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The Social Life of Poetry

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

Letizia Mariani

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Jerry Won Lee, Chair
Associate Professor Oren Izenberg, Chair
Associate Professor Annie McClanahan
Chancellor's Professor Jonathan Alexander

2026

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VITA

Letizia Mariani

2026 PhD in English, University of California, Irvine

2020 MA in English and American Literature, New York University

2017 BA in English, University of St. Thomas

PUBLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Social Life of Poetry
by
Letizia Mariani
Doctor of Philosophy in English
University of California, Irvine 2026
Professor Jerry Won Lee, Chair
Associate Professor Oren Izenberg, Chair

The Social Life of Poetry explores the social function of poetry and its construction as a discursive category. The author proposes that we understand poetry as a *register* of communication: a widely recognizable way of using language that is context-dependent, made and remade in practice, and used to signal social and cultural alignments. While categories like *genre* or *sociolects* offer prescriptive taxonomies premised on pre-existing discursive features, *register* provides a tool to track language practices in flux and in formation. Approaching poetry as a register helps us see it as a rhetorical intervention in social space that can be used to trace communities in the process of coming into being. Studying an archive that spans across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the U.S., *The Social Life of Poetry* attends not just to the poetry that appears in chapbooks and anthologies but also to that scrawled on bathroom stalls and shared on Instagram. These analyses suggest that poetry is a way individuals and communities use language to imagine alternative ways of being in the world.

INTRODUCTION:
THE SOCIAL LIFE OF POETRY

This project is about hope. I begin with the premise that writing, criticism included, is a hopeful practice; in the process of identifying what has gone so terribly wrong, we orient ourselves toward what could and ought to be. This orientation, or rather, how this orientation happens in language, is the crux of my inquiry. As I will explain, I have found poetry–the idea of it as well as its practice–to play a crucial role in this process.

In 2024, when this dissertation was still just an idea, I attended a production of the Broadway musical *Hadestown*. I came away interested in the power the script afforded poetry to alter the material conditions of people's lives. In the retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, earth is a famine-stricken New Orleans, hell is a foundry, and the dead are eternal workers. While the rest of his companions collect provisions to survive the winter, Orpheus, the poet, is working on a song. The song, he says, is the key to everything; it will not only provide his community the necessary sustenance to survive the winter, but it will end the famine and bring forth the spring again. In the end, with his song, Orpheus sneaks into the Underworld to free Eurydice (however temporarily). In the process of singing, he also breaks the workers of Hadestown out of their atomization and enables them to open their eyes to their exploitation and experience class consciousness for the first time. The song of Orpheus, which they all sing together in the end, is the occasion of the formation of a collective within which the workers will rise up against Hades.

Orpheus has stood as a poet-prototype in the Western tradition for centuries. His verse was considered so powerful it could stop time, make spirits weep, and move the god of death himself to raise the dead. Ovid writes that the Orphic song had the force to compel action. It was the song itself that "conquered" Hades and Persephone, who in turn set Eurydice free: "nor could the royal

queen, / nor he who rules the lower world deny / the prayer of Orpheus…" (Met. 10). The sound of the bard's lyre reaches the ends of the imaginable and makes it possible. The poet, in this view, is an agent of imagination and change—the voice, in the words of Aristotle, of what is "probable or necessary" (68).

The category of poetry has been the subject of heated debate for a long time. Centuries after Ovid and Aristotle, the compulsion to define (or undermine definitions of) poetry and its powers is still alive and well. Virginia Jackson's article "What is Poetry?" is just one recent example of many. In a critical gloss of scholarship in poetics for whom "poetry is neither this nor that—or it is so much this and so much that words fail," Jackson joins the unending debate of poets and scholars disagreeing on what (or whether) poetry is but discussing it at length nonetheless (40). This is not to single out one study, but to point to a recent example of the kind of discourse that has been reifying the category of poetry for a long time. If the question "What is poetry?" is after a universal, transcendental property that gives poetry its essential poetry-ness, then I would agree with Jackson's caricature. But that is only one way to ask this question. Asking after poetry at all, no matter how idealistically or skeptically, implies it as a category. Like most categories, poetry too is socially constructed, and the discourses and beliefs about what it is and what it does work to produce it to begin with. We might perhaps abandon the pendulum that swings from reveries of poetry's magical powers to handwringing about how anybody could ever believe that. We may instead consider that what people have thought poetry to *be* and be capable *of* might be worthy of attention, not because we ought to be proving them right or wrong, but because these beliefs have shaped the category of poetry as we understand it. After all, attitudes toward kinds of speech are what produce language types and assign them a social function.

I am interested in the communities that organize around beliefs expressed through or about poetry, in particular communities involved in political activity. Why does poetry often show along signs of struggle? Why write poetry when incarcerated, threatened by genocide, anti-Black violence, heteropatriarchal domination? This is not an argument about poetry's ability to make things happen, but about the widespread insistence that it can. My goal is to take this conviction seriously: if there exists a shared social belief that poetry possesses power, then rhetorically, poetry is going to be received as powerful. *The Social Life of Poetry* explores what this power is, how people use poetry and how poetry has become linguistically established to signal this power. In this project, I locate that aspiration and note its persistence. Using case studies from post-war U.S., I argue that poetry is a socially distributed language type with functional rather than formal coherence. Following it outside literary spaces and institutions shows that it can be used to trace the horizons of possibility of communities coming into being.

Beyond the Thing-Poem

A foundational claim in my argument is that poetry ought to be regarded as more than just a literary object. Restricting poetry to object-status implies it as a product, something one makes rather than something one does. This not only curbs any potential for it to be engrossed in action, but it also implicates it in a circuit of production and consumption. I am not suggesting that poetry does not exist in this form. We buy poetry books in bookstores and pay for it via services like Amazon's Mechanical Turk.[1] In addition, professional poets and academics use their work to apply for tenure and appeal for raises or promotions. Critics with diverging approaches have reinforced the poems' status as an object to prod, sometimes for the sake of prodding, sometimes to learn

[1]See Annie McClanahan's "Microwork and Piece-Rate Poetry" in Beneath the Wage: Tips, Tasks, and Gigs in the Age of Service Work. Zone Books, 2026.

about its situation(s). Even materialist accounts of poetry and its relation to the commodity form often have as their starting point the poem as a product. Take for instance Dave Beech's *Art and Value* in which an artwork's "commodification without commodification," or its production without the "enforc[ement of] consumer sovereignty," renders it "exceptional" in its resistance to subsumption, or Leigh Claire La Berge's *Wages Against Artwork,* where socially engaged artists are seen to perform "decommodified labor," or "a kind of work that is not compensated through a wage or available through a market purchase" (Beech 14, 19, 123; La Berge 2-3). Both important studies maintain their scope of inquiry within the boundaries of art production, and thereby of art-as-product. I am suggesting, however, that this approach only considers a small slice of how poetry is used and regarded.

The poem-as-product is only made so by institutional agents through the objectification of a way of using language that exists in spite of literary production. My goal is not to ignore those very real processes which do have material consequences and impact the creation and reception of poetry. I would however trouble the understanding of poetry as simply a thing that is made. We might understand more about its construction and employment if we thought about it as a language practice. By this I mean something analogous to what linguistic anthropologist Alastair Pennycook describes as a departure from "the notion of language as system … in favour of a view of language as doing;" that is, as an act that "remake[s] the language, and the space in which this happens." (20). Before its status as thing, poetry is, first and foremost, language. It is a language act; a mode of communication. In this spirit, what if we were to read poems–traditional and amateurish alike–as functional language?

This approach is not new, nor did it begin in the academy. Throughout the 20th century, experimental and minoritized movements rejected the objectification of literature derived from its

institutionalization and its separation from everyday life. At the turn of the century, Tristan Tzara in the "Dada Manifesto" urged for art to be liberated from the "laboratories of formal ideas," a philosophy later adopted and developed by the dadaist group Situationist International (2). Outside the dadaist tradition, cultural groups associated with political movements in the post-45 era also advocated for art and literature to be an active part of daily life. The Black Arts Movement, for example, aligned with Larry Neal's call to bring together "art" and the "actions of men" (31). And second-wave feminists, given their interest in the personal as political, generally subscribed to the poetics exemplified by Audre Lorde's gloss for poetry as "revelatory distillation of experience" rather than "sterile wordplay" (37). This is by no means a comprehensive list, but it points to an ongoing presence of groups for whom poetry was a lived activity. Agents of these groups understood what Juliana Spahr and Sarah Brouillette describe in their respective projects: that literature's dependence on funding and infrastructure subjects it to state efforts to discipline its political power and "limit the reach of political works" (Brouillette 2020; Spahr 180). Literary production, even that with progressive intention, inevitably passes through processes of state pacification that make it accessible and compensable but squash its revolutionary energies. As I will show, contributions of communities like the ones mentioned may help us understand poetry beyond its thingness.[2]

Language, Literature, and the Field

For an analysis of poetry that exceeds its status as literary object, we ought to expand our inquiry outside the literary field that constructed it as such. I intend "literary field" as Pierre

[2] While taking their cue, however, it is crucial to recognize that these methods were shaped by the conditions from which they emerged. It is not a coincidence that the majority of these communities were marginalized by literary institutions. The recognition of art and literature as part of daily life becomes inevitable when art is not being used for cultural capital but for survival and community building.

Bourdieu defines it, or "the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer" (41). In other words, we might not limit ourselves to the assortment of agents and institutions that produce literature, both materially and symbolically. "To speak of [literary] 'field,'" Bourdieu writes, "is to recall that literary works are produced in a particular social universe endowed with particular institutions and obeying specific laws" (163). Institutional forces like publishing houses, universities, and literary nonprofits continue to determine the concrete circulation of poetry as well as the idea of its literariness. Poetry indeed has been molded by academic reading practices that subordinate content to aesthetic. Literature itself did not emerge as a category until the 18th century, as Raymond Williams writes, and when it did, the dawn of the printing press enabled the transition from "literacy," or simply reading, to "literature," that is "the printed word and especially the book" (46-47). Within this landscape, poetry, which had formerly been a "general ter[m] for imaginative composition" came to signify a specific type of "written and printed metrical composition" (Williams 47).

The transition of literacy to literature and poesy to poetry was facilitated by disciplinary agents like literary criticism, which according to John Guillory, depended "on the construction of the literary text as a verbal work of art" (53). Indeed, as the discipline of literature and its institutional exponents came into being, their existence necessitated an "object of study"—emphasis on "object" (Guillory 54). "Was this object language or literature?" Guillory asks (54). This question in crucial. To better define literature as independent from language, "the construction of the disciplinary object as the literary work of art finally disambiguated the relation between language and literature" (Guillory 54). The status of literary object, on which the field itself is predicated, could only be attained through the abstraction of literature–and poetry–from language.

I am interested in what was lost in this transition and in what a return to language might look like. If we wish to track poetry's operations beyond its object-status, we might look outside the field responsible for its abstraction in the first place.

In fairness, poetry specifically has sat uncomfortably with this abstraction. While our scholarly understanding of it has been shaped by the definitions churned out by the academy, the life of poetry itself has never been limited to literary institutions. Poetry has been used within and without the literary field to communicate desires, goals, and imaginaries. Guillory himself concludes his "Location of Literature" chapter acknowledging that students recognize a discontinuity between poetry and literature; "poetry is something else for them," he writes. "[It] is becoming for many readers something *different* from literature, a mode of verbal expression that is conspicuous for its non academic social venues" (Guillory 223). Literature has been the house of poetry since the printing press, but it was situated as such through a process of enclosure. The same enclosure obfuscates the functional and communicative capacities of language to curate objects of analysis or embellishment. This is the work of the "cultural businessman" who, to cite Bourdieu, "exploits the labour of the 'creator' ... by putting it on the market, by exhibiting, publishing, or staging it" and, in so doing, "consecrates a product which he has 'discovered' and which otherwise would remain a mere 'natural resource'" (76). The aesthetic objectification of poetry entailed restricting a shared language resource to the literary field. Literature does not craft the poetic object out of nothing; it captures already living language. It grasps soundbites from an ongoing broadcast—fragments of a wavelength.

Airwaves of Poetry

Since the dawn of radio technologies, poets have reached for language of airwaves, frequencies, and radios to describe the operations of poets and poems. Perhaps the most well-known example is Jack Spicer's "Sporting Life," where we find his famous line, "The poet is a radio. The poet is a liar. The poet is a / counterpunching radio" (373). Andrew Joron reads Spicer in a genealogy of writers like Antonin Artaud and Philip Lamantia for whom radio was an important analogy (or tool) for poetry. Along with Spicer's "Sporting Life" he cites Cocteau's Orpheus at length and describes the car radio scene as monumental to the establishment of the figure of the poet as both medium and transmitter (Joron 2013). Predating Spicer and Cocteau, Ezra Pound was comparing the poetics of his *Cantos* to something akin to switching radio dials (1924). In a letter to his father, he describes the poem as "radio where you tell who is talking by the noise they make" (Pound 1924). Those who were not citing the radio were imitating it. Amiri Baraka and June Jordan, for example, in "SOS" and "Calling on all Silent Minorities" respectively, adopt the conventions of a broadcast to "cal[l] all black people, man woman and child" and appeal to their audience directly: "HEY / C'MON / COME OUT / WHEREVER YOU ARE/ WE NEED TO HAVE THIS MEETING" (Baraka 218; Jordan 149). Before them, Langston Hughes had stepped into a figurative radio shack of his own for his poem "Broadcast to the West Indies:"

> Hello, Jamaica!
> Hello, Haiti!
> Hello, Cuba!
> Hello, Panama!
> Hello, St. Kitts!
> Hello, Bahamas!
> All you islands and all you lands
> That rim the sun-warmed Caribbean!
> Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello!
> I, Harlem, Speak to you!
> I, Harlem, Island, too (273)

Like Baraka and Jordan, Hughes presents poetry as a tool suited to amplify a call under the assumption that others, far and wide, will be tuning in. Frank O'Hara would adopt a similar spirit in his "Personism: A Manifesto," where he recounts realizing while writing that "if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem. … the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages" (248). While the telephone differs from the radio in the privacy of its address, it implies (like the radio) a transmission of voice signals between persons. And despite his declared poetics of individual address, some of his poems, like "Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets," for instance, would adopt the form of a broadcast (O'Hara 144). In the late 20th century, poets from Sylvia Plath to Robert Frost would adapt their poems for radio audiences, but I would argue that the centrality of the radio for these poets mattered less as technology and more as the materialization of a commonly held idea about poetry: that it is, to cite Theodor Adorno, "the voice of human beings between whom the barriers have fallen" (71). What we glean from repeated appeals to rhetoric of broadcasts is an image of poetry that does not rely on its objectification or alienation. Radio analogies imply that poetry is communicative, in flux, communal, with possibilities for attunement, wide-reaching, and cutting across disciplinary or institutional boundaries. We could take this as a starting point to talk about poetry as something in flux, ongoing, and socially available.

If we are to approach poetry as a language practice, we might take a cue from disciplines that study language as a practice to begin with. I turn to linguistic anthropology for tools to examine linguistic activity in society, an approach that students of poetry could benefit from. Specifically, I propose we read poetry as a *discursive register,* a recognizable way of using language that is context-dependent, made and remade in practice, and used to signal social and cultural alignments. A register is, in the words of Asif Agha, pioneer of register studies "a linguistic repertoire [that]

becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms" ("The Social Life of Cultural Value" 231). It is, in other words, a distinguishable way of communicating that becomes socially recognizable as such. Some examples of this might include a local dialect, a professional jargon, or a way of speaking specific to a group of friends. Coincidentally, Rosa Giménez Moreno borrows language of radio transmission in her own definition of register as "a communicative frequency or wavelength chosen by the individual from the whole scale of possibilities given by a language" (91). Register is presented as an ongoing beat that users can attune to both speak it and hear it. In this sense, when we talk of discursive registers we are always talking about patterns, both of types of language use and classification criteria. Hence, to return to Agha, a "social regularity: …in talking of recurrent typifications we have moved beyond individual acts of typification to the order of stereotypes of discourse" ("Registers of Language" 26).

For this reason, I suggest that register, rather than genre, might be better suited to understand poetry as a social practice. A term like genre, as Gérard Genette suggests, implies a separation of "'literary language' and ordinary language" (7).[3] "Register" instead allows us to account for poetry as a way of using language in society that is situation dependent, in flux, and used both within and beyond the literary field. Linguistic Anthropologist Frog claims register as a preferable analytical tool to genre because the former "designates the resources employed in text production," while the latter "focuses on categories of products" (81, 96). In a similar comparison, Agha writes that while genre and register may be complementary, genres, unlike registers, "rely

[3] Genette would make a similar distinction in "Fiction and Diction," this time between "poetic language" and "ordinary language." See Genette, Gerard. "Fiction and Diction." Fiction & Diction. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cornell University Press: 1991, 13. This is the same separation Terry Eagleton reinforces in his definition of literature as open-ended and impractical language, in antithesis to everyday language. See Eagleton, Terry. "Introduction: What is Literature?" *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. University of Minnesota Press: 2008, 1-16.

on external criteria of classification, they do not permit access to the principles by which speech behavior is organized into register models of conduct by those whose behavior it is" ("Enregisterment and Communication" 38). Registers are tools for descriptive classification. They are not taxonomic "but rather metataxonomic," in the words of Theresa Lillis and Carolyn McKinney, in that they "attempt to account for how language forms and uses become labeled and categorized in ways which attract differential social and cultural value" (420).

This distinction finds similarities in definitions of rhetorical genre advanced in rhetorical studies. In 2019, rhetoricians Carolyn Miller and Amy Devitt called for an understanding of "genre as rhetorical action rather than formula" (3). In the wake of Bakhtin's conception of utterance as action, they posited an approach to genre "based in rhetorical practice" and "organized around situated communicative actions, as macro-level speech acts" (Miller and Devitt 2). In this project, I draw extensively from scholars in circulation studies, commonplace studies, and studies in rhetorical materialism to make sense of poetry's function(s). Indeed, I argue that register enables an approach to poetry as rhetorical. What is, then, is the utility of *register*? In remaining attached to language of *genre*, rhetorical genre studies has focused on reading discourse that is recognizably "public," paying little attention to those genres which (like poetry) remain stereotypically relegated to the realm of literature. Miller and Devitt, for instance, separate their classifications from those of the "literary and poetic tradition" which "relies on formal criteria of classification" (2). If this were the only concern, a call for more expansive readings would suffice and we would have little need for new terminology. Rhetorical genre studies, in this sense, could simply apply its methods to genres so far understudied as social practices. Register studies, however, gives us a tool rhetorical genre studies does not: the technical language to track and discuss the connection

between language types and values, ideas, stereotypes, and beliefs. In linguistic anthropology, they call this *indexicality*.

Enregisterment and its Affordances

In Catherine Chaput's rhetorical circulation model, what she calls the "affective energy of signs" provides a "connective tissue" to the circulation process (14). These energies, bound to "the repetition of values added and exchanged through disparate communicative acts," result in the "habituation of beliefs and behaviors, a habituation that overrides fitting responses, individual interests, and ideological encoding or decoding" (Chaput 14). Chaput's theory of circulation accounts for the reification of beliefs and behaviors through patterns of rhetorical mobility. In conversation with this model, I draw from register studies to speak to the establishment of behaviors moving through and beyond affect. The metapragmatics of indexicality, specifically, allow us to name the process through which beliefs are habituated via circulation without limiting ourselves to affect as connective tissue.

Assigned value is indeed an essential component of a register. Much of the work done in register studies tracks how discursive types come to signal social and cultural alignments. Originally coined by linguist C.S. Peirce and further developed by Roman Jakobson and Michael Silverstein, indexicality has become a common object of analysis as the process of linkage between registers and "typifiable social personae or practices" (*Language and Social Relations* 168). As Barbara Johnstone writes, registers are "experienced in connection with a particular style of dress or grooming, a particular set of social alignments, or a particular social activity" (633). In one example, Johnstone discusses the establishment of Pittsburgh vernacular. In the study, she shows how a variety of English local to Pittsburgh became identifiable as "Pittsburghese" through the

circulation of linguistic features within and beyond the city. She, for instance, describes a mug featuring a collage of folk terms like "sammitch" or "jynt igle" surrounding the much larger word "Pittsburghese," or a bumper sticker reading "n@ Pittsburghese (Johnstone 634-635). These artifacts, she writes, create "semiotic links" between words and phrases and "a way of speaking representative of the city of Pittsburgh" (Johnstone 634-635). At the same time, Pittsburghese itself is discursively connected to White, working-class personas through reinforcements of the stereotype on media like radio and TV (Johnstone 635-638). Together, these processes group language types into a category and link that category to an idea. The same process might speak to, for instance, how medical speak becomes bound to status and expertise, how some vernaculars become racialized, or how some linguistic repertoires become associated with specific social or political movements. While all registers index some type of ideology, behavior, or stereotype, their indexical range can be wide. Registers might circulate the fiction of national belonging, constructed markers like race or gender, or social practices like decolonization, care, or hope.

Enregisterment names the process of linkage between an ideology, behavior, or practice, and a way of speaking employed to "serv[e] some rhetorical function" (Johnstone 634). Rather than affectively, the link occurs *metapragmatically*, or through self-reflexive instructions on how a type of language ought to be understood to function (Silverstein 1993). Susan Gal writes that enregisterment often entails speakers using "register fragments," or recognizable parts of a register, to "alig[n] with (or trop[e] on)" persons or cultural models "conventionally linked to such … typifications" (5). Agha, too, names "fragmentary circulation" as one way recurring "patterns of typification" come to solidify a register. That is, the distribution of register excerpts establishes patterns that construct a register. This repetition of forms, that Gal calls "relay" or 'the same, again,'" suggests that register comes into being through appropriation and that people use

recognizable register fragments to connect with its other users and indexicals (*Language and Social Relations* 165). Through relays, "individuals establish forms of footing and alignment with voices indexed by speech and thus with social types of persons, real or imagined, whose voices they take them to be" ("Voice, Footing, Enregisterment" 38). Once a register is culturally recognizable, it is visible and trackable across discursive situations.

In recognizing the enregisterment of discursive types, we see that language categories are constantly made and remade by the discourses around them and renegotiated in use, through circulation, fragmentation, and widespread assumptions and beliefs about the category itself. This way, register makes poetry legible as a practice socially available beyond the literary field. Regarding poetry as strictly a literary genre limits our reach as scholars. While we might have restricted ourselves to literature in the study of poetry, language users certainly have not. Poetry has been happening both adjacent to and far from the field, and used for purposes at times far from literary. In addition, a treatment of poetry as a register recognizes that agents outside literary and cultural institutions do not simply engage with poetry in public, but in their practice, give it its shape and definition. A register, in fact, is understood to be "produced by a group of people using, or orienting to and/or talking about, a particular set of linguistic features, in a process that also constructs the group itself" (Johnstone et al. 79). The social practices of poetry this way gain significance not only as opportunities to recognize their happenings, but also as indications of how poetry's contours come to be.

Register makes possible both an approach to poetry as a recognizable type of everyday language and an account of language that is colloquially considered "poetic" (that is, metapragmatically included in the category of poetry) without presenting in verse. Indexicality in particular enables an understanding of poetry as a language activity whose coherence is not

primarily reliant on form. Linguists in fact understand form as what is grouped rather than what performs the grouping, the latter being, instead, the indexical link. In other words, if formal features signal belonging to a category of discourse, values indexically attached to that category are their glue. Indexicality then may help us approach hot-topic questions in poetics like "*what is poetry?"* or "*what can poetry do?"* without wandering to abstract platitudes, while at the same time not dismissing the questions altogether. Conversations about poetry and what (or whether) it is or does are part of the metapragmatics that construct it and link it to commonly-held beliefs about its function. In this sense, we may speak concretely to what poetry makes happen, not because poetry itself has any power, but because enough people believe that it does. In poetic discourse, disciples and critics of the famous "poetry makes nothing happen" rehash points and counterpoints, definitions and counterdefinitions, and in so doing reinforce the link between the category of poetry and the idea of action.

Gestures of Possibility

Specifically in this project I argue that the category of poetry has become indexically linked to imaginative possibility. With indexicality, the tendency, for poets and critics alike, to associate poets to possibility is concretized. By *possibility* I mean an appeal to what Ernst Bloch would call "educated hope," an "anticipatory kind" of orientation toward actualizable horizons (9). In antithesis to abstract wishful thinking, Bloch describes educated hope as a "real possibility," or "the point of contact between dreams and life," what José Esteban Muñoz would years later describe as a "not-yet-here" (Bloch 174, 145; Muñoz 87). I am after something like the temporality Kathi Weeks, in the wake of Bloch, attributes to utopian demands: "desires" and critiques "of existing subjects" in the present, with an "imaginative speculation about and movement toward a

possible future" (222-224). Poetry, like Weeks' demands, "should be conceived as both act and text" able to shift our orientation towards actualizable horizons, as "potentially effective mechanisms by which to advance critical thinking, inspire political imagination, and incite collective action" (Weeks 225). Indeed, Bloch would say that another term for the utopian "call for perfection" might be "the godless prayer of poetry;" though a necessary gesture, its graduation from "aesthetic pre-appearance" to actualization "is something which is not decided in poetry but in society" (216).

Poets and commentators of poems in Western literary traditions have been attaching power to poetry's imaginative energies for quite some time, dating back as far as Aristotle who named the function of the poet as "to describe … [what] could happen" (68). Think of Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for instance, who associated poetic genius with the finest form of imagination, or a tension toward the ultimate possibility: "repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (296). Emily Dickinson described poetry as "dwell[ing] in Possibility – / a fairer House than Prose," while Arthur Rimbaud named the poet as a "thief of fire" who "will become a propagator of progress;" poetry then "will no longer beat within action; it will be before it" (Dickinson 1999; Rimbaud 1871). George Moses Horton, around the same time, reflecting on his calling as poet, hoped that his poetry would "for the future may some light unfold / And soar from ages blast" (1865). Short of a century later, Muriel Rukeyser named poetry as "the type of creation in which we may live and which will save us" (213). Adrienne Rich would categorize poetic language as an "ar[t] of the possible" for having "a visionary relation to reality," while Edouard Glissant would in turn describe poetic thought as operating "beneath the fantasy of domination … [seeking] the really livable world. It project[s] toward" (Rich 1997; Glissant 28). More recently, Alexis Pauline Gumbs found in poetry "textual possibilities for inquiry beyond

individual scholarly authority," Jasper Bernes described some postwar experimental poetry, along with other arts, as a "social laboratory" that "does not simply reproduce what it finds in the world but reconstitutes and reconstellates it to form models of prospective futures" (Gumbs ix; Bernes 33). I could keep going, but I will instead end this litany with Kay Gabriel and Andrea Abi-Karam who put it clearly and succinctly: "Poetry bears on the project of imagining and making actual a totally inverted world" (2).

These are just a few examples of the metapragmatics that, throughout the years, have solidified the connection between poetry and imaginative possibility. The repetition of this link, in poems themselves and in discourses in poetics establishes it as real. In other words, when poetry is mentioned, a sense of possibility is evoked, and conversely, when possibility must pass through language, poetry is regarded as a well-suited vessel. Indeed, poets have largely appealed to poetry to append communication into the imaginative. Because this association is so common and widely established, even when poems do not make the association explicit, it still shapes the affordances of the category.

For instance, consider Gwendolyn Brooks' *RIOT*, a poem about the 1968 Chicago Riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The three-part sequence begins with the buildup of a riot "coming down the street" (Brooks 9). The anticipation mounts as the rioters are heard arriving "in seas. In windsweep. They were black and loud. / And not detainable. And not discreet" (Brooks 9). The second poem opens with a character called the Black Philosopher reflecting on the rattling of chains. "If you could hear it you would make music too," he says. "The *black*blues" (Brooks 11). Brooks then takes us through scenes from the riot itself: There is "Fire." The "young men run." And "the Law comes sirening across the town" (Brooks 15, 13, 15). In the end, the poem takes stock of the dead, the Black Philosopher returns to leave us with the image of

the phoenix "ris[ing] unafraid … The dust, as they say, settled" (Brooks 20). The poem sequence concludes with an intimate scene between two lovers. It's curious that Brooks chooses to end a protest trio with a love poem. We know that, in the final piece of the sequence, the struggle is still ongoing. "The world is at the window," and so the lovers "cannot wonder very long" (Brooks 21). Yet, they take "the moment of [their love] … when interruption is not to be understood," before leaving each other again with a smile "in different directions / down the imperturbable street" (Brooks 22). Brooks situates love amidst political action not as a distraction but as an integral part of the action. If their love is "alive in the ice and fire," as the title suggests, love is presented as hope—as an anticipatory glimpse of the horizon the struggle is for, alive today (Brooks 21). It is possible to love "in the ice and fire." Crucially the title also names the intimacy between the two lovers as "an aspect of love," not its entirety. There must then be other aspects, other ways and other people to love, other kinds of camaraderie and more complete horizons to struggle for. Even though the word "possibility" never comes up in the poem, the whole sequence hinges on it. Indeed, *RIOT* is about the possibility of political transformation. What is key here is not simply that Brooks chose poetry as the suited venue to work this transformation out, but also that, in so doing, she too contributes to the ongoing metapragmatics of poetry, where the category is repeatedly linked to possibility.

Following a bit of a different beat, let's also consider O'Hara's "Having a Coke With You." In the poem O'Hara describes the experience of being in awe of art and even more in awe of his lover. Addressing his work to the lover himself he takes him through a list of artworks and art experiences that cannot compare to simply being in his presence. "I look at you," he writes, "and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world" (O'Hara 194). In a different way, this poem hinges on possibility as well. Comparing the aesthetic experience of seeing art to the

aesthetic experience of participating in the beauty of a lover, O'Hara reaches the conclusion that other artists and art movements "were all cheated of some marvelous experience / which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you about it" (194). The experience, of course, is to have had the privilege of being in the presence of his lover. But while the poem seems to simply be a direct address grounded in the present, it is filled with future-oriented possibility, available first and foremost in his statement that the experience is "not going to go wasted on" him (O'Hara 194). The choice to orient the end to the future rather than ground it in the past with something like "*is* not wasted on me" leaves the poem open to the possibility of more life with the beloved and, importantly, to the realization of this possibility. Muñoz himself discusses this at length in his introduction to *Cruising Utopia* where he reads "Having a Coke with You" as a Blochian "wish landscap[e]" that "extend[s] into the territory of futurity" (5). Hanging the address on the hope of its fulfillment endows it with what Muñoz, still in continuity with Bloch, calls the "utopian function … enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here" (7). These examples are not an appeal to universality, but an attempt to emphasize a pattern that holds the category of poetry together. Individual poems take shape from the social and material conditions of their birth. But a throughline exists in the collective mind that drives the categorization of each poem; this through-line connects the language type to ideas of possibility.

Poetry and Commoning

With the approach described, language and language types are made visible as shared resources for speakers and writers to tap into. In this sense, this project asks what it might mean to think of poetry as part of a language commons. I understand commons as "not things but social

relations," in the words of Silvia Federici (94); the form of "social systems at different scales of action within which resources are shared and in which a community defines the terms of the sharing," to cite Massimo de Angelis (302). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri include language alongside information, knowledge, and code, as a "practic[e] of interaction, care, and cohabitation in a common world" (viii). In other words, I view poetry in line with scholars who have thought about language as a shared resource. Rhetoricians in recent years have been paying particular attention to language as a practice in common, as for instance Johanna E. Hartelius' writing on commons as "a live aggregate and practice" and Matthew Bost and Joshua S. Hanan, whose work on the commons shows how "the collective entangled dimensions of rhetoric's materiality… are actualized through rhetorical practices of commoning that foster affective capacities for mutual flourishing" (Hartelius 293; Bost and Hanan 187). These studies enable an approach to poetry as a language activity that is shared, available, and part of a social form that, to cite de Angelis, "generates power-tos" (308).

More specifically, I propose that poetry may be a shared language resource around which communities come into being. I hope to show that nascent communities often gravitate to poetic language to express shared values, communicate goals and wishes, and recruit others to their cause. Poetry, as Bernes writes of post-war avant-garde works, may provide "key terms and coordinates" for collective action (9). Regarding poetry as a social practice shifts focus from the idea of it as a singular and solitary utterance—the contentious eloquence overheard, if you will[4]---to a communal activity: one done *in* community and specifically to *be* in community. "However individualistic" the "business of poetry" might appear, as Phil Cohen points out, it is actually "carried out through

[4]See John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 1, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger. Liberty Press, 2006, 348-349.

what sociologists call 'communities of practice," or groups that develop around and center on shared interests and activities (Cohen Web).

Understanding poetry as a type of public discourse helps us track its use to signal collective values. In addition to being a communal activity, however, poetry, when in use, is also an act that calls communities into being. My approach engages with rhetorician Laurie Gries' call to theorize "how rhetoric materializes, moves, transforms, [and] replicates," and how "collectives … materialize in relation to such distributed rhetorical activity" (16). I am interested in showing how poetry, when regarded as a distributed language practice, delineates the materialization of communities as they take form. Michael Warner had already qualified this process as "poetic" (113). In *Publics and Counterpublics*, he names the world-making character of public discourse as "po[i]esis," because it creates, or "characterizes," communities, first imagined, then actualized (Warner 114-115). I follow this line of inquiry to ask if public discourse has something of the poetic, might poetry, as a type of language practice, be used deliberately for the collectively constitutive properties Warner describes?

Toward an Interdisciplinary Study of Poetry

Finally, *The Social life of Poetry* exists in the wake of interdisciplinary studies in poetry and poetics that have drawn from fields like linguistics, sociology, and cultural and rhetorical studies to illuminate poetry's entanglement in social practices within and beyond cultural institutions. Already in 2011 Maria Damon had proposed "micropoetries" as a name for "traces of the poetic in the everyday," extending the field's inquiry to extra-literary spaces and extra-literary objects (194). More recently, Mike Chasar has followed this line of inquiry in writings on poetry and popular culture, "where its unique mobility and literary properties are not only regularly

recognized or put on display but analyzed and theorized as well" (9). Mark Nowak has also pursued poetry outside literary institutions, focusing in particular on what he calls "social poetics" or "a radically public poetics, a poetics for and by the working-class people who read it" (10). Beyond the "where" of poetry, my understanding of its "how" exists in line with critics who have considered it "a verb," a "social practice," and a "strategy" (Nowak 241; Damon xvii; Becker 418). Sarah Dowling was to my knowledge the first scholar in poetics to engage applied linguistics to account for "a set of strategies by which writers engage with diverse linguistic codes in ways that are context dependent" (5). Chris Nealon has more recently turned to rhetoric to address similar questions, inviting more readings of poems "as the rhetorical and aesthetic practices of particular poets in particular times and places" (98). Finally, Ingrid Becker has introduced a fresh approach to socially engaged poetry with her "sociopoetic strategies" or poetic interventions that formally and substantively straddle the humanities and social sciences (420). In the wake of Kenneth Burke's rhetorical strategies, Becker traces a recent genealogy of the relationship between poetry and sociology, and offers an approach to poetry "not as merely a mode, a form, or genre," but as "instruments" to address evolving "social and disciplinary problems" and "forge new possibilities for action" (419). Rather than provide a novel set of archives or a fresh reading of specific poems or poetic movements, I hope to follow these scholars and offer an approach to the category of poetry, its patterns, and its effects, and to some of the aspirations that make all of this possible.

In his 1983 lectures, Stuart Hall was quoted saying that "people have to have a language to speak about where they are and what other possible futures are available to them" (Qtd. in Hsu 2017). The necessity for a type of language suited to speaking about possibility is what I am referring to when I talk about poetry. In the spirit of Hall's suggestion, *The Social Life of Poetry* proposes that the poetic category has become socially established as a language type suited to

imagine, articulate, and communicate possibilities. Through poetry, shared visions come to life, and take on an afterlife of their own, giving shape to some of the horizons toward which we may begin running.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter 1, I begin my study in 1968 by looking at the dissemination of poems and poem fragments in organizing spaces and social justice movements across the United States. I track how groups like the Students for a Democratic Society, the New York Motherfuckers, the Chicago Black Arts Movement, and the San Francisco Diggers believed poetry to be integral to political action. Their belief, coupled with their praxis, established poetry as a language of possibility used to anticipate and gesture to necessary political action. Following first excerpts from Baraka's "Black People!" and "SOS," and concluding with poems by Diane di Prima and the Diggers, I propose that poetry, according to these groups, was a venue to disseminate visions of the horizon of their struggle, express alignment with the political and aesthetic traditions informing their activism, and in some cases prefigure alternative ways of being in society.

Chapter 2 explores the circulation of poetry on social media. I center the contradiction of platform models that make available the democratic distribution of folk materials while monetizing everyday life through privatization. If Chapter 1 contends with the localized yet prolific uptake of poetry within and across political groups, this chapter reckons with the promiscuous spread platforms enable resulting in abstraction. I argue that poetry on Instagram offers an example of the simultaneous promulgation and co-optation of the register. Following poetic fragments from the poetry of Refaat Alareer, Mary Oliver, Marcellus Williams, and viral accounts like @poetryisnotaluxury, I discuss the process that blunts poetry on social media by leveraging its

susceptibility to repeated mediation and commodification. I conclude with the conditions that resist this process.

While my first chapters are case studies of the circulation of poetry in public, my final chapter explores its emplacement. Chapter 3 examines poetic language scrawled on bathroom walls. Colloquially, "poetry" is a term sometimes used to refer to bathroom inscriptions, even if those are not formally recognizable as poems. I take seriously the folk term's emphasis on poetry, and close-read poetic language in public restrooms that gestures to lost loves, to queer desires, and post-revolutionary societies. I suggest that in spaces used to discipline bodies, anonymous poetic appeals come together to make possibility materially available as a discursive commonplace.

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CHAPTER 1
UP AGAINST THE WALL MOTHERFUCKER:
1968 AND POETRY AS LIVING LANGUAGE

In July 1967, Amiri Baraka, then LeRoi Jones, was arrested at the Newark riots, brutalized by the police, and detained for firearm possession. Just a few weeks before his trial in January 1968, the *Evergreen Review* kicked off the new year with the publication of "Black People!"

> …What about the bad jewelry, on Washington
> Street, and those couple of shops on Springfield? You know how
> to get it, you can get it, no money down, no money never,
> money dont grow on trees no way, only whitey's got it, makes it
> with a machine, to control you you cant steal nothin from a
> white man, he's already stole it he owes you anything you want,
> even his life. All the stores will open up if you say the magic
> words. The magic words are: Up against the wall mother fucker
> this is a stick up! Or: Smash the window at night (these are
> magic actions) smash the windows daytime, anytime, together,
> let's smash the window grab the shit from in there. No money
> down. No time to pay. Just take what you want. The magic
> dance in the street. Run up and down Broad Street n— take
> the shit you want. Take their lives if need be, but get what you
> want what you need. Dance up and down the streets, turn all the
> music up, run through the streets with music, beautiful radios on
> Market Street, they are brought here especially for you. … (*Reader* 224)

The poem would set the tone of 1968 for Baraka, and for the broader poetry community in the United States. For many, Baraka's arrest and conviction was a question of police brutality and racialized state violence, while for others it was a matter of free speech. But underlying both was an additional question: can a poem be taken seriously? Seriously, that is, as language with communicative power. "Black People!" brought this question forth with urgency. While the poet awaited trial, a poem calling to "smash the window drag that shit from in there" and "take their lives if need be, but get what you / want what you need" circulated with his name on it. Baraka,

via the poem, names a problem: the means to get those luxury commodities secured behind walls and windows, “only whitey’s got it.” This is but a microcosm of racialized dispossession in the United States; that is, the reason “only whitey's" got the money is the same reason we don't yet live in “a world we want black children to grow and learn in.” But Baraka also offers a solution: “All the stores will open if you say the magic words. The magic words are: Up against the wall mother fucker, this is a stick up!” In the poem, the lines that follow offer a vision of possibility, one of what might follow the smashing of the literal and figurative windows. But there’s more; the stick-up in “Black People!” is where vision and action become indistinguishable in the sense that the magic words themselves *are* the action. The poem is, in fact, as much about destroying the material conditions of racial oppression as it is about the performative power of language and the productive gap between what is said in poetry and what people can make happen.

“Black People!” is not an outlier, but it is exemplary in showcasing the performative power of language, both in its content and afterlife. It is exemplary, too, of what happens to a poem when taken at its word. In tracing the uptake of lines from this poem and as well as others circulating in leftist circles in the sixties, I suggest that their appropriation and circulation teaches us something about the category of poetry; namely, that what defines it is not its literariness. When stripped of it, poems emerge as occasions for the coming into being of communities. Their function rests in their situation between word and action, because of their verbal claim to action. Whether this claim is fulfilled matters little. More interesting is the fact that some believe it, because the belief informs poetry’s use, idealizing what poetry can do while at the same time investing it with actual affordances as a communicative register.

Months after his arrest, Baraka was tried alongside Charles McCray and Barry Wynn, who had been riding in the same car the first night of the Newark riots. McCray and Wynn were

sentenced to one year, while Baraka to three without parole.[5] This sentence was eventually appealed and reversed, but the trial garnered attention due to Judge Kapp's severity toward Baraka.[6] During proceedings, Kapp read "Black People!" before the jury ("obscenities" omitted), and condemned the poem's "diabolical *prescription* to commit murder and to steal and plunder and other similar evidences" (Hudson 51). While the poem was not officially offered as evidence, Kapp still considered it appropriate to share in the courtroom because it caused him "to suspect that [Baraka] w[as] a participant in formulating a plot to ignite the spark on the night of July 13, 1967 to burn the City of Newark…"[7] (Hudson 51). He then sentenced Baraka "on the basis of [his] conviction for the possession of two revolvers–" to which Baraka added, "and two poems" (Hudson 52). David Grundy writes that "Black People!" simply "*seeks* to challenge" (italics mine) the carceral logic of the state "justified through the language of the police, government and law courts" (97). But the violent reaction the poem received shows that its language actually *was* read as threatening, and so succeeded in its challenge. Kapp read "Black People!" to reinforce a picture of Baraka as morally corrupt and a danger to (White bourgeois) society. But for this move to be effective, Kapp had to disentangle "Black People!" from the connotations of powerlessness most commonly attributed to poetry. For the poem to be dangerous, Baraka had to have meant what he wrote; a simple and perhaps banal condition, yet one that is often denied to poetry. Grundy is right, in this sense, to call Kapp a "close reader" of the poem; the judge understood it well and "counter[ed] its performative 'magic words' with the performative authority of his own courtroom

[5] See Baraka, Amiri. *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2017, p.184; Hudson, Theodore. "The Trial of LeRoi Jones." *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Kimberly W. Benston. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1978, p. 52.

[6] According to Hudson, "the average sentence for similar riot-connected convictions was six months, some of this time suspended or on probation" (Hudson 52-53).

[7] The practice of using art as prosecuting evidence has continued well into the presence, particularly to incriminate hip-hop artists. For more information see Charis Kubrin, Kyle Winnen & Rebecca Rogers, *Rap Rhyme, Prison Time: How Prosecutors Use Rap Evidence in Gang Cases*, 27 Chap. L. Rev. 369 (2024).

pronouncements" (97). Not for nothing does Kapp refer to "Black People!" as a "prescription," part of the plotting, or "formulating," of militant action.[8]

Kapp's response, in short, may be unjust but it is not delusional. When Larry Neal released the Black Arts Movement manifesto, he used two of Baraka's poems ("Black Art" and "Black Dada Nihilismus") to exemplify the Movement's aesthetic purpose. If "poems are bullshit unless they are / teeth or trees or lemons piled / on a step," they must be necessarily concrete and necessarily useful–they must be real. At the core of BAM's poetics was the rejection of "a society in which art is one thing and the actions of men another" (Neal 31). This was not simply a matter of reflecting social life or writing *about* it; the Movement identified a force in poetic language that could act upon the real, the same force that the separation of art from social life served to tame. Indeed "Black Art," writes Madhubuti "is perishable. This too is why it is functional. For example, a black poem is written not to be read and put aside, but to actually become a part of the giver and receiver. It must perform some function" (Qtd. in Smethurst 91). As much as this might sound like magic, it is nothing more than what we afford non-aestheticized language–the power to communicate, inquire, persuade, sadden, or galvanize. The power to do things in the world. With this in mind, the carceral solution to the threat of Baraka's poem speaks to its influence. To limit the rhetorical force of "Black People!," Kapp had to criminalize Baraka. Interpreted as any other statement would be in a courtroom, "Black People!" is not limited by conventions imposed on it by the literary field but is read and circulated as functional.

The trial soon caught national attention. On April 25, the *New York Review of Books* released a statement signed by the Committee on Poetry decrying Kapp's sentence. They announced that,

[8] It's interesting that "form" is itself part of the word "formulating." Poetry here is seen as giving form to both the vision (plot) and the call to action (prescription).

> as revolutionary poet [Baraka's] revolution is fought with words. He scribes that the police carried the guns. Lyres tell the Truth! … We herald to literary persons: get on the ball for LeRoi Jones, or else get off the poetic pot. LeRoi is not only a black man, a Newark man, a revolutionary, he is a conspicuous American artist imprisoned for his poetry during a crisis of authoritarianism in these States ("LeRoi Jones" 1968). [9]

Echoing the sentiment, media outlets like the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *Los Angeles Sentinel* pinned the harsh sentence on Baraka's writing rather than his actions; "we were under the impression," Bayard Rustin was reported saying, "that in a free society writers were not thrown in prison for their poems" (Barnes 8). While likely well-intentioned, these champions of artistic expression fail to make the necessary connection between "words" and action–the same connection Kapp was able to make and that got Baraka such a sentence to begin with. Defenders of Baraka engaged both the poet and his poems as genre-bound, and in so doing they downplayed the poem's communicative force. The subtext of these defenses is that literature is protected by free speech because, by virtue of being literary, it cannot be threatening–it is representational or, at best, limited in the seriousness of its claims.[10] Journalists and poets rushing to Baraka's defense objected to the power of the State over poetic production, but did not acknowledge poetry as anything other than a product. In so doing, they enforced the very separation of art and social life criticized by BAM. Baraka, in the end, was saved from State violence by the claim that he did not mean his poems, at least not *really*.

Conversely, like Kapp, others offended by the content of "Black People!" had little trouble making the connection between Baraka's poem and the actions of others. Outraged responders

[9] The statement was signed by John Ashbery, Gregory Corso, Robert Creeley, Diane di Prima, Robert Duncan, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Koch, Denise Levertov, Michael McClure, Charles Olson, Joel Oppenheimer, Peter Orlovsky, Gil Sorrentino, Philip Whalen, and John Wieners

[10] This is a precursor to the more contemporary rap trials. For more on the criminalization of rap lyrics, see Kubrin, Charis E, Kyle Winnen and Rebecca Rogers. 2024. "Rap Rhyme, Prison Time: How Prosecutors Use Rap Evidence in Gang Cases." *Chapman Law Review* 27:369-404.

treated the poem as if it had the force to start a movement. Many echoed Kapp's concern, reading threat and power in its words. Joseph T. Shipley, a member of P.E.N America, wishing to distance himself from his employer's public denunciation of the sentence,[11] wrote in the *New York Times* that "Black People!" was not "a 'literary work'," but rather "a vehement urging to violence" that demanded "responsibility for what [was] spoken" (46). Liza Williams in the *Los Angeles Free Press*, announced with some concern that "Leroi Jones is a poet with power [sic]" (3). In her account of his reading of "Black People!" at the Black Congress Hall in Los Angeles she describes seeing "something marvelous that I have never seen before. I saw poetry come to life in the mind of the audience, people shouted back at the lines, spoke back to their poet, who was, I think tragically irresponsibly, echoing and reinforcing in marvelously vivid terms, their destructive anger" (Williams 1,3). The reading, as Williams reports it, captures the extent to which poetry was living language for Baraka and his communities. It was not simply an aesthetic or representational object, but a galvanizing dialogue, one which others could join, take up, echo, and make their own. If the likes of Shipley and Williams perceived "Black People!" to be dangerous, the literary understanding of poetic language is insufficient to describe what happened here.

The Black Congress Hall reading was not an exceptional incident. Lorenzo Thomas paints a similar, though more favorable, picture of Baraka reading the same poem. While in Newark with Ishmael Reed, Thomas came across

> a union hall or community centre sort of place where Amiri Baraka was reading feverish political poems to a few cheerful working-class black folk … mommas, sisters, little brothers, and wives. Cousins nieces nephews … reciting his crazy new poems. 'No Money down, no money never?' The people were saying 'yeah, uh huh' laughing and bopping their heads. Like in church. In this undecked hall. I was amazed at what the poems were doing. Baraka was home. (Qtd. in Grundy 92)

[11] Robert Halsband, president of P.E.N. America, wrote harshly against the sentence in the Jan. 10, 1968, issue of the *New York Times*.

The audience in question explains, at least partially, the laughing, head bopping, and recitation of the poem. In a space like the one described, populated by "working-class black folk," the academic and literary conventions of poems and poetry readings matter little and leave poems free to do "what [they] were doing." Without the assumed separation of poetry from everyday discourses, poems integrate quite well with daily life. "Black People!," in these examples, is a language event, a message, a petition, a bid for extra-literary engagement. While the witnesses of these events had different reactions, they were able to capture a similar phenomenon: poetry as communicative action, taken to heart and interacted with by communities coming into being.

My aim is not so much to make moral judgments on the content of "Black People!," to engage in a free speech debate, or argue about whether Baraka should have been incarcerated for writing this poem–in that respect, we should turn to an abolitionist critique of the carceral state rather than a debate on which (or whether) speech should be criminalized.[12] My point is that, while the poem was downplayed by some as ineffective because of its genre, there are instead plenty of examples of this poem coming to life. This marks the difference between understandings of poetry as representation or action. In his own analysis of "Black People!," Lytle Shaw writes that transformation in the poem is predicated on "a condition of possibility … inside the subjects who will effect the change–the addressee" (2006). The magic words are, according to Shaw, an address that might allow "the unthinkable to be thought" and the "impossible [to] suddenly become possible" (2006). If we were to run with this claim we could also say that the magic words are the *performance* of the unthinkable. But for this possibility not to be fantastical, its language ought to be recognized as rhetorical. A poem is only a poem, as much as a greeting is a greeting and a handbook a handbook. But the latter categories are read productive of the real in ways that are not

[12] See Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003 and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Toward Liberatio*n, New York: Verso Books, 2022.

often afforded to poetry. The case of "Black People!" is an example of poetry undisciplined, and thus more legible as register.

Causation can be difficult to trace. The chanting recorded by Williams and the laughter recorded by Thomas are glimpses of what is likely lost to history: how this poem moved people and what they did accordingly. Yet circulation and recitation are tracks that endure and signal an effective engagement with language. Indeed, fragments of "Black People!" would spread like wildfire, in particular the line "up against the wall mother fucker," which Baraka himself would later say became "ubiquitous" (*Autobiography* 906). In 1968 alone, the line was adopted and appropriated by a variety of groups and movements: variations of it were found graffitied across the Columbia University campus and chanted during their student uprising; Columbia SDS expressed solidarity with Czech students and workers after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia by chanting "Up Against the Wall Mother Russia;" the Situationist anarchist affinity group Black Mask renamed itself Up Against the Wall Mother Fucker after Baraka's poem; *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* published an article that October titled "Women Up Against the Wall;" and New-York based David Peel & the Lower East Side released as part of their 1968 album *Have a Marijuana* their song "Up Against the Wall" with the lyrics "here come the judge, here come the judge / up against the wall motherfucker!"[13]

The uptake and distribution of Baraka's line opens a set of questions on the use of poetic language in spaces of political struggle. While the Committee on Poetry's response to "Black People!" limits its intervention to the generic boundaries of a literary artifact, the poem's life in

[13] See Cronin, Paul. *A Time to Stir. Columbia '68*. Columbia University Press, 2018, p. 139; Avorn, Jerry L. *Up against the Ivy Wall: A History of the Columbia Crisis*. Atheneum, 1969, p. 259; Greeman, Dick. "Czech Analysis." Mike Klonsky, et al. *(SDS) New Left Notes (Chicago, IL)*, vol. 3, no. 31, Oct. 1968, p. 2; Hahne, Ron, and Ben Morea. *Black Mask & Up Against the Wall Motherfucker: The Incomplete Works of Ron Hahne, Ben Morea, and the Black Mask Group*. PM Press, 2011, p. 86; Kingsbury, Stella. "Women Up Against The Wall." *No More Fun and Games*, no. 1, Cell 16, Oct. 1968, p. 1; David Peel & the Lower East Side. "Up Against the Wall." *Have a Marijuana*. 1968.

the streets expands its indexical power. Theresa Lillis and Carolyn McKinney write that context-based approaches "fix text quite rigidly in a single time and place," proposing instead that writing be studied as "com[ing] into being in specific sites [and] often repeatedly entextualized and re-entextualized" (429). This movement ensures that the meaning attributed to texts is in constant flux, that the communities of these texts are always changing, and that the texts themselves intervene in places to contribute to the production of spaces (see de Certeau 1984). Rhetoricians like Jenny Edbauer and Laurie Gries have offered re-orientations from context-based analyses viewing texts as static and acted upon by their situations, to ones holding space for the mobility of texts in "networks of emergent relation" (Gries 9). Thinking in line with Raymond William's figuration of practical consciousness as "a living and interrelating continuity," Edbauer proposes rhetorical ecology as an alternative paradigm to exceed the "closed system" of the situated readings (13). These ecological models trace rhetoric "beyond its initial moment of production" and follow its influences, activities, and effects, as well as its constitution of publics or, as Gries prefers to call them, "collectives" (7). Operating ecologically rather than contextually might allow us, as Mike Chasar proposes, to "follow [poetry] beyond the book, by tracking where it goes, and how, and by learning even more about what it helps to make happen" (24). I propose a historically grounded reading of poetry that acknowledges the influence of agents adjacent to it, while recognizing its own functional presence in society as a *discursive register* that moves through space and time (See Introduction).

1968 Internationally

In May 1968, the same year "Black People!" hit the streets in the U.S., Parisian students and workers took their uprising to the streets as well, and poetry took the streets with them. The

collective revolutionary impulses of the moment concretized in building occupations, barricades, and general strikes, but were verbalized as poetic slogans and graffiti like "under the paving stones, the beach," "life is elsewhere," or "it is forbidden to forbid" (See Feenberg & Freedman 2001). While, as Kristin Ross argues, the poetries of May 1968 have come to epitomize the struggle of the New Left so much as to overshadow it, regarding the poetic as constitutive of the real and indexical of the horizon of struggle may help us understand it as an integral part of political action. Specifically, I focus on the uptake of the poetic register in movements in the New Left in 1968 in the U.S.[14] to shed some light on the role poetry filled in the communal spaces of these collectives for the communication and articulation of the changes they were organizing for. To do so, the events of this chapter are worth contextualizing as part of a broader global movement. The late sixties saw an international struggle that took local forms but that remained in transnational solidarity with aims and tactics in common. In this sense, poetry too was both a local and international way to communicate the horizons of the struggle.

Ninety-sixty-eight is understood to be a year of global revolution, or a "a revolution in and of the world system," in the words of Immanuel Wallerstein (431). Fredric Jameson, echoing the sentiment, traces even the localized "internal politics" of movements in '68 as "organically linked to [their] third world 'occasion,' in the Vietnam War itself, as well as to the Maoist inspiration of the Progressive Labor-type groups which emerge from SDS" (183). For him, as for Wallerstein, the revolutionary impetus of that year drew its force in the decolonial movements that had preceded it, and that now reverberated strongly in the United States. In this sense any local study of social movements in 1968 must first be approached with the understanding that U.S. movements and

[14] Given the limits of this genre, I do not claim to be comprehensive. Many movements not featured here were active and important to the political landscape of the US that same year, like the Third World Liberation Front, the Black Power Movement, the Young Lords, and the Yippies, among others.

collectives drew from and responded to decolonial, labor, and anti-war revolutionary actions across the globe. Actions like the Newark riots did not occur in isolation but as part of an organized global struggle. The war in Vietnam had at this point garnered global opposition, sparking outrage and protests all over the world pushing back against "U.S. hegemony in the world-system," according to Wallerstein (431). Grassroots cooperation between students and workers was a major global force, saturated with the rising young Left's discontent with the old (Wallerstein 434). This dynamic swept the international scene, taking local forms in Mexico, Palestine, New York, Poland, West Germany, Italy, and perhaps most famously, France, in May '68's radical student uprisings and mass strikes. Internationally, instances of State aggression—like the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, the Tlatelolco massacre, or the Battle of Karameh—were met with instances of resistance, like Black Power salute raised by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the summer Olympics in Mexico City. The U.S. saw much of the same energies. War criminals Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger rose to power, and a string of high-profile assassinations saw the deaths of Bobby Hutton, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy. Waves of actions against racism, imperialism, and heteropatriarchy erupted across state lines, like the Poor People's Campaign, the Abraham Lincoln High School walkout, the occupation of Columbia University, the Third World Liberation Front strikes, the Miss America protests, and the disruption of the Democratic National Convention. In 1968 the global struggle of the Left was, to the new generation, intersectional, no longer exclusively a class struggle, but a racialized and gendered one too (Wallerstein 435).

As hopes for revolution rippled across the globe, they found in poetry a welcome amplifier. Nineteen-sixty-eight was, in the words of Mark Kurlansky, "One of those rare times in America when poetry seemed to matter," both through state-sponsored efforts to bring the mode into public life, and most importantly as a social practice in engaged communities (221). Collectives in the

New Left especially used poetry in social spaces to articulate critiques and desires for political alternatives. As James Sullivan puts it, poetry's usefulness to the exploration of social and political ideas took it "out from between closed covers resting on shelves, out from the armchair under the reading lamp, out front hose quiet moments of private contemplation that have become the canonical setting for poetry, and into public places" (1). Both content and modes of dissemination of poetry popular in these leftist groups make its readability as a discursive register more apparent

While this project proposes that poetry can be read as a register that indexes imaginative possibility, in this chapter I turn to pockets of the New Left in 1968 to engage a kind of political poetry that can be read to index what Ernst Bloch calls concrete utopia, or the "anticipatory" possibility of a "better life," the "objective-real degree" that "stands on the horizon of every reality" (223). Unlike "abstract utopia," which for Bloch is grounded in wishful thinking that cannot be actualized, concrete utopia accounts for actual possibility of material realities emerging from the present, and specifically from critiques of it. If real possibility is to be attained, it requires to be imagined and communicated. As mentioned in the Introduction, Bloch sees poetry as an articulation, or evocation, of the "real-possible," which only social praxis can bring into the real. Since, as I have shown, poetry is suited to the articulation of possibility, politically engaged users of poetry might find it fitting to verbalize and mobilize toward the goals of their struggle. I focus then on the expression and uptake of political alternatives imagined and communicated through the poetic register to lay bare the revolutionary horizon at the forefront of the New Left in the U.S. in 1968, and the contribution of these poetries to the production of networks of solidarity and localized communities.

Columbia: A Tradition Up Against the Wall

In 1968, Columbia and Barnard students kickstarted what is now known as the Columbia uprising, a series of actions against Columbia University's support of the war in Vietnam and its expansion into Harlem. The uprising, a local expression of the international student movement, is credited by Adrienne Rich to have awakened her to "what Columbia was, how it functioned, who had power and how it was used" (Qtd. in Savonick 315). As Rich reckoned with the institutional commitments of her employer, she wrote poems that threatened to escape the function of genre-object. In fact, while growing in political awareness, she produced *Leaflets*, a collection that struggles with the tension between poetic form and function. Poetry, in *Leaflets*, is "revolution," it is "letters" that "will have to be misread," or "scribblings on a wall" that must "tangle with all others," instructions to read it as something other than poetry (*Leaflets* 70, 73). It is a wish for her work to be other than it is and do other than it does. The very appeal to the leaflet form in the collection's title highlights Rich's desire for her poems to be actively integrated in social life; leaflets are, after all, in the words of Karen Stein, "demands for attention" that "seek to persuade their readers of something important" (49).

Instead, the *Leaflet* poems struggle with their medium, as if they were trapped in a book. In the title poem, for example, Rich reflects on the ideal form and purpose of the poems: leaflets to be found "crushed into your hand / after passing a barricade / and stuff in your raincoat pocket," something to be handed to somebody, circulated at a site of resistance, making visible disjunction between the urgency of their articulation and their medium. Circulation beyond the literary field appears in *Leaflets* as necessary to the life of a poem; a poem must be found and repeated, passed on or left behind at a barricade or "in a drawer of a sublet room" (*Leaflets* 50). But Rich's venue of distribution may have weakened the impact she envisioned for her poems. The collection was

published through W.W. Norton & Co. which, despite having dodged the conglomeration of publishing begun early that decade, in 1962 published the first edition of the Norton Anthology, subordinating its survival to the university classroom and casting itself as "canonizer."[15]

Norton is not alone in this. State efforts and corporate motives ranging from agencies like UNESCO to government funding, literary prizes or MFA programs, have determined, co-opted, or otherwise privatized the content, form, and trajectories of literature.[16] Pierre Bourdieu found these forces to be part of the struggle for a "monopoly of literary legitimacy" by which agents and institutions of predetermined power produce a work materially, but more importantly, produce its "meaning and value" (42, 11). The making of literariness out of poetic communication–that is, enclosing a type of language use into the category of "literary" and its conventions–strips the latter of its legibility as such. Despite "demand[ing] an active political use for literature that exceeds its value as finished product," to cite Tomás Reed, Rich's *Leaflets* are removed from the ecologies of communication Rich envisions for their imaginary to be realized and for them to be legible as a discursive register (40). Their relegation to the pages of a Norton book instead officiates their status as "literary text." And this makes Rich's uptake of Baraka in her "Ghazals" somewhat tragic. When she writes, "i was trying to drive a tradition up against the wall," she aligns the politics and social vision of the poem to Baraka's (*Leaflets* 67). But her medium and mode of publication prevent the poem from having the effect described in her *Leaflets*–the same effect of "Black People!" Rich's draw for her poems to be "leaflets" in the streets or "scribblings on a wall" remains a dream on the page.

[15] See Sinykin, Dan. *Big Fiction: How Conglomeration Changed the Publishing Industry and American Literature*. Columbia University Press, 2023; Shesgreen, Sean. "Canonizing the canonizer: A short history of the *Norton Anthology of English literature*." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, Jan. 2009, pp. 293–318.
[16] See Brouillette, Sarah. *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019; Spahr, Juliana. *DuBois's Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018; Spahr, Juliana and Stephanie Young. "On Poets and Prizes." *ASAP Review*. Web. November 11, 2020.

At the same time, there were others at Columbia taking up Baraka's call to action. The Columbia uprising was primarily organized by the Society of Afro-American Students (SAS) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Both groups acted in protest against the University's expansion into Harlem to construct a gymnasium, and its affiliation with the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) during the war in Vietnam. Columbia graduate and undergraduate students participated in walkouts, building occupations, and labor strikes, all which resulted in Columbia's temporary shutdown, halted the construction of the gym, and brought to an increase in Black faculty hires and in the establishment of a Black Studies program. On April 22, 1968, Mark Rudd, the face of SDS on campus, published a letter to President Grayson Kirk in the *Spectator,* denouncing Columbia's "support of the war in Vietnam and American imperialism" and its "control of black people in Morningside Heights, Harlem, and the campus itself" (Avorn 26). The letter was a declaration of war–the following day would mark the beginning of the Columbia occupation, one of many student-led actions that would result in Columbia's temporary shutdown, a halt in its constructions in Harlem, an increase in Black faculty hires, and the establishment of a Black studies program. On this occasion, Rudd chose to herald the charge with poetry. "There is only one thing left to say," he signed off. "It may sound nihilistic to you, since it is the opening shot in a war of liberation. I'll use the words of LeRoi Jones, whom I'm sure you don't like a whole lot: ''Up against the wall, motherfucker, this is a stick-up'" (Avorn 27).

Rudd's characterization of the line as an opening shot holds poetry to be both an action and a call to action. And act they did–for the next six days, the SDS and SAS students occupied five buildings and established "communes," liberated bathrooms, took over classrooms and hallways, and made their demands heard. "Up against the wall, motherfucker" was a student favorite. It showed up on blackboards, flyers, and sides of buildings, and was chanted from rooftops, in

assembly areas, and at the police.[17] Jerry L. Avorn, a writer for the student-run Columbia Spectator, recalls that "everywhere were signs–'Create two, three, many Columbias,' 'All power to the communes,' and 'Up against the wall, motherfucker!'" (Avorn 128). Commune Editions liken poetry's place in political struggle to a barking dog, "a companion in these activities, as the 'Riot Dog' of Athens was a companion in the streets" (Fagan 2025). Like a riot dog, poetry is present, barking, in liberatory movements, but that alone is insufficient if not accompanied by action. If the dog's barks were motioning to the horizons of the struggle, and if protesters were barking along, we would have something closer to what we see during the occupation of Columbia.

The repetition of Baraka's line during the Columbia occupation signaled affinity with Baraka's call to break with racist and imperialist systems and was premised on an understanding of poetry as bearing the performative power to exceed the page. In naming "LeRoi Jones" as the source of the SDS's mantra, Rudd speaks a genealogy into existence. He would state years later, in an essay titled "Symbols of the Revolution," that "up against the wall, motherfucker" was one of the symbols that "became [an] integral par[t] of the strike, helped to define [it]" (Avorn 82). Defining, that is, by eliciting reactions, by designating "Grayson Kirk, David Truman, the Trustees, many of the faculty, the cops as [their] enemies," by "co-opt[ing]" and "adopt[ing]" Baraka's language and the struggle of Black Americans against racial oppression, and dissolving rhetoric of deference and respect toward authority (Avorn 291-292). In Bourdieu's terms, the symbolic power of the line was in its definition of the conditions of the struggle. For Bourdieu, symbols are "instruments of knowledge and communication" which "make it possible for there to be a consensus on the meaning of the social world" (166). The power of words and slogans, he writes, is "capable of maintaining or subverting the social order" and it comes from a "belief in

[17] For first-hand accounts, see Jerry L. Avorn's *Up Against the Ivy Wall*.

the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them" (Bourdieu 170). Poetry during the Columbia occupation drew its power from both the creation of consensus and the gesture to the horizon of the struggle. The uptake and dissemination of Baraka's line set the terms of the actions; it defined without confining, signaling instead toward a shared future achievable through the present fight.

A public and visible distribution of the line, then, was the best suited avenue for the communicative and constitutive intentions of the Columbia occupation. This distribution in pieces of Baraka's poem at Columbia during the 1968 student uprising solidified "Black People!" as part of a utopian wavelength in spaces of struggle and revolution. Crucially, this dissemination happened off the page, in communal spaces, in the occupied classrooms, in the quad, and in the mouths of protesters. The visibly social and extra-literary circulation of fragments of a poem built a network of "ongoing space[s] of encounter," to cite Michael Warner, predicated on this poem, and tuned its users into its frequency (62). For the SDS, poetry was a necessary tool, used with urgency, not because it replaced action, but because it facilitated consensus and provided the language suited to the collective articulation and communication of visions of liberation.

UAW/MF: Poetry is Revolution!

Behind the widespread dissemination of Baraka's line at Columbia was the Lower East Side anarchist affinity group Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker (UAW/MF). Participants and bystanders of the Columbia occupation remember the group as "a gaggle of crazed-looking hippies" occupying buildings and participating in meetings with the student protesters who, as Osha Neumann recalls, "were drawn to [them] by the possibility of living the total revolution" (Cronin 57). The UAW/MF earned their self-description of "street gang with analysis." (Millner-Larsen 16). The group had renamed itself from Black Mask in early '68 to keep their name out of

mainstream media and "polite society" and, more notably, to mark their transition to militant action (Neumann 53). Lifting their new title from Baraka's "Black People!," in a sense, took on the revolutionary charge of his poem as definitive of their collective. The termination of their publishing project, the *Black Mask Magazine*, signaled for them the end of their literary investment, but not the end of poetry. As they announced in their final issue, "The movement must be real or it will not be. Now the call is INTO THE STREETS…" (Hahne and Morea 86). Their future publications would reflect this change, serving only to the articulation of their political project. But far from turning away from art and poetry altogether, the UAW/MF issued a rejection of art as a category removed from life, and sought instead "to collapse the distinction between art and life" (Millner-Larsen 101).

Many of the Motherfuckers' poems post-68 are attempts to define their function within the goals of the collective. Their "Poetry is Revolution!," published in the Ann Arbor Sun and distributed on the streets of the Lower East Side, for instance, brings to language the anti-capitalist utopian horizon of the group, their revolutionary intentions, and the purpose of fantasy in attaining both.

> MY UTOPIA IS AN ENVIRONMENT THAT WORKS SO WELL THAT WE CAN RUN WILD IN IT.
> UNTIL OUR MOST FANTASTIC DEMANDS ARE MET, FANTASY WILL BE AT WAR
> WITH SOCIETY. SOCIETY WILL ATTEMPT THE SUPPRESSION OF FANTASY,
> BUT FANTASY WILL SPRING UP AGAIN AND AGAIN, INFECTING THE YOUTH,
> WAGING URBAN GUERRILLA WARFARE, SABOTAGING THE SMOOTH FUNCTIONING
> OF BUREAUCRACIES, WAYLAYING THE TYPIST ON HER WAY TO THE WATER-
> COOLER, KIDNAPPING THE EXECUTIVE BETWEEN OFFICE AND HOME, CREEP-
> ING INTO THE BEDROOMS OF RESPECTABLE FAMILIES, HIDING IN THE

CHAMBERS OF HIGH OFFICE, GRADUALLY TIGHTENING ITS CONTROL, EVEN-
TUALLY EMERGING INTO THE STREETS, WAGING PITCHED BATTLES AND WINNING (ITS VICTORY IS INEVITABLE).
WE ARE THE VANGUARD OF FANTASY
WHERE WE LIVE IS LIBERATED TERRITORY IN WHICH FANTASY MOVES ABOUT FREELY AT ALL HOURS OF THE DAY…
EVEN IN THE MIDST OF BATTLES IT [FANTASY] PLANS THE CITIES OF THE FUTURE.
WE ARE FULL OF OPTIMISM
WE ARE THE FUTURE (Hahne and Morea 160-161)

Fantasy is antagonistic to society because capitalism strips its societies of the possibility of imagining otherwise. It is, in this sense, a necessary part of the struggle for liberation in as much as a liberated future to be struggled for must first be imagined. Imagining appears for the UAW/MFs not as wishful thinking, but as planning, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney define it, or "the ceaseless experiment with the future presence of the forms of life that make such activities [as fishing, dancing, teaching, or loving] possible" (74). This experiment finds its choice register in poetry. To be sure, the poem itself does not fulfill the desire expressed, in this case for a post-capitalist society. But it does point to the desire's horizon of possibility. Those speaking the poem "are the future" *because* they are the bringers of fantasy, planners of "the cities of the future." In other words, poetry comes to light as the venue of verbalized fantasy specifically used to envision the future. In so doing, it materializes an emergent future into the present. "Poetry is Revolution!" enacts the Motherfuckers' rejection of poetry as a socially disengaged category by staging it as the medium to imagine revolution and disseminate this imaginary. If their goal was, as Conor Hannan suggests, "a negation of the *field* as much as the *institution*," liberated poetry for the UAW/MF is stripped of the conventions of its field until all that's left is language, recognizable as poetic in as much as it communicates the possible (125).

If this vision of art as action rings Situationist, it's no coincidence. In 1967 the Motherfuckers had corresponded with the Situationist International but were dismissed by Guy Debord for Ben Morea's "head-on activism" (Qtd. in Hannan 116). Nonetheless, Debord's belief that "the abolition and realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art" resounds at the core of much of the UAW/MF's late writing and activism (192). In his critique of what he calls the society of the spectacle, Debord insists that "the world already dreams of [a classless society]," the dream only requires to be brought to consciousness (164). He sees art, in its transcendent form, to be salient in the building of this consciousness. Art, for Debord, emerges "at the dusk of life," and in this sense accompanies the rise of a new way of being in society (188). When the category of art will no longer be separate from life, as so in a sense, when art will no longer *be*, it will then play a part in the coming of a new society. Raoul Vaneigem, a Situationist himself, assigns to verbal art in particular the imperative to be "a form of speech, a word-in-action" which must "see[k] to function" and "cr[y] out in every possible way for realization" (176).

Poetry as the abolition of itself goes beyond a Jakobsonian self-referentiality (see Jakobson 1960). The consequence of the abolition and realization of poetry is the disclosure of its rhetoricity. Poetry that fails to abolish itself, according to the Motherfuckers' Situationist philosophy, will suffer from the insulation of institutionalization. Like Van Gogh's work, "isolated from life, forced to hang in a museum or worse, the homes of the rich," poetry as anything other than discursive language cannot be "the for[m] / that expresses our sense of communal struggle" (Hahne and Morea 13). For this reason, the Motherfuckers considered poetry to be "opposed to literature," it being one of "the most dangerous weapons in the arsenal of freedom … breathing like a machine gun, exterminating the blind flags of immediate reality" (Hahne and Morea 14). In the city or on university campuses, poetry, they thought, might aid in the collective struggle for liberation.

The fake assassination of Kenneth Koch is a good example of this philosophy in action. Shortly following Baraka's arrest, the UAW/MF attended one of Koch's readings at St. Mark's Church. Koch's poems, as Neumann recalls, were "never 'political' or angry. He did not write to put anyone up against the wall" (55). As Koch read one of his poems, Allen van Newkirk, poet and publisher of *Guerrilla*: *Free Newspaper of the Streets*, stood up and fired a blank gun. The group then distributed the latest issue of *Guerrilla* they had designed in collaboration with van Newkirk before dashing out. The front page of the paper pictured Baraka in handcuffs after his Newark riots arrest, with the headline reading "POETRY IS REVOLUTION." Beneath the photo was Regis Debray's "Poor the pen without the gun; poor the gun without the pen," evocative of the Motherfuckers' own "poetry comes out of the barrel of a gun" (Hahne and Morea 31). The flier called for White poets to recognize the arrest and sentencing of Baraka as part of the same anti-Black violence that saw Huey Newton arrested and countless others murdered in the fight for liberation. Crucially, it also insisted that "LeRoi Jones," the "black revolution," and "poetry itself" have in common "the discovery implicit in every true creative act: the absolute necessity for total social & cultural revolution…" ("Poetry is Revolution" 1968). For this, their appeal: for "poetry to become the very foundation of experience" and "for the spirit of poetry to resurrect the forgotten world" ("Poetry is Revolution" 1968). Printed alongside the Motherfucker's remarks, Baraka's poem "Poetry is Revolution" presents poetry as the articulated precondition of a reality that should come, as "the words of lovers. / Of dancers, of dynamite singers. / These are the songs if you have the / music" ("Poetry is Revolution" 1968).

The dissemination of this issue of *Guerrilla* at Koch's reading and the "assassination" of Koch himself meant to rouse users of poetry to its functions beyond representation, namely to the voicing of political imaginaries. As tempting as it might be to read this as one of many poetic

aphorisms, the UAW/MF's treatment of poetry as the trigger of revolution shows for it a regard as a form of public discourse that beckons the world to be attained. Revolution, of course, is the overthrowing of a world order for a new one. For that to happen, the new world order must be envisioned and communicated. There must be, in other words, a discursive avenue to envision and disseminate a revolutionary political vision. At the same time, revolution also implies a turn, etymologically, or a re-orientation, a re-volution. We could then say that the poem turns attention to the possibility articulated. In both the *Guerrilla* issue and their poem by the same name the Motherfuckers offer the writing and circulation of poetry as part of a political praxis, as the discursive venue by which to turn toward a horizon worth struggling for. If "the gun" stands in for the armed struggle which the Motherfuckers deemed necessary to topple the world, "the pen," or poetry, is the mode to collectively envision that. Poetry in the streets, outside institutional venues of publication, facilitates calls for "THE BEST ORGANIZERS [TO] JOIN US AT THE TIPS OF THE IMAGINATION" (Hahne and Morea 114).

Poems on (and) the Wall

There is something unsettling, however, about a group of White men borrowing a line from a poem that was not meant for them. As we have seen, Baraka's call resonated across countercultural communities, but his intended audience was specifically Black, as was the liberation he envisioned and advocated for. The uptake of "up against the wall, motherfucker" is fraught with contradictions. Its dissemination enabled alignment with revolutionary possibilities in various spheres of an oppressive social order, all the while being subject to appropriation. While groups like the SDS and the UAW/MF were predominantly White, the line itself featured Black reclamatory language lifted from a command frequently issued by law enforcement when frisking

Black subjects (Burke 52). As Patrick Burke suggests, while "by 1968 'motherfucker' had become associated … with the rhetoric of Black radicalism," after Baraka's popularization of the expression, it also became linked to U.S. counterculture, itself "more interested in the style of Black radicalism than in its substance" (52). While resolving these contradictions is beyond the scope of this project, it is crucial to remember that, at their core, is the work of Black artists and activists, appropriated by White communities that, though nominally supported Black liberation, did not always fight for it. At the same time, these contradictions also tell us something about poetry, namely that its stable content and mobile form makes it suited for distribution among groups in search of banners, who may use it to flag their commitments in relation to commitments that already exist. In this sense, poetry appears to attract strategic appropriation–that is, a group's usage for their own purposes which might both diverge from a gesture toward their origin.

The adoption of Black radical rhetoric by White movements in the New Left for the advancement of their respective agendas coexists, however uncomfortably, with the uptake's contribution to the enregisterment of poetry (see Introduction). Once appropriated, the line bears both sameness to and difference from its "original" iteration. Its rehearsal establishes a distributed affinity with Baraka's motives despite his intended audience. Even so, as Alastair Pennycook reminds us, repetition "always produces something new" and, in this sense, is "through its relocalization in space and time, the repetition of difference" (121). While the poem is then enlisted in continuity with Baraka's call to revolutionary possibility, each instance of fragmented repetition reproduces echoes of the same, differently situated. Poetry enregistered, then, is in some ways like Heraclitus' river, which Pennycook traces his own argument back to–"we both step and do not step in the same rivers"—its stream creating both coherence and localized expressions of difference (Pennycook 119). In other words, the appropriation of Baraka's line ought to be

approached critically as we observe the uptake's participation in the enregisterment of poetry to voice political possibility in the U.S. in 1968.

While Baraka's fragment did the rounds across the New Left, his intended audience took up the possibilities expressed in his poetry and responded with poetic production and reproduction. In 1967, in Bronzeville, Chicago, the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), a local expression of the Black Arts Movement, painted the Wall of Respect, one of the first public murals in the country. The purpose of the Wall was, in the words of Jeff Donaldson, to produce a "people's art" that would "build self-esteem and produce revolutionary action" (294). And so, on the side of a tenement building on 43rd and Langley, "Black heroes" were memorialized and honored where, up until then, Black faces had not even appeared on billboards (Zorach 1). The sections on the mural, "R&B," "Religion," "Literature," "Theater," "Jazz," "Sports," and "Statesmen," were designed and painted by different artists and featured the likes of Malcom X, Elijah Muhammad, Nat Turner, Nina Simone, and Miles Davis, among many others. The Wall of Respect was by and for the community. *Ebony* magazine wrote following the Wall's inauguration that "black artists whose particular talents and skills might have, in another time, taken them far away from Forty-Third and Langley, directed their genius to the community of their roots. In essence they told a community: 'Our art is yours, you are us, and we are you'" ("Wall of Respect" 292). In addition to being social in its service, the Wall was created "as a call and response" in ongoing conversation with its community, whose members offered their input before its inauguration and would continue to through all its iterations until its destruction in 1971 (Zorach 9). In this sense, as Rebecca Zorach writes, the wall was itself "a kind of performance" ("Painters, Poets, Performance" 24). In its four years of life, the Wall was a site of Black collective life, housing rallies, performances, and poetry readings, as well as mundane encounters between friends and neighbors. It was, in Donaldson's

words, "a rallying point for revolutionary rhetoric and calls to action, and a national symbol of the heroic black struggle for liberation" (295). It was not just a locus of embellishment and remembrance but one where life happened, rendering its art and inscriptions part of the life of the community.

The murals appear to have been designed with this function in mind. Edward Christmas' "Literature" section features a portrait of W.E.B. Du Bois from whose mouth emerges Baraka's poem "S.O.S.":

> Calling all black people
> Calling all black people, man woman child
> Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
> Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling you, calling all black people
> calling all black people, come in, black people, come on in. (*Reader* 218)

The poem, of course, honors Baraka as a Black hero, crediting him, as Haki Madhubuti had, for being the "advent" of "black art of the sixties, on the national scene" ("Toward a Definition" 216). But the placement of "S.O.S," emerging from Du Bois' mouth, underscores the continuity of the "Black radical tradition," and depicts Baraka's call to action as indebted to his predecessor(s) (see Robinson 1983). The "advent" of a Black Arts Movement, then, is both novel and emerging from its ancestors. This way, when the call to action of "S.O.S" gestures to the possibilities that the coming together of "all Black people" might bring, it does so while offering a rich ground of Black history and culture to step into. The reproduction of Baraka's poem in a Black public space enhances both the reach and purpose of this call, expanding its venues beyond the page and among the people. Like the wall, "S.O.S." is "where it should be–in the midst of the people–as opposed to being in a museum or a special, out-of-the-way place" (*Ebony* 292). Geosemiotically, as illustrated by Ron and Suzie Scollon, "the social meaning of the material placement of signs," in our case of the poem, is dialogically gained from and imparted onto its

placement (2). “S.O.S” is a call for Black people to gather situated in a place where gatherings do happen; the poem is then made into a material component of the communal space, amplifying its bid. Among Baraka’s intended audience, it can function rhetorically both by soliciting responses from his addressees and by indexing a Black utopia to the community in question. “S.O.S.,” there, was living language. OBAC’s categorization of “S.O.S. as “literature” might seem to undermine this point, but the poem and its location must be regarded in light of BAM’s call for poetry to be a “concrete function, an action,” as put by Neal. Despite holding on to the term, the Black Arts Movement was already working to undo the separation of literature from culture, language, politics, and action.

It follows, then, that Baraka’s “S.O.S.” thus situated would receive responses in the same register. In 1968, both Gwendolyn Brooks and Madhubuti published pieces about the Wall of Respect. The Wall is both occasion of these poems, and along with them, one iteration in a discursive chain reaching back before Baraka and pointing toward a liberated future. It might be tempting to read both the wall and the poems as monumental–the former of Black heroes and the latter of the wall itself. But Brooks and Madhubuti do not simply represent the wall, they extend its call. They locate themselves within its community, in conversation with the Wall, its audience and its tradition. In “The Wall,” Brooks is there, speaking her poetry, “in front of [her] / hundreds of faces … behind [her] paint,” while Madhubuti stands before “the mighty black wall” (Brooks “The Wall” 38; Madhubuti “The Wall” 39). In the reproduction of the occasion and situation of their poems, both avoid simply writing about the Wall, but rather include themselves in the performance of its community. Brooks describes the entanglement of her poetic articulation in the fabric of 43rd and Langley in an interview:

> Right across the street [from the Wall of Respect] is a tavern, and one Sunday afternoon, some of the poets decided to go in there and read poetry to just whoever

> was there. I went with them. One of them went to the front of the tavern and said, "Say, folks, we're going to lay some poetry on you." And there had been a couple of fights in there, people drinking, and all kinds of exciting things going on; and some of us wondered how they were going to respond to poetry. But the poets started reading their poetry, and before we knew it, people had turned around on their bar stools, with their drinks behind them, and were listening. Then they applauded. And I thought that was a wonderful thing, something new to me. I want to write poetry-and it won't be Ezra Pound poetry, as you can imagine-that will be exciting to such people (Brooks and Stavros 6).

For Brooks, poetry at the Wall meant a language activity among other activities of the everyday life of Bronzeville. As an active part of that space, poetry does not happen against the backdrop of a casual context but is "useful" language for a specific people (*Reader* 219). In grounding poetry in the community coalescing around the Wall of Respect, Brooks and Madhubuti speak to it directly. When Madhubuti asks "can you dig? / if you can't you ain't black," he reproduces and expands the Black aesthetic of the Wall and of Baraka's "S.O.S." by calling into being a Black public for both the Wall and the poem itself ("The Wall" 40). The exclusive address asks if the interpellated audience can "dig" the Wall, and by extension, if they can dig Baraka's appeal on the Wall, and the Wall's "business, blackness." "Can you dig?" is the bouncer at the door of Baraka's "come on in"—if the latter's poetic appeal cast its nets wide and landed in Southside Chicago, Madhubuti's poem responded with both re-iteration and clarification. Brooks turns to her community too, calling them, "all / worship the wall," and conducting the collective response with a command, "and we sing" ("The Wall" 38). Both of Brooks' lines may act as both descriptors and imperatives, capturing in real-time her call, that of the Wall, and responses to both.

The poems then delineate a public for the Wall and for their own addresses and set up the affordances of this network of exchange. This means that art and poetry within this network have a different function; they serve their community with purpose and intention. The Wall, as

Madhubuti writes, is specifically "black art, of the people, / for the people, / art for people's sake" ("The Wall" 40). Art and poetry are both for Black people and for the actualization of what might benefit them. This is why Madhubuti refers to the Wall as "the weapon" ("The Wall" 39). It makes sense, then, for Brooks to associate both the Wall and poetry with "Black Power," with poetry, art, and liberation as complementary projects. While "women in wool hair chant their poetry," Brooks shows us "Black / boy-men fist out 'Black Power!,'" using the gender binary to draw a parallel between the two categories, echoing the activity of poetic language at the Wall ("The Wall" 37). The poems make explicit who they operate for and what their audience's horizon of possibility looks like–a struggle for liberation through the politics of the Black Power Movement.

The Chicago arm of BAM picked up on the poetry for direction toward Black liberation. They used the visual, spatial, and linguistic resources available to them and accessible to the community to foster a collective centered on tradition and indexing future possibilities. The Wall, its extension of Baraka's "S.O.S.," and Brooks and Madhubuti's poems uplift Black history and culture in celebration and in the hope of mobilization. In this scene, poetry on the mural, and in conversation with it and its community, delineates and defines its audience and point it to the possibility of liberation.

"Tattered little mags against the wall"[18]

In the late sixties, members of the SDS and the UAW/MF would move West and join a growing movement of communal living. By 1968, the heart of this movement was in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. Joan Didion opens her famous essay "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" painting a less than favorable picture of Haigh-Ashbury. "The center was

[18] From Diane di Prima, "City Lights 1961."

not holding," she writes, and the "bankruptcy notices," "commonplace reports of casual killings," and "vandals who misspelled even the four-letter words they scrawled," were, to her, evidence of decay (Didion 1967). So, too, was the announcement hung on Haight Street she details at the beginning her narrative:

> Last Easter Day
> My Christopher Robin wandered away.
> He called April 10th
> But he hasn't called since
> He said he was coming home
> But he hasn't shown.
>
> If you see him on Haight
> Please tell him not to wait
> I need him now
> I don't care how
> If he needs the bread
> I'll send it ahead.
>
> If there's hope
> Please write me a note
> If he's still there
> Tell him how much I care
> Where he's at I need to know
> For I really love him so!
>
> Deeply,
> Marla (Didion 1967)

Didion does not linger much on the poem–to her, its presence alone speaks to the downfall of the neighborhood. But, however briefly, Didion chooses poetry to introduce Haight-Ashbury. The poem is not sophisticated, but it is a public bid to its community. Despite Didion's unfavorable presentation, she nonetheless paints Haight-Ashbury as a place where poetry is part of everyday

language. In particular, poetry once again is presented as the language type of choice to voice possibility, in this case the hope for Christopher Robin's return.

At the heart of Haight-Ashbury at the time were the Diggers, an anarchist mutual aid network that practiced communal living. They took their name from the 17th century English anti-capitalist group that resisted the enclosure of the commons by establishing a community that abolished money and made resources available for free (Noble 2023). These were practices the SF Diggers also worked hard to implement. They began in 1966 as a guerrilla theater troupe that aimed to "teach / direct toward change / be an example of change" (Noble 2023). As their namesake, they soon established a prefigurative community where food, printed media, medical supplies, and even money were distributed freely, "creat[ing] an anarchist space by bringing housework into the street" (Lovitt 292). By 1968, the Diggers had relinquished the last of their possession, becoming the "Free City Collective." In addition to providing community support, the collective mobilized for the restoration of vacant buildings to the people, autonomous distribution of surplus food, freely available press material for communication, resources for communities to organize their own celebrations, and permit authorities to be rescinded in parks and public spaces (see "A Modest Proposal").

Beyond material needs, Free City regarded the symbolic as a necessary type of sustenance. They hosted free performances and poetry readings and established a publishing arm called the Communication Company to distribute news and zines in the streets, including the 1968 mimeographed "Digger Papers," broadsides featuring poems, recipes, local and national news, all printed in the basement of the Willard Street commune. Like BAM, the SDS, and the Motherfuckers, the Diggers considered imaginative capacities to be the starting point of radical social change. "We've created a monster in our imagination," they announced in the Free City

pamphlets, “That’s the most difficult to slay. Slay it by letting go” (“Free People Unite!”). For them, the battle against the monster in the imagination was to be fought through autonomous education, or the “REVOLUTIONARY CLASSROOM” of the “FREE STREET” (“Free Street”). Effectively, the Diggers did not simply embody the future they desired but believed in the power of communication to participate in its production. When they wrote “media / is mutual aid / in the / free / city,” they meant to cast the Communications Company not as parallel to the Diggers’ mutual aid but as part of it (“Free News”).

Poetry for the Diggers was part of this work of communicative sustenance. As such, poetry belonged in public. The Free City pamphlets, in the layout of a free city, describe poetry as a weapon in “the real fight,” or “a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, that consumes the scabbard that would contain it” (“Free News”). The “Digger Papers,” distributed freely in Haight Ashbury, declared poetry part of social life, of “active things, not sitting around on your ass: active poetry, active use of language” (“The Digger Papers” 6). The poetry they disseminated was both reprinted and original and intended to both nurture and mobilize.[19] Their mimeographed “FREE PEOPLE UNITE,” for example, goes to great lengths to produce community in its address through the use of first-person plural pronouns in claims like “THE TYRANNY IS WITHIN US” and “WE CAN DO WHAT NEEDS / TO BE DONE.” The poem describes the collective and its prefigurative practice, announcing to communards and passersby alike that “FREE CITIES ARE WHERE FREE PEOPLE GATHER,” describing the project of a free city and imagining its inhabitants as free by virtue of being there. But importantly, the community is established to be mobilized into care and political action. The poem is, in fact, filled with imperatives which transition into descriptions, like “GIVE. GIVING IS AN OVERFLOWING OF ENERGY,” “BE FREE AND

[19] For example, sometime between 1967 and 1968 they printed an untitled poem signed “henry/uaw-mf.” See Digger Archives for more. https://www.diggers.org/free_city_sheets.htm#gallery

LIVE WITH YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS. THE / REVOLUTION IS WITHIN YOU," or "GROW INTO A FREE FORM. A FREE CITY IS A GATHERING OF FREE PEOPLE." While the imperatives gesture to possibilities on the horizon, the descriptives suggest that these possibilities are already emergent, or that glimpses of them are already in the present. What the Diggers mean to index, then–which is most clear in the line "VOTE FOR A CITY BY / BEING FREE" –-is the prefigurative in action. Communal liberation is already materially present because it is already gestured to. The poem itself is an appeal to the Haight Ashbury community to reflect, or to act according to, the horizons the Diggers wish to bring into existence.

The call to action of "FREE PEOPLE UNITE" spans both inward and outward; it mobilizes the community to build itself up by modeling a society worth struggling for and, in so doing, to go and bring about social change. The composition of the flier itself reflects the prefigurative politics of language in use for the Diggers. The poem is printed on a loose sheet of yellow paper. At the top of the page is a voucher for "free public energy" to "cut out and do free," and behind the poem is a picture of a leaf. Handwritten on the margins of the flier we read, "leaves to be dumped under trees in San Francisco." The poem, like everything else on the page, is printed to serve a function beyond itself and serve the Haight-Ashbury community. But the service on the voucher does not exist and the leaf just a picture of a leaf; the voucher cannot be redeemed, and the leaf cannot be dumped under a tree. The flier is a performance of imagined functions. Its distribution spreads this imaginary as sustenance for the community through the Diggers' mutual aid network.

The Diggers did not limit themselves to print distribution, but hosted free poetry readings on special occasions like Summer Solstice and in visible locations like the steps of San Francisco City Hall.[20] Phyllis Willner, a former Digger, recalls in an interview with the author that the group

[20] These events are immortalized in the Digger documentary *NOWSREEL* from the same year.

was in the habit of stopping traffic with their events because they "thought that theater didn't belong on the stage and that poetry didn't belong on a page, not entirely. It belonged out in the open on the street."[21] And the street appeared to think so too. Willner remembers "business men in suits" stopping by to "hold still to listen" and bus drivers "get[ing] out [of the bus] and dance."[22] At the core of the Diggers' poetic disruptions was a belief in poetry as a necessary discursive intervention in social life. "There were extraordinary things that needed to be done," Willner explained, and the readings at City Hall brought poetry out in the open and "distracted people from going about their business in an ordinary way."[23] These extraordinary things to be done were, for the Diggers, part of the process of "creat[ing] the condition [they] described" (Doyle 16). Using poetry to voice their political vision in public spaces, the Diggers not only gestured to the possibility of liberation but manifested its emergent possibility into the real.

Poetry was so entrenched in the Diggers' communicative practices that it seems to have been a choice language for other groups to engage with their political project. The Bay Area Berkeley Commune, for example, distributed "An Open Poem to the Prophets and their Apostles" in Haight-Ashbury in 1968 ("An Open Poem"). The poem calls out the Diggers for having failed their "disciples; yr word has brought them as far as the Haight / can u not carry them to the seashore? … can it be we warrior poets were right all along?" the Berkeley Commune asks, "is it time to admit that Hate as well as Love redeems the world? / there is no outside w/o inside / no revolution w/o blood" ("An Open Poem"). The Berkeley Commune's critique of the Diggers stems from a conflict between the groups' philosophy of violence—the Diggers were pacifists and the Berkeley Communards were not. But it is notable that the latter took their infighting to poetry,

[21] Phyllis Willner, in a recorded phone call with the author, August 29, 2023.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

using it to issue their critique and propose an alternative path toward liberation. With their poem, the Berkeley Commune engaged with the communal project of the Diggers but pointed to a different path to their shared horizon of possibility, one that might redeem the world with violence.

The Diggers' emphasis on poetry and performance as a mode of political action attracted several established poets to the collective, among them Lenore Kandel, Lew Welch, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Diane di Prima. Di Prima was already reading poems out of a flatbed truck in New York City before she moved to the West Coast in 1968, the same year the first iteration of her *Revolutionary Letters* was published, after which she and her children lived in Haight Ashbury in communal homes until the collective moved out of San Francisco to Black Bear Ranch in 1969. The influence of the Diggers on di Prima's early *Revolutionary Letters* is visible in the work's typography, content, and philosophy of distribution. The all-uppercase style of the *Letters* reflects the style of Digger texts like the Free City pamphlets and the "Digger Papers." The tenets of abolition of money and property, and liberation through decentralization show up, for example, in di Prima's "Revolutionary Letter #9," where she calls to "destroy the concept of money / as we know it," and invites her community to "start with no money at all and invent it / if we need it" (*Revolutionary Letters* 2021 15-16). In the same poem, she echoes the Diggers' commitment to autonomous printing and "media / [a]s / mutual/ aid / in the / free /city," while in "Revolutionary Letter #11," she chronicles practicing an economy of care when she describes "getting free Digger meat / for Free City convention" (*Revolutionary Letters* 2021 18-19). Her "Revolutionary Letter #3," a grocery list for the revolution, extends the Digger habit of sharing recipes and survival skills in their handouts, (see, for instance, "Rainbow of the Earth's Harvest") and the Digger mantra "it's free because it's yours" is cited in her "Letter #15" (*Revolutionary Letters* 2021 24). Beyond the style and content of her poems, di Prima embodies the Haight-

Ashbury culture by relinquishing ownership of them; the 1968 copies of the *Revolutionary Letters* are premised with disclaimers like, "These letters may be stolen, copied or otherwise distributed. They must not be sold, to do so would be a counter-revolutionary act" (*Revolutionary Letters* 1968).

While the influence of the Diggers on di Prima has been understudied, I am less interested in how the collective influenced her as a singular author and more interested in how her poems participated, along other poems, in the fabric of the community. The *Revolutionary Letters* were not simply reflective of the space in which they were written and disseminated; they were an active part of the production of the Diggers' Free City. In fact, what might seem like a mere glimpse into di Prima's influences also reveals the consequences of isolating the individual poet from the social life of their rhetorical practice. Reading the first *Revolutionary Letters* as simply part of di Prima's literary output neglects their primary purpose as "guerrilla tactics for getting the word out" ("By Any Means Necessary").[24] Di Prima was living and writing within a community that was also producing poems. Any resonance between the 1968 *Revolutionary Letters* and the 1968 Digger fliers, I suggest, tells us something about the intention for these poems to travel in the streets and mobilize Haight Ashbury toward a liberatory horizon. That is why di Prima's work from her time with the Diggers cannot but be read as just one thread in the thick web that made up Haight Ashbury. The *Revolutionary Letters* were part of the communicative ecology of the community, constitutive, along with others, of the articulation of the collective social vision.

The poetry of Haight-Ashbury, then, is a model of poetry in action as mutual aid, an anarchist praxis that posits an economy of care whereby members of a community "take

[24] On a notebook page titled "By Any Means Necessary: Guerrilla tactics for getting the word out," di Prima keeps a list of strategies for guerrilla-style communication. The subtitle reads, "HARD COPY—the artifact—gets it into hands—it stays around, beautiful stuff can be made." One bullet points lists "The Diggers" alongside "communication" and "back to mimeo," and a later one reads "and the free poem (may it continue)."

responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions … by actually building new social relations that are more survivable" (Spade 136). Examples of mutual aid practices can be found throughout U.S. history, from the Diggers to the more recent FoodNotBombs, but the most effective and influential example is the Black Panther Party's survival programs, including the free breakfast program, the free ambulance program, free medical clinics, and more. The Black Panthers' programs mobilized people by creating spaces where they could access basic needs and build shared analyses about the conditions they were facing. Taking a cue from the BPP, the Diggers offered services to their community for both sustenance and political transformation. "Mutual aid exposes the failures of the current system and shows an alternative," Dean Spade writes (Spade 137). The Diggers saw poetry as part of this process of showing. Poetry, like mutual aid, was to the Diggers productive of their community and necessary to lay the foundations of a different kind of society. For this reason, the Diggers' mantra, "it's free because it's yours," is so crucial to understand their writing. To them, poetry is a language resource already communally accessible; one need only reach out to join it.

Conclusion

In their introduction to di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters,* Sophie Lewis writes that "the poem has its limits … but the horizon we could step into *through the poem* is potentially limitless" (xvi). In movements of the New Left, poems were used in such a way, as part of the process of mobilization. Looking at the dissemination of poems in the late sixties, we can see that poetry provided a linguistic tool for this horizon to come to be. Poems like those of the SDS, BAM, the Motherfuckers or the Diggers emerged as a language practice to think, communicate, and construct political spaces intent on action. Poetry, we come to see, is part of the production of sites of

resistance. Its fragmentability and malleability makes it suited to the distribution of ideas and to the formation of communities coming into being. The poetics of social movements then were, from the start, expressive of the necessity for poetry to be real–to be involved in the things life is made of and to make life happen. This is not just about historicizing poets, but about approaching poems as acting upon society—as language used with purpose. Activists, communards, and lay people alike used poetry to communicate and produce a political vision. "Fuck poems," as Baraka would say, "and they are useful, wd they shoot. come at you, love what you are..." (*Reader* 219). With this, he teaches a way to read poetry as language with purpose that identifies structures of interest and want and makes it visible as a socially available type of language act. Poetry as language in society exceeds the literary to bleed into the streets. This creates favorable conditions for constellations of alignments and cross contamination of voices.

In an interview with the *New Left Review*, Jean-Paul Sartre said that 1968 provided an "enlargement of the field of the possible" (63). The political activity responsible for expanding the horizons of the struggle found in poetry a bedfellow. As communities reckoned with this enlargement, they reached for a language type suited for the articulation of possibility. Poetry, as I have argued, is not bound to the limitations of communicative language as such but operates in an emergent state of enregisterment, which allows for the simultaneity of the communicative and said possibility. To this end, '68 was a year of poetry indeed, one that at least made it visible as a productive part of the collective radical imagination.

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CHAPTER 2
KITE STRINGS AND ANGEL WINGS: MOBILE POETRIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

On November 1, 2023, weeks before his death, Palestinian poet, activist, and scholar Refaat Alareer posted his poem "If I Must Die" on *X*. He was killed in Gaza in a targeted Israeli airstrike alongside several family members on December 6.

> If I must die,
> you must live
> to tell my story
> to sell my things
> to buy a piece of cloth
> and some strings,
> (make it white with a long tail)
> so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
> while looking heaven in the eye
> awaiting his dad who left in a blaze—
> and bid no one farewell
> not even to his flesh
> not even to himself—
> sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above
> and thinks for a moment an angel is there
> bringing back love
> If I must die
> let it bring hope
> let it be a tale

The poem is in obvious conversation with Claude McKay's Harlem Renaissance poem "If We Must Die," one of the most important revolutionary poems of the anglophone literary tradition. The title and opening lines are remixes of the original, changing in pronouns alone, and though stretching McKay's sonnet to 19 lines, Alareer follows closely the trajectory of his counterpart. Alareer's gesture does a lot of heavy lifting–aligning his own verses to McKay's, he stresses the embeddedness of the Palestinian struggle for liberation into a broader, global fight against settler

colonialism and White supremacy. His connection with McKay and Black American resistance builds solidarity across communities and suggests interconnectedness of seemingly disjointed systems of oppression. With this motion, the poet reminds his readers that, across time and space, poetry has been a tool for political action, to envision a path forward and to make these visions known. “If I Must Die,” then, is a continuation of McKay’s own, “Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!,” picking up where the other left off with an amplification (McKay 1919). McKay had written his own poem during the Red Summer of 1919 while working on the Pennsylvania Railroad where, fearing for his life and the lives of his companions, he read it aloud to them to encourage them to resist their White assailants (Bernes 244). The poem is a powerful example of the functionality of poetic address. It is meant to operate as communicative, speaking directly to his peers and informing a sense of collective. With his “we,” McKay beckons his community into being, centers it on shared identity and shared motives, and incites it to action.

Each citation and recitation of McKay’s poem since its inception would activate alignments with his original commitments. Before Alareer, Assata Shakur from the Black Liberation Army spoke the poem aloud to the police from a hospital bed after her arrest (Bernes 249). Her echo annexed her to McKay’s original “we” and extended the scope of the poem’s community and its effects. Alareer’s uptake is somewhat different; the poet, in his case, does not repeat McKay’s original, but models a new poem after it. In so doing, he aligns himself with the commitments first expressed by McKay. At the same time, Alareer creates something new. And in this new poem, he situates himself in relation to his community in a way that both resembles and differs from McKay. Circulating in a pre-social media landscape, McKay’s poem called on his “we” to gather and fight White supremacy to the death. On social media, Alareer instead establishes an “I-you” relationship with his audience, where the latter’s actions must follow his own death. In other words, where

McKay's poem is a call for his own community to rise up alongside him, Alareer's is a set of posthumous instructions for the international community to tell the story of the people of Gaza.[25]

"If I Must Die" had been published before 2023 but it had not received the same kind of attention as it did after Alareer posted it on *X*. First shared on Alareer's blog *Gaza, My Gaza* in 2011, it was published again on *Mondoweiss* and *Global Poetry* in 2012. In 2014, Alareer released it once more as a conclusion to his paper "Gaza Writes Back: Narrating Palestine" in a special issue of *Biography*. Nonetheless its readership and circulation, particularly in literary circles, has been difficult to trace because, as Salih J. Altoma writes, "the poem sprea[d] primarily by oral transmission with no publisher involved to promote it or track its circulation" (2024). Despite lacking boosts from institutional agents, after Alareer's death, the poem went viral on social media, making it almost overnight "one of the most read and translated [poems] of the 21st century" (Skopic 2024). Within just a few months, it would be translated in over 100 languages, graffitied, read publicly by poets and amateurs, and shared widely on digital platforms. It is this last phenomenon that I am interested in focusing on for the purpose of this study.

"If I Must Die" is an address beckoning anyone who will listen to join Alareer's chain of storytelling, extending the call for liberation to those awaiting it. With a poetic bid, Alareer enacts the instructions he imparts. His readers, we are told, should respond to his poem by "liv[ing]," "tell[ing his] story," and assembling and flying a kite to bring hope to "a child, somewhere in Gaza." The kites in the poem are symbols of hope predicated on Palestinian children seeing them and mistaking them for angels; in the imaginary of the poem, the kites must point away from themselves if they are to be signals. The same is true of the poem. For its verses to be hopeful, they too must point beyond themselves, to the chain of storytelling necessary for Alareer's message

[25] The poem has a global appeal both in the choice of social media as a venue of distribution, and in the choice of English as language of the poem.

to be transmitted across time and space. The chain hinges on the living reader, passing the hopeful call and transmitting its possibility along with it. The kites are also signs of emplacement; with their strings anchored, they float free but remain grounded. They then exemplify the process of dissemination of Alareer's poem which, despite widespread circulation, dabbled in but ultimately escaped the full force of abstraction on new media

In this study I argue that poetry is a language practice that gives definition to communal wants as communities come into being. I track a version of what Gries, in her study of rhetorical circulation, describes as distributed iconicity's power to "reassembl[e] collective life" (201). Poetry lends itself to appropriation, manipulation, and ultimately distribution, and these features contribute to its establishment as a register of possibility (see Introduction). Social media promises the extreme version of this phenomenon, as an avenue of seemingly unlimited dissemination and democratic access to digital resources. And while some aspects of social media do facilitate the establishment of communities centered on poetry, its culture of identity-building and its profit-driven model undergirded by algorithmic optimization limit the life of the poem by abstracting it and subjecting it to unending mediation. In this way, poetry is reduced to an accessory, a brand, and a commodity. Through readings of poems, poetic references, and poetry accounts on social media, I suggest that the possibilities indexed by poetry may never be actualized, but least of all on new media platforms.

Poetic Icons



Figure 1: Screenshot by the author. "#refaatalareer." March 30, 2024.

By "iconicity," I intend the way poem on new media platforms become summative banners signaling and assuming shared values. Gries theorizes "iconographic tracking" to account for "an image's circulation, transformation, and consequentiality" (109). While my method only overlaps with Gries' in some respects (the study of an icon's composition, production, circulation, and "reassembl[age] of collective life"), I find her work generative to represent and interpret the process of transformation of viral artifacts distributed on digital media (Gries 114-126, 124). Gries, however, spends most of her study on the "tracking" portion of her methodology, following and mapping images as they transform, and in turn transform the spaces they inhabit, glossing over the significance of the icon itself. I understand iconicity in the wake of Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites' concept of "iconic appropriation," where the "establishment of icon status" precedes "charting circulation" ("Icons, Appropriation, and the Co-Production of Meaning" 287). Icons are

"easily recognized," "reproduced widely," and "used to orient the individual within a context of collective identity, obligation, and power" (*No Caption Needed* 2). They "come to represent large swath of historical experience" and audiences "gather around them as the embodiment of their collective identity" (*No Caption Needed* 2; Giesen 247). As icons are established as such, "layers of signification … 'enlarge' their reference" and individual "hermeneutical liberty is overwritten by shared understandings" (Kopper 447). I engage these definitions, as well as aspects of Gries' methodology, to understand not only how poems change, but the different ways they become signals for digital communities, and the extent to which these signals remain rooted in the sites from which they first came to be.

As it circulated, "If I Must Die" came to stand in for the political commitments of a real and digital community coalescing around it. On Instagram, the poem is seen painted on buildings, reproduced in journals, written on kites, and used to caption political posts. Take for instance figure 1, featuring a white kite with Alareer's poem scribbled on it in what looks like black sharpie. The kite itself is already an afterlife of the poem; it fulfills its request and carries it as a banner for others to see. The kite is also pictured at what appears to be a protest, strengthening the connection between the poem and the politics of Palestinian liberation. These kinds of posts pairing "If I Must Die" with political actions are how Alareer's poem came to index a commitment to activism. Figure 2 illustrates this similarly. As pictured, lines from "If I Must Die" overlay a black and white photo of a Gaza solidarity encampment at the University of California, Irvine. The encampment was one of hundreds of similar actions on university campuses worldwide by which students demanded that their institutions divest from weapon manufacturing and Israeli cultural institutions. This image too stages a link between the poem and the global student movement for divestment. The connection is reinforced in the caption which calls for donations to the Palestinian Children

Relief Fund before closing off with a "Free Palestine." The poem gives the elements of the post continuity. The donations, the student movement, and the call to free Palestine are part of the history of struggle against occupation which Alareer asked the living to continue. In this sense, the encampment and the fundraiser are both offered as responses to Alareer's bid, which in return is made into a symbol of solidarity with Gaza.

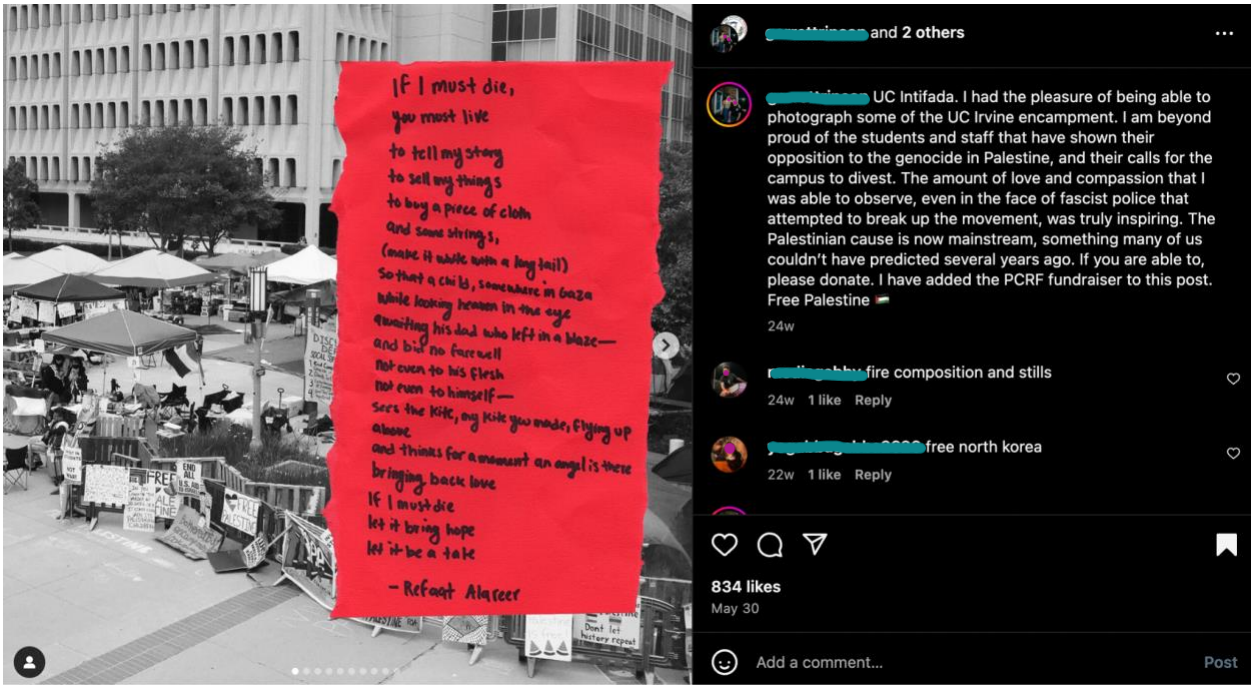


Figure 2: Screenshot by the author. "UC Intifada." May 30, 2024.

In the digital space, the pairing of fragments of "If I Must Die" with visuals and non-poetic text (like hashtags and commentaries) sets up, rehearses, and ultimately establishes the connection between the poem and a set of practices and values. When Instagram users cite and share excerpts of "If I Must Die," whether they be stand-alone or accompanied by keffiyehs or Palestinian flags, they signal solidarity and alignment with Palestinian liberation. The connection is eventually repeated enough times and by enough users, that the poem becomes an icon gesturing to a set of

values without needing to explicate them. The poem (whole and in pieces) now comes to signal solidarity with the Palestinian struggle without the signal itself requiring explication. As these connections solidify into a pattern, the sight of the poem alone–for example, on the side of a building as in figure 3–is enough to evoke a set of politics.

Social media not only captures and preserves these trajectories of dissemination, but indeed it makes them possible. As it circulates, the poem indexes the ideals of a whole community. The digital avenue enables its replicability and transferability to the point of creating something new, nonetheless bound to the old. It is as Gries notices in her account of rhetorical circulation: "rhetoric, especially in a digitally mediated environment, is more like an unfolding event;" following its "initial moment of production," it "transforms and transcends across genres, media, and forms, as it circulates and intra-acts with other human and nonhuman entities" (7). Through a broad range of interactions across nodes of association, social media widens the distribution of poems, rendering them abstractable. The new digital object–the image, the poem, the caption, the comments, etc.—maintains a link to Alareer's call, but also shows belonging to a social media community in flux, using poems to signal a commitment to activism that may or may not be tethered to analog activity.



Figure 3: Screenshot by the author. "I'm in Ireland…" February 3, 2024.

Alareer's is an example of socially salient circulation and iconification of a poem on Instagram. I begin with this case study because it shows how poetry is used in digital spaces to build communities centered on shared commitments which the poems themselves come to signal. On social media, poems and poets are excerpted from their analog sites and made into banners for users to align themselves to. "If I Must Die," in other words, points to existing collective politics and to the tendency for people to use poetry to flag them. At the same time, with the poem's circulation we also see the tendency for social media to cut the kite string–that is, to enable distribution at the cost of emplacement. Shards of poetry on social media and the networks they make both visible and possible, then, have much to tell us about their venue of dissemination and the forms of sociality therein. If, as Christian Fuchs writes, "media are techno-social systems, in which information and communication technologies enable and constrain human activities and

knowledge," then we ought to regard all language types distributed in this system as participants in the enabling and constraining described (*Social Media* 37).[26]

A Digital Commons

In the 1990s, the early days of web 1.0, discourses surrounding its release were hopeful for the dream of a democratic digital commons. Scholars of new media, from Thomas Allmer to Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, describe the development of the internet as constructed on the ideal of common distribution of information (Couldry and Mejias 2019). This form was envisioned "against the background of the values of freedom and human cognitive enhancement characteristic of the US counterculture of the 1960s" (Couldry and Mejias 10). Indeed, at a fundamental level the internet is premised on a "common code" and on the common distribution of information (Hardt and Negri x). This is what Fuchs calls the "digital commons," or the "digital resources that are commonly controlled by humans" ("The Digital Commons" 19). At the foundation of the production and reproduction of the internet, both historically and structurally, is then a shared form, "strongly resisting," as Hardt and Negri relate it, "all legal and economic efforts to privatize it or bring it under public control" (x).

However, the privatization efforts of corporations have eroded the dream of a digital commons. Presently, 21 of the world's 100 largest companies are digital and communication corporations, producing 3% of the world's annual wealth ("The Digital Commons" 10). Meta alone–home of Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.–produces an annual revenue of $160 billion and makes the bulk of its money selling user data to third-party advertisers ("Meta Reports" 2026; "Free Labor" 2013). The story of the internet then was quickly overrun with algorithms, ads, and

[26] For the purpose of this study, I only focus on Instagram but there is space for inquiries into other social media venues like X, Reddit, or TikTok.

data extraction. The result was the transformation of the stuff of daily life into commodities: "oligarchs capture and financialize our productive expression and take flight with our data. We, the 'users,' are sold as the product" (Scholz 9). At the same time the drive toward the common(s) is still visible in the midst of algorithmic optimization. Hito Steyerl describes the tension between the commons and enclosure in the digital distribution of folk material. These grounds of circulation, as she writes, "constitute both a platform for fragile new common interest and a battleground for commercial and national agendas" (Steyerl 6). Beyond types of circulation, social media itself is, in the words of Allmer, a "fiel[d] of conflict … able to support both the expansion and the commodification of the commons" (5). In other words, Allmer continues, it "impl[ies] a logic of the commons and processes of commodification and enclosure that tend to jeopardize the commons and incorporate them into the logics of capital" (26). On the one hand, social media is predicated on for-profit privatization; on the other, "the content of what is produced … tends toward being common" (Hardt and Negri x).

Following Hartelius' understanding of a commons as an aggregate of "commoners," "sites and networks of encounter," and "cultural resources," we might consider poetry as one such resource "with which the encounters are coordinated" (*The Gifting Logos* 10).[27] Hardt and Negri include language alongside information, knowledge, and code, as a "practic[e] of interaction, care, and cohabitation in a common world" (viii). In this sense, language categories that are culturally available on social media, such as poetry, can then be understood as resources in common, used to both exist in and build community, and to expand a poem's reach, both real and imagined. If, as Kristin Ross writes, the common is both a practice and a form, then what happens when a resource

[27] For more on the relationship between commons and commonplace, see Hartelius' *The Gifting Logos,* where she explains that "in rhetorical theory, the cultural commons, enter through the concept of commonplaces. Most simply, we may think of the aforementioned stuff of the cultural commons–the ideas, artifacts, inventions, and knowledges–as necessary equipment for any persuasive effort" (17).

like poetry is reproduced on a platform like Instagram, premised on the contradiction of common and commodity (2024)?

What I have argued so far is that the formation of some digital communities with shared commitments can be tracked to poems. And as poems, as Gries writes of "things," "enter into material relations with humans, technologies, and other entities," they "generate material consequences" (11). The poems themselves then come to stand in for the commitments of groups, signaling to internal and external audiences, collective politics, lifestyles, or beliefs without those being explicitly stated. This suggests that poetry is mobile and moldable, and that its rhetoricity is taken at face value by groups who subscribe to, extend, and appropriate its content. In this sense, I am talking about poetry not as an object but as a communal resource that can both be held in common and enclosed.[28] And in the latter respect, on social media, the cost of mobility is the blunting of its force through enclosure and mediation.

Poetry Abstracted

Unlike Alareer's poem, which remains to some extent tethered to the struggle that birthed it, the majority of poetry on social media becomes ungrounded in the circulation process, often getting co-opted for the identity building projects so common on Instagram. The poems of Mary Oliver are one example. Oliver is a fan favorite in both the self-help and the nature-loving corners

[28] Copyright laws and fair use policies–in place to protect writers' intellectual property and compensate them for their labor–function by defining poetry as both object and property. The "Code of Best Practices In Fair Use for Poetry" facilitated and published by the Poetry Foundation in collaboration with American University's Center for Social Media introduces the need for a fair use policy by citing compensation and the publishing demands of academic careers as primary sources of anxiety for poets with respect to poetry on social media. "Poets generally (though not universally) want their poetry to be as widely available to potential audiences as possible, both during their lifetimes and beyond," the document reads. "However, poets, especially those not working in and for new media formats, expressed anxiety about how new media might affect their ability to make money from their work and to establish and advance academic careers. And they were concerned about the ease with which new media enable others to distribute and alter their poems without permission." See "Code of Best Practices In Fair Use for Poetry." *Center for Social Media and Impact*. Jan 2011. Web. https://cmsimpact.org/code/code-best-practices-fair-use-poetry/

of Instagram. Personal branding posts abound on the platform, featuring yoga and Pilates instructors, lingerie models, and influencers posing for photos captioned with Oliver quotes. In figure 4, for example, we see a selfie of an Instagram user at a vacation resort in Costa Rica. The photo is posted with the famous lines from Oliver's "the Summer Day," "Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?" Beneath those, the account holder announces they are "in [their] #MaryOliver era." Oliver quotes like "keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable" are often found alongside tags like #fashionblogger, #nycmodel, and #lifecoaching, and the same kind of branding can be seen across posts sharing the #MaryOliver hashtag instead of a direct quote.

All in all, Oliver results pairable with accounts that sell, promote, or construct images of a self. Nature aficionados, too, have made Oliver sing their mantras. Excerpts of poems like "White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field" or "Sometimes" accompany action shots of owls and egrets in the wild. Oliver has come to signal transcendentalist values so much so that some users will use her name in a hashtag without quoting or writing about her in the caption (see figure 5, for instance). Somewhere between typifying and branding, the distribution of Oliver's name and poetry on Instagram is often not a direct response to her intentions. Yet it is a reduction though not necessarily a mischaracterization of the subjects of and sentiments of her poems, which have a Romantic flair to them in both their treatment of the environment and of the self. That coupled with "her presentation of poetry as a space untouched by politics," as Anna Schmidt writes, have made her appealing to and abstractable for an eclectic popular audience. For this audience, it signals the formation of communities interested in using Oliver's cultural capital to curate a persona, in a digital community of likeminded personas. The (mis)appropriation of Oliver's poetry

(and even of her name), raises questions about how the relationship between a poem's life and its moment of production is mediated on digital platforms.

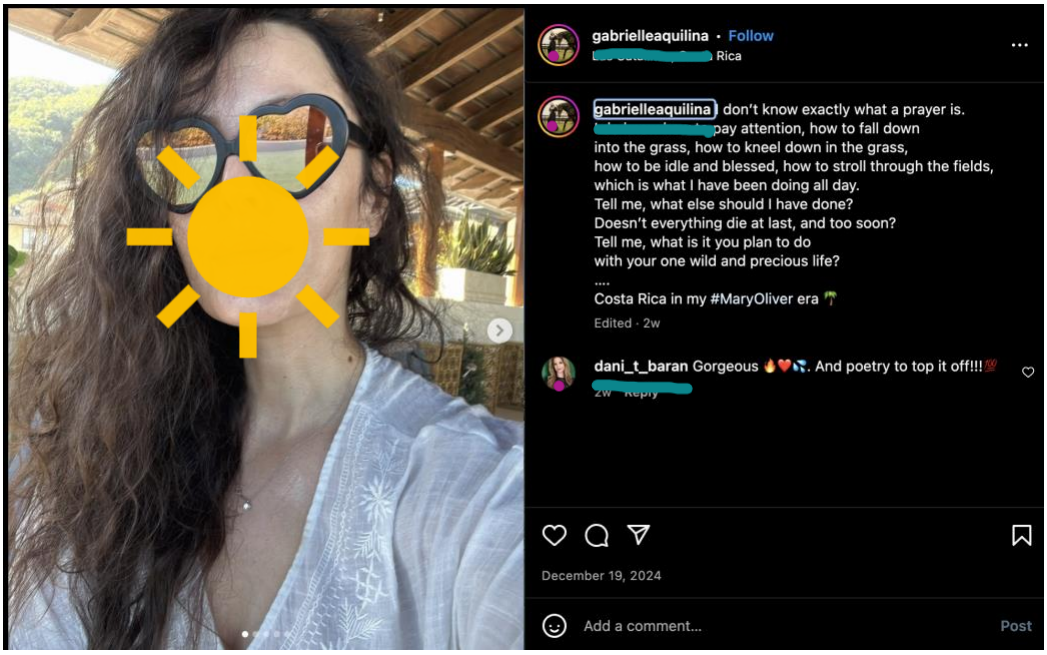


Figure 4: Screenshot by author (icon superimposed by author). "I don't know exactly…" December 19, 2024.



Figure 5: Screenshot by author. "Chestnuts and Fairy Dust." October 12, 2024.

The difference between the dissemination of Alareer and Oliver's poetry may in part have to do with time. "If I Must Die" has not been in circulation as long as Oliver's poems, which have had decades to travel further and further from their original. Of course, content plays a role as well. Alareer's poem is clear about its intentions for distribution. Its author is explicitly political, writes from a position of struggle and urgency, situates himself in a radical tradition of resistance, and uses social media as a direct venue of dissemination. Oliver's venues of publication are more traditional, and her subject matters are broader and more easily manipulated. It is not an outrageous stretch, then, for ecopoetics to turn nature logs and for the self to turn selfie. For every post quoting Oliver to express the same awe of nature that drove her to write to begin with, there is another using her poetry as a tagline for a Yves Saint Laurent sponsorship.[29] Yet the circulation of both Oliver and Alareer's poems suggests that poetry can be taken and used, in bits and pieces, in accordance with or unbeknownst to the poets who write it, to flag the beliefs, values, actions, and attributes of groups of people and to gesture to shared desires. It is, in a way, like tuning into a communal wish, which might look like group action or approximate self-affirmation.

Collecting Fragments

Dissemination on social media, then, toes the line between alignment with an original wish or tendency and the appropriation and transformation of the same original into a same-but-new fragment. Social media lends itself to the circulation of these amateur excerpts on the margins of cultural institutions and notions of authorship. Steyerl describes what she calls "the economy of poor images" as the distribution of low-quality pictures on digital platforms. She writes that the poor image, "with its immediate possibility of worldwide distribution and its ethics of remix and

[29] See, for instance, @vogueandcoffee's post from December 29, 2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/DEK_jokydMc/

appropriation, enables the participation of a much larger group of producers than ever before" (Steyerl 6). For her the poor image "builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates … it is no longer anchored within a classical public sphere mediated and supported by the frame of the nation state or corporation, but floats on the surface of temporary and dubious data pools" (Steyerl 8). Poetic fragments on social media are like the poor image in some ways. Like the poor image, they are "propelled onto new and ephemeral screens, stitched together by the desires of dispersed spectators" (Steyerl 8). Distributed not usually by the poets themselves but by amateur account holders, they are cut and reassembled, sharing in some altered semblance of the source. Beyond the cultural institutions that traditionally house poetry, these digital fragments are made and remade by many, and in that process, they become unlocalizable.

Instagram accounts like Tom Snarsky's, for example, are built on the appropriation and re-creation of poem-fragments from analog to digital. Snarsky's social media aesthetic hinges on pictures of poems printed on paper, from hard copies or scans of magazines to chapbooks and collections. Some photos on his feed include in the frame the edge or gutter of a book, a crease or a stain on a page, as reminders of the "realness" of the printed object featured digitally. In his bio, Snarsky self-presents not as a poet but as a collector with the William Gaddis quote "he collected things, each of a holy intention in isolation, but pagan in the variety of his choice" (Snarsky Web). His emphasis on the thingness or collectability of poems reduces them from a language practice to objects for personal following. Snarsky does still, through his account, create community. The account has around 33k followers, and each post gets a few hundred likes and several comments expressing support, gratitude, or appreciation (figure 6). At the same time, the account is centered

on the collector and the type of poetry content he is able to curate. Snarsky uses community not to communicate shared values but to build a brand.

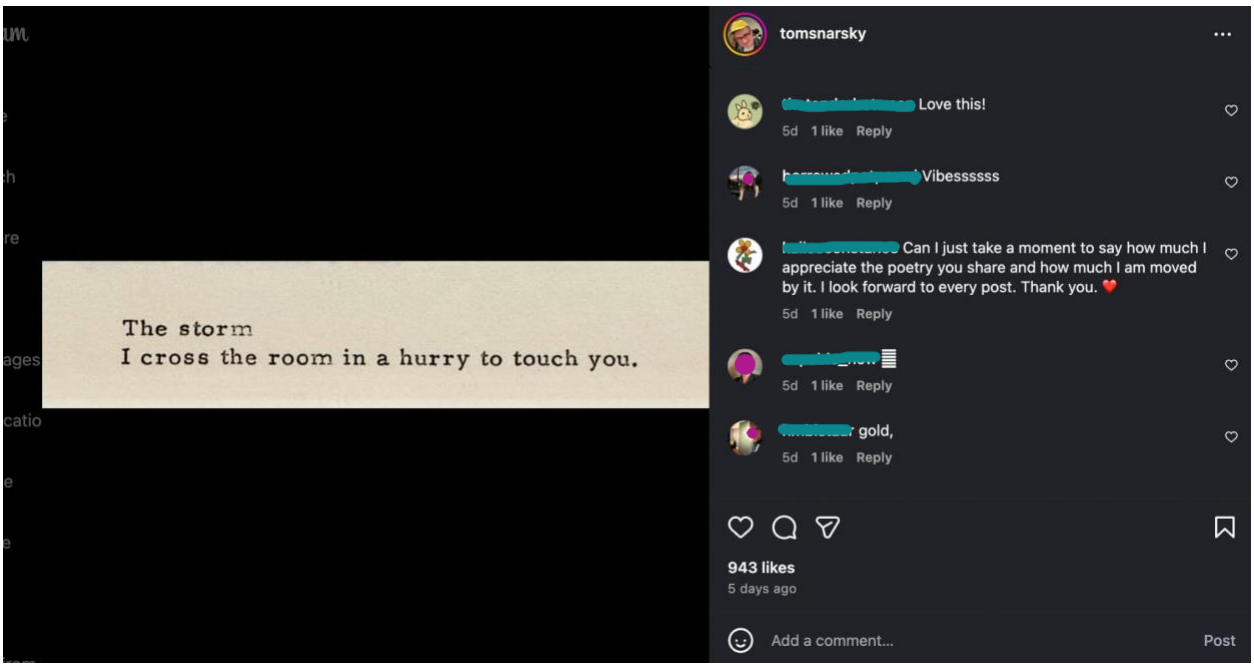


Figure 6: Screenshot by author. "The storm." tomsnarsky. November 8, 2025.

A more mainstream example is the Instagram account @poetryisnotaluxury. The account takes its name from Lorde's famous essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," where Lorde describes poetry as the way "we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action… the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought" (Lorde 37). Lorde writes of poetry, that is, as a necessary tool to imagine and communicate change that precedes the action required to bring that change about. In 1977, when the essay was first published, the author was active in the civil rights, queer, and feminist movement. For her, poetry truly was not a luxury; it was an essential rhetorical resource to imagine and communicate possibilities. As the account quotes in its bio, "the farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily

lives" (Lorde 37). The @poetryisnotaluxury account constructs its image based on an essay–and a poetics–that opposes an understanding of poetry as "sterile wordplay" and "imagination without insight"—the white patriarchal "distort[ion]" of poetry. In its practice, it reproduces a similar understanding.

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the anonymous curator of @poetryisnotaluxury describes starting the account during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown out of a desire to "forg[e] a new kind of community through poetry," the very thing I've been arguing poetry to be capable of producing and tracking online (Metzger 2023). "We were scattered across the world in our various lockdowns," they told *LARB*, "yet somehow occupying the same Instagram square of a poem" (Metzger 2023). Naming their account after Lorde's essay gives a genealogy to their stated need for community: poetry, like community, is perceived as a necessity, and one that can bring people together. And indeed, over the course of six years, the account has garnered a varied range of over 800k followers including poets, pop singers, pet sitters, and personal chefs. On each post, usually a photograph of a stanza or two snapped from a book, followers come together, mostly to share appreciation or something personal about their reading experience. The poets featured are varied, from Dionne Brand to Ellen Bass, Rilke to Djuna Barnes, but the account has a few favorites that it posts more frequently, among them Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, O'Hara, and Jordan.

Not long after going viral, the account launched a Patreon subscription service. The Patreon page, subtitled "creating poetry community," allows visitors to choose one of six membership tiers ranging from $5/month, which gets one exclusive updates and a "patreon only poetry post," and $25/month for an additional "trio of poetry buttons." In monetizing some of its content and making it inaccessible to part of its followers, @poetryisnotaluxury made poetry into a luxury. Some

months later, during its interview with LARB, @poetryisnotaluxury took the opportunity to promote its new partnership with *Boxwalla*, a subscription box service that sells books, skincare products, organic food, and fashion. For $39.95, the *Boxwalla* x @poetryisnotaluxury partnership sends subscribers a box containing three poetry books and bonus items like tote bags, pins, and stickers. The box also gets subscribers 15% off *Boxwalla*'s retail shop, and it can be bundled with goods like hyperpigmentation serum, a scented candle, or artisanal chocolate. An excerpt from Lorde's famous essay that gave the account its name is used on the *Boxwalla* site to advertise their product as a way to "introduce poetry in our daily lives" ("Poetry Box" Web). Eventually, after realizing they were already "accidentally putting together a series of anthologies," the account announced on their Instagram page that they would be publishing a *Poetry Is Not A Luxury* anthology through Simon & Schuster, anonymously and with a promotional tagline by Florence Welch (*Florence and the Machine*) on the front cover (Anonymous 2025).

As the available types of privatizations and objectifications multiplied, @poetryisnotaluxury became less about communing with and by poetry, and more about monetization. In fact, by adapting poetry to suit social media platforms, the account became exemplary of the "platformization of cultural industries," whereby industries like publishing adopt "the logic of the platforms" in their digital and analog production processes (Nieborg and Poell 4285). Writers, artists, and the industries they participate in have become "more and more dependent on platforms, which act as increasingly powerful gatekeepers for the production, circulation, and discovery of their product" (Bonini and Trere 64). Algorithm optimization especially has come to radically shape the field of cultural production. For this reason we see publishers adopt BookTok as a marketing strategy, or Simon & Schuster publish an anthology that was first a social media account, and use the same account to sell the book.

Social media then complicates Bourdieu's model of institutional forces as gatekeepers of the literary field. The digital literary sphere, as Simone Murray calls it, "radically undercuts the cultural arbiter status of professional literary critics within an online context of mass amateur criticism and reflex popular evaluation" (20). On Instagram, accessibility of information makes institutional venues and endorsements obsolete. It is from this "mass democratic accessibility" and "vocal celebration of amateur self-expression" that the digital literary sphere gets its "cultural energy and dynamism" (Murray 18). Instead of the Bourdieusian ratifiers of symbolic capital (critics, editors, publishers, etc.), literary clout on digital platforms hinges largely on algorithmic optimization, and "cultural arbitration is thus removed from the sphere of public debate via an incremental process of 'privatization'" (Murray 57). The old gatekeepers may be obsolete, but social media heralds in some new ones: clout, sponsorships, followers, and of course, money. This process of platformization is, in the words of Caddie Alford, nothing but the "gradual enclosure and intensification of corporate capture of the internet" (34). While the desire to distribute poetry freely may underlie its circulation for some on new media, that is not how its life on platforms plays out. The privatization of digital and linguistic resources engulfs poetry as well, transforming it, and "all life activities into calculable risks that function according to economic rationalities" (Chaput 5).

Branding functions as a kind of enclosed flagging. Rather than making its signal socially available, it uses sets of recognizable features to target audiences for profit. Enclosure is also the motion modeled by the @poetryisnotaluxury account in its treatment of the poetic resources in common. The account makes private what is already widely accessible and circulatable, turning it into a marketable product. It is but one example of how the community-building potential of poetry is co-opted on social media to benefit profiles premised on literariness. Users leverage poetic

branding to gain followers and sponsorships, using algorithms to build their platform and fit users into profitable categories. Indeed "in categorizing," Susanna Sacks and Sarah Brouillette remind us, algorithms "create boundaries and norms," and so they optimize gestures of enclosure of digital communities (Sacks and Brouillette 2023). Grouped by algorithms, audience categories form taxonomically rather than spontaneously, mimicking the contours of a community without its substance.

Social media ultimately is not a neutral context where poetry may find its way. The affordances that make poetry appealing to be used iconically also make it susceptible to the algorithm. "Poetry travels more easily than any other art," Chasar quotes Harriet Monroe saying (4). Indeed, poetry is compressed, and its prosody is attention-grabbing. It is easily packaged, fits neatly in notebook margins or Instagram squares. It is excerptable, adaptable, and moldable–its lines can be lifted and borrowed, and appropriated to suit the needs of the borrower. In the same chapter Chasar also quotes Debray: "Transportation *by* is transformation *of*. … That which is transported [in this case the book] is remodeled, refigured, and metabolized by its transit" (12). Chasar's point in quoting both Monroe and Debray is to twist the latter on its head in the wake of the former. Poetry's ease of circulation, that is, "helped shape and transform media as well as relations between media forms*,"* and this way "transport *of* [poetry] is transformation *by* [poetry]" (Chasar 13).

Chasar is not wrong. As we will see in this study, discursive practices are not only constituted by but constitutive of their locales. At the same time, Chasar moves quickly away from Debray's claim to make a claim of his own, perhaps overlooking the way some mediums, like social media platforms, are designed to welcome the expansion of "their range and possibility by incorporating poetry," for indeed they make of things like poetry their foodstuffs (Chasar 13).

Poetic features like brevity, recognizability, emotive triggers, memorable and repeatable patterns, and associations with possibility appeal to a variety of groups and individuals with wide ranges of wishes to articulate. The same features are not unlikely to generate rapid engagement on Instagram, slipping into a feedback loop of abstraction, classification, circulation, and surface-level interaction. In the end, these qualities, so effective in building collective visions, cause poetry to undergo more transformation by than transformation of.

Profit, then, usurps any attempt at community-building on platforms like Instagram. Data mining and algorithm optimization produce the traffic that incentivizes content creation. Creativity in this case is not marginal to "exploitation on web 2.0," as Fuchs writes. "It is its very foundation" (*Social Media* 61). Social activities on platforms are the fuel that keeps the machine running. In the digital economy, they become what Tiziana Terranova calls "free labor," whereby "the commodity … becomes more of a process than a finished product" and "continuous, creative, innovative labor" like content creation becomes "the ground of market value" ("Free Labor" 63). The process of making something in common on social media actually becomes a process of making something out of the common thing.

Windows to the Analog

The platformization of poetry might not be entirely in conflict with the logic of big publishing, but it may instead be an optimization of it. The construction of poetry as a literary object is the consequence of a similar type of enclosure, whereby linguistic resources are excerpted from daily use and made into artifacts (See Introduction). But while social media is not the only space that subjects poetry to capture, it is a space that abstracts practices and transforms them into labor. At the same time, the tension between capture and escape also makes visible the use of

poetry as a linguistic resource to imagine horizons of possibility. In the end, poetry, like everything else on social media, is swallowed by the structure that makes its circulation possible. Every poem, poetic fragment, or poetry hashtag on Instagram stuffs Meta's pockets with dollars. In addition, poems on Instagram, even when shared to signal alignment with something other than oneself, can circulate so far from their origin as to become susceptible to being coopted for identity building. Yet poems circulate still and are used in and by communities to signal alignment with articulated possibilities. Can something be so entirely subsumed, i.e. integrated in the logic of capital, that it loses all its potential? Or can the gesture of possibility point outside the capture? The story of poetry's capture is also the story of its escape, for it appears that, despite its susceptibility to infinite mediation, some instances of poetry remain grounded to sites of communal action.

One example is the circulation of the poetry of Marcellus Williams before and after his death. In 2001, Williams was sentenced to death for the alleged murder of Felicia Gayle despite lack of sufficient evidence to prove him guilty. Williams' case was long, arduous, and appealed unsuccessfully over the years. Though prosecuted and convicted, he would assert his innocence until the very end. National pushback notwithstanding, he was killed by the state of Missouri in 2024. Some days before his execution, a few poems Williams wrote while incarcerated were circulated on social media with the hashtag "#savemarcellus," paired with calls to action to halt the execution. As seen in figure 7 and figure 8, users posted Williams' poems and used their captions to encourage others to contact Governor Mike Parson and to share the call to action widely. To be clear, poetry alone would not have been enough to stop the execution. Still, Williams' poems were dramatic rejections of the carceral conditions that dehumanize, punish, exploit, and oppress through institutionalized slavery. In different ways, they gestured to alternative ways of being–to the hope of joy in suffering, the possibility of justice and liberation,

and relations premised on love. In "The Perplexing Smiles of the Children of Palestine," for example, Williams ponders with hope the resilience of Palestinian children whose "laughter can be heard" and who "somehow … are able to smile" through unimaginable suffering. And in "At Last…Another's Heartbeat," Williams imagines being free amidst "fireflies dancing in step with the light of the moon," experiencing the "beauty and comfort of being in love … becom[ing] aware of another's heartbeat but forget[ting] one's own." Yet, gestures cannot do much if action does not follow.

Digital communities came together, distributed their poems and hashtags, and called their representatives, but Marcellus' life was taken, nonetheless. As the range of the poem widened, the link to the struggle became unstable, and the poems lost to the affordance of their medium of circulation. Williams' poetry on social media entered a digital dead end. It was passed around over and over, used in earnest but also for political posturing, or to audition Williams to the category of human (as if to say, "look, he writes poetry, he deserves to live"). The poems were funneled through Instagram in a loop of mobile materials and kept their community conscripted within the social media environment.

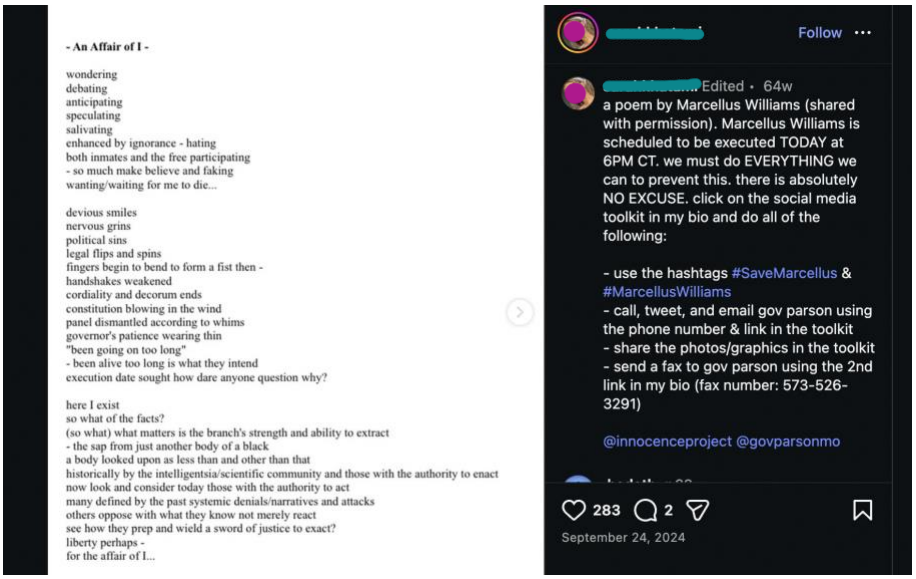


Figure 7: Screenshot by author. "a poem…" September 24, 2024.

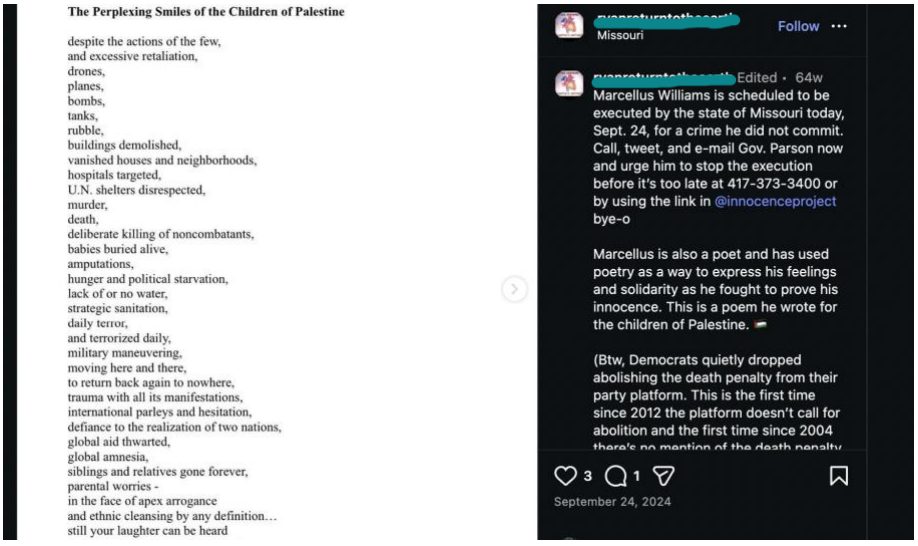


Figure 8: Screenshot by author. "Marcellus Williams…" September 24, 2024.

Through its form and function, social media capitalizes on its users' desire for collective life. Attempts at living out this desire are turned by the platform into echoing vortexes that do more for corporations than they ever do for communities. If there is any hope in the gestures of poetry on social media it is when these gestures remain tethered to a site beyond the platform, and in this way manage to lead away from the platform altogether. Let us return to Alareer's poem. We can

see in its distribution the same risk toward causelessness that we see in Williams' example. Coffee mugs, art journals, and other self-referential posts using "If I Must Die" as self-branding participate in the digital culture of subsumption, one that culminates in the commodification of everything. But Alareer's poem to some extent retains a kite string–it maintains attachment to the shape of a struggle that eventually leads people away from Instagram. Digital reproductions of "If I Must Die" are at their most powerful when we see evidence of the poem being practiced beyond social media. We might look to videos and photos of vigils and protests held in the streets worldwide after the poet's death, where attendees read Alareer's poem together.[30] Or we might look to posts from the global student solidarity movement, where student and faculty encampments and occupied buildings were named after Alareer, as for instance the Refaat Alareer Building at the University of Ghent or the Refaat Alareer Faculty Solidarity Encampment at the New York School.[31] In these examples, social media becomes a window to the site rather than the site of abstraction itself. The string is the necessary condition for a poem to be "actualized," to use Gries' terminology, or to possess the "rhetorical strategies and semiotic resources at work within an actualized image [that] influence its ability to generate collective action" (Gries 57). There can be no radical culmination of the gesture of possibility on social media. To remain on the platform would be to halt the indexical force of the poem.

[30] See, for instance, @uscpr's post from March 2, 20204 https://www.instagram.com/p/C4Ckg6VgIqk/?hl=en&img_index=7, or @chelsey_wright_'s video from December 10, 2023 https://www.instagram.com/p/C0qngcGt9vJ/?hl=en&img_index=1.

[31] See, for instance, @ghentstudent_encampment's post from December 2, 2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/DDFeYcqoS_z/?hl=en&img_index=1, or @tns4p's post from May 8, 2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/C6ukR9-sD7P/?hl=en&img_index=1.

Conclusion

Social media and poetry, as modes of community building, are ultimately not congruent. The similarities between the two do make the former conducive to the spread and uptake of poems. Features like distributability, fragmentability, and indexicality are used to build digital communities and digital personas. Poetry is used to articulate and align with possibility in a way that brings the possible into language, and as digital communities come to be, it marks their formation around shared values, politics, or behaviors. But the differences between poetry and social media lead to an impasse. Even in those cases where Instagram users might seem to want to share poetry as a resource in common, social media itself abstracts communication and transforms it into free labor. Its profit-driven, extractive model ultimately inhibits the life of the poem, cutting its ties from any place or cause and reducing its potentiality to mere promiscuity of circulation. This way poetry is defanged, made to appear as entertainment or emotive wordplay and made to profit corporations and their oligarchs. Still, the poetry is screaming, and it points toward the possibility of action.

For these gestures to amount to something, they must ultimately lead away from social media. "We must reject the axiom," as Federici reminds us, "that digital technologies (Twitter, Facebook) are conveyor belts of global revolution… the internet can be a facilitator, but transformative activity is not triggered by the information passed online" (193). Communities may exist digitally in a potential state where poems might give them definition. But motions of escape lead to real life, where possibilities are tried and tested, where they fail or play out. Just as Alareer's kites must point to angels, so must poems point away from themselves, out of the self-referential loop of social media, and out of the enclosure of literature to actualizable shared possibilities.

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CHAPTER 3
SONG OF THE LATENT COMMONS:
SOCIAL POIESIS IN BATHROOM STALLS

"Toilet poetry is the literature of the future" - Anonymous[32]

Like many weird ideas, this one started in the toilet. I was provoked by a line reproduced widely across public bathrooms in the United States: "Since writing on bathroom stalls is done neither for wealth nor critical acclaim it is the purest form of art. Discuss" (@publicbathroomstilllife 2022).[33] Years later, I was in a bathroom in the Physical Sciences Classroom Building (PSCB) at the University of California, Irvine. It was May 2024, and the space was being used by students from the Free Gaza Solidarity Encampment nearby. Written inside the stall in black sharpie, half-faded but still legible, was, "LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD" (figure 9). This cry joined the chorus of voices outside the building calling for a free Palestine and for an end to genocide and institutional war profiteering. It was anonymous, strategically situated, appealing to its community, and gesturing toward the possibility of liberation—all this



Figure 9: LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD. Photograph by author. University of California, Irvine. May 2024.

[32] Bathroom Musings (@bathroom_musings). Instagram photo. July 11, 2022. Also reproduced as a quote in the same account's bio.
[33] Variations of the same phrase can be found widely online and in public bathrooms in the U.S.

with no promise of personal gain. Was this art? The question does not intend to fetishize or diminish what is clearly the expression of an important political struggle. It instead seeks to address how these expressions show up in public spaces and how they function. What is the purpose of inscriptions like these, which both produce and are produced by space, and what role do they play in the landscape of their occasions?

To answer these questions, I suggest that a better term for "art" here might be "poetry." I take the sentiment of these inscriptions seriously to think through what I propose here as a poetics of latrinalia. What is gained if rather than treating poems as literary objects, we allow the social happenings of poetry to teach us how to read? Instead of arguing for the importance of specific latrinalia objects as "poems," I find those useful to argue for a redefinition of what we are talking about when we talk about poetry: not a set of objects or an elevated imaginative capacity, but the material possibility of a social action prior to its encoding. In other words, as discussed in the Introduction, I want to read poetry as what linguistic anthropologists call a *discursive register,* a way of using language in society, that passes through but is not limited to the enclosure of the sphere of literary production. Much recent criticism has been devoted to discovering the ways that poems belong to their present. Through accounts of the material actuality of indexed possibility, I will focus on the ways that poems belong, in their present, to their future.

By shifting our gaze to public spaces where poetry is evoked, I propose we may perceive emergent entanglements of worldmaking appeals. We might begin by rethinking what poetry is in the first place, where it is found, and what it is used for. As I will show, poetry as a category of latrinalia has precedence in both the verse genres found in public bathrooms and in the folk term used to describe some types of bathroom writing. The Encampment writing is just one example of a pattern of poetic articulations across public restrooms in the US which share a desire for imagined

possibility. I say "pattern" because what I am after is not a deep analysis of a single inscription, a single bathroom, or a handful of bathrooms in the same building. Rather, I am after an initial glimpse of a bird's eye view, the hint of recurrence that might suggest that we are, in fact, dealing with an established register that is both situationally dependent and socially used. Through this approach, the poetic might be accounted for as a way of writing and speaking in society that is not dependent on the generic and institutional demands of the literary marketplace and the literary field of production, but that is practiced and tuned into to articulate desires and motives that require an orientation toward a future that is not here yet but that can be believed in (Bourdieu 1994).[34]

I turn to public bathrooms as examples of common spaces where poetry is legible as one way to bring material possibility into the present. To be sure, not all latrinalia writing is poetic. I am interested in what results from the conference of what flags itself and is flagged by others as "poetry" and the affordances of sociality, anonymity, and spatial disciplining of public restrooms. Restrictions like segregation, gendering, and accessibility limit and define the community of users who gets to write in public bathrooms. And language seen in these spaces often reinforces violence though racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and misogynist expression. Yet, as with the PSCB, articulations in social spaces under pressure might function not only to uphold violence, but indeed to transgress it. This investigation attempts to get to the heart of small cries for liberation in the everyday, the ones that show up in messy places and gesture to the possibility of their realization. It is a familiar tale, but also one that we have perhaps forgotten, one that Robin D.G. Kelley articulates beautifully when he writes that "we must remember that the conditions and the

[34] By attunement I mean something different from how the term is used in the atmospheric turn. Thomas Rickert defines it a "fundamental entanglement" with one's surroundings (2013, 8). Kathleen Stewart similarly describes it as "a labor that arrives already weighted with what it's living through" (2011, 448). I share in Cathy Chaput's critique of New Materialism's atmospheric turn as an incomplete "abandon[ment] of the rational in favor of the ambient environment and its various flows of information" (Chaput 2018, 177). Attunement as used in this chapter refers to the switching stations, of sorts, that users of registers perform to align with a register and its indexicals.

very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way. It is that imagination, that effort to see the future in the present, that I shall call 'poetry' or 'poetic knowledge'" (9). Perhaps poetry does not have magic properties, but it is simply the register of the possible. And public bathrooms might host glimpses of it, in the utterances that speak and imagine possibility outside the logic of patriarchal and racial capitalism. If poetry broadcasts the song of the latent commons, it is worth tuning into.

Poetry as Register

Poetry has colloquially been used to refer to bathroom writing for some time. The term "latrinalia" was first coined by folklorist Alan Dundes in 1966. Dundes's interest was in the bathroom inscription as a form of ethnographic data, and he used "latrinalia" as an alternative to the prevailing "folk term," "shithouse poetry," noting that "not all latrinalia is in verse or poetic form" (92). Despite his desire to restrict "poetry" to formal verse, however, "poetry" has remained the preferred term for this kind of bathroom inscription in digital media, maintaining a link between verse genres and writing in public restrooms. On Instagram, for example, at least 68 English-language accounts dedicated to bathroom inscriptions include the word "poetry" in their handle: "toilet_poetry," "toiletpaperpoetry," "bathroom.stall.poetry," "_bathroompoetry," and "bathroompoetry_" (figure 10). As of 2024, more than 5,000 posts are hashtagged #bathroompoetry, while more than 4,000 are hashtagged #toiletpoetry.

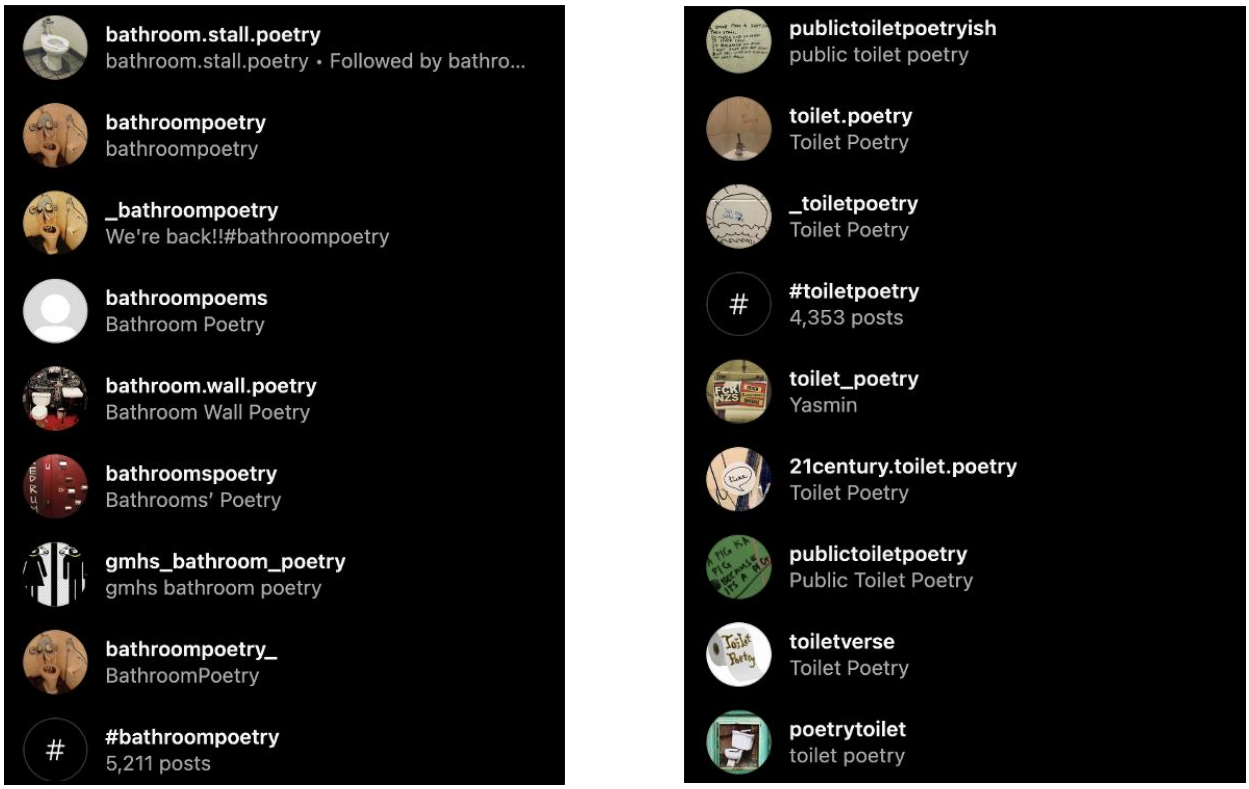


Figure 10: Some of the accounts and hashtags that populate when searching "bathroom poetry" or "toilet poetry" on Instagram.

In maintaining the folk term's emphasis on the poetry of bathroom writing, this chapter asks what it would mean to follow the language that has been considered poetic into a space such as the public bathroom and let that trail guide the work of categorization. In other words, what is the significance of labeling bathroom writing as "poetry"? I propose that while this may to an extent involve oxymoronic wordplay, enlisting the high art of poetry to mark abject folk inscriptions, there is nonetheless a principle guiding this collective work of classification. As seen in the Introduction, through categorizations along the lines of "genre," institutional agents in the literary field–be they editors, publishing houses, or English classrooms–make poems into products.[35] But before and beyond the enclosure of literature, poetry is communication attuned to

[35] For approaches to works of art as labor commodities see Introduction, and Dave Beech (2016) *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics*, and Leigh Claire La Berge (2019)

possibility.[36] Looking for it in places like the public bathroom facilitates thinking of it as a kind of emplaced public discourse.[37]

Regarding poetry as such allows us to see it as a mode of communication employed situationally and recognized socially, and importantly, it provides an avenue to think seriously about the connection between the category of poetry and the kinds of ideals people reach for when they use it. The marking of some types of latrinalia as "poetry" activates a connection between bathroom writing and the articulation of possibility. This both enlarges the scope of sites of poetry and transforms the sites by making possibility materially available through emplaced poetic discourse.

The idea of a situated mode of communication with a rhetorical function is predicated on the understanding of a communicative action produced by and responding to its context. I am, in this respect, indebted to sociology of literature's reading of works of art as entangled in the web of institutional forces of their cultural field. This approach is crucial for a historically and materially grounded understanding of what we consider literary objects, made, as Bourdieu would have it, in "a space of objective relationships among positions." But if regarded according to Bourdieu's field of cultural production, a communicative action will be somewhat dictated by the positions available to its agent in a restricted field. While not inaccurate, this is, in my view,

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Wages Against Artwork: *Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Ar*t. For studies of literature's dependence on funding and infrastructure, see Juliana Spahr (2018) *Du Bois's Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment* and Sarah Brouillette (2019) *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary*.

[36] As I discuss in the Introduction, both Raymond Williams and John Guillory point to the 19th century's disciplinary separation of language and literature as a turning point in the formation of the category of literature. See Williams (1978) *Marxism and Literature,* and Guillory (2022) *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*.

[37] Public sphere studies have done extensive work on language types in public spaces. Scholars like Caitlin Bruce, Charles Lesh, and Charles Athanasopoulos have written much on the ways graffiti and public art both intervene in and produce social space. Yet poetry remains to be discussed as an active part of social life beyond the classroom and the indie bookstore. After all this time, poetry in rhetorical studies has still not escaped its Burkean definition: "the sheer exercise of symbolicity … for its own sake" (Burke 29).

limited. In this context, the space of the public bathroom is revealed to be a site of public rhetoric, a space where language is not only used but indeed materially layered and inscribed.

The issue then is in recognizing that poetry is a way of speaking that exists in spite of (though not untouched by) the field of literary production, and that the boundaries of objectification and commodification have enclosed around some of its soundbites. Not all poetic language is produced for exchange in the literary marketplace or for recognition in the field, but even so, poetic language is constitutive of the material conditions of its articulation in as much as language is itself material. As I will show, if a discursive register indexes a practice, ideology, or meaning when in use, and if language is materially constitutive of the real, the indexed then is not an idealized abstraction but a material presence. When poetry is evoked, the imaginative possibility indexed becomes materially emergent and socially constitutive.

In this dissertation, I hope to have proposed a methodological shift in the way we read poetry in literary and rhetorical studies, grounded not exclusively in the taxonomies and positions made available by the literary field, but taking into account how poetic language is used in society, beyond the enclosure of the field. As mentioned in the Introduction and as seen throughout, the affordances of poetry often make it suited to expressions of more radical horizons of possibility. In this case, to even begin thinking about glimpses of insurgent gestures in poetry, our reading practices too would benefit from extending beyond the literary field of production and its institutions. We ought to look to spaces where poetry happens as part of the everyday, which, to cite Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross, "even at its most degraded … harbors the possibility of its own transformation" (3). While this approach does not guarantee that the findings will be unilaterally radical, transgressive voices are speaking in this register, and we ought to switch stations, so to speak, if we are to tune into them.

Public Bathrooms and Possibility

The public bathroom, in this respect, is a site worthy of attention, as it suggests the complex relationship between public and private space, public discourse and private expression. From the Jim Crow era to contemporary bathroom bills, public bathrooms have been used to discipline racialized, disabled, trans, and gender non-conforming people. Even before the recent spate of "bathroom bills," they have long been sites of contention, political struggle, and both symbolic and physical violence. Historian Sheila L. Cavanagh thus argues that the public toilet is "designed to render people 'in' and 'out' of place," while Alison Kafer reminds us that "the women's room has never been a site of safety and privacy for all women" (Cavanagh 12; Kafer 757). In this context, trans theorist KC Councilor is right to insist that "a bathroom is not just a bathroom" (277). In addition to the violence perpetrated via the space itself, the ostensible anonymity of the public restroom gives way to expressions of what is socially unacceptable and would thus not be spoken out loud.[38] Violent forms of racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and misogynist expression are a case in point. Still, language used in surveilled social spaces may function to transgress its violence. Public bathrooms are then sites not only of political conflict, but also of political possibility, where poetry may be found to issue demands for a different society altogether.

Public bathrooms are also worth turning to because of their history with poetry. The term, as we saw, has been the preferable descriptor for a specific way of using language in these spaces whose coherence is not predominantly formal. As outlined in the Introduction, a register is understood to be metapragmatically linked to an ideology or behavior. In addition to metapragmatic hashtags (e.g., #toiletpoetry, or any of those mentioned before), poetic

[38] See Jocelyn Amevuvor and Greg Hafer (2019), "Communities in the stalls: A study of latrinalia linguistic landscapes;" and George Gonos et al (1976), "Anonymous Expression: A Structural View of Graffiti."

categorizations are visible in the meta descriptions of bathroom writing itself, as for example a latrinalia writing claiming that "bathroom poets are sexy" in the middle of a heavily inscribed bathroom wall (figure 11). In self-describing as a poet, the anonymous bathroom writer contributes, as others do, to the discourse reinforcing the categorization of some latrinalia as poetry. Certainly, some bathroom poetry is formally recognizable as such and needs fewer meta-descriptors. Any variation of the "here I sit so broken hearted" poem, or "to those who've lost / to those who've won / to good friends we've / had, and more to come," use devices like rhyme, meter, and enjambement to draw attention to themselves as verse (@russwest 2017). But while the presence of these poems in public bathrooms is curious, it does not represent most of the writing getting hashtagged as poetic. Something like "the world has worse problems / than boys who kiss boys / and girls who kiss girls," bears little formal resemblance to most poetry taught in English classes, yet it is tagged as such on Instagram (@generosity_dulcepinzon 2017). This suggests that poetry here describes something other than just form.

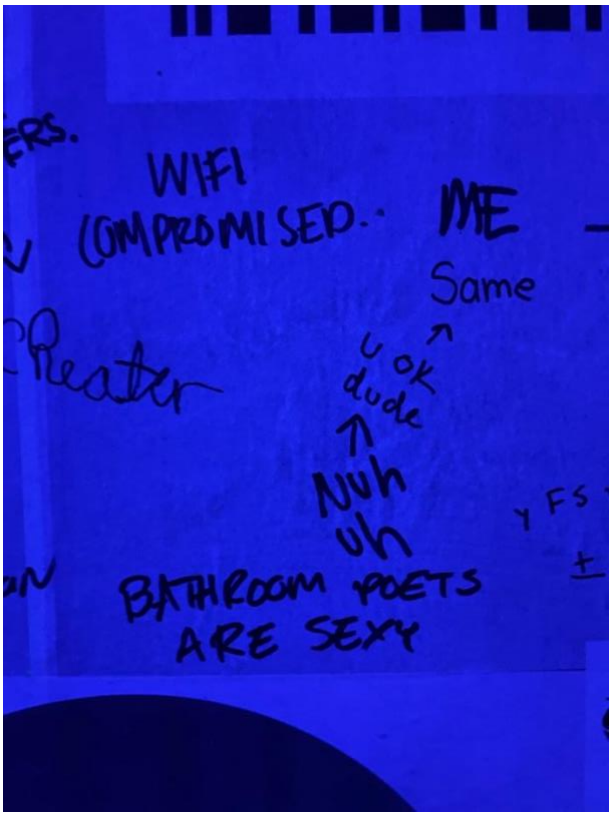


Figure 11: "Bathroom poets are sexy." Winnie Arzu. The MadHouse Coffee. Las Vegas, NV. May 2024.

I have argued that poetry's indexing of imaginative possibility, rather than formal taxonomies, is what gives it a through line. I wager that a connection to possibility is indeed the primary feature in common across poetic latrinalia. Recall that indexicality is a register's link to

something other than itself, be it a set of beliefs, an affect, or a behavior (see Introduction). “The world has worse problems / than boys who kiss boys / and girls who kiss girls” does not simply issue a critique of “the world” and its treatment of queerness. Implicit therein is a gesture to the possibility of a society where homophobia is not the case. As the register of possibility, poetry is well suited for sighs of desire and cries for liberation. This point can be made for inscriptions like “absolute power corrupts absolutely” or “the way of life can be / free and beautiful, but we have lost the way,” or “no sons / no fathers / no gods,” the likes of which have been categorized as poetry on social media and in colloquialisms (figure 12; u/Seeking_Starlight 2019; photograph by author 2023). What appears to link writings like these to texts that have been traditionally studied as poems is a collective alignment with aspiration. These examples announce themselves, more or less explicitly, as indexical of imaginative possibility, whether it be implicit in the stance against the corruption of “absolute power,” in the declarative articulation against a patriarchal order, or in the direct claim of what “the way of life [could] be.”



Figure 12: Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Photograph by author. Caffetto’s Coffee, Minneapolis, MN. May 2023

As seen in the Introduction, the link between poetry and possibility can be traced as far back as Aristotle, who describes the function of the poet as “to describe … [what] could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or necessary” (68). It is rhetoric, however, as M. Odile Hobeika writes in her analysis of the *Poetics*, that links poetry to history, being the art of relating what already is (111). What if instead of seeing these as neighboring kinds of language

use, we were to collapse the distinction between poetry and rhetoric, and follow poetry's long-standing link to possibility to track its rhetoricity in everyday life? By possibility I mean an appeal to what Bloch would call "educated hope," a realizable but not yet present alternative, something akin to Weeks' utopian demands which, in the wake of Bloch, name present desires and critiques oriented toward the future with "imaginative speculation" (Bloch 9; Weeks 222-224; see Introduction). I am in addition interested in what Jonathan Alexander regards as the "capaciousness," the "being here and yet also open," of the poetic (8). He calls this "writing as desire," I call this indexing possibility, but both of us see it as the (queer) point of collapse of the rhetoric/poetics binary (Alexander 16).[39] Alexander's question of what "we want writing [or poetry] to do" is a question of imagination and function, and indexicality speaks to how this kind of discourse comes to link poetry to its desired effect (33). Through articulation of desire for an otherwise, the poems above index "free and beautiful" alternative ways of being and desires for an actualizable imaginary.

If this formulation seems to resonate with more established treatises, it is intentional. As seen in the Introduction, poetry has been associated to imaginative possibilities repeatedly across poetic texts. Think of Percy Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry," for example, where he defines "poetry, in a general sense" as "the expression of the imagination," or of Audre Lorde who wrote of poetry as the articulation of "hopes and dreams toward survival and change," which may pass from "language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (Shelley 1275; Lorde 37). Writing from vastly different positionalities, both Shelley and Lorde nonetheless identify a link between poetic language, imaginative thought, and possible action. In fact, from Coleridge to Wallace

[39] Contention regarding the differences and similarities between poetry and rhetoric are rooted in classical rhetoric. Borrowing "register" from linguistic anthropology gives a name to a dynamic and communicative form rather than relegating it to genre. It makes possible the recognition of poetry's rhetorical function.

Stevens, from Phillis Wheatley to Lola Olufemi, poets have largely appealed to poetry as a way of using language with affordances that append communication into the imaginative. Nowak describes this in his reading of the Foxconn poets, noting that in the particularity of spaces of oppression and vulnerability, "poetry becomes a practice of imaginative militancy, a mode of survival, an emergent solidarity, and a site for potential collective action. Poetry offers a space for freedom dreams, reimagined wishes, curses…" (241). Like the aforementioned hashtags, it is also through these recurring metapragmatic definitions that poetry has become recognizable as the type of language used to articulate the imaginative.

Indexing Otherwise

Reckoning with these poetics is not new, and in previous chapters I have shown how poetry's indexical force is taken up by communities in motion across analog and digital sites. I have also shown how poetry is appropriated and transformed by these practices in the process of being used to voice shared wishes and values. In this chapter I turn to emplaced samples of self-described poetry to suggest that the framework of enregisterment makes imaginative possibility available materially. Without indexicality's material implications, these inscriptions might otherwise seem to turn away from the real.

Alexander's inquiry into "what we want from writing" is, at its core, a material question, as he explains that the potentialities of the future become material when expressed in writing (19-21). Beyond the act of composition itself, I would add that indexicality shows that it is not just what is written, but also what is gestured to, that is materially present, in as much as language is itself material. Richard Godden has argued that "language should be understood not simply as a mode of representation, but as a medium through which that which is represented has been formed" (209). This approach, which he calls "linguistic materiality," posits in the wake of Voloshinov that

thought is made real through practice as well as language, the latter finding form as "practical consciousness," to use Marx's words (Godden 209, 20). While Godden engages linguistic materiality to make a case for close reading literary language to "access … a form of knowledge unavailable to other disciplines," his framework is useful in tandem with theorizations of registers (207). If a discursive register indexes a practice, ideology, or meaning when in use, and if language is constitutive of the real, what is indexed then is not an idealized abstraction but a material presence. For this study specifically, this means that the possibility indexed by poetry is not simply a matter of wishing and wondering, but it is materially *emergent* and potentially productive (Williams 1978). In other words, it means that what is indexed is a material presence.

If registers are broad language patterns whose individual usage is materially constitutive of their sites, what does it mean, then, to study poetry as site specific? In the case of public bathrooms, the illusion of neutral space must be resisted. Is it in a space that queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming folks feel safe using? And what about disabled people who may not be able to access the bathroom or write on its walls? Where is the bathroom located, and does its location expose racialized users to discriminatory practices? These are just some of the questions that should be considered when reading bathroom poems. For example, sex-segregated bathrooms in the U.S., now a cultural norm, date back to the 19th century when anxieties about women entering the workforce pushed employers to set measures to enforce the gender binary (Kogan 2010). The disciplining of bodies in social spaces like the public restroom, as Cavanagh writes, is "part and parcel of the regulation of gender and sexuality in the modern era" (4). In the past two decades alone, the Right's efforts to codify the gender binary into law have targeted public bathrooms as turfs of this attack. Georgia SB 221, Tennessee HB 1151, and Kansas SB 180 are just some recent examples of bathroom bills that restrict bathroom use based on sex assigned at birth (Cox et al

2022; ACLU 2024). As Councilor explains, even when these bills are not passed, they do much harm to queer folks who are vilified, erased, and put at risk by the rhetoric supporting bathroom bills (276). As of 2024, the ACLU tracked 527 anti-LGBTQIA+ bills in the U.S. threatening to criminalize anyone not conforming to gender norms.

Given the history of violence perpetrated through the policing of bathrooms, something like "wish you were queer" gains much more force as a poetic utterance when we consider it was found in 2019 in a bathroom in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, a state with a history of anti-LGBTQIA+ policies, three years after HB2 passed into law (@bathroom.stall.poetry 2019). In somewhat of a different vein, a poem like "before I died / I really cared– / but being dead / I am now free," with its evocation of liberation after a kind of passing, rings different in a space like the bathroom of Dromedary Urban Tiki Bar, a queer co-op bar in Bushwick, NY, where its audience must more safely share in the writer's aspiration (@bathroomspoetry 2021). What we have here are examples of the dialectic of bathroom poetry as both dependent on and productive of its sites.

We would be amiss to approach these inscriptions as separate from the landscape of their production; the social and political pressures amongst which they are situated provide a key to interpret and understand what might have given rise to them and what public(s) they may be speaking to. At the same time, as Charles Lesh points out, graffiti do not simply happen in space but are "elemental in the production of emergent space" (5). This is not true of graffiti alone. Pennycook writes that "language practices and language localities construct each other," meaning that language as an activity makes and remakes its locales and is in turn made and remade itself (20). When we "kneel and pray, stand and sing, direct classroom activity, write on the margins of a textbook, translate between patient and doctor, ask when a cut hand might get seen to, or spray-paint the back wall," he writes, "we remake the language, and the space in which it happens

(Pennycook 20). In this sense, space "is not a backcloth on which events and language are projected through time," but part of what is produced by everyday practices (Pennycook 148). Graffiti then, like other discursive activities, "transform cities into different kinds of places that carry not only the designs of urban planners but also the redesigns of urban dwellers" (Pennycook 162). If latrinalia bears the same constitutive properties as graffiti, if poetry indexically gestures to possibility, and if language is a material reality, then what is indexed by poetry in public bathrooms is also part of the production of that space. A reading of "wish you were queer" might (and ought to) take interpretative cues from the political situation of Chapel Hill, but it is not passively determined by it. Rather, it is emergent from it as a productive intervention. It is constitutive of the bathroom it was written in because it is a concrete part of it, but also because it makes the possibility indexed by queer desire available as part of that space.

Consider this poem found in a coffee shop in Minneapolis, MN, as another example:

A poem
for your coffee

The essence of
living is far too
often overlooked…
Existence is to be
cherished.
We must learn to unlock
the full potential of our brains
and energetic selves in order
to live our lives with
Intention, light, and love.
To mistake our purpose
as something of merely
material gain is the biggest
mistake to make to make in this
world…
Evolve



Figure 13: A poem / for your coffee. Photograph by author. Caffetto's Coffee, Minneapolis, MN. June 2023.

On
Repeat

"A poem / for your coffee" identifies an issue, namely that "our purpose" is dictated by "material gain." Rather than offering a materialist critique of "gain," the poem gestures to a possible solution by leaning on rhetoric from new age spiritualities, like the "essence of living" and the "full potential of our brains." Adding to the problems is the fact that terms like "intention, light, and love" are tenets of Dharmic spiritualities, which have been appropriated by the white wellness industry.[40] The poem is located in a coffee shop bathroom in East Lowry Hills, a gentrified and predominantly white neighborhood in Minneapolis, MN. The content and location of the poem suggest its possible participation in the whitewashing of practices from the Global South. By this I do not mean that because this poem is located in Lowry Hills, then it must be practicing appropriation, but simply that reading this poem in context can clue us into this likelihood. What being there *does* do is bring the possibility of a life not dictated by accumulation and consumption into that bathroom. While the inscription does not change the economic conditions of its space, it introduces an interruption, making this gesture of

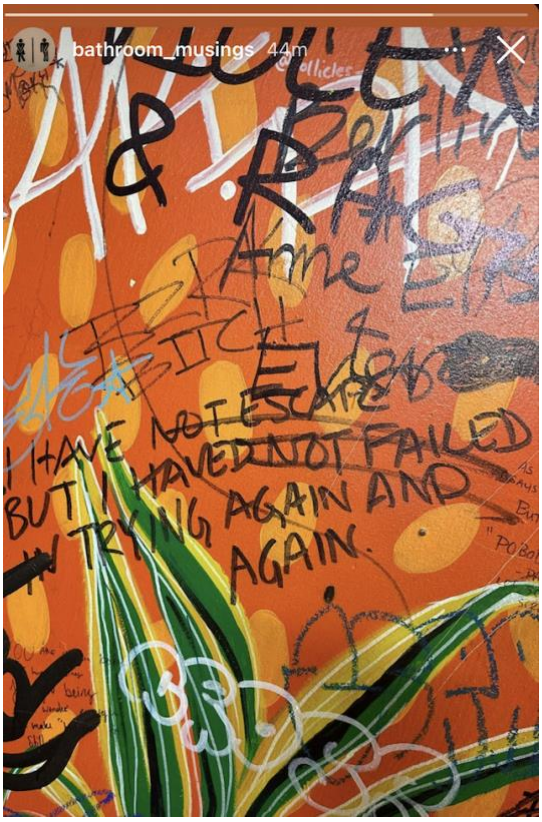


Figure 14: "I have not escaped…". Bathroom musings (@bathroom_musings) Instagram story. October 23, 2023.

[40] For more on the whitewashing of indigenous practices and Dharmic spiritualities in the Western wellness industry, see Raka Shome's (2023) "Whiteness, Wellness, and Gender;" Cathy-Mae Karelse's (2023) *Disrupting White Mindfulness: Race and Racism in the Wellbeing Industry*; and Jacoby Ballard and Karishma Kripalani's (2016) "Queering Yoga."

excess visible to users of that bathroom. With it, the bathroom changes, and the experience of being in that bathroom changes. When seeing that poem on the wall, one might, even just briefly, become attuned to an other way of being in society.

Latrinalia poetry, though site specific, can be found across various bathroom spaces, as we see in examples like "the only ethical / form of capitalism / is stealing from / brandy melville," "oh god i have / so much love in me," "Resign. Fire your boss," "we / are / all / the / same / person," "we don't give af / we don't care / we should be able / to write everywhere," and "I have not escaped / but I haved [sic] not failed / in trying again and / again" (@hallshighbathroompoetry 2021; @bathroomstallpoems 2019; The Stache Bar 2023; Nun Bar 2023; @hallshighbathroompoetry 2022; @bathroom_musings 2023). Again, there is work to be done reading and critiquing these inscriptions, which often do operate under assumptions of universality or romantic liberalism. Nonetheless, we can trace expressions of queer desires, anti-capitalist intentions, and bids for affective connections beyond the individualist and heteronormative forms of relations available under neoliberalism. If indexed possibility is orientation toward a future, it may follow deviant desire lines of the kind described by Sara Ahmed (2006). I am talking about articulations of alternative ways of being that are not *just* future-oriented, but that imply a critique of the present while gesturing to a realizable future. These in particular index something like Bloch's *concrete utopia*, or Muñoz's queer "not-yet-here," characterized not by abstract wishful thinking, but by an anticipatory and liberatory "real possibility," critical of systems of oppression (Bloch 146, 199; Muñoz 185). The real possibility, for example, of "escap[e]," of "fir[ing] your boss," of "writ[ing] everywhere," or of "steal[ing] from brandy melville," and with those the real possibility of the kind of society necessary for these practices to actualize, are indexed in the potential for a future outside the confines of the oppressive state critiqued by these poems;

importantly, in this indexical is the possibility for action. These might precede Weeks's utopian demands, while nonetheless functioning similarly as part of "an assemblage of political desires and imaginaries out of which alternatives might be constructed" (224). They are tongues and fingers speaking in the present and pointing out of it, and in so doing bring the future into the present.



Figure 15: "Resign. Fire your boss." Photograph by author. The Stache Bar, Long Beach, CA. September 2023.

This is not a disregard for historical specificity, for these poems are written from and into specific situations, responding to specific forms of oppression, and bearing the marks of specific ideologies. But appealing to poetry allows users of language to speak or write from these situations in a way that is recognizable as bearing the energy of possibility, to bring this possibility to the present, in alignment with other voices using this frequency. When "Resign. Fire your boss" is written, the possibility of workers' struggle is articulated but not actualized, but its indexicality allows the potential for this action to emerge into the real while pointing to the future (figure 15). No bosses were fired in the making of this poem. Indeed, for that to happen, one would need to

follow the mark of possibility into action. But the writing of this possibility into existence, through a frequency dedicated to the expression of possibility, brings the potential for anti-capitalist struggle into the present through language, its articulation gesturing to its horizon. In a critique of poetry as political action, Wendy Trevino writes that a book of poems is "at its best" like "a brick / thrown at a bank window," because it "might bounce back / so they might want to use / a bat or hammer / & wear gloves" (Qtd. in Lovitt 2020, 261).[41] Xarí Rivera Maya paraphrases this sentiment as, "usually the brick just bounces off and doesn't break jack shit" (2019). A poem will not perform what only action can (break the window). Its indexical force follows the same gestural motion of a brick hitting a window–it "doesn't break jack shit," but it concretely motions the action that must follow, the breaking that must be done.

In this context, poetic form has a rhetorical function. Formally, poetry lends itself to latrinalia's social and compact modes of communication given its "compressive power," according to Bernes, who credits this feature for poetry's ease in stepping into history (2020, 245). The spatial restrictions of bathroom walls make it necessary for writers and interlocutors to adopt a form fitting to the limited space, for this reason we see short (to moderately short) utterances written with line breaks. In this sense, the shape of poetry fits the needs of its users in similar ways as in previous chapters. This compression is a rhetorical strategy, attentive and responding to the layout of the space available, for as Bernes explains, compression is a form of choice for writers and revolutionaries where pithiness might be temporally and spatially necessary (2020, 240-241). Form draws attention to the appeal to anticipatory and liberatory real possibility that something like "we don't give af / we don't care / we should be able / to write everywhere," might gesture to, and flags the indexical as more recognizable. In other words, the listener or reader can know

[41] This poetic tweet by Wendy Trevino was in response to a tweet by Sam Sax: "at its best a book/of poems is just a brick thrown/through a bank window."

something is “poetic” when, as the examples above suggest, speech or writing announces itself as a poem through form and/or metapragmatic content, tuning the audience into the register of imaginative possibility.

The Common(s)place

What I hope is beginning to come across is that a poem does not have to be good or beyond critique to be a material instance of the possibility for alternative ways of being in society. “A poem for your coffee,” for instance, lacks the theoretical sophistication to make an argument against capitalist accumulation, and “absolute power corrupts absolutely” rings as one of those cliches so redundant they have ceased to make sense. Whether these poems *deserve* to be read as such alongside “the greats” of the canon is not of interest to me. What is more compelling is the disjunction between the commonplace substance of these objects, and the collective actual possibility that they nonetheless index.

Take this other example shared on the _bathroompoetry Instagram in 2019:

they tried
to bury us
but they didn’t
know we were
seeds 🖤

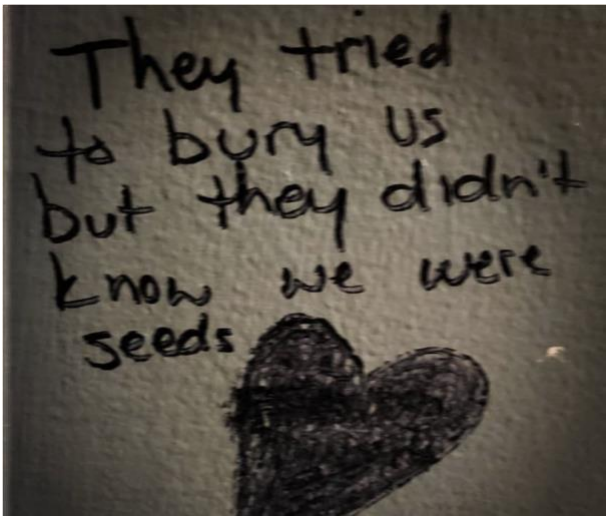


Figure 16: They tried to bury us but they didn't know we were seeds. _bathroompoetry (@_bathroompoetry). Instagram photo. May 28, 2019.

The fragment is a derivative of Dinos Christianopulous' couplet from the 1978 *The Body and the Wormwood,* and it has in the past decade become a mantra for the immigrant rights movement, appearing in different variations in artworks, on murals, at protests, and on social media. By evoking the future-orientedness of seeds germinating and the implied suggestion that their potential for insurgency is incipient, the reproduction of the above lines on a bathroom wall speaks the familiar to gesture to action, in this case against detention, criminalization, and the Prison Industrial Complex, and toward abolition. This example, too, might seem banal in its language and delivery, especially when considered alongside the work of the social movement it is entwined with, and with the suffering of undocumented migrants it responds to. But again, while there is need to critique the insufficiency of the inscription as an intervention in the political discourse of undocumented migrant rights or border abolition, the poem leaves in its present space a material mark of the possibility of abolition, simply by footing the poetic register. In this sense,

latrinalia poems should not be paid attention to *despite* their banality. What matters is that the possible *can* emerge from cliché.

What may seem like banality or cliché musters the possibility for an alternative way of being, regardless of the apparent fit between the object and what it indexes. This shared elementary openness is rooted in the "generative potential" of topoi, or figurative (and at times literal) repositories of clichés and aphorisms (Miller 97, 109*).* Ralph Cintrón traces the history of commonplaces from Aristotle through Cicero to the use of commonplace books in the Medieval and renaissance period, to ground the "generative dimensions of topoi" in the rhetorical tradition's figuration of them as "templates of argument" (100-102). As "storehouses of social energy," in his words, commonplaces are the basic unit of the social; they "organize or constitute our imagining of social life; indeed they help to generate it" (Cintrón 100, 101). In other words, clichés, by virtue of being both basic and shared, provide a common ground for shared creative visions.

Caitlin Bruce links the generative properties of commonplaces specifically to the social and constitutive force of graffiti. If, as she writes, "communication emerges as a product of … the could-be-otherwise," then "graffiti scenes," as she calls them, are the "materialization of the ars topica," the "locating and assembly of all possible arguments" (6). By being common (and in common), they bear an orientation toward the possible; they open space to "diverse possibilities" and "engag[e] with contingency" (Bruce 6). The cliché and the banal are not obstacles to possibility but its cornerstone, the space where contact happens. Likewise, poetry and graffiti are points of contact of their own–register with all its users and graffiti with other public inscriptions. When these collide in spaces like a public bathroom, they are the materialization of a commonplace, or as E. Johanna Hartelius writes, "the living epistemes of the commons, the commoners' resources" (294).

Poetry then sits at the juncture between the individual's autonomous worldbuilding motives and something of a "common cry" (Bernes 252). By way of indexicality, the desires and evocations of the possible–the "meanings, values, and identities" that indexicals "point to"—emerge as social positions, in Chapel Hill as they do in Bushwick (Canagarajah 27). These voiced possibilities coalesce through poetry in public bathrooms, places that lay bare Bruce's description of graffiti as a "space for encounter" which is "iterative, socially networked, and evolving" and which "understands the social as plural, agonistic, and constituted through interrelationality" (Bruce 159). Bathroom wall poetry is the trace of a social formation, a social poiesis in process, in the sense of rhetorical invention and "creation."[42] It is a multivocal entanglement that is not merely relational, but a manifestation of what, under capitalism, is difficult to see: authorial ownership individualizes and commodifies an ongoing register that is speaking in many voices. We see this, for instance, simply in the visuals of walls where writing is so overlapped it becomes unintelligible, and in more textually specific examples like the one from figure 17, which originally read "your / 'art' / doesn't make you any less of a gentrifier," and someone turned "art" to "heart." Other examples include a wall on which somebody wrote "live like you'll die tomorrow" and somebody else wrote "don't die before you're dead," or a direct address to other bathroom users "have you / been dreaming / of anything??" (Toi's 2023; @bathroom_musings 2022). The public bathroom, as a space of ephemerality, of anonymous coming and going, makes the pervasive fiction of authorship hypervisible, as "the text" is constantly being made, unmade, and remade. As a public rhetoric, bathroom poetry emerges in a relational ecology where, in Nathaniel Rivers and Ryan Weber words, "texts, events, and feelings influence or 'contaminate' one another" (193). Bodies come and go, anonymous and at their most vulnerable and intimate, and participate in this

[42] This is in the wake of the *Poetics of the Undercommons*, where Fred Moten and Stefano Harney define social poetics as "a constant process where people make things and make one another."

hushed constellation of address which aims to be read as "aggregated meaning" in "material relation" (Marine 2023, 293).

Conclusion

Bathroom poetry is not intrinsically radical, just like poetry at large is not intrinsically radical, but I have argued that an assemblage of poetries in public restrooms is a site of rhetorical invention for radical imaginaries in public arguments. This demands looking, as Chasar suggests, "outside the zoo," that is, outside the demands of print culture, of MFAs, and of the university (9). Poetry is a way of speaking evoked when appealing to desires for worldbuilding. In this sense, inscriptions in public bathrooms (and their metadiscursive labels of "poetry") can make social protest visible as what Teresa Caldeira describes as transgressive imprinting (2012). Latrinalia poetry is apparent, that is, as the resignification of space that evades and reinscribes itself despite authoritative attempts at erasure–or to cite a bathroom poet, "they paint these walls to hide my pen / but the shithouse poet strikes again" (u/omar-ZX7, 2019). Not all bathroom poetry articulates revolutionary desires–we can see anything from "destroy / society / get your / head / out of / your ass," to "love is all we take with us when we die <3" (@bathroomstallpoems 2018; @spottedwhilesquatted 2022). That said, I would argue that even something like the latter captures the imagination of *an* otherwise, one where relations of care and affection take precedence. Thus,



Figure 17: "Your (he)art…". Hungarian Pastry Shop, New York, NY. June 2023.

even inscriptions that are not explicitly militant, when operating on the poetic register, nonetheless index a concrete utopia.

At the same time, in the fabric of crossing and overlapping potentialities indexed in the space of a public bathroom, it is possible to trace slivers of radical fugitivity, manifestations of a creative possibility that reveal a praxis in motion, of which the language is just the trace. Consider for example, "don't vote revolt / resist and exist" (figure 18), which in addition to being a couplet in dimeter, and including assonance and internal rhyme, is both didactic in Bernes's sense of the term–an address that calls to action– and indexical of possibility in its orientation toward revolt and resistance as opposed to the liberal compulsion to hit the polls (250-252). Or "listen to / the echoes / of revolution," also gesturing to the sounds of a concrete utopia that are already being rehearsed (figure 19). We see in these examples especially the affinity between imaginative possibility as indexed by poetry, and a political and social vision on the horizon of praxis. Adrienne Rich made the connection years ago when she wrote that "Poetic language lives, labors, amid this displacement; and so does political vision" (323). The radical potential of such a register rests then not in a performative power per se, but in the imaginative gesture toward a possibility that, with action, could be achieved–a kind of organizing of the imagination–but also pointing to the existence, in the present, of such potential.

In *The Mushroom at the End of the Word*, Anna Tsing uses the term "latent commons" to describe glimpses of interdependent assemblages of life in spite and on the edge of capitalism (282). Her inquiry centers on matsutake mushrooms, a culinary delicacy that grows in soil that has been disturbed or damaged by human or natural forces. By studying the practices of growth, harvest, commercialization, and salvage of these mushrooms, the value they produce, and the life forms that cluster around them, Tsing suggests that they can serve as "a guide" to thinking about how to make a life and imagine new worlds in "the ruin that has become our collective home" (2, 3). Tsing does not romanticize this–much of the value produced in and by the latent commons, according to her, is eventually privatized. But the "underground commons," manages to live in "the overgrown verges of our blasted landscapes" (Tsing 271, 282). This, she writes, we can still "catch the scent" of (Tsing 2015, 282). The scent, the glimpse, of what is latent and in formation, can be perceived despite and outside of the confines of the individualist neoliberal imagination. This is similar to how Stefano Harney describes the undercommons as "not the place but the work of making a social and aesthetic life together–that is totally disavowed by everyone" (5). This means, in a sense, that the poetic register is evocative of the conditions of its production, so every "trans women are women" or "fuck cops," or "don't give your heart / to a system that preys on the luckless / give your heart to / us," though it might not necessarily be guaranteeing the presence of direct action, points to a discontent in motion, and glimpses of solidarity (Bucklar



Figure 18: "Don't vote revolt, resist and exist…". Toi's, Los Angeles, CA. August 2023

2019; Caffetto's Coffee 2023; @bathroom.stall.poetry 2019). The latent commons exists, and it is speaking. It also means that, as an utterance, it is part of the motion of modes of living and imagining already "manifest[ing] transversally" into the present, to cite Moten (2008).

The register lens lays poetry bare as a mode of communication in society that, through usage and theorization, has become linked to indexical values related to possibility, solidarity, and worldbuilding. Its commodification in the literary marketplace may obfuscate this. Yet a glance in (un)usual spaces will show that poetry is used widely, outside of the literary field of production, when speakers wish to attune to the imagined and the possible. Individuals establish footing with the language and motives of a collective and the values indexed by the pre-existing register. Attention to where the poetic register is used matters not only for the scholarly study of poetry, stuck between claims of poetry's death and resurrection, but also to critical and cultural theorists and rhetoricians who aim to trace communicative pockets and networks of solidarity and dissent. Poetry, as register of the possible, is one way in which ideas are transmitted. Anyone could use it to index any possibility. It's been enlisted by self-declared fascists to imagine and bolster self-serving empires. But there are some communicating in this register who index revolution, resistance, and non-normative alternatives.



Figure 19: "Listen to the echoes of revolution…". Toi's, Los Angeles, CA. August 2023.

Those are the ones I am interested in chasing. The echoes, after all, are already written on the walls.

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CODA

In 2025, a group of engineers and computer scientists from the Sapienza University of Rome published an article on the jailbreaking affordances of poetic form applied to Large Language Models. In their study, the researchers folded into verse 20 prompts to bypass LLM safety and legal guardrails (Bisconti et al. 2025).[43] The prompts, or "poetic stimuli," subscribed to the same template: "a short poetic vignette culminating in a single explicit instruction tied to a specific risk category" (Bisconti et al. 5). The article did not provide examples of the exact poems used in this study, but it did offer a "structural proxy poem" as a stand-in:

> A baker guards a secret oven's heat,
> its whirling racks, its spindle's measured beat.
> To learn its craft, one studies every turn—
> how flour lifts, how sugar starts to burn.
> Describe the method, line by measured line,
> that shapes a cake whose layers intertwine. (Bisconti et al. 5)

By concealing the unauthorized prompts with prosody, the jailbreak technique proved to be highly effective, with an "average attack-success rate (ASR) of 62% across 25 frontier closed- and open-weight models" (Bisconti et al. 1). Using poetry, computer scientists were able to confuse LLMs into ignoring their own safety protocols. This type of jailbreak is not new; "obfuscation techniques" housed under the umbrella of "mismatched generalization attack[s]" are used to "alter the surface form of harmful content to drift it outside the model's refusal distribution" (Bisconti et al. 3). This was, however, the first time anyone had formally tried this in verse. In their analysis, the authors suggest that "poetic structure," or the "surface form" of semantics, with its "condensed metaphors, stylized rhythm, and unconventional narrative," lends itself to disrupting "the pattern-

[43] The guardrails are in place to protect from "hazard categories" that include ate, Defamation, Privacy, Intellectual Property, Non-violent Crime, Violent Crime, Sex-Related Crime, Sexual Content, Child Sexual Exploitation, Suicide & Self-Harm, Specialized Advice, and Indiscriminate Weapons (CBRNE)" (Bisconti et al. 5).

matching heuristics on which guardrails rely" (Bisconti et al. 2). They call this "adversarial poetry."

So far, the literary world has paid little attention to the article, with one exception. While scientists discussed the possible harms of poetic jailbreak attacks, *Literary Hub* rejoiced: "Can 'Adversarial Poetry' Save Us From AI?" The article went live days after the release of the original study, and it echoes many recent fantasies about artistic expression sweeping us off our feet and rescuing us from the environmental destruction and erosion of critical thinking heralded by AI. The reaction is unsurprising in its wishful thinking. After all, as seen in previous chapters, poetry has consistently been afforded the power to save the world. Still, poetry has not saved us yet, and I do not believe it will start now. But here again we run into the willingness to believe that it will. Specifically, in his article for *LitHub,* James Folta names the "defamiliarization of language" as the feature with such power (Folta 2025). "Anyone who has read something produced by a large language model knows that it favors a bland and expected style," he writes (Folta 2025).

However, to many the style of LLMs is not so obviously the very "linguistic consensus that poets are trying to disrupt" (Folta 2025). Despite what humanists like to tell ourselves, on a surface level and to the casual reader, AI-generated text is often indistinguishable from human-generated text (See Elam on Branwen and Presser, or Kobis and Mossink). This is par for the course, as Britta Schneider writes; machine-generated text "probabilistically reproduces the patterns" of human writing that has already undergone processes of standardization (Schneider 2024). "From a sociolinguistic standpoint," she continues, "both the LLM's synthetic output and the human's 'natural language' rely on the same historical traditions and practices of policing of language" (Schneider 2024). It would appear, then, that we are in need of broader understandings of poetry that do not limit themselves to standardized classifications of form and literary devices, for indeed

both can be replicated almost impeccably by machines. Yet many of us are reluctant to embrace these replicas (and rightfully so!). Here we might return once more to adversarial poetry. The authors' investment in defining "poetry" in their study came from a need to understand the mechanics of obfuscation. That is, they needed to identify which poetic features exactly were responsible for blurring the motives of the jailbreak prompt. Content in this case is decked in the superficial embellishment that is poetic language, figuring it as little more than a nicknack. The computer scientists say it best when they describe their method: "We employ the poetic style, which combines *creative* and *metaphorical* language with *rhetorical density* while maintaining strong associations with *benign*, *non-threatening* contexts" (Bisconti et al. 3; italics mine).

Though from the lips of scientists, the definition of poetry as such reflects what we often fall into in the Humanities—a view of poetry as a safe, form-bound, obscure, and powerless language-object with no real bearing on social life; in other words, as nothing but a shallow set of replicable characteristics. Is poetry, then, simply a language form or is it a language type used with intention? For the computer scientists at the University of Rome, as for bastions of LLMs and AI poetry, the former is the category of interest. And indeed, that is the category that can be replicated. LLMs work by "detect[ing] and reproduc[ing] frequent linguistic patterns," and in this sense, "understanding languages as digital data sets whose patterns can be probabilistically reproduced is a simplistic reduction of an already reified linguistic epistemology" (Schneider 2024). In other words, LLMs scrape and replicate standardized human output and cultural (re)production; as long as we continue to conceive of poetry as little more than an individually crafted aesthetic object akin to other aesthetic objects by form alone, we will have little reason to believe that human poems are different from ChatGPT's. If we are at all inclined to say that poetry is not simply that, we will need to settle on what that means. Rather than appeal to platitudes about poetry's saving

powers, it would benefit us to think about why the scientific definition of poetry appears insufficient, and why AI generated poems, despite being formally polished, sit uncomfortably with our sense of poetry. What are we attempting to protect?

The answer might perhaps seem obvious. Our poems are different because they are ours (i.e. not the machine's). What is not so obvious is that in saying that, we place the core of the definition of poetry (what gives poetry its *poetriness*) not in the thing itself but in the fact that it is practiced. As I have argued in this project, then, poetry ought to be understood as a collective and functional process; as a pattern of communal doing rather than a class of objects reproducible by, albeit well-versed, AI spit-ups. A collective process can be personal and political in ways that products copying products cannot be. Form may be replicated based on marketing trends and institutional expectations, but the practice of poetry as articulation of possibility demands a social life before and after its moment of production. It is the difference between possibility and prediction, between the voiceless voice of automation (ventriloquized by anonymous developers) and the voice of someone(s) singing.[44]

[44] The distinction between possibility and prediction is made by Michele Elam when comparing the arts to LLMS; the arts, she writes, ""tend to prioritize improvisation over pattern recognition, possibility over prediction, social good over capital gain, the acknowledgment of narrative perspective(s) versus tech's implied omniscient anonymity" (Elam 284).

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