its substance recall Emmanuel Levinas's capsision of being as "nausea—which amounts to an impossibility of being what one is—we are at the same time riveted to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers" (66). The final section's desperate pleading, and its production of an erotic substance[232]—"Billy The Kid / I love you / Billy The Kid / I back anything you say…There is honey in the groin / Billy" (*MV*, 191)— do little to redeem or even mitigate the totalizing sense of despair that precedes them. Instead they double down on the previous section's ill-fated

[231] Structures of aborted or incomplete differentiation are threaded throughout Spicer's poetry, often in form of broken prefixes— as in "the in / ability to love" in "Ghost song" from A Book of Music.
[232] See also Spicer's "A Poem to the Reader of the Poem," in which he "wrestle[s] with…God or Charles Olson," and with "the reader of this poem," finally resolving to "tell God / It was a wet dream" (MV 65-8).

evocation of a marriage proposal. Spicer's attempt, through the figure of Billy the Kid, to desire—and to relieve—history, feels perilously close to learning his death.

The shadow suggestion that the unknown might not, in fact, be entirely unknowable, appears in the fifth of Spicer's "Imaginary Elegies," written in 1959 and addressed, mid-way, to James Alexander. It is a bleak poem, an elegy composed six years before Spicer's death, at age 40, of cirrhosis and is perhaps less imaginary than prognostic (*MV,* 230-1):

> And offering up your life to summon anything is a pretty silly thing.
> I can't see
> Where their messages get me. Another five years
> Their wings
> Glittering in its black ab / sense.
>
> For the birds. Whose live-r is torn out. Whose live-r is torn out.
> Pro-me-thee-us. The old turning.
> ...
> And so I say to you, Jim, do not become too curious about
> your poetry
> Let it speed into the tunnel by itself
> Do not follow it, do not try to ride it
> Let it go into the tunnel and out the other side and back
> to you while you do important things like loving and
> learning patience
> Five years. The train with its utterly alien cargo moving on
> the black track.
>
> Prometheus was a guy who had his liver eaten out by birds.
> A bum who rode a black train. Who was curious.
> Play it cool with Williams or paranoid with Pound but never ride
> it past the tunnel or look for a conductor to ask questions
> Hide, and do not ask the questions,
> At the black throat of the tunnel.

Rather than heeding his own advice, after issuing this dramatic warning to the younger Jim, Spicer doubles down on his position as martyr to poetry, and on his underlying conviction that his own life is a lost cause with respect to more quotidian pleasures like love. The absence of Olson in this last stanza is notable, as it is largely his influence that lies behind this fatal "wrong turning," his contention that "we have not yet learned to ask a question and live" that has, in part, driven Spicer to undertake the perilous inquiry. The "questions," for Olson, are at once psychic and historical, as they increasingly will be for Spicer as well. Their pursuit threatens to

reveal (if not exactly 'answers') uncomfortable implications. As the "black track" sublimates the Underground Railway (with its human cargo) of the first letter to Jim, the danger of curiosity the elegy warns against belies its insistence that the cargo remains "utterly alien."

If Spicer's Prometheus, Spicer as Prometheus, is 'unbound'—his name parsed into a series of pronouns, as if to highlight the fragility of political community or the rhetoric that would forge it—it is in the double sense of his corporeal decomposition on the one hand, and the breakdown of his revolutionary faith on the other—both of which occur in the face of blackness. The "savage education" of Spicer's silent revolution at the level of the self has morphed into a form of psychic torture. This is not the obsessional neurosis of the ego treated in James Alexander's "jack rabbit poem," but an ontological—or more properly, and in Derrida's sense, "hauntological"—crisis, as Spicer comes too close to receiving and channeling messages that threaten to radically unsettle the constitutive ground of his psyche.[233] When he writes to Stan Persky that the James Alexander letters had become a trap for him, much more was at stake than poetic genre or personal romantic embarrassment. The psychological transformation he had hoped to effect, and which was to be the basis of a better mode of social and political relations, had failed. And it had failed at least partly because of race—which is what remains, undigested and liable to desublimation, when the effort to resurrect his queer utopian space falls short. If this particular causal factor wasn't immediately evident to Spicer, it seems to have nagged at the back of his mind, to emerge more explicitly in a serial work that forms the second part of his 1960 *Heads of the Town, Up to the Aether*: "A Fake Novel About the Life of Arthur Rimbaud."

[233] See *Spectres of Marx* (2012).

The Dead Letter Officer

Like much of Spicer's work of this period, "A Fake Novel About the Life of Arthur Rimbaud" was still deeply engaged with James Alexander, who the two had fancied as Rimbaud's contemporary reincarnation. In it, Spicer conjures the young poet as both boy genius and erotic ideal. He also, however, pays a good deal of attention to Rimbaud's later implication in the slave trade. Existing scholarship, while illuminating in other respects, has tended to ignore this substantial aspect of the work's content (Davidson 1977; Katz 2013). Norman Finkelstein's specifically historical engagement with *Heads of the Town Up to the Aether,* in "Jack Spicer's Ghosts and the Gnosis of History" (1981), skips over "A Fake Novel" almost entirely, concurring with Spicer's designation of the prose as "unattractive" (in Finkelstein's usage, a possible euphemism for discomfort with, and uncertainty regarding how to read, the work's racial content). Nonetheless, it remains the case that, instead of the more expectable focus on Rimbaud's relationship to Verlaine, the poem is largely preoccupied with slavery's psychic consequences and the inextricability of that historical inheritance from the inheritance of Rimbaud's poetic gift. As such, it explicitly treats the problem of internalized racism that perforates the surface of Spicer's earlier poetry and poetics in more ambiguous and sometimes troubling forms. In keeping with Spicer's suspicion that his epistolary poetics had become a trap, the double pressure of direct mail and "cargoes of Negros on the Underground Railway" that constituted the framing referents for Spicer's latest epistolary endeavor had converged to produce the more anxious construct of the dead letter. Letters, then, are not abandoned, but live on in Spicer's poetics as a hauntological principle after their death as useful genre. It is through these "dead letters" that Spicer reinvents, or belatedly discovers, his own poetics as more deeply preoccupied with historical damage than with the queer utopia he once imagined as a political escape.

*

The "Fake Novel" begins in "The Dead Letter Office" with a refusal to seal off the past: "'You can't close the door. It is in the future," French history said as it was born in Charlieville. It was before the Civil War and I don't think that even James Buchanan was president" (*MV,* 281). Immediately, the American context and consequences of the transatlantic slave trade are made present.[234] Throughout, Spicer struggles with Rimbaud's split life and legacy as poet and as merchant-venturer reliant on networks of the eastern slave trade, a complicity that perhaps held up a usefully distorted mirror to Spicer's own American condition.[235] It is "the humanness of Rimbaud" with which the fake novel is largely preoccupied. As Spicer puts it midway through the novel: "Rimbaud offered himself up to Africa in all continents. Built a sea wall. But he was sixteen and a love object (a love object) when we eventually heard of him. / … / When Rimbaud was sixteen he never dreamed of Africa" (MV 291). Yet, in spite of registering the desire to keep these aspects of Rimbaud's lives apart, to preserve the relative innocence of his youthful poetry, Spicer cannot, and does not, let the matter rest so easy: "Sentiment is not to the point. These dead poets knew what was coming to them" (293). In an earlier passage, the cognitive dissonance that will later lead Chinua Achebe to insist, with respect to Rimbaud, that "[p]oetry and slave trading cannot be bedfellows,"[236] is figured by Spicer as a race between two competing

[234] Spicer'American cultural context is revisited in a chapter titled "An Embarrassing Folksong":

> Folksinging says that the youth of a hero is nasty, short, and brittle, says that the streets of Laredo will forever contain one coffin, that Sweet Williams' grave will forever contain one brier, while we ghosts and shrewd people know that the graves and the streets are choked with them. / Ghosts are not shrewd people. History begins with shrewd people and ends with ghosts. / That is why we/I are writing this novel. If he had read it when he was sixteen, he could have changed human history (MV 290).

Rimbaud is imagined here as the cowboy who knows he's done wrong and who—contrary to the singular referent of the song's narrative, although consonant with the generality of its popular form and transmission—has plenty of company: other such cowboys; as well as persons who, like the woman in the ballad of "Barbara Allen" who snubs and then dies for Sweet William, come around to love too late. The briers that the graves and streets are choked with recall not only that ballad, but Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* stories, and perhaps, "The Briar Patch" of Robert Penn Warren, an essay in which he, as a "Fugitive" before his New Critical fame, argues for segregation. Changing human history requires engaging all the baggage it is choked with.

[235] A summary of Rimbaud's relationship to the East African slave trade is given in Susan Harrow's "'Je suis de race inférieure de toute éternité': Towards a Postcolonial Reading of Rimbaud." *The Modern Language Review* 11.4 (October 2016): 956-74.

[236] Interviewed in *The Paris Review* 139, http://franciscovazbrasil.blogspot.com/2013/02/chinua-achebe-interviewed-by-jerome.html.

horses, two modalities of Rimbaud's soul: "The horses Rimbaud is shooting are the white and the black horse mentioned in Plato's Phaedrus…The horse, Phaedrus, will win the race, the black one, the white one" (284-5).[237] The effort to separate the two impulses and determine which is dominant fails; the outcome of the race remains unsettled, and unsettling.

The previous section, "Chapter VI The Watch Rats," contains another refusal to sustain a clean opposition, instead offering a perverse dialectic that is presented as a kind of thesis for the novel, couched, at the same time, in ironic terms:

> The novelist should explain what he was going about. "Surrealism is a coat of many colors," Rimbaud is supposed to have remarked long after everything was over. To love is not to continue with the Zanzibar slave trade. To continue with the Zanzibar slave trade is not to love. It is similar (284).

The uncomfortable resemblance proposed here is a function of the inseparable cohabitation of both impulses in the single life and psyche of Rimbaud as a stand-in for so many others, indeed for an entire world order built on the double consciousness of whiteness. This discomfiting proposition is followed by a description of the colonial transport to which it gives rise:

> The watch rats (they were really called wharf rats but Rimbaud called them wharf rats) ran along the Meuse River. They explained. The river ran to an ocean that ran to a number of oceans. / 'We get into the cargo,' said the wharf rats, 'and then we get out to sea. We make journeys and it is history. Our ages are 6, 17, 24, and 75.' / What they meant was that all this time Rimbaud was being born a little wharf rat was crawling from his skull, into his skull (284).

Rather than being limited to his later years, the "wharf rat" as colonial interloper is present from birth, at home in the structure of Rimbaud's psyche—and in Spicer's own Rimbaud-haunted skull—which is at once its origin and primary destination. The larger image is both an acknowledgment of the interpenetration of global economy and poetic imagination, and a nod to

[237] This chapter, entitled "So Far We Have Stressed the Humanness of Rimbaud," also contains, repeated twice, the line "Imagine not being attacked by Indians." In addition to bringing Plato's metaphysical inquiry into an American historical, and Hollywood Western, context, the ineradicability of this foundational image for the national psyche is used, a few lines later, to posit, through parallel structuring, the ineradicability of the dead: "Imagine also that the dead are not alive and his awkward face" (MV 284-5).

the networks of transmission that have made Rimbaud's poetry available to Spicer. The latter includes surrealism.

Behind the fake novel's argument lies an ironic allusion to and reworking of Andre Breton's 1935 "Speech to the Congress of Writers" in Paris, in which he offered an inter-war defense for a global understanding of culture. Breton's speech ends with a succinct statement of a psycho-political dialectic in which Spicer, too, was invested: "'Transform the world,' Marx said; 'change life,' Rimbaud said. These two watchwords are one for us" (1969: 241). Breton's watchwords would likely have been linked for Spicer to James Alexander's wristwatch, his personal symbol and reminder of alterity. That the watchwords are transformed to wharf rats—stowaways and beneficiaries of a more concretely violent production of otherness—is the first of many ironic deflations, as Spicer grapples with the liabilities and occlusions of his poetic and political inheritance. Earlier in his speech, Breton quotes a passage he had written a few years prior, one that obviously resonated deeply with Spicer, supplying the key term for his own historical reckoning and epistolary reinvention—the dead letter:

> The poet of the future…will go beyond the depressing idea of the irreparable divorce between action and dream…He will bring together, at whatever cost, the two terms of the human relationship which, if destroyed, would instantly cause the precious conquests to become a dead letter: the objective awareness of realities and their internal development, insofar as it is magic (until we are otherwise notified), by virtue of individual feeling on the one hand and universal feeling on the other (1969: 235-6).

The premise of Spicer's fake novel is that surrealism's "precious conquests" have indeed become a "dead letter," and must be reengaged as such. Among the ironies channeled in the work is that the union of political action and poetic dream in the figure of Rimbaud has given the idea of "precious conquests" a more violently literal, material significance. As the conceit of postal transport broadens to include the vast sociopolitical transformations wrought across time and space by shipping, poetry's necro-sociality comes to map a necro-geography and a necro-historiography that are more difficult to romanticize. It is as if his chosen epistolary metaphor and method will not allow him either his utopia or the selectivity on which it depends.

Where does one go from here? The poet, endeavoring to navigate another outcome, must become a Dead Letter Officer. Doing so entails responsibility to the specifically historical dimension of social reality and the psyche, the admission of our fundamentally haunted condition: "The dead are not alive. That is what this unattractive prose wants to stamp out. Once you see an end to it, you believe that the dead are alive" (284). Punning on the double meaning of stamp, Spicer's "unattractive prose" ultimately aims to crush not ghosts or the uncomfortable truths they conjure but the ontology that would draw such hard protective lines. Stamping out facile assurances of the past's closure means putting dead letters back into circulation, like the wharf rats who have been circulating with the global economy, and globalizing culture, since the days of mercantilism. Spicer's psychological focus, his attention to the way dead letters are constitutive of what Olson had called "man's interiors," distinguishes the work of Spicer's poet from that of Walter Benjamin's historical materialist, with which it otherwise overlaps. The poet as Dead Letter Officer traffics in political history's unrelieved ghosts with the hope of turning, at least and primarily *within himself*, the psychic tide of the imagination.

In order to work through what this might mean, Spicer returns to the river Meuse, at once passageway to routes of colonial transport and source of poetic inspiration—both via the pun and by running, as the actual river does, by Rimbaud's childhood home. A chapter entitled "The Muses Count," recalls wistfully, ironically, "when you didn't get angry at other people's putting to the question." Punning on the 'water cure,' Spicer uses the river as a figure for "our life" and for historical continuity throughout the poem, locating us mid-stream in slavery's unfolding as psycho-political structure. This belated recognition of complicity is counterposed to "the ghost…Remembering every cup of blood they have lived" (290). The grim image with which the chapter opens—of the Muses as "Determined funsters who have eaten half their skull away"—points beyond complicity to self-destruction, literalizing the idea of being eaten alive by guilt and attributing to it a willfulness with which it is not usually associated. Remade by the gnawing wharf rats, Rimbaud seems to merge with the racist imaginary to which Africa gives

rise in colonial fantasy, appearing in the next chapter's title as "a Gorilla with Seven Teeth"—a figure, now, for all of our lives lived in blackface. The two images remake the "black and blinding cannibal with sunny teeth / That only eats itself" of Spicer's earlier imaginary elegy; now, however, the racial meaning is placed in its historical context, no longer abstracted and appropriated to unrelated ends. A poetics that channels spooks eventually has to face them, and, with them, the possibility that the 'Outside' may, in fact, be one's own historical unconscious.[238] This is the revelation that occurs in the space of the Dead Letter Office, and it marks a shift from complicity to a more totalizing and impersonal historical implication: "'Who is fighting? What is this war that seems to go on through history?' / 'On the battlefields,' and it was a little ghost that said this that had edged Rimbaud away for a minute. 'Why is the river?' / 'I is the river', the ghost said." (*MV,* 295). The ghost's response effects a shift from descriptive historiography to intimate implication. Causality is beside the point.

At the end of the "Fake Novel" Spicer bequeaths this condition to his readers: "I mean that the reader of this novel is a ghost. Involved. Involved in the lives of Rimbaud" (298). Spicer had discovered that condition of involvement through his own—his investment in, even identification with, Rimbaud—making his "Fake Novel" effectively a work of intimate historiography, and one shorn of the lyricized redemption of its writer that his poetics had previously offered. He, like his reader, is no longer part-angel but ghost—uncanny host to historical damage that is neither exhausted nor yet relieved. The dead letters remain "exactly as if someone received [them]" and the poet who processes them must risk losing his sense of being, or at the least the comfortable fiction of historical distance on which certain genres of being are premised. This recognition effectively breaks Spicer's idealization of poetry and points the way toward a different use of poetry writing, a form of listening to the dead that is less

[238] In the first of his late Vancouver lectures, Spicer points to "a welling up of the subconscious or of the racial memory" as possible specifications of what he prefers to call the 'Outside', while maintaining that "an id down in the cortex which you can't reach anyway…is just as far outside as Mars." (1998: 5)

mystical abstraction than psycho-historical work. An 'I' who reads his insides as unrelieved history, Spicer approaches what Derrida might have meant at the end of *Spectres of Marx* by learning to speak 'with' the *Es Spukt*: "He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her…how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself" (2012: 221).

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In "A Textbook of Poetry"—the final section of *Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* that follows the "Fake Novel"—Spicer returns once more to the figure of the dead letter to inflect with historical damage his own earlier investment in an idealized poetics and, by extension, the sense of political possibility it generally underwrites. There, a "blue image of the unknown"—a figure for poetic indeterminacy—becomes "a blue surcharge for Tchad":

> an imaginary African kingdom which will never gain independence because it does not exist and is not merely an act of the imagination and did issue postage stamps…And each stamp we put on the letters they send us must be cancelled, heartlessly. As if its delivery, the beautiful image of it, were a metaphor" (*MV,* 310).

As if. Flipping the structure and function of aesthetic imagination on its head, Spicer delivers a perfect indictment of its cordoning off from politics. Instead of the generative suspension of disbelief (treating the possible as real), we are accused of disavowal—acting as if the real global stakes of racial politics were merely figurative, inconsequential. As "a blue surcharge" for an African sovereignty lost to the undead realm between the precolonial past and a neocolonial present, "the unknown"—the precious source of Spicer's dictated poetry—is remade as a site of indebtedness to historical overdetermination.

This remarkable reversal might have been the start of a socially and interracially (re)committed political poetics but the loss of the aesthetic idealization in which Spicer had vested his own psychic survival as a gay man, combined with his implication in the unrelieved persistence of racial slavery's global reign, proved too much for him to overcome. Instead, Spicer moves toward a registration of psychic reparations that is less the political practice it might have

become than it is a sense of threat—even, of an inevitable form of blackmail by history itself, or by poetry remade by and understood as intimate historiography. Returning to the end of "A Fake Novel," we find that, as the poetic function fallen into history, "The Dead Letter Officer" exacts a heavy toll:

> Inside every Rimbaud was a ready-made dead-letter officer…Blood would not appease his ghost which stays in us even after we are in the house of the dead. He is in every corpse, in every human life. / He writes poems, pitches baseballs, fails us whenever we have a nerve to need him. Button-moulder too, he grows in us like the river of years (295-6).

The reference to Ibsen's fairytale verse play, *Peer Gynt*, captured in the appellation "Button-moulder," suggests that the Dead Letter Officer stands ready to melt down, into salvageable raw material, any of our corrupted souls. Here, too, we might recall, as Spicer surely did, that Melville's Bartleby—having once worked as a clerk in the Dead Letter Office in Washington, DC—loses his desire or capacity to contribute anything to the present, ultimately starving himself to death: a form of choosing to have nowhere to turn that is considerably bleaker than the anarchist politics more than one philosopher has sought to rescue from Melville's story. Not heroic refusal but wasted life, Spicer (who was well on his way to drinking himself to death) suggests, is the fate prepared for us by the mass of unrelieved historical misery that we have largely neglected.

From this point forward, his poetry is explicitly concerned with American and global politics, and its insights and depth of feeling are often devastating, but they are combined with a growing despair and concomitant withdrawal. His poetics retreats from its earlier attention to social address and use of the epistle as genre to the dead letter—as emblem of his, and his nation's, fate. His unversion of lyricized poetry proves less a loosening of its grip than its dark mirror, or ghost—animating genres explicitly marked as obsolete and futile, language broken into constituent parts, and a dense web of self-reference.

The dead letter's afterlives and the poet's fate

It is a short path from the Dead Letter Officer to Spicer's chilling contention, in *The Holy Grail* (1962), that "poetry…use[s] us as a cup the dead drink from" (332). The long poem extends the psychological consequences of this metaphor to a wider civilizational fate. In the final of its seven major sections, "The Book of the Death of Arthur," the moribund monarch laments his belated comprehension of a warning, and his fatal receipt of ostensibly misdirected messages—a layering of dead letters: "The wrong notes, the wrong notes, Merlin told me, were going to kill me. / Dead on arrival" (357). As history's missives become "uncomfortable music," the wreckage of the great quest generates "a monstrous anti-grail," a "blackness alive with itself" that hollows out the entire Western ontological order: "a simple hole running from one thing to another. No / kingdom will be saved. / No rest- / Titution" (357). We are not far here from Giorgio Agamben's "messianic subject" who "contemplates salvation only to the extent that he loses himself in what cannot be saved" (*The Time That Remains*, 42).[239] Spicer's attention, however, reluctant and ultimately despairing as it is, to historical context and to his own racialization, avoids the sense of universality that inheres in Agamben's philosophic articulation. Rather than offering another abstract ideal, Spicer's late poetics fleshes out what inhabiting such a position and its attendant use of the self might feel like, and for whom.

As he interrogates his own and poetry's use, Spicer becomes a differently critical reader of himself, with his established citational tendency turning increasingly reflexive, as if to decompose and regenerate, in a new key, his own corpus. Some of the more striking instances occur in his last collection, *Book of Magazine Verse* (1965). Each serial poem is itself framed as a dead letter, addressed to a publication Spicer expected would reject it. In "Six Poems for *Poetry* Chicago," the erotically-charged lemon of *After Lorca* returns, only to instead provoke an uncomfortable reflection on "where my love, somehow, stops." Incorporating folk music, citrus

[239] As Daniel Katz notes, in his late books Spicer becomes at once reader and site of the human crisis, as it is "woven into…his internal speaking and listening…his desiring flesh" (2013: 142).

farming, and the Vietnam war, the poem's attention to skin also suggests a racial subtext: "The rind (also called the skin) of the lemon is difficult to understand…It's the shape of the lemon, I guess that causes trouble. It's / ovalness, it's rind." The sequence ends with "the ghost of myself and the ghost of yourself dancing / without music. / With / Out / Skin. / A good dream. The / Moment's rest " (*MV,* 407-8).[240] In "Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival," previous invocations of the figure of the fountain—it appears in a children's chorus from one of the Lorca translations, "*A little river / And a colored fountain,"* and in a recurring reference to Ezra Pound's "Beauty is so rare a thing / So few drink from my fountain" in Spicer's 1958 "Fifteen False Propositions Against God"[241]—merge to assume a more politically pointed meaning. In a thrice-repeated couplet that can't but evoke Jim Crow and the Freedom Riders of the Civil Rights struggle, Spicer now writes: "You are going south looking for a drinking fountain / I am going north looking for the source of the chill in my bones" (418). The black and white horses of Plato's *Phaedrus* reappear, too, in "Three Poems for *TISH,*" among those proverbial stubborn horses who, when led to water, don't drink: "Refusing / Bare sustenance" (410). Any careful Spicer reader could produce numerous other examples, not necessarily specific to blackness as I have focused on here, but revealing a similar downshift from the more abstract and erotic registers of poetry as magic, to contexts heavier with historical and political baggage.

This referential cannibalism is accompanied by the poet's degradation into person, a final collapse of the impersonality and potential for transcendence in which he had so invested. It all comes to a head in Spicer's final serial poem, "Ten Poems for *DOWNBEAT*," a despairing address on America routed through, and delivered to, the preeminent Chicago-based (and white-owned) jazz periodical. The poem's preoccupation with messages and appellations—

[240] The music that abates here is the 1957 folk song by Will Holt with which the series opens: "Limon tree very pretty / And the lemon flower is sweet / But the fruit of the poor lemon / Is impossible to eat" (406). Holt was famous for his recording of the African-American spiritual "Sinner Man." The poem also makes reference to the Vietnam war drawing a connection between "smudge-pots" used to treat citrus crops and those employed in defense by the North Vietnamese.

[241] The lines are from Pound's "Villanelle: The Psychological Hour." In Spicer's poem, the third citation is interrupted: "Beauty is so rare a th— / Sing a new song / Real / Music" (MV, 196).

misdirected and derailed—and its titular gesture toward blackness as medium of transmission neatly encapsulate Spicer's late sense of poetry-writing as the submission to a kind of *historical* blackmail—the agent of which is no longer fellow poets with less compromising racial attitudes, as it was in his novel, but the legacy of "Western Imperialism" itself. The governing trope of the dead letter is revisited one last time, in occluded but quite literal form, through the lyrics of a turn of the twentieth century ballad, "The Wreck of the Old 97."[242] The song is based on the disastrous 1903 crash of the *Fast Mail* train on the Southern Railway, an accident that resulted in the incineration of the train's epistolary cargo. In his poem, Spicer cites and annotates the ballad: "'It's a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to / Danville, declension on a three mile grade.' In either case / collision course. You either pick up the music or you don't."[243] It's not clear that either offers much hope: the folk music consists of "Telling the young lies so they can learn to get old," and its alternative, introduced in the next section, is "the impossible music of the Star Spangled Banner." Here, Spicer's poetics unravels in earnest:

> ...The poetry
> of the absurd comes through San Francisco television. Directly
> connected with moon-rockets.
> If this is dictation, it is driving
> Me Wild.

Spicer, as Dead Letter Officer, and months away from death, is on his own collision course. The next section begins:

> The poem begins to mirror itself.
> The identity of the poet gets more obvious.
> Why can't we sing songs like nightingales? Because we're not
> nightingales and can never become them.

As the deathblow to Spicer's own residual romanticism, the passage begs the question of what—if not transformation and transcendence—poetry's negative capability is to accomplish. Having

[242] Scott, Alfred P. (1965). "Wreck of the Old 97: The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad." Published online at http://www.rosegill.com/Old97/Old97.pdf.
[243] The additional literary and technical meanings of the word 'declension'—as social deterioration and linguistic differentiation—are surely not without resonance for the poet whose deathbed explanation was "my vocabulary did this to me." Lynchburg is also not insignificant in a poem so concerned with naming.

discovered, in the ruins of his queer epistolary utopia, an intimate historiographic practice, Spicer is unable to see his way through it to a sustainable and sustaining political path.

In a kind of grudging, ambivalent acknowledgment of his own failure, "Ten Poems for *DOWNBEAT*" is framed by references to two of his most influential peers who did sustain a more hopeful investment in American politics. It opens with "Poets in America with nothing to believe in except maybe the ships in Glouchester [sic] Harbor"—a clear nod to Olson's differently historical poetics—and closes with a parting admonition to Ginsberg, one that betrays the kind of weak solidarity only despair would suggest as an endpoint:

> At least we both know how shitty the world is. You wearing a
> beard as a mask to disguise it. I wearing my tired smile. I
> don't see how you do it. One hundred thousand university
> students marching with you. Toward
> A necessity which is not love but is a name (MV, 426).

Ginsberg's message, too, Spicer implies, is ultimately a dead letter (if not simply a disingenuous one), a gesture that fails to arrive at the transformative effect on the present it seeks, a failure marked by the unruffled presence of the police who remain "Civil but obstinate." And yet their longstanding tactical quarrel too seems futile: "Why / Fight the combine of your heart and my heart or anybody's / heart. People are starving" (426). Having argued and effectively shut himself out of more material political engagement and internalized the epistolary structure that kept his poetics social, Spicer ultimately lacked the capacity to keep impersonality distinct from self-immolation, or dead letters apart from blackmail. Rather than pursuing the correspondences across racial lines that his earlier poetics had disallowed or rendered hostile (as in his admonition to Kaufman) but that his newfound historical understanding might have fostered, Spicer succumbed to the pathos of two conflations, merged under the sign of (lyricized) elegy: of whiteness with his core self; and of utopian promise with political value.

For the intimate necro-historiography of the Dead Letter Officer to nonetheless point toward a potentially useful mode of impersonal, if not necessarily aesthetic, sociality, it would rather have to be thought and practiced in the spirit of Fred Moten's and Stefano Harney's call

for sharing our "bad debt, forgetting, remembering again, remembering it cannot be paid, cannot be credited, stamped received" (2013: 63). Insofar as such sharing entails (de)composing our selves, it also requires a practice of reading that neither idealizes nor presumes critical mastery of its objects, but instead seeks to disentangle their contradictory impulses in relation to a problem that the reader, too, however differently, shares. As Spicer writes in "A Birthday Poem to Jim (and James) Alexander": "Jim-almost-James tells me he likes Tolkien / 'He doesn't water down good and evil,' they say. 'He sees them'" (*MV*, 226). At its best, Spicer's insistence that the reader, too, is a ghost—"involved" not merely in the aesthetic work she chooses to pick up but in the writer's "lives," plural, contradictory, and freighted with history—and his haunted practice offers writing and reading as sites for political work on the intimate attachments and disavowals that, in some measure, make us who and what we are and that figure, at times against our critical positions and intentions, our horizons of possibility and desire, in and for the world.

Coda

Intimate Historiography in the Present

Since this project's inception, the urgent need for not only racial political revolution but, with it, a revolution in American historiographic practices has become all the more evident. As activists topple Confederate and other whitewashed monuments in city after city, and Trump stakes his reelection on yet another invocation of the fable of America's past greatness (this time at Mount Rushmore, imagining his profile among the stony parade of Fathers), a genuine reckoning with what I have called, following Olson, our nation's "unrelieved" history seems finally to be at hand. The Irish writer and journalist Fintan O'Toole similarly describes the present American experience as an "excess…[of] outrage…perpetrated and felt [that cannot] be contained within the existing frame of institutions and discourses," the result, he notes, not just of present injustices but of "a superabundance of the unresolved past" ("Unpresidented").[244] The removal of monuments and the resignification of their sites that is currently taking place has an important, if limited, symbolic function for the reconstitution of the public sphere, but it should neither be an alternative to structural overhaul (firstly, but not only, of policing), nor the primary avenue of historiographic working through. In order to meaningfully change how Americans understand and *feel* history and not merely what they agree is and is not acceptable for public space or discourse, the latter alteration must also take hold intimately. In this respect, the work of Kara Walker and of less-known artist and photographer Nona Faustine suggest a bridge from public site to psyche that we might follow to the question of psycho-political *practice* with which I have framed the mid-century poetics central to this dissertation.

Walker has long been acclaimed for her cut-paper silhouettes that depict—in the anachronistic and haunting, gendered and childlike technology of shadow-play—scenes of racial

[244] https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/07/23/trump-unpresident-unredeemed-promise/

historical violence that foreground the libidinal dynamics of racial slavery and its aftermath. The work's power lies in its evocation of fragmented micro-narratives of anti-black violation as sources of psychic pleasure and trauma, forcing viewers to sit with if not fully work through the imbrication of these terms and their own solicitation by them. In 2014, she brought this intimate historiographic sensibility to the matter of monuments with *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*—a giant white sugar sculpture of a sphinx with what the New York Times reviewer described as "undeniably black features," an Aunt Jemima kerchief, and prominently displayed female genitalia, attended by thirteen molasses-colored boys—installed on the site of a former Domino Sugar factory compound in Brooklyn, New York.[245] Here the intimacy conjured is again domestic but also/differently corporeal, the guilty pleasure gustatory as well as libidinal. Beyond the temporal parameters of viewing (or perambulating around) the work, the consumption of refined sugar is made to implicate one in the history of plantation slavery, and to extend an opportunity for linking critical thinking to the quotidian practices of preparing and eating food.

Nona Faustine, too, brings embodiment to bear on the site-based production of national history. Her "White Shoes" project is comprised of a series photographs of herself, partially naked, taken in front of former slave trading sites—including Wall Street and City Hall, now/still centers of global financial activity and governance—in New York City. The images are captioned with such phrases as "Of My Body I Will Make Monuments In Your Honor," "From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth," and "Over My Dead Body," rendering further explicit her baring of the fleshly matter of black lives on which the nation is founded and by which it is sustained.

[245] See Smith, Roberta. "Sugar? Sure, but Salted With Meaning." *The New York Times* Art Review. May 11, 2014. Accessed at https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12/arts/design/a-subtlety-or-the-marvelous-sugar-baby-at-the-domino-plant.html

Figure 1: From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth Wall-Street, 2013[246]

In their activation of the viewer's proprioceptive imagination that her body, at once hyper-vulnerable and determinedly stoic in its stance, can't but sympathetically induce, the images are visceral. They ask the viewer to sit with interoceptive as well as intellectual reactions, routed partly through the recognition that these are not merely photographs posed for, but practices, performed and undergone as experiences of historical possession: Faustine taking the place of the slave, and vice versa. For the viewer who thinks she is white, that identification is re-bound to the violence of its historical production at the same time as her casual engagement with the city's bustle is revealed to rest on a callousness to capitalist exploitation of racialized laboring

[246] See review by Seph Rodney for *Hyperallergic,* August 4, 2015. "About 'White Shoes' project: An Artist Poses Nude at Former Slave Sites." Accessed at https://africanah.org/nona-faustine-white-shoes-project/.

bodies that is at once historical and ongoing. The telescoping effect of Faustine's and Walker's work puts pressure on historiography as a social genre that underwrites other social genres and forms of address, rendering them meaningful, even possible, only to the extent that the persons they gather share a basic temporal understanding and depth.

Insofar as both artists locate the body—itself, as Faustine suggests, a co-memorative object ("Of My Body I Will Make Monuments")—as the site of intimate historiographic engagement, it is worth briefly noting a very different use of the body as intimate historiographic ground that has gained substantial traction over the last several years. Among the more prominent contemporary public variations of intimate historiography is Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s PBS documentary series, "Finding Your Roots," which combines the relatively new availability and popularity of genetic testing with more traditional archival methods to "get into the DNA of American culture," as the tagline goes. Commencing in 2012 and having just completed its sixth season, the show has produced sixty episodes, each of which reveals the ancestry and racial-historical inheritance of two or three American celebrity figures, from presidential hopeful Cory Booker to Martha Stewart, Stephen King to Ta-Nehisi Coates, Aziz Ansari to Sandra Cisneros, Questlove to former senator John McCain. Each interview is staged as a big reveal, bringing to light unknown entanglements that implicate the celebrity subject in at least one strand of Americans' painful and violent histories—be it immigration, slavery, Native American genocide, the Holocaust, or another trauma that brought persons to or afflicted them upon these shores. The show's drama consists not only (I would argue not principally) in the historical information the stories relay—largely conveyed in a familiar placid documentary mode—but in the performed (if also real) emotional reactions of the celebrities as they register an intimate connection to histories otherwise generally assumed or treated as distant. This spectacle tends to peak with the revelation of black and slave-owning ancestors to their white descendants. In this regard, Larry David (paired with Bernie Sanders, with whom he discovered remote kinship) gave a very in-character performance of half-ingenuous, half-laughing bemusement that rather

neatly encapsulates the Janus-faced quality of white 'non-racism'. Laying claim to another paradigmatic response, Ben Affleck demanded the suppression of his slave-owning ancestry as a condition for airing his portion of the episode. More than his own cowardice, or Gates's willingness to compromise his editorial integrity to avoid discomfiting a guest, the Affleck controversy betrays the weakness of the show's premise—that intimate means personal and, worse, biological—as if the absence of a slave owner in one's family tree absolved him of implication in America's racial history.

Over the past several years, the news has carried numerous stories of individuals who thought they were white who, following the same idiosyncratic personalizing logic, have reacted to the revelation of African-derived genetic material in their bodies with sudden claims and appropriations—from a man suing for "disadvantaged business" status on the basis of DNA results that suggested he was 6 percent indigenous American and 4 percent sub-Saharan African, to a woman who "became kind of an activist" because suddenly, having learned of her own purported ancestry, she "felt like [she] couldn't idly stand by anymore" when she found herself "in a group of white people and they were throwing around the n-word or racist jokes."[247] These reactions, mundane and predictable as they are, testify to the utter lack of exceptionality of the much-hyped story of Rachel Dolezal's painfully sincere blackface anti-racist lifestyle. In the white imagination, race, whether mere appearance or genetic coding, is somehow a thing apart from and able to bypass historical experience and psychic formation. Contrary to this, it is a strength of the poetics practices I have discussed that they understood race in psycho-historical terms and engaged with the entrenched problem of anti-black racism accordingly. Avoiding the reductive logic of personal identification, they pursued lines of implication that instead leaned on place (Gloucester, Massachusetts for Olson) and cultural inheritance (the

[247] https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/09/dna-test-race-lawsuit/570250/ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/they-considered-themselves-white-but-dna-tests-told-a-more-complex-story/2018/02/06/16215d1a-e181-11e7-8679-a9728984779c_story.html

Blues for Baraka, and Arthur Rimbaud in Spicer's case) to recognize the wider psycho-social routes our historical formation also takes, and which apply to "any sad man here, american."

These modes of intimately impersonal psycho-historical engagement—marginalized (or, in Baraka's case, racialized) within American poetics for several decades—have reemerged and been re-centered in the contemporary poetry scene in myriad forms, as the poetry world frees and seeks to exculpate itself from the racial crisis and toppling of that monumental intervention in lyricized poetry that was Conceptual writing (ConPo)—a movement that appears, in hindsight, to have been susceptible, at least in some instances, to the snarky phrase a 22 year old Spicer once leveled at his peers: "like the avante-garde [sic] of a horse walking backwards."[248] Pushing Language-oriented writing's critique of the "lyric I" to the extreme and pitching itself "against expression," as the title of one anthology put it, Conceptual poets pursued what they described as "uncreative writing," relying on appropriation, recontextualization, and constraint to generate work that (like its decades-prior antecedent, conceptual art) prioritized the generative idea over the text produced. In addition to ostensibly minimizing the connection between the work and the writer's personhood, Conceptual poets also aimed, in the words of key practitioners and theorists Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place, to "negate[] the need for reading," seeking instead a "thinkership."[249] In spite of this claim to transcend the complex experiential temporality and intensity of feeling that reading entails, the success of Place's work in particular arguably relied on the affect generated by its content rather than on its conceptual reframing. In any case, having established the political impact of the approach with her *Tragodía 1: Statement of Facts* (2010)—in which she published as poetry material from appellate briefs of sexual offense cases to which she, as a criminal defense attorney, had access—Place had sought to apply the movement's genre-recontextualizing strategy to the history of

[248] *The Jack Spicer Papers*, Bancroft. Such is Spicer's description, a 1947 letter to Ezra Pound of all people, of the anarchist scene around Kenneth Rexroth.
[249] Fitterman, Robert and Vanessa Place. *Notes on Conceptualism*. New York: Ugly Ducking Presse (2010): 27.

American racism by tweeting lines from *Gone With the Wind* using Mamie along with other minstrel images as avatars. The project, the (again underwhelming and comparatively trivial conceptual) aim of which was to provoke a copyright challenge from the Mitchell Estate, had been ongoing since 2009, but it gained new attention and notoriety following another racial intervention by Kenneth Goldsmith, who has been described as the "brand manager" and "court jester" to Place's roles as "law-giver" and "ideologue."[250] At Brown University in 2015, Goldsmith gave a more simply racist performance of "Michael Brown's Body," in which he read the autopsy report, revised to highlight remarks on the murdered young man's genitalia. In the wake of this, Place's comparatively benign Twitter project came to be differently received, as another callously shallow exploitation of anti-racism's political currency—a "hot text," as Goldsmith described his own piece, with which to "hold the stage a bit longer."[251] Finding herself more dramatically reframed than the infamous romance she tweeted, the professional lawyer could mount only a desperate, clumsy defense of her painfully sincere anti-racist blackface performance, comparing her project to the work of Kara Walker.[252]

Taken together, the two interventions rendered at once apparent and intolerable the political limits of Conceptual poetry's markedly dis-implicating impersonal frame and deadpan affect, along with its narrow understanding of and engagement with history. As Fred Moten succinctly put it in response to Goldsmith: "Do you know that why you fucked up and how you fucked up are totally entangled? Do you know that entanglement is given in the raciality of the concept, as such?"[253] As Moten implies, abstraction as political alibi has a long racial history, in

[250] Chen, Ken. "Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show." June 11, 2015. *The Margins.* Asian American Writers' Workshop. Accessed at https://aaww.org/authenticity-obsession/. For an overview of the
[251] Quoted and described in Wilkinson, Alec. "Something Borrowed." *The New Yorker*. September 8, 2015. Accessed at https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/05/something-borrowed-wilkinson.
[252] "'Kara Walker uses violently racist imagery to make art about the racial imaginary — the American imaginary,' Place argues. 'This project does the same thing.'" Quoted in Chris Chen and Tim Kreiner. "Free Speech, Minstrelsy, and the Avant-Garde." December 10, 2015. *The Los Angeles Review of Books.* Accessed at https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/free-speech-minstrelsy-and-the-avant-garde/.
[253] Collected, with other responses, by poet CA Conrad and published in "Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw" at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/06/kenneth-goldsmith-says-he-is-an-outlaw.

and beyond the field of American poetics, one he traces to Immanuel Kant.[254] Conceptual abstraction—at once foundational to the New Critical 'speaker' and the lyric reading it enables, and central to ConPo's anti-lyric reduction of the author to a genre-curating function—evades the messier psychological realms of feeling, experience, intention, and unintended but nonetheless revealed motivation foregrounded in the mid-century poetics I discuss.[255] Along these lines, the *why* of Moten's damning dyad might be understood as deriving from a failure to undertake the psycho-historical work that a meaningful anti-racist intervention calls for, in poetry or any cultural form.

In any case, ConPo's performed intellectual mastery and separation of critique from the lived experience of writer or reader would shortly give way to a revaluation of *working through* as the charge not only of poetic practice but also of (and as the criteria for) its institutionalization. Notably, the dis-invitation of Vanessa Place from the planned 2015 Berkeley Poetry Conference—an event that was to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference at which Baraka refused to appear—led to the collapse of that proposed (canonizing, monumentalizing) act of repetition through the uncanny obverse repetition of a key figure's withdrawal. Perhaps with Baraka's earlier departure and founding turn to what became the Black Arts movement in mind, another conference, entitled "Crosstalk, Color, Composition: A Berkeley Poetry Conference," was quickly put together in its stead.[256] "Crosstalk," described by one attendee as "poets of all stripes and ages sitting around as if in group therapy (and perhaps

[254] See "Black Kant (Pronounced Chant)," initially given as a 2007 talk at the Kelly Writer's House at the University of Pennsylvania. Published in *Stolen Life: (consent not to be a single being)* (2018) as "Knowledge of Freedom."
[255] An apologia issued by Place indicates that she came to a partial understanding of this fact. Rethinking her insistent refusal to commit the "intentional fallacy"—a standard trope of New Critical reading—of accounting for her work, she remarked: "My refusal to explain my work is an artist's privilege. It is also a white privilege. My position is also due to my belief that such explanations are demonstrations of mastery, which is another feature of both artistry and whiteness. This mastery is the presumption of authority over form, content, and interpretation. But it is also a privilege to imagine one can always dodge that particular obligation." (Accessed at https://www.facebook.com/notes/vanessa-place/artists-statement-gone-with-the-wind-vanessaplace/10152841235969212?pnref=story).
[256] https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/free-speech-minstrelsy-and-the-avant-garde/

it was),"[257] provided space for hashing out the antagonisms to which its cancelled predecessor had succumbed.

In the vacuum left by Conceptualism's excommunication and withdrawal, attention has shifted to other poetries (Moten's among them) and to other frameworks for writing and reading poetries that were already there. Among these, intimate historiographic practices are, again, resurgent. The shift was particularly evident in a post-reading discussion of M. NourbeSe Philips' *Zong!* at California Institute of the Arts in 2015, in which attempts to frame the archival work as conceptual (because of its exclusive use of language from a legal document to tell the story of the 1781 massacre of Africans aboard a slave ship) were refuted by the poet herself. She instead described its writing as a painful communion with her drowned predecessors—an experience explicitly brought to the reader's attention by a sub-titular note: "As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng," a name the back cover author bio includes and defines as "the voice of the ancestors revealing the submerged stories of all who were on board the *Zon*g."[258] In its felt engagement with archival material and its silences and silencings, mystical summoning of unrelieved voices, and insistent effort to "chant or shout history down," as poet Nathaniel Mackey has described the work, *Zong!* combines the modes of intimate historiographic practice this dissertation has explored. This is not to say that M. NourbeSe Philip was directly influenced by all three of the poets I discuss (although Baraka, and, as for many, Olson through him, is a referent), but that her long poem participates in a shared vital reckoning that has a history in American poetics and that, in doing so, it extends and develops what I have described as a tendency in that earlier work.

The same can be said of the differently experimental poetry of Douglas Kearney, whose radical typography functions as a dense score that visually signals the historical

[257] https://kellymcquain.wordpress.com/2015/06/19/crosstalk-what-can-a-canceled-berkeley-poetry-conference-learn-from-san-franciscos-theater-scene/
[258] I was in attendance at the event: https://calarts.edu/about/news-and-events/press-kit/press-releases/calarts-hosts-now-2015a-festival-of-new-writing

overdetermination of the poems' content—and their performances, which are explicitly if also inescapably marked as racially embodied, and central to Kearney's poetics. One can imagine no more painfully affecting condensation of the historical and ongoing lynching of black people than his poem "Well-Hung," which pushes the title's last phoneme toward a terrifyingly real performance of choking.[259] To hear it read is to have conjured the extreme psychic violence of anti-blackness as powerfully as videos of police murder document its ruthless physical destruction of life. In a realization of what I have suggested was Baraka's ongoing quest to push the weight of history across the color line, breaching the refusal to hear that is built into our racially segregated genre protocols in the process, the intimate imposition of racial violence on black life is, for the brief duration of Kearney's poem, given to the non-black reader to feel and endure. Here there can be no question of the universal, nor of the merely conceptual, as genre is pushed to the limits of the social recognition that constitutes it. In Kearney's work, it is the historical depth and present urgency of fraught and freighted address (rather than, as with Conceptual poetry, the institutional conventions and protocols of social life) that are brought to the fore. What is sought is not critical reflection but psychic registration—a wound that sets to work. Neither Philip nor Kearney use poetry to idealize and reify personhood, nor do they absent their personhood in order to de-lyricize and interrogate Poetry. Rather, they use poetry's historical attention to the way language, in its psychic materiality, animates and possesses bodies that do overhear what persons seek to block out in order to confront what Creeley called our "concepts of person" and "terms of human relationship," with their constitutive exclusions, and to "provoke / some meaning, where before / there was only hell. I said / silence, at his huddled blood," as Jones/Baraka, in "A Poem for Willie Best," once wrote (*SOS*, 65).

In the spirit of this last line, I turn, in closing, to the work of CA Conrad, who has made his poetics into a set of ritual practices—"(soma)tic exercises"—available alongside the poems for

[259] Published in *Buck Studies.* Fence Books, 2016: 24.

the reader's (writerly, psycho-political, personal, and/or pedagogical) use. Conrad engages with a wide range of social-political concerns and their histories, anti-queer violence chief among them. The exercises, which are always published with the poems they generate, combine sensory engagement with social confrontation and can be said, above all, to revive the "immanent" orientation and political edge of mid-century poetics more broadly. When they turn explicitly to history, they frame it in terms of intimate implication, both psychically and materially. In "AMERICAN poem, AMERICAN poet, the roots the roots the roots there are roots," Conrad writes:

> Go to a local government building or monument, courthouse, statue or prison, but a government structure, one paid for by all tax payers. This monument or building is something you paid to create, something you pay to upkeep. It stands for the collective stronghold of our nation, as Americans, as America moves and removes our collective fingerprints around the world as a military, as a business, as a structure of faces supplanting trust and empathy with a guise of trust and empathy under the guise of one flag. This is not to say an angry poem must ensue. This is just saying LET'S GET CLEAR. This is not to suggest you read up on American assassinations of leftist governments in South America, this is just saying KNOW what you already know to be true when coming to this poem. We're here as Americans. It's an American poem in a way that has roots, literally roots. Study the plants if there are plants. Study the grass around this government building or monument. Smell samples of the soil. What's around? See everything as best as you can, sit very still and look closely at the world as it always is around this structure you have come to today.[260]

The tongue-in-cheek (non-)suggestion for the reader's historical education, following the disclaimer about the exercise's affective overdetermination by the poet's political views—the two bridged by the confrontational all-caps LET'S GET CLEAR—succinctly encapsulates Conrad's intimate historiographic modus. Over and again, the exercises serve to remind you of what you partially already know but generally disavow, and to insist that you make that knowledge felt—a process that might result in an obliquely related poem, and, arguably more importantly, in the conversion of your psychic resistances to political ones. These are, in short, writing exercises designed to "make ourself fit instruments for use," as Olson put it some sixty-odd years ago.

[260] Accessed at http://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/somatic-exercises.pdf

The question of fitness for use also pertains, for Conrad, to matters of inheritance. While they assert that "[t]he first time I heard a white gay man say Nigger I never felt safe again," Conrad's racial reckoning as a poet occurred around a figure at the center of their—and American poetry's—literary history, that of Walt Whitman. As they tell it:

> Just when I was learning to confront the fictions we find ourselves walking inside, someone showed me Walt Whitman's prose where he referred to newly freed slaves as baboons who should not be allowed to vote…Soon after my Whitman awakening I saw a large poster of him in the library. I got close to it to study his eyes, looking to see where I had gotten lost in my younger illusions of this man who was once my hero. Like others, I had cozy warm naps in his beard as if there is actually a place in American history we can all turn to together and feel okay about our nation. Like, "HEY, but there was this one moment!" Then I woke to the stench of shit and bad breath and looked into his eyes and said, "I see you much clearer now old man, and you are just like the other white supremacists where I grew up. *Fuck your poems*!" It was like a library I loved had burned down and I poked around the charred wreckage but soon realized I was going to be just fine without it ("From Whitman to Walmart").[261]

This story ends with a disavowal of its own, an abandonment of the more complicated earlier admission that "I continue to question if Whitman was using his poems to hide his true self or if his poems represented the person he wanted to be?" This dissertation has considered cases, both less idealized and less compromised than Whitman's but nonetheless likewise riven, for which the answer would have to be: both. One worthwhile use of these poems for the critical reader lies, I have suggested, in tracking where one impulse shades into the other and, most importantly, where *work,* particularly intimate historiographic work, on the self can be found in between. This work toward partial psycho-historical relief has offered and continues to offer itself to other uses and to the cultivation of other practices, including those I have sketched above, in and beyond writing as such. While Conrad follows the mid-century poets in their intense valuation of poetry, they simultaneously radically extend the office of the poet, opening poetry's generative resources—the wild funneling of experience and imagination through language, felt before it is thought, and shaped before it is framed—to anyone. In the process, as I

[261] Accessed at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/06/from-whitman-to-walmart

have sought to likewise draw out of the poetics each chapter discusses, they model and offer one way to practice the work that a true overturning of American historiography will require on the part of not only its artists and writers but all its inhabitants.

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