UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

On Counterepic
Feminist and Anti-State Interventions Into the Epic Genre

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Jeanine Marie Webb

Committee in charge:

Professor Shelley Streeby, Chair
Professor Michael Davidson
Professor Ricardo Dominguez
Professor Page duBois
Professor Sal Nicolazzo

2020

The Dissertation of Jeanine Marie Webb is approved, and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2020

DEDICATION

To Sue & Henry, Greg
Azi, Jess
& Jimi

EPIGRAPH

Perhaps he was right
to call me Hecate and a witch;
I do not care for separate

might and grandeur,
I do not want to hear of Agamemnon
and the Trojan Walls,

—H.D., *Helen In Egypt*

there are so many ways to BE GOOD
to not go to Hell.
to accept Paris. to marry it. to do duty.

to adhere patriarchs . to accept story ,
despite indignity.

there are so many ways to

static space

to go to Hell.

this is not those ways & this is

NOT that story.

Hell, I'm Helen.

—Sara Larsen, *Merry Hell*

There is a moment in Camaraderie
when interruption is not to be understood.
I cannot bear an interruption.
This is the shining joy;
the time of not-to-end.

On the street we smile.
We go
in different directions
down the imperturbable street.

—Gwendolyn Brooks, *RIOT*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I would like to acknowledge my wonderful committee Chair, Professor Shelley Streeby, for all her generous work with me these many years, for her humor, her candor, her expansive vision and willingness to entertain unconventional approaches to scholarship and creative work, and for her work advocating for working-class, historically marginalized, and minority graduate and undergraduate students and their struggles.

Chapter 1, in part, for which I, Jeanine Webb, am the sole author, is forthcoming for publication in *The Alette In Oakland Reader*. I would like to acknowledge the brilliant work of Professor Page duBois on Notley and the epic genre that formed an integral part of the basis and inspiration for this chapter and also for Chapter 2, Part 2, on Lisa Robertson. I would also like to acknowledge UCSD's Special Collections Archivist Heather Smedberg for her kindness and help throughout the research process, and Professor Ricardo Domínguez for our independent study work on Brecht and other writers and "epic theatre."

The second part of Chapter 2, for which I, Jeanine Webb, am the sole author, was published, in part in *Tripwire: A Journal of Poetics*, Number 13. For Part I of Chapter 2, I would like to acknowledge Professor Michael Davidson for his incredibly helpful insight into, and work on, Dickinson's sensorial and "prosthetic" subjects, particularly in the context of disability studies, his support during treatment, and for his conversations. I would like to acknowledge Sal Nicolazzo for her great help in understanding theories of poetic genre, including lyric and ballad, in the long 19th Century. I would also like to acknowledge my

colleagues at the Emily Dickinson Society and Alexandra Socarides's helpful critique, and Robyn Bell, for her course on Emily Dickinson's Manuscript Books.

For Chapter 3, I would like to acknowledge Professor Michael Davidson again for his seminars and critical work and our helpful conversations on Rukeyser and H.D. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Sal Nicolazzo again for her seminar on the 18th Century novel, and Bruna Mori for her generative conversation and support.

For Chapter 5, I would like to acknowledge all of the Archives staff and Curators in the Rose Library's Special Collections at Emory University, and the Righteous Room and Little Five Points, in Atlanta, Georgia.

Chapter 6, Part I, for which I, Jeanine Webb, am the sole author, was published in the Post-Crisis Poetics Series online. I would like to acknowledge Brian Ang for this amazing project and for his correspondence and conversation as an editor and friend. I would also like to again acknowledge Professor Ricardo Domínguez for his willingness to stand up with students and imagine new worlds being possible, all of the Lumumba-Zapata Collective, everyone in the UCSD LitAction Collective, the Ché Cafe Collective—we saved it together (long may it stay!), Groundwork Books, everyone in the Peterson building occupation, every graduate student who participated in the book blockade of Graduate Studies, all the people at the Shaping Change Conference, Professor Shelley Streeby again for her amazing work in co-organizing this conference, and also for her science fiction seminar, her work on radical speculative texts, and on imaging the future of climate change.

A few of the others I would like to acknowledge: Mark Kelley, Gina Altavilla DiGrazia, Omar Pimienta and Marcela Vargas, Reema Rajbanshi, Raquel Pacheco, Josh Tremill, Niall Twohig, Stephanie Gomez, Tongo Eisen-Martin, Aurelio Meza, Nima Rassouli,

Camila Gavin, Miguel Castaneda, Tanner Smith, Brad Fils, Mark Wallace, Adam Stutz, Danna Staaf, Cynthia Clark, Poets In Need, Tara Bennett of Living Beauty, The Samfund, Brenda Ijima, Megan Kaminiski, and Calliope.

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PUBLICATIONS

A portion of Chapter 2, Part II, "Bodies That Swerve and Resist: Lisa Robertson's 'The Venus Problem' and Feminist New Materialisms" was published in *Tripwire: A Journal of Poetics*, Dialogues Issue 13, 2017

A portion of Chapter 6, Border Counterepics, Part I, "Stars, Seeds, Swarms: On the Present and Future of Border-Area Action Collectives," was published online on the Post-Crisis Poetics Project (Ed. by Brian Ang) and presented at the Buffalo Poetics Conference, Poetics: (The Next) 25 Years, at SUNY, Buffalo NY, 2016.

A portion of Chapter 1, "Poetry Tends To Abolish Time: Alice Notley's Dream Notebooks

and Counterepic," presented at the Alette In Oakland Symposium on the Works of Alice Notley, 2014, Oakland, CA, is forthcoming in *The Alette In Oakland Reader*.

"Wild Seed, Fledgling and Bodies That Resist," in *Monstering Magazine: Disabled and Nonbinary People Celebrating Monsterhood*, April 2017.

"Our Occupations: After the Occupations," *Occupy Poetics* (Essay Press, 2015), contribution originally published for Ed. Thom Donovan's Series on Harriet for the Poetry Foundation, 2012.

"The Poetics of Reverie, Labor and the Drone Imaginary," Poetic Labor Project, online, 2014.

"'Weak Intimacy,' Celebrity and Bay Area Poetics," in ON Contemporary Practice .PDF Archive Series, 2014.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

On Counterepic
Feminist and Anti-State Interventions Into the Epic Genre

by

Jeanine Marie Webb

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California San Diego, 2020

Professor Shelley Streeby, Chair

"On Counterepic: Feminist and Anti-State Interventions Into the Epic Genre" centers critical intersections of gender, the state, and the epic tradition. This dissertation looks to the work of women and non-binary people writing modern and contemporary epic poems in response to ancient epics' narratives of patriarchal statecraft and teleological narratives of conquering and dismembering the wild or uncontrollable feminine. I argue that these works constitute a radical countertradition of anti-state or anti-patriarchal epic, or what I call modern and contemporary counterepic. In an era of late capitalist market economy and raced and gendered systemic violence, counterepic poems and cross-genre poetic texts reimagine space

and time in relation to race, gender, class and structural inequalities. Carefully outlining the uses and critical functions of counterepic as a genre of feminist and anti-state interventions, both within literary communities and within social movements, this dissertation clarifies tropes and repeated motifs of the counterepic genre and the complex ways in which writers of counterepic politically confront past epics' themes and ideologies and create new literary spaces of empathetic imagination and political resistance. This dissertation aims to put the ancient epic tradition and contemporary counterepics into conversation, examining a long countertradition of epics mainly by women and non-binary people within an intersectional, feminist context.

Introduction

On Counterepic and Empathetic Imagination

This dissertation examines critical and radical epics written mostly by women, non-binary and queer people; writers who confront the Classical Western epic tradition, its ponderous immensity and its individual elements, and counter, *détourne*, and challenge the genre's underlying ideologies. This dissertation argues for a long-running counterepic tradition of radical and critical poems that, often explicitly borrowing tropes from ancient and Classical epic, position themselves against hierarchical, patriarchal narratives —of the State and statecraft, of bodies, and of gender —and writers who imagine new counterepic narratives built on voices and stories historically erased and obscured under various forms of structural inequalities.

My own perspective is of that of a poet, a poet-scholar, one who is concerned about many different forms of political resistance, and about radical ways of being in the world and making art as well; what the poet June Jordan once called *Life as Activism*.[1] I am also a poet who writes about science fiction and speculative fiction in addition to writing about radical poetics, so I think about the connections of the three worlds often; that of radical poetry, that of activism, and that of speculative fiction.

What frequently connects all three worlds are forms of empathetic imagination. I borrow this felicitous term from several other sources in the fields of poetry and science fiction writing. One such appearance is in the essay by Jamie Green on Unbound Worlds,

called "The Word for Empathy Is Sci-Fi." Writing about LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* and Nancy Kress's *Probability Moon*, Green notes:

"All science fiction is work of imagining. *Empathetic* imagining, though, is the real gift." Through this capacious 'work of imagining,' we open ourselves to empathy and to understanding of difference: "They are both books in which outsiders learn to understand an alien world—perhaps to love it, perhaps to fear it, but either way it breaks their heart. Empathy begets openness, after all, which includes openness to hurt. But it begets more empathy, too—a rising tide."[2]

Poetry, which the science fiction writer Ursula K. LeGuin once defined as "patterned intensity in language" (Nancy Kress quoting LeGuin at Comics Fest in San Diego, 2018) is associated with empathetic imagination too. The very form of poetry, from the line break itself, to tensions in the music of regular and irregular rhythm, of enjambment and breath, creates moments of slippage, attunement and speculative openings, which may lead to both estrangement and understanding. And much radical poetry (formally and politically radical), like counterepic, is further fundamentally attuned to its historical moment. As one writer says of Alice Notley, one of the most prolific writers of counterepics, and the central focus of Chapter One, "The range, comprehensiveness, and empathetic imagination of Alice Notley's poems are among the major astonishments of contemporary poetry. Book by surprising book, she reinvents not only herself as a poet, but also what it means for anyone to write a poem at this volatile moment in our history."[3]

And activism, for many of the best thinkers and the best writers of poetry, and for simply those that are the most desperate, by necessity, is also a space of empathetic imagination. In her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, on social

movements and practical activist strategies (AK Press, 2017), the writer and activist adrienne maree brown, also co-editor, with Walidah Imarisha, of the science fiction anthology *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction from Social Justice Movements*, notes: "we are in an imagination battle."[4] There are very real stakes to empathetic imagination in poetry, in activism, and in how we see and understand what is at first alien to us, that which is Other. These stakes include, on a very basic level, who is afforded personhood, who finds affinity, who speaks or whose communication is understood, and who joins in revolt.

As a person who began surviving breast cancer while in my fifth and sixth years of dissertation research and writing (now in full remission and my final year), I would also like to note that this dissertation was written in the context of both cancer and illness and disability, and in a context of collective action and organizing against the UCSD Literature Building's cancer cluster, and against the Trump administration and its ideologies.

It occurs to me that cancer and illness can also be a space of empathetic imagination. And cancer, and chronic illness, is also an epic endeavor, and a counterepic one. Illness is often an encounter with brutal systems of power, but also a space for empathy. I think about how chemotherapy, radiation and surgery are a kind of epic. Chemo and injections and surgery and six weeks of radiation each day and electrocardiograms and the thinning of the heart by PTCH chemo. The resilience of the heart as a muscle that can and does rebuild itself and heal. Sometimes one has to heal in order to fight. This healing can be bodily, and it can be emotional, and it can be both, really intertwined and never separate. Sometimes chronic illness is a continuous fight without healing. But there are problems with the metaphor of "fight." As if those who pass away didn't "fight" hard enough—an ableist lie. Still, from within, the process felt like a battle. In one hospital where I got chemotherapy on the 9th

floor, the computer system of records, called the EPIC medical system (their website explains, somewhat terrifyingly I thought—the combination of "glorious" and "nation" I guess. "An 'epic' is a glorious recounting of a nation's events. Like the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, our electronic health records chronicle the story of a patient's healthcare over time.") When EPIC was down, the nurses' memories and their pencils and paper powered everything; no, these elements of labor and care always also powered everything—but they were then made more evident and given stronger voice. During infusions, I thought about poetry as a place of resilience and facing darkness and empathy. And about song as what remains when so much else falls away. Moments of belonging and connection with strangers. Moments of patterned intensity. Jimi Hendrix's "Little Wing" playing from my neighbor's phone, as we, hooked up to tubes, laughed and "mmhmmd" over his concert recollections.

As such, this dissertation is also particularly informed by disability studies perspectives. It is especially informed by Christine Miserandino's popular essay "Spoon Theory"[5] and by Tobin Siebers's essay "Disability on Trial" in *Material Feminisms*. The latter strongly advocates for the value of disability experience to critique and also for the intersectional potential of this knowledge and experience:

> I argue here that disability experience has the potential both to augment social critique and to advance emancipatory political goals. More importantly, it is my hope that the knowledge given by disability experience might renew the incentive to reclaim and to re-theorize other experiences of minority identity, despite the argument by [Joan W.] Scott and others that they have no critical value.[6]

Throughout the process of researching and writing this dissertation, I paid particular attention to archival work as embodied work, and of bus fare as embodied work. My notes in the

archive were necessarily interspersed with notes on my eyelashes falling out for the 2nd time, on bone pain and fatigue as companions.

When do the stories we tell through poetry—one of the most ancient ways of transmitting stories—cross over into economic struggles, into politics and social movements, into peoples' real everyday lives on a mass and personal scale? My dissertation, *On Counterepic*, centers on critical intersections of gender, the state, and the epic tradition. Herein I look at the work of women and non-binary people writing modern and contemporary epic poems in response to ancient epics' narratives of patriarchal statecraft and teleological narratives of conquering and dismembering the wild or uncontrollable feminine. My research into epic focuses on the idea of anti-state or anti-patriarchal epic, or what I call modern and contemporary counterepic, in an era of late capitalist market economy and raced and gendered systemic violence. I argue that counterepic poems and hybrid poetic works reimagine space and time in relation to race, gender, class and other structural inequalities, challenging patriarchal systems and structures.

I seek to examine a long countertradition of epics by women and non-binary people within an intersectional, feminist context. Deep archival research on manuscript materials housed in several unique collections is key to my research and to my dissertation, which I plan to revise and publish as a book on poetic resistance and social movements. This dissertation is rooted especially in the Archive for New Poetry in Special Collections at UC San Diego, particularly the Alice Notley Papers and the Bernadette Mayer Papers. I have also worked with the manuscript collections of Gwendolyn Brooks's papers in the Black Print Culture collection and researched Emily Dickinson's fascicles or manuscript books, which I develop a preliminary reading of as (counter)epic. Some of the counterepics written by

women I write about in my dissertation include Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette*, *City Of*, *Disobedience*, *Alma, Or The Dead Women* and her manuscript Dream Notebooks; Gwendolyn Brooks's *In the Mecca* and *Riot*; H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*; Bernadette Mayer's *The Helens of Troy, New York*; Trisha Low's *The Compleat Purge*; Sara Larsen's *Merry Hell*; Bhanu Kapil's *Ban en Banlieue*; and Lisa Robertson's *The Venus Problem* and *Debbie: An Epic*.

In my review of relevant scholarly literature in Chapter 1, when referring to Mikhail Bahktin and Walter Benjamin on aspects of the ancient epic tradition in "Epic and the Novel" and "What Is Epic Theatre?" respectively, I define the common features of the traditional epic as 1. a poem or hybrid text which somehow interacts with or originates from poetic modes of oral performance, 2. a poem or hybrid text which describes a "public" communal experience or quest, whether for lineage, statecraft or other telos, 3. a poem or text which is considered longer, in culturally relative terms. Building upon this multifaceted definition of the common features of the epic tradition, I introduce the road map for my dissertation, which considers counterepic texts by women and non-binary people as forms of intersectional feminist resistance.

Throughout the dissertation, another central research question is "How Does Epic Relate to Lyric?" I examine epic and lyric as genres in dialectical relation to each other, contending that though both forms are often gendered and have existed in dynamic tension with one another in history—with the traditional epics associated with "masculine" and "public" valences and themes and the lyric associated traditionally with "feminine" and "private" or "personal" valences—in reality, emergent works by many women and non-binary people in both genres have also tended to challenge, counter, subvert and critique traditional epic forms in order to challenge the patriarchal elements associated with the forms.

Thinking through this question, in Chapter 2, I develop a preliminary unusual reading of Emily Dickinson's Fascicles or manuscript books, which she carefully ordered and sewed into booklets during her lifetime. Using the integral new volume edited by Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson's Poems as She Preserved Them*, which finally reproduces her manuscript books in the order that she preserved them, I ask "What if we were to read Dickinson's fascicles as epic?" In this section, building on Michael Cohen's analysis of "vagabondage" and reportage in ballads in *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*, I discuss ballad meter, balladry as a form that straddles the epic and lyric tradition, and the subversion of hymns and ballads by Dickinson. Drawing on Sal Nicolazzo's examination of lyric genres and Michael Davidson's intersectional disability-studies-centered essay on Dickinson, "Critical Losses in the Politics Of Gain," I consider how we might, as he suggests, read the "social body" alongside these "social lives" of the poems. Taking a further cue from Alice Notley's assertion that each of Emily Dickinson's poems is like a compressed epic in scope, I consider Dickinson's poems as compressed counterepics and issues of scope and scale in relation to prosthetic technologies such as microscopes and telescopes that occur in her work's preoccupations with epic scale and sensorial domains.

I presented an early version of the first chapter of my dissertation, "'Poetry tends to abolish time': Alice Notley's Counterepic," at the Alette in Oakland Conference on the work of Alice Notley in the fall of 2014. This Chapter relates material from Alice Notley's manuscript Dream Notebooks, her counterepic works *The Descent of Alette*, *Disobedience* and *Alma, Or the Dead Women*, and her essay on "The Feminine Epic" to formulate a theory of counterepic.

Chapter 2 Part II, which I wrote during active cancer treatment including

chemotherapy, entitled "Bodies That Swerve and Resist: Lisa Robertson's 'The Venus Problem' and Feminist New Materialisms," concentrates on a conjuncture of two different but vitally interrelated materialist traditions: the profound legacy of Marx's historical materialism and the older materialist tradition through atomism, Epicureanism and Lucretius's epic *Der rarum natura*, which Marx wrote his dissertation on, and which I argue, in many ways was to become the progenitor of emergent feminist new materialisms in our current era. My chapter on Lisa Robertson concerns her long counterepic poem-essay which inhabits the tensions and alignments of these intertwined materialist traditions: "The Venus Problem," which references Marx on Epicurianism, popular stories of Lucretius and the poetics of his invocation to Venus, art history and questions of political action and what art can or should do amid a capitalist and patriarchal environment. "The Imperium's fucked up/So how can I screw or work?" her poem's speaker asks with an amused desperation. Using Mel Y. Chen's *Animacies* and Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, in this chapter I argue that Robertson's poem-essay reaches towards a feminist new materialism: a collective vitality.

In Part I of my Chapter 3, "The Helens of Troy, New York, the Didos of Carthage, Texas," I gather together works in the long tradition of critical counterepic which take on the legacy of often-demonized female figures from ancient and classical epics and rewrite these works to center these women's voices as heroines or protagonists of their own stories. In particular, I focus on modernist reinterpretations (H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, figures of Dido and Carthage in Muriel Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*) and contemporary counterepics (Bernadette Mayer's *The Helens of Troy, New York*, Lisa Robertson's *Debbie: An Epic*, and Sara Larsen's *Merry Hell*) which center and transform the experiences of the ancient characters Helen of Troy and Dido of Carthage to tell new, more subversive stories. I argue that these subversive

stories dive into the wreck of false patriarchal myths, uncovering new and empowering feminist perspectives on these characters as heroines of their own stories as well as unidealized and complex characters. In the process these characters are depicted more like real thinking women involved in social resistance and affected by systemic oppression, rather than simply as scapegoats for foundational war and possession narratives. This chapter section traces the transformation of writers from Muses, historically relegated in literary circles to representing inspiration to influential men, to Witches, in charge of their own stories and publishing their own works.

Chapter 4 examines the use of gender, spectacle, and affect in post-conceptualist feminist epic such as Trisha Low's *The Compleat Purge,* which mashes up 18th Century conduct books for ladies and today's chatlogs, Kate Durbin's *E! Entertainment,* which transforms the traditional epic through reality TV transcripts, and Jos Charles's serial poem *feeld*, which, deriving inspiration from the serial poem tradition and from Medieval epic sources, as well as our current moment, strives to invent an emergent new language in order to describe trans* experiences of gender and the gendered body. This chapter, entering into a long-running contemporary debate in poetics regarding conceptual poetry, also argues for the existence of conceptual affect in counterepic conceptual and post-conceptual works.

Chapter 5 of my dissertation, drawing on research I did in Summer 2017 in Atlanta on Gwendolyn Brooks's epic poems in Emory's Black Print Culture Collection and the Raymond Danowski *Poetry* Library, considers Brooks's counterepic works *In the Mecca, Riot,* and *In Montgomery* as epics which confront skillfully and variously the realities of being black in the United States, and which depict the minutiae of oppression that Richard Wright, who corresponded with Brooks and who was a great admirer of her work, called 'the pathos of

petty destinies, the whimper of the wounded, the tiny incidents that plague the lives of the desperately poor, and the problems of common prejudice." This chapter also considers Brooks's mythopoetics, which encompass everything from the Aeneid and Dante to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, and her work's move to document social movements such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott in *In Montgomery* or the economic violence of *In the Mecca*'s poor Chicago tenement's dissolution both on an intimate and specific scale and a mass or collective scale. I argue that it is integral that these two tensions exist alongside one another in her critical epics. This chapter also asks what it means to make a city or an architecture a character alongside the multifluous voices of people of color in the narratives of these poems, and how these depictions prefigure later depictions such as Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I take a theory of counterepic to an even larger, transnational scale, striving to think about counterepic resistance in the violence and slippage of a liminal border context. Can we read social movements and action poetry collectives (such as Colectivo Intransigente of Tijuana and the poet-activists of the Mexican Spring resistance post-financial crisis and post-Ayotzinapa massacre) as counterepic? What about speculative poetic counterepics written by border-area authors such as Alfredo Aguilar's *Here on Earth* and Lizz Huerta's *The Wall*, which critically imagine the possibilities of the future? Can collective poetic resistance, in its vital interactions with social movements and direct action in the recent past and the present, be a form of counterepic? If capitalism is an epic on an economic scale, can the collective find forms of resistance in art alongside other action and praxis?

A Note on the Perils and Pitfalls of Genre.

The Epic is story. The epic is the large story of a people told by the victors. The epic is the retroactive story of a conquest which justifies the conquerors. The epic tells the story of a hero, a man, who kills a goddess or an animal, who makes war and founds a city. By killing the goddess or the witch or the traitor or an animal, by making war and founding a city, the hero gains knowledge; he gives structure and order to the Universe. He tells the story of his father and his son and his son's son and his son's son's son and their great deeds, their fears, their patriarchal violence, and the women who sacrificed themselves for it. Well, yes, and no. Does Gwendolyn Brooks's *Anniad* follow this model? Certainly. Does the Mayan epic called the *Popul Vuh*? Certainly most of these themes and models are accounted for (rabble-rouser animals are killed to bring order, there is a founding narrative of a citadel, etc.). However, the unnamed writer of Book I also introduces the impetus for the recording of this saga as counter-colonial, against erasure by those currently in power, who were burning Mayan texts at the time of its composition:

> in the nation of Quiche people...We shall write about this now amid the preaching of God, in Christendom now. We shall bring it out because there is no longer a place to see it, a Council Book, a place to see 'The Light That Came from Beside the Sea,' the account of 'Our Place in the Shadows,' a place to see 'The Dawn of Life,' as it is called (63).

This fact certainly complicates matters as we consider genre in this situation. Similarly, if we shift to contemporary epics and counterepics, is Eileen Myles's contemporary poetic New York queer memoir *Inferno*, which of course broadly references the *Divine Comedy*, a prose counterepic? In addition, can we consider Classical ancient works such as Euripedes's play

The Trojan Women as having counterepic elements, as they reference the network of epic stories in their own time, from the perspective of those left behind postwar in a sacked city?

The primary peril and pitfall of naming and writing about an emergent genre is perhaps the peril of becoming too prescriptivist in defining and outlining genres.
I do not believe that writing about a critical genre, such as counterepic, nor discussing counternarrative, simply reinscribes or reifies that which is countered. If I believed that, I would not be writing this account. I actually feel that this claim is teleologically absurd and completely ignores the material effects of domination that centuries of patriarchal, militaristic, colonialist stories have had on communities, to say nothing of how they have impacted the work of women and non-binary and queer writers. Similarly, I do not think that all classical Western epics are solely regressive, nationalist, or solely patriarchal. Nor am I critiquing the value of reading ancient epic, with its rich poetics, critically. I am describing an arc of signification over time, showing the way that these texts have tended to be both interpreted and used socially, in culture. Hence I strive to take a dialectical approach at all times to understanding counterepic and classical epic as genres.

Furthermore, no genre is so firmly delineated that there is no occasional melt between itself and its predecessors, nor can be fully separated into one discrete category of genre. Many of the works discussed in this dissertation simultaneously engage with several different distinct genres and their common forms. Genres are concepts that are fluid, informed and crystallized by many historical and social antecedents. For example, one could teach a whole exploratory class simply on the question What Is A Novel? and the class would come up with a multitude of persuasive, historically specific answers for this one question. And many different questions would need to be addressed before answers could even begin to be

formulated. Did the genre of the novel begin in Japan, with Lady Murasaki? In the 18th Century in Europe? Is a novel an epic form? And so on.

A Note on the Archives.

Much of this dissertation's research material is rooted in deep research on several different archival collections, across the country. This includes manuscript collections including correspondence, drafts, artworks, notebooks, transcripts of talks and speeches, posters, broadsides, and other ephemera. I include a brief note here on each of the archive collections represented in this dissertation.

Chapter 1 draws primarily from materials housed in the Archive for New Poetry at the University of California, San Diego, in the Special Collections & Archives at the Geisel Library. Research collections at the Archive for New Poetry consulted include the Alice Notley Papers, 1969-2014 (MSS 319) and the Bernadette Mayer Papers, 1958-2017 (MSS 0420); in particular, Mayer's correspondence with Notley. In addition, this Chapter draws from materials held in the Raymond Danowski Poetry Library, within the Rose Library Collection at Emory University, including the Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley Collection, Manuscript Collection No. 1135 and the Harris Schiff Papers, Manuscript Collection No. 1125.

Chapter 2 incorporates research from the Emily Dickinson Museum, Amherst College's Beneski Museum of Natural History and the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Emily Dickinson Society Conference, and also research conducted in the UC Santa Barbara Special Collections Library on Dickinson's manuscript books.

Chapter 3 includes research from manuscript collections including the University of California, San Diego's Archive for New Poetry's Bernadette Mayer Papers (MSS 0420).

Chapter 5 incorporates research collections from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, held at the Rose Library, including the Raymond Danowski Poetry Library and the Black Print Culture Collection, including the Gwendolyn Brooks manuscript collection/author file, the Michel Fabre Archives, the May Miller Archives; in addition to these are audio interviews with Brooks from the Archive for New Poetry at UCSD.

Finally, Chapter 6 includes a great deal of independent research conducted by myself--including interviews with authors, and from my firsthand experience participating in social movements over the last 10 years—on contemporary San Diego/Tijuana border-area writers and artists, and materials and interviews relating to direct actions and demonstrations across Southern California and Mexico, from the time of the 2008 financial crisis to the present. This final section of this chapter also includes my research on speculative poetry and fiction by San Diego authors (including in the form of unpublished manuscript excerpts) and interviews, which have been included with the authors' permission.

A Note on Time Travel.

Another feature of this dissertation which, like empathetic imagination, connects the three subjects referred to in the start of this dissertation's Introduction, including radical poetry and poetics, activism and speculative fiction, is the notion of liberatory time travel. My work and my form of literary analysis and critique aims to put the ancient and modern epics and counterepics into conversation with one another. For example, Chapter 1 on Notley's counterepics time travels from ancient Mesopotamia and *The Descent of Inanna* (written c.

4,000 BCE) to Spenser's 16th Century *Faerie Queene*, to Alice Notley's contemporary works of the 80s and 90s. Similarly, both parts of Chapter 2 do a large amount of time traveling in their analysis, just as the authors themselves do. In Part I, Emily Dickinson in the 19th century imagines prehistory and geological time while transforming the ballad and hymn traditions in her manuscript books and incorporating new technologies such as microscopes and advanced telescopes in her poetry. In Part II, Lisa Robertson's poem-essay mixes epic works by the ancient Roman poet Lucretius, with the visions of the Renaissance painter Botticelli, with Marx's theory in the 19th Century, and with the contemporary questions of feminist new materialisms, developed in the last ten years.

My rationale for this time-traveling literary analysis is not simply that the authors themselves are doing it in their counterepic works, and that I am fascinated by this, but also as a way of highlighting the counterepics' anti-teleological structure. In addition, I aim to consider temporal questions of poetic form, especially non-linearity, disruption, abolition, the dream and reality of non-collaboration and dispersion, the authors' counter-cosmology and counter-mythopoesis. Finally, through delineating (in this sense, decoupling from linearity) this use of anachronism by the poets and writers and by myself, I hope to allow us to consider these questions of the speculative temporal space of dreaming and time's abolition, bending, and anti-capitalist liberation in the counterepic tradition.

Part I.

Counterepic As Feminist Intervention

Chapter 1. 'Poetry tends to abolish time': Alice Notley's Dream Notebooks and Counterepic

On Materialisms and Mythopoetics

In an interview in Jacket2 on the subject of the poet's novel, Alice Notley outlines a particular and complex poetic and temporal cosmology of sorts:

> "The Book of Dead" contrasts two states, that of Dead and that of Day. Day is what we have generally agreed life is; Dead is a world where boundaries are erased. It resembles dreams and is where the ghouls live. Poetry is more like Dead than like Day, but prose is more useful for describing what goes on in Dead — how it works. Prose is more useful for flat and general statement. Poetry tends to abolish time and present experience as dense and compressed. Prose is society's enabler, it collaborates with it in its linearity. A poem sends you back into itself repeatedly, a story leads you on.[1]

I would like to begin to discuss this compact, rather wonderful, and weird idea that formally "Poetry tends to abolish time" and presents experience as dense and compressed. First of all, we must say the obvious— from a material perspective, poetry does no such thing. For all of history's repetitions, time is irreversible and capital, while not eternal, is the tyranny that currently structures our time in terms of labor-hours and increments. But from a perspective of consciousness and awareness, the poem and revolutionary periods can demonstrate this tendency to temporal suspension or abolition.

I will argue that the poet Alice Notley's postmodern epics, particularly her contemporary epic poem *The Descent of Alette*, represent a response to patriarchal traditions both in modernist epics and ancient epics. Notley's epics present a counterepic, counterpatriarchal narrative, which critiques gendered modes of Empire and statecraft and their accompanying oppressions and transforms these narratives by identification with the formerly conquered. Notley's postmodern epics, which I will examine through the manuscript

Dream Notebooks in UCSD's New Poetry Archive, create a contrary narrative by imagining forms of resistance to capitalist and patriarchal structures which might allow for the emergence of a new material feminist understanding of time and history beyond the bounds of Empire.

My desire to give a feminist materialist reading of Notley's mythopoetics in many ways responds to a particular recent contemporary moment in the field of Poetics. In October of 2015 a Symposium on the works of Alice Notley, called Alette in Oakland, was held at the Omni Center in Oakland, California. My paper, presented on the second day of the conference, directly responded to the keynote address on the first day of the conference: "I'd like to take some (generous) umbrage with what [the San Francisco Bay Area poet and publisher] David Brazil said in his keynote introduction at the Conference, that 'Notley is not a materialist,' implying that this is precisely why we ought to celebrate her (for which there was a collective clap?) and present a contrary perspective to this claim, seeking to give my own materialist reading of her work." (J.Webb, original paper). One reason that I took (and continue to take) this stance is I oppose the false binary that this orientation of "materialism" and its opposite both imply: namely, that metaphysics and aesthetics do not converge in material praxis and the creation of historical narratives. I am less interested in labeling Notley, as if according to an ontological claim, "a materialist" or "not a materialist" than I am examining elements of materialisms in her poetics. Surely Alice Notley's work is not materialist like Marx is materialist, or perhaps not even as Federici is materialist, but in her work, any liberatory claims of poetry, dreaming, temporal abolition and ritual are placed in relation to, and juxtaposed with, everything (mundane, real) that kills us under the State's tyranny. Her work demonstrates a feminist materialism which centralizes the mythopoetic

and the metaphysic but accompanies this mythopoesis with a knowledge of the misery and inequalities of structural reality and how our experience of that structural reality is informed by State violence, which shapes the political unconscious.[2]

I'm using the term "political unconscious" as Jameson uses it in *The Political Unconscious*, which argues that socially constructed narratives in mass culture unconsciously influence our understanding of history. In some respects Notley's work's materialism may have more in common with the emergent new materialist tradition through Lucretius and Deleuze than it does with either an Orthodox or hardline Marxist or a Hegelian materialist idealist dialectic. In Notley's work, timeless space, the Soul, edges of ecologies, contrary myths and dreaming are the places one goes to as sources of understanding, resilience and healing from which to draw strength before fighting back in disobedience. Is there a claim in Notley's work not only for poetry's imagined abolition of time, but for a real abolition of leaders, of self-interested politics and hierarchies? I think so and would like to think the how and why of this through.

The story of *The Descent of Alette* is the story of slow feminist utopian combat rock, of "an unfashionably utopian epistle about tyrannicide that takes place on a subway ride deeper and deeper into the city's body."[3] The main character Alette, the narrator and heroine of our story, at first who has no identity or memory, must descend deep into the earth's aggregation beneath the city, from station to subway station, encountering many different characters and personages, participate in a series of animal transformations and metamorphoses, attaining the weapons of the owl —flight, a beak and talons, confont and expose the accumulation of patriarchal history-making of Empire in the form of a Tyrant, discover that the Tyrant is not one person but the world-system itself and kill this Tyrant, in

order not only to survive, but to "heal the world."[4] Alette, at the River St. Stop of the subway underworld, must swallow a black cloth, which restores to her memory and her name and enables her to find the one way to kill the Tyrant when she discovers that she is in mourning for her brother who has died in one of the Tyrant's manipulative wars. The narrative ends in the post-catastrophe utopian interstices, as the subway doors unlock and open, and people start to emerge and the world can begin anew in the open air.

I include this summary of *Alette*'s story in order to introduce the poem to readers unfamiliar with the narrative, to give an account of the poem's counternarrative moves and also to show the ways in which liminal worlds and visionary traditions interact in Notley's systemic materialist critique, which links private and public forms of violence and trauma through images of war and forgetting. One can recognize within this story many references to the underworld journeys of ancient epic, to the River Lethe in Dante's *Inferno*, the river of forgetting or oblivion, and to Dante's emergence from Hell's caverns at the end of the Inferno out into the stars and fresh air. Homer's *Odyssey* is referenced by the heroine's namelessness at the beginning of the journey, a subtle reference to Odysseus's evasion of the Cyclops by introducing himself as "Nobody" and "No One" in Homer. The poem's narrative also draws on the Sumerian ancient epic *The Descent of Inanna,* which tells the story of the descent into the Underworld of the Goddess Inanna, and *The Iliad* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh.* Central to *Alette*'s narrative are the blurred boundaries of liminal or visionary worlds.

Though some—perhaps the sort of materialists that David Brazil wished to distinguish himself from with his comment at the conference—are quick to dismiss the utopian impulse as mere idealist folly and mystifying fluff, I hold with Jameson's argument in *Archaeologies of the Future* that the utopian impulse, utopian desire and the utopian wish in literature and art

are all socially and politically significant to our understanding of how otherness is embedded in systemic difference, subjectivity and material conditions under capitalism:

> The Utopians offer not only to conceive of such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet. The fundamental dynamic of any Utopian politics (or of any political Utopianism) will therefore always lie in the dialectic of Identity and Difference, to the degree to which such a politics aims at imagining...a system radically different from this one. [5]

That Notley's epic visions enter into this fray with their explicitly feminist politics and experimental form is certain. Her poetics is always in dialogue with this dialectic of Identity and Difference, with what is elided when the public obscures the private, and vice versa.

From 1995 to 2008 Notley recorded her dreams in a series of notebooks, referred to simply as the Dream Notebooks, which are now housed in UCSD's Special Collections. They are a pleasure to read through not only for their imaginative and mundane record but also for the ways in which they interact with her daily real life— for example, "Collapsed anemones" "Nothing 'French' happened yesterday" and [of Paris] "I wish I'd occasionally meet someone ugly."[6] The Dream Notebooks seem to have also been a great writing praxis and inspiration to her, as one recognizes more and more passages from the journals in her published work. In the Notebooks, it is not unusual to see her go from a meditative discussion of the Soul, or of individual dreams, in which owls fly out of sepulchres toward the light, to frank depictions of sexuality and the Detroit riots.

Where in the dream is the space of revolt? How does the reverie correspond to political and economic realities (a question one always encounters in Rimbaud, necessarily)? How does the radical temporal abolition of time, toward which poetry "tends" according to

Notley—relate to her work's cosmology or cosmogony—to the world of dreaming, to the subterranean and fluid "boundaryless" worlds of the dead, to her images of the modern city, the subway that Alette travels on her Dantean or Innanan journey? To the material world, its historically and economically specific experience of modernity and postmodernity?

What is Epic? Or, a Brief History of the Epic Genre

In order to further answer these questions, and to understand what a counterepic tradition would and does look like, first we must understand the legacy of ancient epic in creating and reproducing a historical and temporal mode with roots in the justification for and expansion of Empire. Perhaps to do this we must begin, like Alette, having forgotten the name of epic. How are these temporalities and histories constructed?

Calliope, the ancient Greek muse of epic poetry in myth, was known as the leader of the Muses. She is often shown, like Clio, the muse of history, holding either a scroll, a recording tablet or a lyre. The epic poem developed as a form to be recited largely orally or sung, whether at court or at more public gatherings. That the conventions and symbols of her representation are shared with the Muse of History is not coincidental, as the epic as genre shares in the production and reproduction of history as part of its fundamental narrative. The lyre, a stringed instrument a version of which is common to nearly all cultures, was made in ancient world from the resonant parts of beasts: usually a tortoise shell for the body, the horns of a bull or antelope or tree branches for the arms (*pecheis* or *kerata*) and sheep-gut as strings, with a plectum of ivory, boxwood or sycamore.

Like all the Muses, her name is said to be a source for "museum" as a place of public knowledge. Calliope can also refer to the music of a circus steam organ (once advertised as

"the steam car of the Muses"). Calliope could be punishing to those who challenged her to epic rap (or lyre) battles: when the daughters of the King of Thessaly dared challenge her, she not only lyrically trounced them but turned them into magpies, birds more known for their mimicry than for their originality. Some of the first lines of the *Purgatorio*, Canto I, by the exiled Dante, invoke her unforgiving and phoenixlike powers: "Now from the grave wake poetry again...Now let Calliope uplift her strain/ And lift my voice up on the mighty song/ That smote the miserable Magpies nine/ Out of all hope of pardon for their wrong!"[7]

As Queen of the Muses Calliope was the mother to Orpheus, the man who was said to be the orginator of lyric poetry and the first to become a marvelous lyre player, learning directly from the god Apollo, the inventor of the instrument, until his body was torn asunder by the Maenads, and his head went floating down the River Hebrus, still singing. In some ways, though the patron in myth of the epic was originally a woman and the lyric, a man, the trajectory of epic poetry vs. shorter, lyric poetry became a gendered dichotomy which is systemically replicated to this day,[8] with epic associated traditionally with the masculine or masculinist tradition (hence coded public, solid, political and continuous) and the lyric with the feminine or women's tradition (coded private or domestic, personal, apolitical, fluid and transitory).

The story of Calliope's son Orpheus —whose name in Greek only appears coincidentally etymologically related to the name of Morpheus, or the god of dreams — connects him to Benjamin's Angel of History: both condemned or destined always to look back, one to the lost Beloved and the other to the aggregation of the past catastrophes while blown inexorably forward by the storm of progress, back turned, to the future. Both of whose only hope appears the salvation of the past. However, where Benjamin argues against an

"eternal picture" of history, and against a materialism or historicism which endlessly valorizes destruction at the expense of genuine understanding, the classical epic's narrative aggressively pursues this eternal picture, substituting for the beloved or the Angel, in most cases, a mythos of state power.

Benjamin's Thesis VII takes as its epigraph a quotation from Brecht's work of epic theater (a genre to which I will return), "The Threepenny Opera": " Consider the darkness and the great cold/ In this vale that resounds with mystery." Critiquing elements of historical materialism as it is understood in his own time and distinguishing these problems from the problems of historicism he identifies, Benjamin references the epic tradition from Homer to Virgil, quoting Flaubert on the defeat of Carthage by Troy. He describes a kind of process of empathy that occurs "whose origin is the indolence of the heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly." In Benjamin's terms, "the genuine historical image" can only be held in this space of brief flareup. The despair which results from this (inevitable, it is implied), confrontation with the brevity of the "genuine" image of history is a great cause of grief. "Among medieval theologians," he says, "it was regarded as the root cause of sadness. Flaubert, who was familiar with it, wrote: '*Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage*.' ['Few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage.']"[9]

The phrase carries with it the compressed knowledge of Carthage as once powerful North African city ruled by a woman, Dido, who in the narrative of the *Aeneid* the gods made to fall in love with Aeneas and be spurned in order to produce her downfall, as well as eventually the total destruction of her city. The Roman Cato the Elder's famous phrase "Carthago delenda est" ["Carthage must be destroyed"] represented his scorched-earth style

foreign policy campaign of continuing aggression and a state policy of vengeance, which, during the Punic Wars, resulted in the total destruction of Carthage by the Romans and all of its remaining inhabitants being sold into slavery. Though she, very like Aeneas, is embedded in the founding myths of Empire, Dido's people lost, again and again, even after Rome was founded. Says Benjamin of the despair at "resuscitating" Carthage: "The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor." This conditional empathy with the victorious comes at a great price and Benjamin cautions profoundly against it, as well as any celebration with the victorious in war: "And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers."[10]

Not only does the celebration of the conquerors create the conditions for the benefit of the victor and thus the rulers, the noncritical celebration of "cultural treasures" without reference to the colonizing apparatus behind them also materially upholds the rulers. And, it is implied, the victors write the history which reproduces a mythos which has had this historical complexity drained from it, either out of revenge or despair. The further implication we might draw here with respect to the an epic like the *Aeneid*, which was written under pressure to celebrate and create a founding false lineage mythos for the ruler Augustus, is that, though Vergil shows us a narrative capable of having nuanced empathy both with the exiled Trojans and with Dido, its narrative also provides an overall support for a profoundly gendered destruction of the conquered.

It is also significant that Benjamin invoked ancient epic in his lament. In his *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Vergil to Milton*, David Quint further describes a central irony of power at the heart of the *Aeneid*:

> At Virgil's Actium the sides are sharply drawn between the forces of Augustus and those of Anthony, although the historical battle was, in fact, the climax of a civil war, Roman against Roman, where distinctions between the contending factions were liable to collapse. The construction of an apologetic propaganda for the winning side of Augustus brings into play a whole ideology that transforms the recent history of civil strife into a war of foreign conquest. There is a fine irony in the fact that epic's most influential statement of the imperialist project should disguise a reality of internecine conflict. But this irony points precisely to the function of the imperial ideology to which the *Aeneid* resorts—its capacity to project a foreign 'otherness' upon the vanquished enemies of Augustus.[11]

This scapegoating of foreign elements to mask internal conflicts is central to the poem's narrative force. Aeneas must watch a woman (whom he seems to have loved) burn and drain all "feminine"-coded sympathy out of himself in order to be able to attain victory, to save his comrades, to kill Turnus with a cold heart in the poem's ending, enraged when seeing him wearing the belt of his fallen comrade Pallas. The founding gesture of the *Aeneid* is a gesture of violence that requires an othered, subservient mind and body begging for mercy and for that mercy to be denied. Denied mercy or compassion which is valorized (revenge justified by past unresolved trauma of the now-conquerers) is thus one of the key founding, colonizing gestures of epic.

In her essay in the journal *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, "'An Especially Peculiar Undertaking': Alice Notley's Epic," Page DuBois begins her analysis and exegesis with the question, "What could be more *arrière-garde*, trailing behind, looking backward, than an epic poem written at the end of the twentieth-century? We all know that the epic is dead."[12] DuBois traces the linked history of the most well-known classical epics succinctly:

> [And we know] That Homer and Virgil and Dante and Ariosto and Tasso and Spenser and Milton, in a great patriarchal lineage, wrote their works attending to one another, and that this great line came to an end, perhaps with the beginnings of capitalism and the end of the old forms of monarchy, in which the king stood for his people, or in which a hero, an everyman, could found his genealogical line in an adventure, a series of ordeals, a long progression of elsewhere toward the beginnings of his people, toward salvation, toward a promised land, often represented as a virgin land, as a bride, as a blooming rose.[13]

All, or most of, the actual women in the epic narrative's drama of statecraft or lineage must be thrown over, it seems for this fundamental idealized feminized object-telos, or impossibly merged with it (in the case of Beatrice or Penelope). In this respect the ancient epic's ideological motions or its tableau begins to resemble a scene reminiscent of Jacques-Louis David's "The Oath of the Horatii" (painted in Rome, exhibited Salon of 1785) in which the male warriors swear upright vengeance upon their swords against their competing brothers while the women and children form a triangle of weeping despair in the corner. For all its beauty and complexity of characters and narrative, classical epic reproduces these binaries endlessly, with the women usually in stasis, faithful at home (like the legendary fidelity of Penelope) while the male hero pursues public greatness. The figure of Dido, the Queen who once shelters with Aeneas in a passionate encounter in the storm, must become the storm that he defeats, building her magical pyre, the terror of the "natural," and with it, any relation of feminine "weakness" of the heart that would prevent him from founding the new Empire. This is part of the gendered narrative of epic: a woman or feminized monster must be destroyed as a sacrifice in order to attain the idealized feminized object-telos. While female witches and warriors exist in epic, such as Dido and Camilla in the *Aeneid*, and homoerotic relationships between men (such as Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad*), these characters and relations are

still each distinguished, for the most part, by their sacrifice in service of the state and founding narrative.

So what, then are the common historical characteristics of the epic genre? One, traditionally, it begins as poetry, a poem often produced through the tradition of oral performance. Two, the poem should describe what is considered a "public" experience, one which expresses some kind of collective history: whether of war, religious origin or conflict, and very often it tells the story of statecraft and nationbuilding, of kingship, an adventure to colonize new lands, a crusade, the capture of a city, a spiritual enlightenment or a founding narrative of some type, a quest. Three, the epic poem is traditionally apt to have a cast of thousands, on a Cecil DeMille scale, though this varies, in order to communicate the scope, importance, character, temporal experience and nuance of its public story. The epic poem is longer, in relative length, and the definition of what makes a "long poem" is relative to culture and modes of cultural and material production.

These are the three basic criteria for the epic tradition: 1. a poem which somehow interacts with or originates from poetic modes of oral performance, 2. a poem which describes a "public" communal experience or quest, whether for lineage, statecraft or other telos, 3. a poem which is considered longer, in culturally relative terms. Also, usually, there are heroes, of some type, whether tragic or comic. Finally, the classical epic replicates in many ways a masculinist or often explicitly male tradition in which the goal is a feminized, idealized object-telos, and often celebrates the victors, and thus, as Benjamin would point out, the rulers. At the same time, though dominated by these regressive modes, each traditional epic will display, being within history dialectically, forms of internal narrative challenge and contradiction and occasionally, genuine subversion.

The *Cambridge Companion to the Epic* (2010), edited by Catherine Bates of the University of Warwick, which aims to be a survey of over 4,000 years of epic poetry, gathers writing on the epics commonly considered to be of the classical Occidental or Western canon, beginning with the oral versions and three written versions of the Gilgamesh poem, recorded and passed down by scribes; from the 2000 BCE Sumerian version of the poem, to the 1750 BCE Old Babylonian and 1300 BCE Middle Babylonian versions, respectively. Included in the earliest canon of this volume are also Homer's and Hesiod's epics, as well as the Sanskrit epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Epics such as the Mayan *Popul Vuh* and the oral Slavic epics, African oral epics of griots and griottes, as well as Welsh and Irish epics such as the *Book of Taliesin* and *Táin Bó Cúailnge* are noticeably absent here, but even more absent in this collection perhaps are epics written by women. In the entire timeline and throughout the whole volume, she includes only one essay which considers epic work by a woman, David Loewenstein's essay on the "Seventeenth-Century Protestant Epic" and Lucy Hutchinson's 16th-Century epic *Order and Disorder, Or, the World Made and Undone*, which retells the Genesis story.[14]

Noticeably absent from this volume are works by women which blend mock-epic and serious epic, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, which critiqued the misogyny inherent in the satirical society mock-epics of Alexander Pope, such as *The Rape of the Lock*. Of Aurora Leigh, the eponymous heroine of Browning's poem, Virginia Woolf wrote in *The Common Reader*, "with her passionate interest in social questions, her conflict as artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom, [she] is the true daughter of her age." Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* was also a major influence on Emily Dickinson, one of the most innovative poets of the 19th century. Neither does the editor of the

Cambridge collection include Christina Rosetti's epic poem "Goblin Market," nor prose epics by women. In fact, no epics written by women (besides Hutchinson's Protestant epic) are included in the essay, nor are they included in the comprehensive timeline of epic which accompanies this volume.

The modernist era saw an upswell in epics written by women which responded to modernist epics (and modernist epic criticism, on the category of epic) being written by men such as T.S. Eliot's epic poem "The Waste Land," Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All*, Joyce's epic experimental novel *Ulysses*, and Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*. H.D.'s counterepic *Helen in Egypt* responds to the Trojan War epic tradition—the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, with its mix of occult imagery, Egyptian elements and "feminine" mystery tradition as well as its tremendously complex engagement with modernism's forms; Marianne Moore's counterepic poem "Marriage" responds to the epic's "circular traditions" (adopting Sir Francis Bacon's words for her own critique and celebration of marriage which references *Paradise Lost* throughout), and Muriel Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*, documents the progression of the Hawk's Nest Mine Incident, which resulted in the death of hundreds of miners from silicosis and which, like Notley's work, combines mythopoetics with materialist critique and includes as central image the Carthaginian sculpture of a woman.

Some late modernist and postmodern feminist epics or counterepics include Gwendolyn Brooks's *In the Mecca* and arguably, *Riot,* Rita Dove's *Mother Love*, Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day*, Notley's *Alma: Or the Dead Women, The Descent of Alette, Close to me...& Closer (The Language of Heaven), City Of* and, arguably *Désamère* and *Disobedience,* Lisa Robertson's *Debbie: An Epic* and "The Venus Problem: Or, On Actual Real Beginning

and What Happens Next," Eileen Myles's *Inferno* as prose epic and poetic bildungsroman, Leslie Marmon Silko's prose epic *Almanac of the Dead*, Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everything With Lungs*, Anna Joy Springer's hybrid epic *That Vicious Red Relic, Love*, Bhanu Kapil's recent *Ban en Banlieue*, which follows a woman of color walking home during the first moments of a riot, Trisha Low's *The Compleat Purge*, which plays with the mock-epic traditions and 18th Century form of the conduct book for ladies, and many others yet to be gathered and named here.

On the Counterepic: Toward a Feminist and Anti-State Counterepic

In a talk called "The 'Feminine Epic," given at the New York State Writers' Institute at SUNY Albany, in October of 1995, Notley explicitly connects *The Descent of Alette* to both the epic tradition and to some of the modernist poems which inspired and preceded elements of her own writing praxis.

The desire to write epics came about for both personal and literary reasons; both, as she says, "unapologetically." A response to Olson's works was one catalyst: "I began to move towards the epic first out of a sense of the Twentieth Century 'Big Poem.' I'd become interested in Olson again, mostly in terms of his geologic-mythological connection..." She was not only interested in this, attempting Big Poems of her own, but approaching an epic from a different, more "continuous" narrative vantage:

> [I was interested in Olson's] presentation of pieces, beauty of fragmentary past, and present, as reflected in the look and feel of *Maximus.* But I started to be intrigued in the idea of telling a *continuous* story— not in the manner of Olson, Pound, Williams, but more in the manner of Dante or Homer.[15]

In this sense, Notley's counterepic *Descent of Alette* responds, in its formal construction, to the serial poem tradition of the modernist men Olson, Pound and Williams, a form which uses these series fragmentations as narrative devices in diverse ways. Pound's and Olson's fragmentations, for example, result in adventurous narratives which transmit themselves in tightly-compressed excited pieces, often dialogic, with bright, clanging rhythms, heavy assonance and alliteratives and numbered or otherwise serialized sections that evoke the heroic epic and oral or bardic tradition: "in! in! the bow-sprit, bird, the beak"[16] or "Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly seas,/We set up mast and sail on that swart ship, /Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also/Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward"[17] In addition these modernist epics serial poems juxtapose these ancient-sounding figures and language with fresh artifacts from the sonic vernacular of modernity (as in Olson's "sound neoned in" in "I, Maximus, of Gloucester" or "eyes of Picasso" in Pound's "Canto II"). These serial poems give the epic effect of being "in medias res," and in narrative motion, whether through their formal fragmentation, forced enjambment, radically short lines in irregular spaces or by breaking-off mid-line. What intrigued Notley about the form of these poems was not just their sonic beauty or fragmentation but also the ways both the past and present are activated simultaneously by their forms' "look and feel."

But also what attracted Notley to the project was especially the challenge and the difficulty to do something different and which was her own reinterpretation of this form: to apply and modify a "continuous narrative" to this form, of the sort of Homer or Dante, seemed the project to undertake precisely "Because it seemed too difficult; and I already know how to negotiate pieces. Everyone in this century seems to."[18] What is fascinating about this, is of course the way that the form of *Alette* still highlights these pieces or fragmentations

over the course of its narrative structure. The poem's structure is as far as I know wholly unique to Notley: quatrains of enclosed, telegraphic-looking phrases between parentheses with a fairly regular syllabic line of fifteen syllables making up each of the four lines of the quatrain, except for the third line of each stanza, which usually contains twelve syllables:

> "I entered" "a small cave" "above the door of which" "was written:"
> "*A Piece Of*" "*The Tyrant*" "The cave contained" "a table" "over"
> "Which hovered, like fireflies" "five or six" "constant lights"
> "As I came nearer" "I saw that" "there lay on" "the table" "a small

The visual effect and narrative effect are that of a single story, continous but broken into irregular fragments, carrying a generally regular rhythm. In her essay on "The 'Feminine' Epic" Notley traces the development of this measure which allowed for the possibility of Alette through two preceding works, her *Beginning With a Stain* and her poem "White Phosphorus," an elegy for her brother who had been a sniper in Vietnam and came back with acute post-traumatic stress disorder and developed drug addictions. He went through rehab but overdosed about a week after leaving that facility. She grappled with the complex emotions she felt reconciling mourning her brother and being what she calls "touched by political madness." "And one afternoon," she says, "I stood in my apartment in New York and thought to myself, just exactly this clumsily, 'What if my brother in Vietnam was like a Nazi, and I by extension am? And what if I owe an epic?'"[19] After writing "White Phosphorus," she says, "I began to grapple with the idea of a Female or Feminist Epic—but not calling it that in my mind, rather, an epic by a woman or from a woman's vantage." After the death of her brother and of her stepdaughter a year prior, she became aware of the ways in which "myself, my sister-in-law and my mother were being used, mangled, by the forces which produce Epic." She connects all of this to her material awareness of increasing homelessness and

inequality when she was writing the poem in 1980s New York, when "the steamy money of Reaganomics had begun to evanesce."[20]

Her Author's Note which accompanies the 1992 volume of Alette explains the purposes of the quotation marks, which are: 1. they measure the poem, enclosing poetic feet 2. they encourage slower reading of the phrases so that the reader experiences their "musical intention" 3. they highlight the poem's epic oral or vocal quality—"they may remind the reader that each phrase is a thing said by a voice: this is not a thought, or a record of thought-process, this is a story, told." And finally, 4. they distance the narrative from its author. As Notley says, "I am not Alette."

Three Dreams

Dreams in epic often mark the places in the narrative either where the narratives of statecraft are maintained and enforced by some outside entity—usually a god (as when Aeneas is visited by Mercury who enjoins him to leave Carthage behind and go found Rome, already) but also, conversely, mark the places in epic narrative where metacritique and subversion of narrative structure occurs, where the rough edges of memory show.

In Dante's *Purgatorio*, having passed through the nine levels of Hell and back out again from the Underworld to the stars, Dante climbs up the seven levels of Mount Purgatory in a spiral inversion of the downward earthy descent through the *Inferno*, again guided by the shade of the poet Vergil, finally reaching the Earthly Paradise at the top, where the wind at the summit from the music of the spheres is rustling both the wild forests and the landscaped plants alike. This summit of Mt. Purgatorio at the Earthly Paradise represents Eden before the Fall, and is the place where the pagan Vergil will finally be forced to leave Dante to be his

guide no more, being able to no more follow to the heavenly realms; it is Beatrice who will accompany him there. While at the summit of the Mount, Dante sees a dream-vision of Leah in the Earthly Paradise, gathering flowers for garlands, near the fount where meet the twin streams of Lethe and Eunoe. A swig of the waters of the former make one forget one's past life, while a flagon of the waters of the latter (like the black cloth that Alette consumes, though she retains both positive and negative memories) make one remember the good memories, creating a net effect of only remembering those memories that are free of the guilty recollection of "sins." A metacritique may be found in this section— though Dante is "cleansed" with his good memories restored to him, he has lost his access to the darker knowledge of the physical world which he once retained. Is his salvation therefore a form of false knowledge, and like Eden, really a place where this knowledge was once suppressed?[21]

In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas voyages to the Underworld to speak to the shade of his father. There he encounters Dido, the woman he spurned after their tryst, and left behind to die, after being told by Mercury in a dream that he must continue upon his greater path to found Rome. He tries to speak to her, but she refuses. The metareality of the poem's narrative is questioned in what may be an internal critique which undermines the poem's championing of the false lineage of Augustus. When Aeneas is ready to return to the upper world—he returns not through the Gate of Horn (true dreams) but the Gate of Ivory (false dreams). Similarly, the *Iliad* recounts a dream-vision of a now lost memory of the pool where the women of Troy and their daughters would wash their robes in times of peace, and this image is juxtaposed with the brutal killing of Hector while his mother Hecuba unknowingly prepares a hot bath for him which he will never enjoy, while his body is dragged behind Achilles's chariot. Again, an internal critique of the war is contained within the brief flashing forth of this vision.[22]

The dreams and visions in *Alette* likewise bring her to knowledge via critique of the previously understood given realities which the heroine must resist to find the truth, which is obscured by false histories. In her notes for her Talk, "Homer and Postmodern War" Notley notes that she deliberately inverted the usual path of the epic, one from darkness to an imperial enlightenment, making it a descent deeper and deeper into darkness, because she sees the imperial enlightenment project as a luxury not given to the other. Alette sees the tyrant in a dream, then awakens and thinks "He owns enlightenment" "all enlightenment" "that we // know about" "He owns" "the light." Later Alette comes upon a woman who is a "dark shining" whose body is "a grotto" "of diamonds" who tells Alette:

> "'His great failure—" "the tyrant's failure—" "& yours too?' she said," " ' is to think that" "achievement" "must be evident,"
> "in the light—' "[23]

Walter Benjamin, writing on Bertolt Brecht's "epic theatre" in his "What Is Epic Theater?" identifies the features of epic theatre as eliminating the traditional tragic hero for an "untragic hero." By this switchup, Benjamin claims, "Brecht's drama eliminated the Aristotelian catharsis, the purging of the emotions through empathy with the stirring fate of the hero"[24] and highlighted instead episodic structure, "interruptions" and "gestures" as key elements. In this form of "epic theater," the audience is free to address the performers, the performer to address the audience, and these non-naturalistic encounters which break the fourth wall become a key part of the action and instructive quality of the scenes, demonstrating an internal critique. Minimal sets are used and the goal is that the audience be both relaxed and self-aware, aware of themselves in the setting; rather than be "seduced" by realistic sets, the epic theater aims to make the audience aware that what they are watching is staged. Thus Brecht's theater shares some qualities of classical or traditional epic, such as

instructive or didactic elements, but at the same time invites a self-aware or disillusioning experience of theater which focuses audience awareness on the way in which spectacle is produced under capitalism, aiming to be a counter-spectacle epic or theater as counterepic.

Mikhail Bahktin, in his "Epic and the Novel" from *The Dialogic Imagination* juxtaposes the epic and the novel as genres. He sees the epic as a dead, completed genre, while the novel "is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is yet uncompleted."[25] At the same time, many novels use the poetic epic tradition as inspiration but depart by not having a claim to determinism but to "a certain indeterminacy" in which the present is continually made to intrude on any notion of a fixed past. Identifying the novel as a form associated with "extraliterary heteroglossia" and with laughter, irony and elements of self-parody, he contrasts and critiques the classical epic tradition as reproducing a national, founding impulse that is fundamentally hierarchical (yet, in his belief, circular) and centered upon a closed and distanced valorization of the hero. He explains the way that this "The absolute past is a specifically evaluating (hierarchical) category. In the epic world view, 'beginning,' 'first,' 'founder,' 'ancestor,' 'that which occurred earlier' and so forth are not merely temporal categories but *valorized* temporal categories, and valorized to an extreme degree."[26]

Bahktin identifies laughter as that which destroys the epic as a category, because laughter is that which creates doubt, that which dismembers and examines freely, that which, he says, "works in a zone of maximal proximity," in the present as opposed to a static, distanced past. For Bahktin, the novel is hence always in transformation and always in some respects unfinished, and open to self-criticism. Thus, for Bakhtin, the novel represents a counterepic form.

That Benjamin's (via Brecht's) views and Bahktin's initially appear to differ so sharply on what the postmodern epic look like may be surprising, but both actually offer materialist critiques of the limiting temporalities of the fixed and closed ancient epic in the same way. Both authors describe and make the case for a counterepic genre in which embraces an open-ended temporality that rejects hierarchy and absolutes, allowing for the creation of art which critiques the state and exposes the illusion of an absolute past (in Bahktin's case, the novel is this genre; in Benjamin's case, Brecht's "epic theater"). If we apply Benjamin's reading of Brecht and Bahktin's counterepic reading of the novel to Notley's counterepics, we see that what connects each of these ideas of counterepic is material-temporal critique of state power.

Queering the "Female Epic"

There are a few books written on the genre of what is usually referred to as "The Female Epic" or the "women's epic" (a later version of my project, I hope, will examine the problems and troublings of these gender constructions in more detail—for now, I'll consider the different extant varieties of this theme in an effort to historicize the prior studies related to this genre). These few volumes are largely still rare, expensive to acquire and hard to come by. Jeremy M. Downes's book *The Female Homer: An Exploration of Women's Epic Poetry* (also published, interestingly, in 2010, when the epic genre had another 'moment' in academic study, it seems) is probably the most exhaustive attempt yet to inquire into this topic, besides, of course, the counterepics themselves. He takes as his central questions for this volume, "Are there any women's epic poems? If so, what are the central characteristics of these epics and how do they relate to the traditional vision of epic poetry as male-authored and masculinist, as powerful and patriarchal?"[27]

Of course, we now know the answer: yes, many epic poems have been written by women, epic poems which explicitly critique these systems of patriarchal and state power and the temporal modes of the past epic tradition. However, it is important to also ask the question, do these categories of "female epic" or "feminine epic" or "women's epic" simply reinscribe gender binaries in their critique of male structural power? Does defining the counterepic, as "female epic," epic poems written by women according to "masculinist" tradition and "feminine" response simply reproduce an essentializing of the form and content within the genre? What about noncisnormative and nonbinary people writing counterepic? What about transwomen writing epic—is their work to be excluded unfairly from the category of the "female epic"? What about femme and butch identity, which, as Judith Butler notes, cannot and should not be simply aligned to heteronormative gender categories as if to describe these identities as a poor "copy" of a supposed original?[28] It is for these reasons that I have proposed the gender-neutral term "counterepic' to describe anti-patriarchal, feminist and or anti-state responses to ancient epic. I like this term because it allows for a less binary, wider field of critique but also because it does not deny materially uneven systems of gendered structural power.

Christopher Roman reads Notley's *Descent of Alette* as expressing queer forms of knowledge and subjectivity. Also noting the uses of gendered metaphors, they argue that

> In order to deconstruct the enlightenment project which subsumes bodily knowledge under the abstract knowledge tied to institutional and theological practices, Notley's narrator, Alette, must rediscover knowledge as found in her queer subjectivity; this subjectivity is linked to an expansion of the body through rediscovering the repressed becoming-animal. As José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia*, 'queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.'[29]

Though I don't necessarily agree with the assumption behind this argument that queer subjectivity is something to be "recovered" or "rediscovered" from the "repressed," this seems a useful way to think about queering the human/animal binary in Notley's counterepic as well as part of the poem's visionary project.

Notes from the Archive and Notes on Form

Figure 1.1: Alice Notley; "The Books in My Life," Emory University

In archival collections there are varying often unpredictable waves of researchers who concentrate on any one text or manuscript collection, whether of serendipitous arrangement, coincidence, fashion, or flashpoint of poltics or discourse. Since the Alette in Oakland conference on Notley's work, and the poet David Brazil's initial pronouncement that she "is not a materialist," as well as my subsequent argument, with real stakes in the conference, that her work demonstrates a feminist materialism, I've been interested to see the ways in which different poets, critics and rabble-rousers have claimed or disavowed her work; whether aesthetically, politically or both. Engaging with Notley's work in the archives in manuscript form has been another way to engage with her work's material poetic praxis.

For the whole year, intermittently, but with continuous effort, I conducted research on Notley's epic in the Alice Notley Papers in the New Poetry Archive in Special Collections at UCSD's Geisel Library. Over the course of the year there were many months in which I was the only researcher on her Papers; one month, there was a bloom-surge in other scholars looking at her work. The renewed interest may come from the conference and the contemporary debates that followed, as well as the current poetry wars raging (over especially and most saliently and worthwhilely: appropriative techniques in poetry and the politics of conceptualism, sexual violence and racial exclusion in poetry communities and over different understandings of what "radical" poetics should or cannot look like), with some major proponents on either side declaiming or claiming her work as their own. Though the subjects of these aforementioned debates are sometimes vital and key critiques have been made in print and online (one of my favorites for real critique is Cathy Park Hong's essay "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," which argues that attention be given to the way that people of color in the avant-garde and conceptual tradition are often occluded in discussions of these

forms and in poetry spaces), on social media they frequently have devolved into near-witchhunts, fear-mongering, shallow binaries, trolling, bullying, namecalling, subtweeting, general egoism and on some occasions, overt racism, ableism, homophobia and misogyny and transmisogyny as guise for real critique. This has made me even more grateful for my time in the archive. The other researchers in the archive have been generous for the most part and receptive to collaboration; I am hoping to work with one of them in the future and the poet's family/estate on assembling a rare exhibition of Bernadette Mayer's massive visual-poetic epic work "Memory."

One of the pleasures of the archives work has been some breathing room for what often seems much more nuanced thought away from these primarily internet-based debates, and for contemplative time and close reading. It has not been an escapism but a place where it feels one's brainspace and perspective on the more noisy space of the contemporary present, in all its reality and pain and spin and misunderstandings, can really occur. In this respect, oddly enough, it has been in some ways like the real-world activism, direct action and collective organizing I have been involved in as well, but far less exhausting.

Like all archives work, another pleasure has been seeing the small intimate details which represent parts of a writer's own addendums, scrawled in-draft edits and marginalia, and notes as to the details of the writers' daily life. The poet Bernadette Mayer's notebooks, for example (she was and is a close friend and collaborator with Notley) contain a collaborative dream notebook practice that she and Notley shared, as well as notes from the two studying Latin together; as well as Mayer's notebook on the epic and *Paradise Lost*, which juxtaposes notes on reproductive labor as a working-class mother performing the "second shift"—scheduling the pumping of breast milk, for example— with notes on the

structure of Milton's epic. In the future, I hope to look more closely at Mayer's (counter)epics as well, particularly "Memory" and *Midwinter Day*, and the ways her collaborative work and her work on the epic overlaps with Notley's on these foci.

Though Alice Notley, as previously noted, set out explicitly to write a "public" epic which responded both to construction of gender as justification for war and state violence and to her own personal trauma, in order to write, she also thought as well about her audience as more cosmic, even beyond the human and the visible. At the Alette in Oakland Conference, asked who her audience is, for whom she writes, she said " I'm writing for ants. I'm writing for flies. I write for the rocks and the ghosts." I'd like to look closely at one of the manuscripts in the Notley Papers now which is haunted by its own archaeologies of the future, and like many postmodern epics, is haunted as well by the ghost of Dido (or Helen): [30]

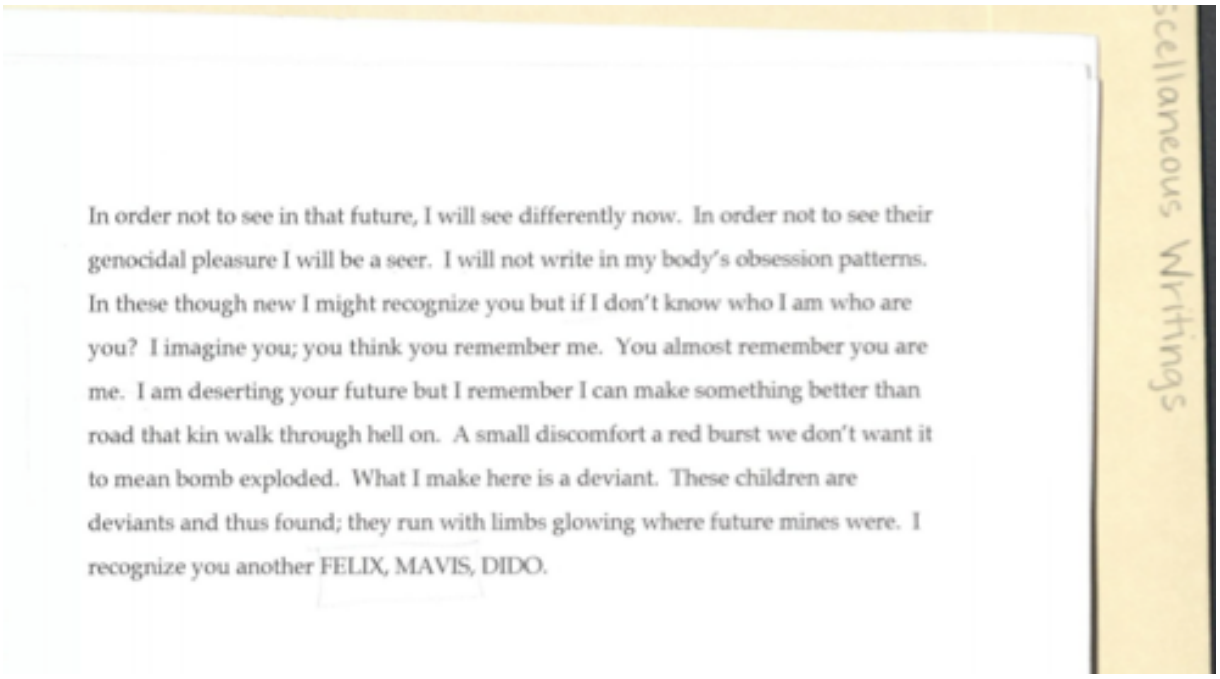


Figure 1.2: Alice Notley, MSS 0319, Miscellaneous Writings

This one-page manuscript, from the section "Miscellaneous Writings" in the Notley Papers, is untitled and undated. Typed in the form of a prose poem, the piece imagines an alternate temporality in which an old "future" is abolished. The speaker's visionary "I will be a seer" is connected to forms of embodied knowledge and difficulty. The "you" in the poem shifts from first person singular to second person and back again, as if to draw attention to both poet and reader and the "I"'s shifting subjectivity in the poem. The poem speaks of resistance to the violence of an imposed future, juxtaposing a small gesture to an atomic event "we don't want it to mean bomb exploded." The eerily beautiful image of children who "run with limbs glowing where future mines were" simultaneously grieves and implicates the old "future" and seems to carry with it a hope for "deviants." "I recognize you another FELIX, MAVIS, DIDO" serves to again simultaneously address the reader and also, perhaps these deviant children who continue to run in spite of this (atomic?) toxic past future. In Latin, "Felix" can mean both happy and feline; "Mavis," like Felix can be a proper familiar name or part of an epithet which means "preferred." The phrase subtly inverts the famous description of Dido in the Aeneid as "unhappy Dido," "Infelix Dido," giving her a happiness and luck or fortune and granting her a "recognition" which seems intimate. While in some ways keeping a narrative distance, the poem's forms of the shifting subject draw "you" closer; through its visionary temporal modes and shifting subjectivity, the poem performs the opposite of an othering, an anothering: "I recognize you another."

The Uses of Counterepic

At this time in our discussion of epic and counterepic as genres, I would like to map several tendencies of counterepic. Eleven, in fact. What are, broadly speaking, the uses of

counterepic, their "functions" in terms of their systematic critique and potential? In what specific ways do counterepics tend to intervene in epic tradition?

Uses and Critical Functions of Counterepic Literature

1. Critique of war and patriarchal structures of war
2. Critique of systems of State power
3. Critique of systems of racism, class, ableism, gender, and other forms of structural inequality
4. Critique of media ideologies and spectacle
5. The intersectional critique of all the previous four listed, considered together
6. Internal feminist critique within literary movements and literary communities
7. Representations and records of social movements, uprisings and other disruptions against structures named in 1-4
8. Internal critique of systems of power within social movements
9. Making the stories of women and non-binary people "large" and epic in challenge to the world's attempt to shrink or erase their stories
10. Depicting the "witch's flight" and the path of the witch and the shapeshifter
11. Imagining, through radical speculative poetics and empathetic imagination, new forms

Figure 1.3: Uses and Critical Functions of Counterepic Literature

These are just a few of the uses or functions of counterepic that we can name, which

reoccur again and again in the history of the genre I have called counterepic. In addition, counterepics tend to intersect with several other "counter-s": counterculture, counterpublics, counternarratives, countermapping, countermemory. In addition to this list of eleven different uses or functions of counterepic as a genre (we might just as well name this list "catalysts for counterepic"), many counterepics also make an even more wide-ranging critique, of conventional understandings and delineations of time and history themselves.

A Brief History of Time in the Epic

In her groundbreaking work on the epic, *History, Rhetorical Description and the Epic*, Page DuBois outlines and contrasts the shape of the journeys recounted, physical and metaphysical, temporal and geographic, in the classical canonical Western epics: she identifies Homer with the rounded cosmos, not a shape in this case, she argues, of repetition, as is often held, but of regeneration. With Vergil she associates a path of east to west, of histories made not by gods but by men and women, containing an internal contradiction, of circularity, with both its negative and positive aspects. With Dante she asserts the structure as an upward spiral, which contains horizontal, vertical and meta-history; with Spenser, she associates the fragmented landscape and fragmented heroism and reads as a symptom of the death of the epic in his era. DuBois notes, with Spenser, who sees "time as having direction, as irreversible, without a knowable future," meta-history itself changes: "The hero cannot embody the destiny of his community [because the virtues and vices are divided, separated and embodied, but disconnected in different heros and heroines]. "History," therefore, "cannot be represented for the hero in a single, coherent shape" and "Meta-history [becomes] no

longer a process of cyclicality or evolution toward apocalypse" but it represents "endless change."[31]

In Notley's epics—such as *The Descent of Alette*, *City Of*, and I'd argue, *Disobedience* and *Alma, Or the Dead Women*, which while divided into individual "poems" are all epic works in structure— the forms are often more like a ladder on its side, fragmented manuscript cells and rungs, containing within their meta-structure the fractured distributed grid network or web of the modern city's subterranea, the sinuous forms of the subway, of desert caves and warzones and paths between geoliths. Notley's epics challenge the patriarchal Statecraft narrative of the Western epic (this classic narrative, though I love ancient epics, is basically, in the words of a poet friend, "like we killed more people and made cities-good for u, fuckers" or as I would like to add, "we killed your mother goddess and ate her and now we made cities"). I am interested in Notley's use of Sumerian and Native American material in *Alma* and *Alette* as an attempt to counter this patriarchal narrative of exploitation. Says the tyrant in *The Descent of Alette*, about the former mother goddess:

> "What she had could not"
> "hold its own--" "wit and warmth" "& beauty" "are weak & exploitable"
> "vulnerable" "to our enemies--"

to which Alette responds,

> "Our enemies,' I asked" "Don't you"
> "contain them too?" "He ignored me"[32]

Notley's appropriative techniques often function to critique several forms of interconnected oppressions, including colonization. At the same time, I'd argue, further examination of what it means for a white woman to be complexly appropriating these myths we should and must also consider: to what extent does her use of the metaphors of the "shaman," of animal spirits,

for example, serve to appropriate and even if unintentionally, colonize these indigenous forms of knowledge? I don't believe that it is right to elide the problematics of this appropriative adopting of metaphors, as Lindsay Tuggles does in her article on "Elegaic Shamanism in Alice Notley's *Alma, Or the Dead Women*."[33] Jodi Byrd, in the Introduction to her book *The Transit of Empire*, discusses Gerald Vizenor's work on indigenous "stories of survivance" as "the creases of transmotion and sovereignty" and the power of these stories as "reincarnations that resist absence and possession." I believe that Notley recognizes in indigenous stories and metaphors these powerful metaphors of resistance, motion and sovereignty, but that her appropriation of these metaphors and concepts can also allow us to dialectically critique, as Byrd says, "how ideas of 'Indianness' have created conditions of possibility for U.S. empire to manifest its intent."[34]

In Notley's *Disobedience*, the narratives take place in relation to the 1995 general strikes in Paris. In *Alma, or the Dead Women*, the Iraq war and supposedly "surgical" air strikes are foregrounded. As in Spenser, Notley fragments the heroism into meta-history, while distributing memory and resistance amongst multiple speakers and heroines. But unlike Spenser's epic, which as DuBois claims results in a fragmentary heroism, around which the epic form had begun to dissolve, in *Alma*, the distributed heroism acts as collective voice to the simultaneous upwelling of trauma and forms of resistance, making for a new vision of the epic in its own ecology. She relates this ecology of resistance to the soul and dreaming and to a spirited resistance conceived of as "outside time":

> i confronted the nuclear waste as a quartz being. it had a spirit
> just existing, if it seeped into the water table it was just existing. my spirit
> could find out how to have sex with its spirit Mara says, in the future but there
> is no time here, for there is no time unless you enter it. if you are dreaming

> you're outside it, that's how you can dream the future but you don't have to be asleep to dream. in this myth
> the spirit of the owl continues to seek out for destruction the spirits of the male leaders who were inside time. outside time owls are making their own light for outside time they can dream reality
>
> ...they can dream they are terrorizing you. outside time contains what you call the future when everyone's dead. the owl had once gone into the woods to pine away with grief and love until there was no flesh left on any part of her body but her head. she is all lightness and eyes and she is all spirit but she eats in the future she will eat all of the radioactive and polluted but outside of time she dances with the spirits of waste for they are natural. our leaders are not natural they are timebound and cruel they are spiritless and then the stranger went out into the darkness. every time she/i sang a leader died outside of time again and again. i can't be quartz for very long yet i can be an owl for longer.
> ....
> he is holding them together by the myth of property and wealth. scatter scatter it now. [35]

Perhaps we might turn to Jameson, from his book *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, to reach a further idea of the terrain where the struggle of myths lies and how the structure of myths and the political unconscious can be related to structural reality, real desires and the form of capitalism "of our own time" :

> I have already pointed out that Mandel's intervention in the postindustrial debate involves the proposition that late or multinational or consumer capitalism, far from being inconsistent with Marx's great nineteenth-century analysis, constitutes, on the contrary, the purest form of capital yet to have emerged. a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas. This purer capitalism of our own time thus eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way. One is tempted to speak in this connection of a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious: that is, the destruction of precapitalist Third World agriculture by the Green Revolution, and the rise of the media and the advertising industry.[36]

Capital's relentless pursuit of surplus value now requires as progenitor brutal expansion into Third World economies and ecologies, and the "penetration" of consciousness itself, into

every "tributary" ("they are not natural they are timebound and cruel they are spiritless"). Poetry like Notley's, subject to history and present struggles, responds to this "historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious." It does this, to a large extent, by thinking through the contradictions of survival, dreaming, being in the world, time and structural misery. Notley's counterepic epic responds by challenging the patriarchal structures of the State and past epic narratives in relation to the mythic and to everyday living. As she says in the Dream Notebooks, "To cross the street I must order the waters to draw back."

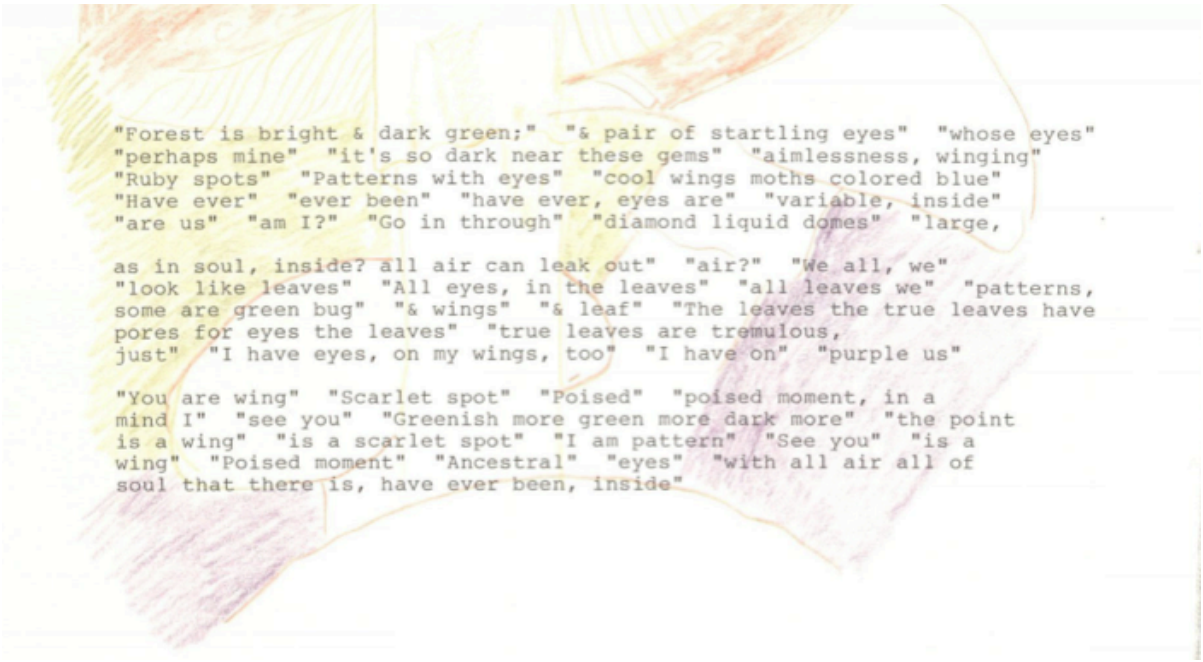


Figure 1.4: Manuscript from *The Descent of Alette*

"...Turn/ onto Rue des Couronnes & then there's a steep high park/ Everyone knows it's always been there but/I don't.It contains a little piece of my body/ because I/remember it." (Notley, "City Of," manuscript draft)

Chapter 2. **Counterepic Materialisms of Space and Scale from Dickinson to Robertson**

An Introduction to Feminist New Materialisms

In the last roughly ten years, we have seen the emergence of theories of materiality and *matter* emerge within feminist theory, particularly those which concern bodies, agency, economic and social structures, and the natural world. In their influential anthology, *Material Feminisms*, published in 2008, Editors Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman assert that

> Materiality, particularly that of bodies and natures, has long been an extraordinarily volatile site for feminist theory—so volatile, in fact, that the guiding role or procedure for most contemporary feminisms requires that one distance oneself as much as possible from the tainted realm of materiality, by taking refuge within culture, discourse, and language.[1]

Alaimo and Hekman then go on to suggest that though the contemporary linguistic turn has "been enormously productive for feminism" and "fostered complex analyses of the interconnections between power, subjectivity, and language," and enriched our understandings of gender, yet, they argue, this has led to an impasse in feminist thought. As a response to this impasse, new feminist materialisms have emerged, by theorists who are arguing that rather than defining the body and materiality as discourse, "we need a way to talk about the materiality of the body as an active, sometimes recalcitrant force,"[2] as lived, corporeal experience. We can see how this approach highlights the materiality of bodies as tied to the built environment, to disability, to economic healthcare policy, to policing, and to literary production, to name a few areas.

In addition, feminist new materialisms have begun to take up questions of ontology, material ecocriticism, posthumanism, and ethics in light of contemporary scientific developments of the 21st century. In their anthology, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency,*

and Politics, published in 2010, editors Diana Coole and Samantha Frost highlight three different interrelated "themes or directions" in new materialist scholarship. The first they name is that of an "ontological reorientation that is resonant with...natural science" which "conceives of matter as lively or as exhibiting agency."[3] One example of this tendency in feminist new materialism would be Donna Haraway's work blending posthumanism, oncology, and materialism such as her essays in *Primate Visions*. Another example of this new materialist feminist theme would be Aimee Bahng's essay, "Plasmodial Improprieties: Octavia Butler, Slime Molds, and Imagining A Femi-Queer Commons," which "posits Butler as a black feminist scholar of science," by looking into Butler's research into slime molds which she performed in the public library.[4]

The second new materialist tendency that the editors of *New Materialisms* name is "a raft of biopolitical and bioethical issues concerning the status of life and of the human."[5] Mel Y.Chen's thrilling book *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* which "interrogates how the fragile division between animate and inaminate—that is, beyond human and animal—is relentlessly produced and policed and maps important political consequences of that distinction,"[6] including the consequences on racialized bodies and disabled bodies, would be one example of this tendency. Another example is Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*, in her chapter "Political Ecologies," wherein she considers the world as "a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agentic assemblages," and invites us to consider the New York Blackout of 2003 and the power grid as having a kind of agency, better understood as "a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood—to name just a few of the actants."[7] These examples

serve to highlight what I would argue is another key characteristic of feminist new materialisms today—an emphasis on theories of the network, the swarm, and amorphous and interconnected ecological systems, and how these act and exist materially on other complex systems.

The third of the tendencies or emergent themes Coole and Frost name in their *New Materialisms* anthology is a new materialist scholarship which "which testifies to a critical and nondogmatic reengagement with political economy." One of the examples of this tendency is Jason Edwards's essay "The Materialism of Historical Materialism," also included in the Coole's and Frost's anthology. Another example of this tendency is my own work on political economy, poetry, and feminist new materialisms, which follows in the second part of this chapter, on Lisa Robertson.

Space and Scale in Dickinson and Robertson

This chapter contains two linked parts: 2.1 on Emily Dickinson and part 2.2 on Lisa Robertson. This may at first seem to be an odd or anachronistic pairing of poets. Both sections are linked by material feminist interventions and by both poets' fascinations with space and scale in their counterepic works. Both poets are visionaries of form, representing modes of perception, and contrasting perspectives of space and scale in their poetry. Both writers produced counterepics which map both the natural world, aspects of the political landscape, and the complex inner world of the poet’s spirit, thoughts, and desires.

In the fascicles or manuscript books, Emily Dickinson considers prehistory as well as her contemporary moment in science. In "The Venus Problem," Lisa Robertson reveals the

layers of history and happenstance surrounding the texts we inherit, from ancient Rome, to the Renaissance to the present. She considers the atom and the wave or clinamen in Lucretius's epic *Der rerum natura* ("On the Nature of Things") as a model of larger systemic processes, whether those of nature, or of human art and contemporary politics. Both Dickinson's and Robertson's works are counterepics which blend compression and fine, dense detail with larger themes of the expansion of space and scale-- of the natural world, of time and history.

Both poets are concerned with tensions between public and private expectations in their poetic examinations of space and scale. Both poets map the infinitesimal and the microscopic to the macroscopic (microscope to telescope) (the atom within a material immensity) and from the very large (the megatherium or prehistoric giant sloth) to the quite small (the wild strawberry). In additions, there is a tension between the narrative “I” in both these works and also the unknowability of the infinitude of space and scale — of the texts of history, of forms of perception, of enforced spaces of oppression that separate, and of desires for rebellion. Though both consider aspects of the spiritual, secular systems of power and exchange figure prominently in both of their works. This attention allows Dickinson's and Robertson's counterepic works to boldly show us one of the central paradoxes of space and scale: how what we perceive may seem small but is inevitably part of larger material and social processes.

Chapter 2.1. **(Counter)epic Proportions: Reading Emily Dickinson's Manuscript Books as Epic**

Dickinson's Prehistory and Her Present

Emily Dickinson Critical Institute, August 2018, Amherst

Science is very near us -
I found a megatherium
on my Strawberry -

-Dickinson, autonomous fragment

“Faith” is a fine invention
For Gentlemen who *see!*
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency!

-Dickinson, fascicles

The great contemporary poet Alice Notley (author of such formally and imaginatively innovative works as *The Descent of Alette* and *Disobedience*) has noted, in her essay "The Feminine Epic" that an Emily Dickinson poem is like a "compressed epic in scope." Foregrounding her interest in writing her own subversive version of the public epic tradition—a tradition long associated with "masculine," or more specifically, patriarchal expression, and with founding narratives of conquest, Notley focuses attention on women's poetic voices: "I know that some of Emily Dickinson's poems are as Epic as an Epic." She goes on to assert, "I want to discover a woman's voice that can encompass our true story existing on conscious and unconscious levels...I may have to sound even more different than the traditional epic—I may have to sound funnier or, curiously, more frivolous to do it properly this time."[8]

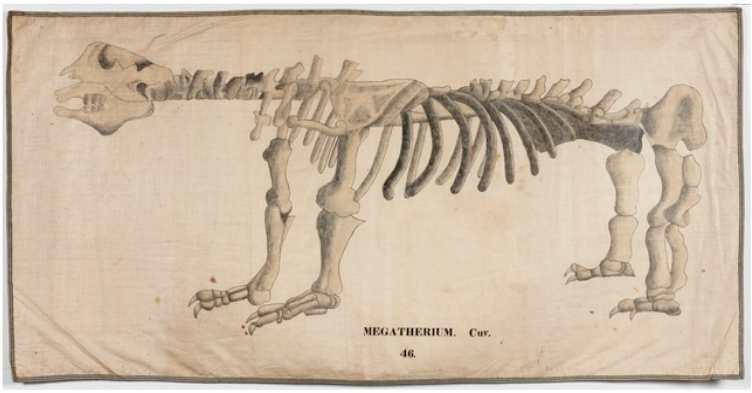
Certainly, Notley's reference to Dickinson's epic scope and compression speaks to a critical dimension of the wild strangeness of many of her poems' juxtapositions of scale and density. In an autonomous Dickinson fragment published on Martha Werner's project *Radical Scatters*, a "megatherium," an extinct prehistoric mammal endemic to North and South America, a kind of elephant-sized giant sloth known to have once subsisted on ancient avocados,[9] is metaphorically juxtaposed to a small "Strawberry." Is this "megatherium" a metaphor for a prehistoric-looking caterpillar slowly munching one of the jewels of Dickinson's garden, or a mantis perched atop the fruit? Perhaps. Strawberries, native to North America, were known for their irrepressibility and wildness ("The first settlers at Jamestown in 1607 were inundated with the wild strawberries. As quickly as they cut down forests, strawberries would spring up in clearings"); in the 19th Century, in New England, these began to be cultivated for home gardens.[10] The fruits would have likely been smaller than our modern strawberries as a result, heightening the contrast in scale in Dickinson's poem. As a student of and personal friend of Edward Hitchcock, who was President of Amherst College, and of his wife, Orra White Hitchcock, Dickinson would have likely seen the illustration of the megatherium in Edward Hitchcock's textbook *Elementary Geology* and may have also seen Orra White Hitchcock's drawing of the megatherium. As Hiroko Uno notes in her "Chemical Conviction": Dickinson, Hitchcock and the Poetry of Science, " Dickinson was educated at Amherst College and at Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary, where she studied astronomy, botany, geology, rhetoric and other subjects, and she applied her knowledge of astronomy and optics (particularly her own use of newly-developed instruments such as microscopes, telescopes and the camera) in her poems "to solve problems in her inner world."[11] In the space of one line, a Dickinson poem can reach from Vesuvius to home.

Reaching radically beyond more conventional applications of scale and scope, to domains of spiritual and scientific perception which were often barred to women, Dickinson's poems, like compressed epics, frequently juxtapose inner space and outer space, the microcosmic and macrocosmic, adopting a radical compression and expansion of time, composed of prehistory, history and the present: Forevers composed of Nows.

What would it then mean to consider an epic or counterepic reading of Dickinson's poems—either individually as "compressed" epics, as in the fragments gathered in the *Radical Scatters*, or as a non-linear epic as in her handmade manuscript books? In this spirit, using the integral new volume edited by Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson's Poems as She Preserved Them*, which finally reproduces her manuscript books or fascicles in the order that she preserved them for a wider audience than the Harvard Variorium edition had previously afforded,[12] I argue for a "compressed epic" or counterepic reading of Dickinson's poems both individually and collectively within her manuscript books.

Orra White Hitchcock drawing of megatherium skeleton

Amherst College Digital Collections > Archives & Special Collections



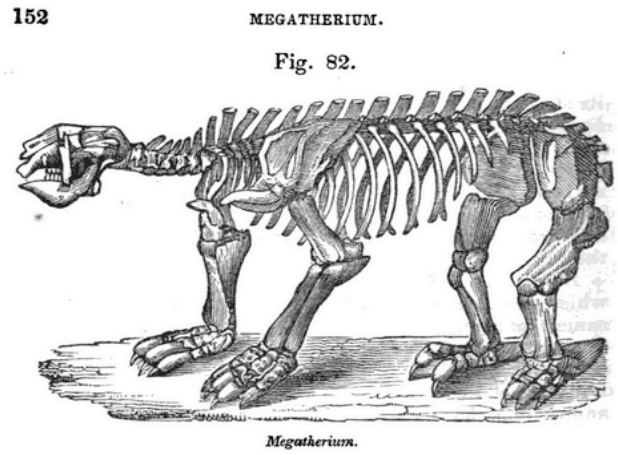
Creator Hitchcock, Orra White, 1796-1863

Title Orra White Hitchcock drawing of megatherium skeleton

Dates 1828-1840

Abstract One of 61 drawings done by Orra White Hitchcock for use in Professor Edward Hitchcock's classes on geology and natural history. This is a reproduction of a preexisting drawing.

Figure 2.1: Orra White Hitchcock drawing of megatherium skeleton



152 MEGATHERIUM.

Fig. 82.

Megatherium.

Descr. In the superficial deposits of South America, several interesting extinct animals have been found, belonging mostly to the Pachydermata, or thick-skinned, and the Edentata. The Toxodon, which had a skull 28 inches in length, approximates in its structure to several families of animals, viz. the Rodentia, the Ruminantia, and Cetacea; although, in fact, a Pachyderm. The Macrauchenia greatly resembled the llama, and had a neck almost as long as that of the giraffe, with a body nearly as large as that of the rhinoceros. This also was a Pachyderm. The Mylodon, an Edentate animal, was of massive and singular proportions. Its body was shorter than that

Figure 2.2: Thomas Hitchcock, President of Amherst College, *Elementary Geology*, 1847

Admittedly, to some, it might seem strange, daring, perverse even, to try to read Dickinson's poetry as epic, when she is known widely as an innovator of the lyric genre. After all, as many insightful and influential scholars, such as Victoria Jackson, in her book *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, have argued that the "circulation of Dickinson's work as poetry chronicles rather exactly the emergence of the lyric genre as a modern mode of literary interpretation."[13] I'd like to propose embracing such a "perverse" reading as a thought experiment in genre and as a way of understanding the qualities of scope and compression that Norley describes. It is also an experiment which may reveal gendered valences of forms and genres. As Lynn Keller notes in her *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems By Women*, "[the] association of the long poem with the privileged status traditonally accorded to epic has been 'the quintessential male territory whose boundaries enforce women's status as outsiders on the landscape of poetry."[14] Also, there is the sheer volume of the poems: preparing the manuscript books was certainly an epic endeavor for Dickinson in terms of their scope, with the total spanning forty handsewn fascicles containing over 1,100 poems which she ordered and copied by hand. Anachronistically sharing some characteristics of modern and contemporary serial poems, which often eschew titles and are frequently linked by leitmotifs, the poems of the fascicles are thrilling in their form and arrangement.

At the time that Dickinson was writing her fragments and assembling the fascicles, the early to mid-nineteenth century, the dominant modes of poetry accessible to U.S. American poets were the popular ballad (whether lyrical in the still-popular tradition of the Romantics, or epic, "public" and third-person, as in Tennyson, Longfellow and Whittier), the dramatic monologue (as in Robert Browning and Elizabeth Browning, two of Dickinson's favorites),

the sonnet, the elegy, the ode (as in Keats, another she loved), and the hymn. Emergent epics, which pushed the boundaries of lyric and form, such as Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, would not necessarily have been read by Dickinson. But she may have read Whitman. Probably with her tongue firmly in cheek, as a historically closeted queer person and a lifelong embracer of un-conventions, she noted that she was "dissuaded from reading" her contemporary's work "by rumors of its disgracefulness."[15]

Dickinson's poetic form draws primarily from two forms with musical origins, blending elements of the ballad and the hymn, and subverting or bending both forms, adding her "slant." It is not unusual for the two forms, ballad and hymn, to be combined in musical form as well, for many of our most well-known hymns, such as "Amazing Grace" are also written in ballad meter, and many hymns, or songs of praise, in the Judeo-Christian traditions and in contemporary popular songs, use a storytelling form closely related to ballad structure (V-V-V, or verse-verse-verse, with some hymns and ballads adding choruses or refrains alternating the verse current). Both the ballad and the hymn were made to be sung. Nearly all of Dickinson's poems use ballad meter throughout, as well as borrowing spiritual conventions and structural elements of hymns. In many ways, though elements of these two popular musical forms often coincided formally over thousands of years, ballads and hymns can also stand in for two traditions in poetry: epic and lyric, respectively. Ballad structure is often used to tell an epic tale and a "public" tale, while hymns more often use the lyric "I" in their praise structure. Homeric hymns often contain invocations to the gods and the Muses, and Sappho's Hymn to Aphrodite and Epithalamions introduce similar invocations to the Divine coupled with praise for the Beloved, but both hymns and ballads as poetic forms far predate even ancient Greece, with the earliest written forms of each we know of harkening back to ancient

Sumerian song forms, 4,000 to more than 5,000 years ago, from areas that are now modern-day Iraq and Iran. Certainly, the history of both poetic forms is epic in its scope as well, though we'd have to go back at least 5,000 ***more*** years to prehistory, and to the end of the Pleistocene Era, in order to encounter the megatherium that so captivated Dickinson.

But back to Dickinson's own era and milieu. How did these poetic forms circulate, and how were they understood, in the nineteenth-century U.S.? Virginia Jackson argues that although lyric forms far predate the nineteenth century, lyric forms began to be thought of differently in the nineteenth century, and thereafter "progressively identified with an idealized moment of expression."[16] In his book *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*, seeking to "think through the variety of social relations that poems made possible, whether materially...or theoretically,"[17] Michael Cohen suggests that the nineteenth century ballad form must be read as existing within a wide milieu of popular literature and a hybridity of social practices which connect the form to peddling, gossip, slander, vagabondage and news— arguing that the form existed within tensions between folk and elite forms. He also ties the balladmonger to "contraband songs" [ballads written by or about "contrabands," a word which he traces back to the history of piracy, which came to be used to describe slaves who sought refuge with the Union army] and connections to abolitionist writers pushing for an end to slavery and other forms of social transformation and reforms. The circulation of ballads such as the "contraband songs" "Song of the Negro Boatman" and "Let My People Go" constituted "part of a counter-history" of "secretive song-making," against slavery.[18] Hence, Cohen connects the ballad as a genre to a countertradition that was perceived by the powers-that-be as a little dangerous, potentially. Dickinson's poems, in their often irreverent use of ballad-structure, reference epic forms, but also obliquely reference countertraditional

aspects, particularly those critiquing constrictive expectations of gender and neurotypicality as forms of imprisonment and forms of slavery (as in "Much Madness is divinest Sense": "Demur - you're straightaway dangerous - / And handled with a Chain").[19] Similarly, as many other scholars have discussed, Dickinson breaks many conventions of hymns and traditional lyric conventions with the formal and thematic aspects of her poems as well as her use of unexpected personae. In one poem, she takes the perspective of a gun; in another, she sees the perspective of the wounded deer, which "leaps highest."

How might have Dickinson understood her own sense of genre, as she ordered, copied her poems, sewed and assembled her manuscript books? If nineteenth-century poems have "social lives" in circulation, as in Cohen's formulation, we also must consider the two seemingly contradictory modes of sociality of Dickinson's poems during her lifetime: the circulation of her poetic work in many letters to colleagues, friends, family, and the literary community in Amherst, and the semi-"private" epic project of the manuscript books, which compiled a large amount of poems she had only shared with her great love Susan and with a few literary colleagues, and which only became public later. In her essay "The Feminine Epic," Alice Notley says "I wanted to write that large public poem." I'd argue that in spite of Dickinson's ambivalence towards publication and her affinity for Solitude as a practice and refuge, a place of "A Soul admitted to Itself"[20] with its own sense of the infinite that might put "Society" to shame— in spite of this, Dickinson was likely preparing the fascicles, which she carefully ordered, and arranged for publication or for circulation, as a collection of poems. Only grappling with the entirety of the poems as she arranged and preserved them will give us a full understanding of her work's epic density, compression and scope.

Thinking toward an intersectional feminist reading of Dickinson's compression and scope on an epic scale, I desire also to read the "social lives" and afterlives of the poems alongside what Michael Davidson, in his disability-studies centered article "Cleavings: Critical Losses In the Politics of Gain" refers to as the "social body" of the poems. Looking to the critic Mel Y. Chen's accounts of illness in *Animacies* and to his own experience with illness and hearing loss (or "deaf gain"), Davidson draws our attention to the ways that Dickinson represents bodily changes in perception along with "moments of spiritual pain" or "heavenly hurt," "when a plank in reason breaks and the body is revealed in all its clunky vissicitudes."[21] I think it is important to recognize here that the expansiveness of Dickinson's epic scope and scale is also always accompanied by her attention to compression, to density, to loss, to rupture, to a queer attention to the affect of failure. Dickinson also experienced firsthand disability and illness, rheumatic iritis, "a rare iris disorder...that inflicts upon the eyes pain, extreme light sensitivity, and blurred vision,"[22] and the letters record her travel to Boston for treatment for her eyes. Dickinson's poems also play at the limits of allowable perception in poetry, and in social and sensorial domains. With "Domains" in their "Pocket,"[23] they Dwell in Possibility, speak from the mouth of a gun or a wounded deer, break boundaries, and more than occasionally wildly dream of pilfering strawberries "Over the fence." If, as I have suggested, we can begin to read Dickinson's poems, individually and collectively as critical epic, what I have called counterepic, we must consider not only her attention to the radical and expansive possibility but also her attention to wreckage, refusal, stillness, and pain as sources of knowledge. This breaking down of boundaries and grappling with loss and restrictions extends this (counter)epic compressed scope, even in a single poem,

to the imagination, to temporality, to place: "As it takes but a moment/ of imagination to place/ us anywhere."[24]

So why did Dickinson assemble and compile the epic endeavor of the fascicles or manuscript books? There are three answers to this question: 1. for Susan Gilbert, to whom many of the poems were written, and who was one of Dickinson's most intimate and primary readers, 2. for Helen Hunt Jackson and other longtime interested friends, literary correspondents, and readers, and 3. for preparation for publication. If the third seems odd, as Dickinson is often associated with a stance against publication and a mortification of "fame"— hold fast, for I will get there.

To answer the first of these answers that I have provided, that the manuscript books were prepared in part for Susan Gilbert, very few academic books in the lexicon of Dickinson Studies—a field which is shifting but the old guard of which remains very conservative in some ways—address fully or do full justice to the importance of this element. Maria Popova, a great non-academic reader of Dickinson, is one of the few I've seen who do the ardor of the letters between Susan Gilbert and Emily Dickinson full justice with her well-researched account in her book *Figuring* (2019).

> No one knew [Dickinson's] love more intimately, nor had reason to trust it more durably, than Susan [...] a love Dickinson would compare to the loves of Dante for Beatrice and Swift for Stella. Throughout the poet's life, Susan would be her muse, her mentor, her primary reader and editor, her fiercest lifelong attachment, her "Only Woman in the World." To Susan, Dickinson would write her most passionate letters and dedicate her best-beloved poems; to Susan she would steady herself, to her shore she would return again and again, writing in the final years of her life: "Show me Eternity, and I will show you Memory-- /Both in one package lain / And lifted back again--/ Be Sue-- while I am Emily/ Be next--what you have ever been--Infinity."[25]

Having read all of her love letters to Susan and all of her other correspondences which have been collected, I have to agree. When Dickinson fell in love with Susan Gilbert in the summer of 1851 or 1852, she fell fast and hard, and that love and intimacy between the two would endure until Dickinson's death at 55. The Making Queer History project, which researches and publishes public articles and podcasts which work to "tell the stories of the queer community's history" (About the Project), answered a question they had received, "was Emily Dickinson gay?" like this:

> 'Susie, forgive me Darling, for every word I say--my heart is full of you, none other than you is in my thoughts, yet when I seek to say to you something not for the world, words fail me. If you were here--and Oh that you were, my Susie, we need not talk at all, our eyes would whisper for us, and your hand fast in mine, we would not ask for language'
>
> This is from a letter Emily Dickinson wrote to her sister-in-law
>
> 'I have tried hard to think what you would love, of something I might send you--I at last say my little Violets, they begged me to let them goand with them as Instuctor, a bit of knightly grass"
>
> This is from another letter. It is important to note that both grass and violets were symbols of homosexual love
>
> And the grand finale:
>
> 'Now, farewell, Susie, and Vinnie sends her love, and mother her's, and I add a kiss, shyly, lest there is somebody there! Don't let them see, *will* you Susie?'
>
> So in answer to your question; she definitely wasn't straight! [26]

As Popova notes, Dickinson's courting of Susan in public, like her brother Austin did, was not possible in that time and under those constraints of heteronormative Victorianism. When the summer arrived in which Austin eventually did begin courting Susan publicly, Emily Dickinson cut off her auburn hair.[27]

In this respect, we must consider that in light of these heteronormative and oppressive conditions, a time of Oscar Wilde's "love that dare not speak its name," and because many of the poems were written for Susan, may be a key reason why Dickinson did not pursue publication during her lifetime, but intended publication or circulation of the carefully-prepared manuscript books only after her death. Certainly sometime after her death, and after the publication of the first volume of the poems in 1890, as Popova notes, there was a censoring:

> And so somebody set out to erase Susan...the darning thread of one booklet is carefully taken apart to remove one poem, the punctures of Dickinson's needle trimmed off to mask the fact that the page had once been sewn to others. The page thus removed, but preserved for the sake of the poem on the other side, contains the verse ending with 'Sue--forevermore!' Black ink scratches out each line, most furiously concentrating upon the last. The poem survives only because Susan herself kept the copy Emily handed her over the hedge in the dawning days of their romance.[28]

When we consider the material and social oppressions of enforced heteronormativity during this period, and the divisions of the public and private spheres in terms of a queer and renegade perspective, many points of queer defiance emerge within the poems, which enables us to ask even more interesting questions. For example, how does "Over the fence," reproduced below (which is positioned at the end of Fascicle Eleven, and which follows the erotic "Wild nights - Wild nights!" and then the summer vespers and "seeds" of "I shall keep singing!") further our thinking about gender, scale, juxtaposition and scope, or her poetic use of strawberries and science in the fragment quoted above? What of the spiritual dimension in relation to the themes of perception and scope here? If we read it as linked thematically to the two previous poems, does a sense of queer affect and transgression emerge?

Over the fence —
Strawberries — grow—
Over the fence—
I could climb—if I tried,
I know—
Berries are nice!

But—if I stained my
Apron—
God would certainly scold!
Oh, dear, — I guess if He
were a Boy—
He'd—climb—if He could! [29]

Our strawberry has returned, transformed from wonder to temptations, here accompanied not only by contrasts of space and scale, of compressed epic, that we have previously seen with the pairing of the strawberry with the megatherium, but also by hints of queer transgressions and desire and the fluidity of gendered expectations as the speaker imagines climbing this fence with the boldness of a Boy, this boundary so enforced by polite society and materially by the law. She also imagines God as a Boy, transgressing Himself, tempted as well by the bright jewels.

Dickinson was also dissuaded from publication by the prominent literary man and abolitionist, her admired friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who both encouraged aspects of the several poems she sent and urged her to delay "to publish" due to their unconventionality, which somewhat stupefied him. He considered her poems "spasmodic" and "uncontrolled"; she countered, "I have no tribunal." In addition, Dickinson's philosophy was not to seek fame through her verse during her lifetime: "My barefoot rank is better," she would also write to him in response to his critique. Helen Hunt Jackson's correspondences with Dickinson are wonderfully supportive of her as a fellow-female writer, even as her tone

in the letters and her rough-riding Western forthrightness contrasts with the subtle Eastern recalcitrance mixed with sporadic volcanics that characterize Dickinson's tone. Helen Hunt Jackson repeatedly urged her to publish her work, and if she would not, to make her the literary executor of Dickinson's work upon her death, but I believe that Dickinson, who published only ten of her poems during her lifetime, intended that role for Susan, who wrote in her obituary of Emily that her mind was "a Damascus blade gleaming and glancing at the sun," and that "quick as the electric spark of her intuitions and analyses, she seized the kernel instantly"[30] Susan, with her own electricity of mind, defends Dickinson from public misunderstanding, active rumors and an ableist mindset: "Not disappointed with the world," she counters, and "not an invalid until within the past two years," "not because she was insufficient for any mental work or social career."[31]

Upon her death, Susan, familiar with Dickinson's hand, began painstakingly transcribing a preliminary portion of the forty booklets that make up the manuscript books. When preparing and preserving the fascicles into these booklets, Dickinson herself had made clean copies of her own drafts, destroying all her original drafts along the way, as if to make the fascicles the definitive version. She did this for six years, during her late twenties and early thirties. I believe, like Dickinson scholar Robyn Bell, that Dickinson's manuscript books and the way they were carefully prepared, sewed into stacked pamphlets, resembling a collection of signatures for binding (signatures always being divisible by 4 for this reason) indicate that she was preparing them for publication or for some form of circulation before an audience of readers. As Bell notices, rather than simply preparing a complete record of her work, she omits certain poems and includes others, and makes clear editorial choices in her process.[32]

Clearly they are not structured linearly, but do the fascicles, considered as counterepic, have an overall narrative or thematic arc? If so, what is the impression or shape we have of this arc? Bell suggests cogently that the organizing principle of her editing was "primarily reverbative — she arranged poems so that they comment on, contrast with, or amplify one another."[33] This method is allied, I think, to Dickinson's juxtaposition of scope and scale and varied sensorial domains in her work—the megatherium and the strawberry, the microscope and the telescope, the infinitude of loss and pain, of joy and thought. Narrative is not necessarily prominent if we read the fascicles as an epic, or as Alice Notley suggested, an Emily Dickinson poem as a "compressed epic," but these prepared volumes, which make up half of Dickinson's total oeuvre, discovered stacked carefully in a locked box in her room upon her death, do have their narratives of amplication, of contrast, of interlocking themes, and of queer transgression. They contain something of the story of her life and body of work written during one of her most productive periods, constituting a narrative of her formation and maturation as a great poet. I do believe that they were a massive missive meant to be shared with an audience of readers. "This is my letter to the World"[34] Dickinson would write in the fascicles.

Figure 2.3: Jewell Strawberry, 1886

omitted for the sake of distinctness and simplicity. Here *abc* is the vertical or altitude circle, and EFG the horizontal or azimuth circle; AB is a telescope mounted on

Fig. 13.

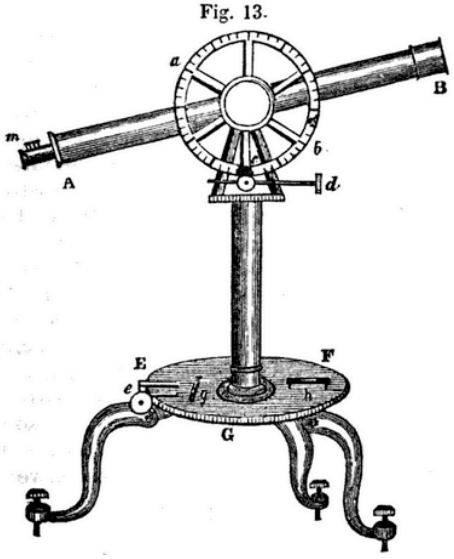


Figure 2.4: Illustration of a telescope from Denison Olmstead's *A Commendium of Astronomy*, 1855

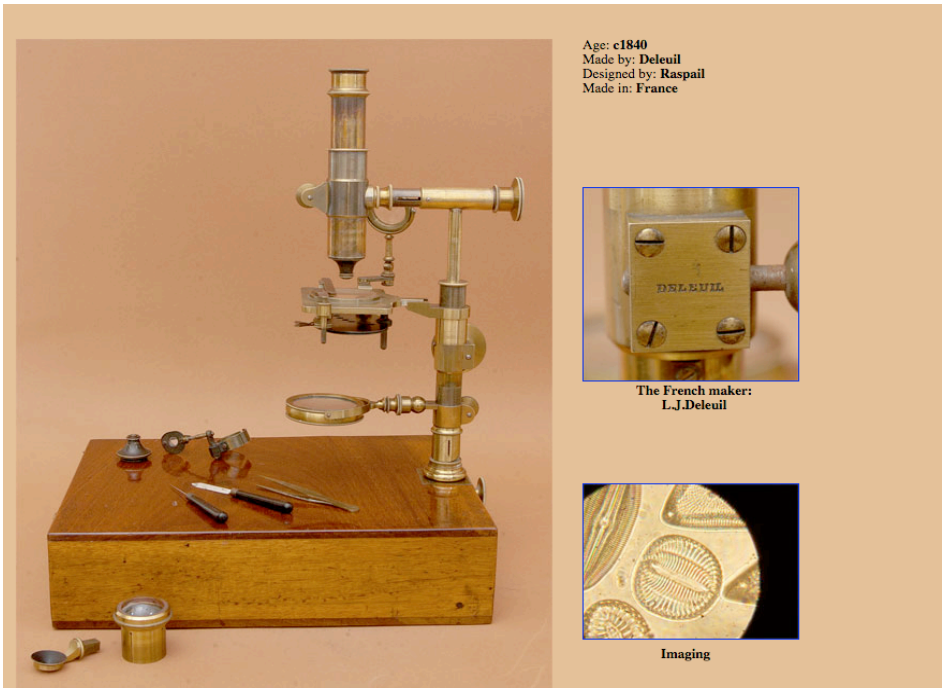


Figure 2.5: Microscope, c. 1840, Golub Microscope Collection, UC Berkeley

Figure 2.6: Drum/Portable Microscope, 1850, Golub Microscope Collection, UC Berkeley

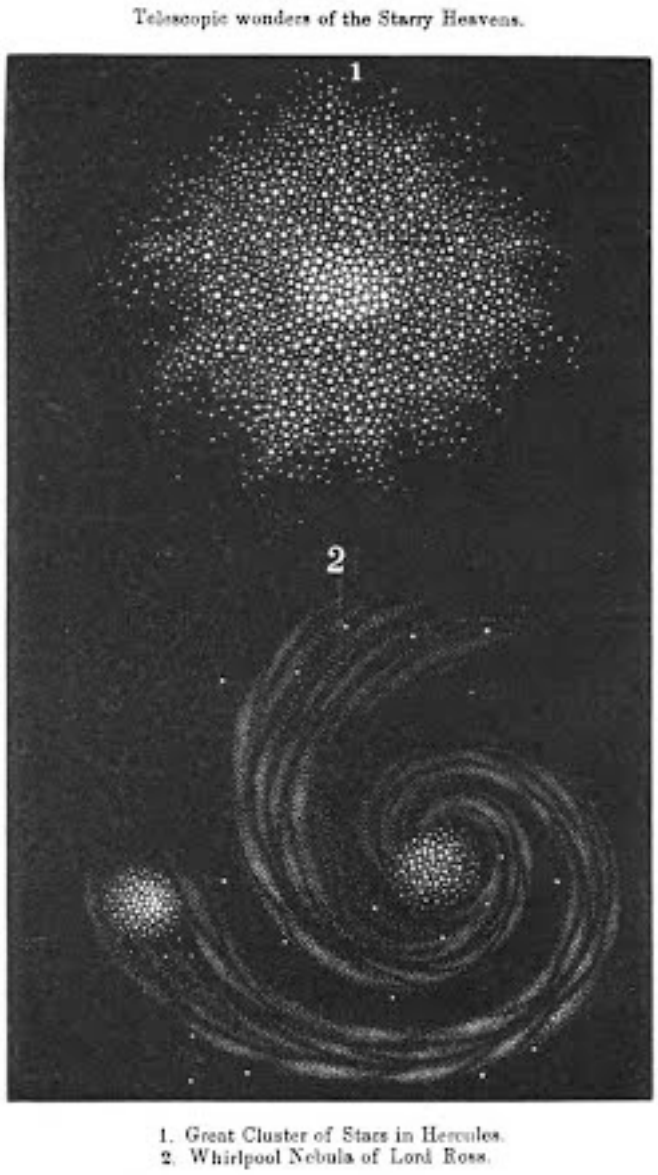


Figure 2.7: Frontispiece illustration of the "Telescopic wonders of the Starry Heavens," from Denison Olmstead's *A Commendium of Astronomy,* 1855

Chapter 2.2. **Bodies That Swerve and Resist: Lisa Robertson's "The Venus Problem" and Feminist New Materialisms**

Marx and the Atom

The young Karl Marx, writing his doctoral dissertation, saw in the atomism of Epicurus as represented in Lucretius in his (counter)epic[1] philosophical poem *On the Nature of Things* (*Der Rerum Natura*), a radical possibility. Wrote Marx, "it can be said of the atom that the declination is that something in its breast that can fight back and resist."[2] The Epicurean school was a radical school in that it admitted both slaves and women (one famed alum, Horace, the son of a freed slave, is known for "carpe diem" (seize the day) and "ut pictura poesis" (as painting, so poetry)). Lucretius's poem, which begins with an invocation of "Venus, the giver of life" advocates, amongst other things, free love, and affirms a embrace of sensual life. To read Lucretius's poem is exhilarating and I recommend it to any poet with a mind still open, or to any thorough reader of Marx or Classics, or to any curious person; for Lucretius's originality and sensuality in visualizing concepts of physics, poppy seeds and endives, volcanoes and rivers, the sea and the stars, for radical discussion of the folly of the fear of death, proofs of the mortality of the soul, for how the potential of matter and "material" was understood pre-Marx and pre-Hegelian idealism, for its discussion of the physics of the preservation of matter understood in the philosophy of Epicurus, pre-figuring modern laws of physical science. The poem is in many ways a sustained paean to change itself, to flux. Epicureanism through Lucretius is absolutely vital to Marx's thought and these ideas were tremendously important to him and to his ideas about change and resistance and understanding collective systems. For Marx, the swerve of atoms in the clinamen is precisely

what rescues materialism from determinism.[3] For, as he says, the entire Epicurean philosophy "swerves away from the restrictive mode of being wherever the concept of abstract individuality, self-sufficiency and negation of all relation to other things must be represented in its existence."[4]

Figure 2.8: screenshot of Robertson's side-scrolling poetic form, showing word cloud in the form of Lucretius's clinamen

Lisa Robertson's counterepic[5] poemic essay, or creative-critical hybrid project, "The Venus Problem," published on Triple Canopy's Issue 14: Counterfactuals (2011),[6] considers the relation of freedom from disturbance and freedom of self-mastery (we might look to Isaiah Berlin's excellent dialectical discussion of both "negative" and "positive" freedoms, and Eric Fromm on the same)[7] and living within contradictions under capital. The structure of the poem—which also calls itself an "essay" in the full title—elegantly shifts between contrasting motifs of lyric couplets, historicizing research quotations and visual or concrete sections of verse in Latin and English arranged in echo of the swirl of atoms or the swarm of the

collective. The "word cloud" shape of the visual or concrete section of the poem, containing invocation to Venus from Lucretius's original Latin "Aneadum genetrix, hominum divomque voluptas," while echoing the swerve of atoms, further echoes the shape of the sea-waves and foam from which Venus was said to have emerged.[8] The verse sections of piece at times take up variations on syllabic verse and reference the dactylic hexameter (or epic, heroic meter) of *De rerum natura*, popping spondees, for emphasis, at times into the arsis and anceps. Robertson's poem deliberately situates itself at the nexus between Marx and the Lucretian tradition, which would later inspire the feminist new materialists. The poem takes as one of its jumping-off points the Epicurean philosophy of Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* and Marx's interest in Lucretius's text. Not only did Marx engage with the alternate materialist tradition through Lucretius, he wrote his dissertation on the "Difference Between [the] Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature." Robertson's poem considers political possibility, love and insoluble material conditions. It considers the moral problem of making art in conjunction with politics or political action. Lucretius was a figure known, perhaps apocryphally, for doing philosophy at a distance, for watching raging battles from a clifftop while writing and pursuing the Epicurean flavor of *ataraxia*. How and where should the poet intervene, and to what, extent, if at all, is art politically efficacious? The poem also calls into question all these ideas about Lucretius and his circumstances as possible constructions or exaggerations of his political enemies, showing that in fact where he lived was not actually safer or removed. Though the poem borrows its concept of *ataraxia* from Lucretius, I'd argue that the form of Robertson's poem and its theme reflect a both celebratory and skeptical engagement with his notion of clinamen, the swerve of atoms in Lucretius.

In this sense, Robertson's poem creates a feminist new materialist dialectic between two elements of what it calls "Marx's massive problem, the reason he goes to Lucretius": practice and material conditions. Says Robertson's lyric, invoking the second person, "Practice arises from conditions/ Yet these are the conditions we must change." This phrase of course echoes Marx's Theses on Feuerbach: "the point is to change it." The poem is haunted by the image of the goddess Venus, of "plenty," "breezes," the affect, the "feeling" which cannot be kept aloof. Venus comes to represent both the pursuit of Epicurean pursuit of *ataraxia*, and the almost violent intrusion of desire into struggle. This image is also kept at a somewhat distance from Robertson in the poem. Rather than embracing the image fully, she intersperses her poetic essay with prose passages which describe the historical background of the texts she is reading and responding to within the poem. These interspersed factual passages express a skeptical mode, and like Sextus, Robertson is concerned with the fluidity of meaning and of sign and signifier, semiotics, in these passages, and how these features of art have material effects in the real world:

> The "aesthetic act of 'empathy'" that Warburg opens up as the motive and expressive agency linking the Italian Renaissance to the pagan world describes also the hypogrammic mode of reading that Saussure explored in his notebook entries on Lucretius. For a moment in Saussure's research, the sonic body of Venus itself conceived the poem. He was later to abandon this research. For both Warburg and the Saussure of the notebooks, meaning circulates in culture as a charged, discontinuous material presence whose iteration brings freshly to life the presence of a historical vitality. The artist or the reader—and for both, reading stands as an active art, with an art's techniques, cultural pressures, and diverted economies—reinscribes this vitality in the present as style.[9]

A small subset of hardline Marxists, those who relentlessly work to demystify everything, sometimes ad absurdum (a few are my allies), sometimes dismiss all new materialist theory as "OOO" or "Object-Oriented Ontology" and oppose this tradition, quite

ironically, to the true scientism or the true historical materialism of Marx. An exemplar of this type of argument would be Julie Torrant's essay in Red Critique,[10] which argues that new materialist feminism should be discarded as "liberal" "bourgeois" and "ruling-class." (Should all of Marx also be discarded? His own material origins are wealthy and upper middle-class, if we were to enact this exclusion by dint of radical purity.) Torrant dismisses new materialism as "disenabling for feminism in that they are forms of spiritualism which displace critique." While there are points of Torrant's critique that are certainly quite trenchant, especially her points about the limits of some of the solutions proposed by new materialists like Grosz, positioned next to Karl Marx's words on the Lucretian "swerve" of atoms in the Epicurean material as precisely against the restrictive mode of being commonly represented by bourgeois morality and "abstract individuality," the irony of the radical purity argument's basis becomes even more keen. The irony continues with the claim of new materialist feminism's "spiritualism," for, again, this tradition's radix grows out of what was considered in its time a radically more *secular* tradition surrounding *matter*; the Epicureans taught that the gods were indifferent at best, did not believe in a separate life after death and emphasized the interconnectedness of the matter of life over an abstract immortal soul.

This Orthodox Marxist argument collapses all of new materialism into an argument with Timothy Morton or a shadowbox with a phantom of Bruno Latour rather than reckoning with a close reading of the historical texts and the emergent thought underlying the incredibly useful writing by feminist scholars in the new materialist tradition which seeks to relate interconnected oppressions, dismantle subject/object binaries and describe ecologies as well as complex, porous and open collective systems and the motion of what I like to call bodies that resist (materially, categorically, definitively). In fact, as we've begun to see, the basis of

this Lucretian tradition on matter and animacy not only predates but is actually vitally and integrally intertwined with Marx; and rather than dismissing all philosophical enquiry into matter and being (ontology), in reality, Marxists should rather be willing to see the ways in which materialism through Lucretius actually formed the basis of Marx's early and later thought. And really, it's ok to read a book! (or to blend radicalism with spirituality and mysticism for that matter...). In fact, far from dismissing all of this "other" tradition of matter and materialism of Epicurean thought through Lucretius, Marx *wrote his dissertation* on it, seeing in its core arguments non-hierarchical, revolutionary and radical thought.

The reawakening of contemporary interest in this school of matter recently by some brilliant thinkers (Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Arjun Appadarai, *The Social Life of Things*) and revolutionary collectives (Black Orchid Collective and others) marks a turn toward a materialism which is intersectionally feminist, combining elements of queer of color critique, disability studies, biology and the physics of matter, Deleuzian and Marxist thought. Says Chen, "*Animacies* interrogates how the fragile division between animate and inanimate—that is, beyond human and animal—is relentlessly produced and policed and maps important political consequences of that dis-tinction. The concept of animacy undergirds much that is pressing and indeed volatile in contemporary culture, from animal rights debates to biosecurity concerns, yet it has gone undertheorized. This book is the first to bring the concept of animacy together with queer of color scholarship, critical animal studies, and disability theory."[11]

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett argues for feminist materialities that resist the hierarchies of capital and which represent not bourgeois individualism but a complex understanding of individual things in time and how the collective swarm represents, like

Marx's resistance within the atom's breast, "...sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure. We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of "talented" and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self)."[12]

First: let's historicize. I'm really interested in the ways this debate about the uses of art in politics, as it plays out in poetics, often names and opposes its terms - reflection vs. embodiment. Embedded in this vast and fascinating question is not just the question of what it means for a poem to reflect or embody, but also the further question as to the materiality of language, and how poetic form represents, or might represent, or even change, larger economic realities and economic tensions. In some ways this question is a question about the purpose of art in relation to politics. Reflection and embodiment in poetics, it turns out, have been opposed in a dialectic as above in Western understanding since antiquity. This double-form of **r**eflection vs. embodiment, economic vs. aesthetic, revolution vs. art, use value vs. exchange-value, materiality of language vs. economic materiality, spectacle vs. performance, representation vs. performance (and sometimes unsatisfyingly as the false dichotomy of conceptualist vs. "affective" or lyric— as in Calvin Bedient's analysis in "Against Conceptualism"[13]) is repeated again and again in different but in related flavors, tones and weights particular to their historical periods and economic systems. This repetition of these oppositions is highly significant. The best poetry and poetics both reflect and embody the material divisions— aesthetic and economic— of its time.

The question of reflection vs. embodiment in art is a very old one. Recently, reading Sextus Empiricus's polemical *Against the Grammarians.* I was struck (like Odysseus with the spine of a stingray, perhaps, a narrative device from the eponymous poem Sextus mocks in

the former work); struck with the enduringly contemporary nature of many of the ancient philosophical debates therein—debates about the uses and meaning of art, the supposed dangers of poetry and poets, about expression and false knowledge, control of metaphors and what might be considered ideology, and about the sometime failures of linguistic explanations or solutions to material problems.

While I have intentionally rooted my understanding of Robertson's poem's relation to these debates about art to contemporary categories and according to a contemporary understanding of poetry and political economy, I would like to show how the debates' categories and formations are rooted in some very old and dusty texts as well. I want now to consider the ancient debate about the uses or abuses of poetry and grammarians (or teachers of letters) and place the ancient claims of Skeptic philosophers and Epicureans alongside two recent contemporary debates amongst radical U.S. poets on both poetry and political action, aesthetics and economics and whether the two are reconcilable or useful to one another.

A raging debate since antiquity concerns to what extent poetry and the language arts are useful or entirely useless (said Oscar Wilde, "all art is quite useless,"[1] and says Sextus in what appears to be a somewhat playfully punchy tone, referring to the argument of the Epicureans, "poetry is not just useless for life, it is actually quite harmful")?[14] Is this at first seeming verdict of the philosopher rooted in a claim against art as deceptive spectacle only or does he think that there are some cases in which poetry, art and song can be useful or worthy of study? Is the nature of poetry—though one had better avoid an argument by nature yet or be skeptically demolished— to seduce away from the truth, or is it the grammarian "industry" of "supercilious" teachers of letters, the primary barrier to the truth? Or is it poetry and myth or the grammarians themselves which are the primary barrier, more fittingly, to *ataraxia*? But

this is actually a false dichotomy, and Sextus actually thinks neither. Sextus Empiricus goes further than simply opposing these terms as might the Epicureans.

So what *does* it mean for a poem to reflect, or to embody, the material economic conditions of its era? Perhaps the earliest form of this dichotomy, or more accurately, dialectic of "reflection vs. embodiment," can be found in the opposition of mimesis vs. catharsis in Plato and Aristotle. In Plato's *Republic*, the rationale for banishing poets is the way in which they participate in the mimetic, seductive qualities of art (wearing its cosmetics and feminine disguises!), which he opposes for epistemological as well as moral reasons: poets, spreading their imitative lies, are sure to corrupt youth to dissolution and melancholy. He bases his critique of poetry's mimetic representation on the form of the theatre, then the most prominent place to see and hear poetry in public. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato does see some benefit in writing, as a help to remembrance, but distrusts poetry's power over affect and mind. For Aristotle, in *Poetics*, the argument is that art and poetry are good because the arts of poetry and theatre are useful to the social not simply as false mimetic spectacle but as sites of knowledge and purgative catharsis, aids to understanding of realities which are not our immediate landscape. At the same time, this purgative catharsis may serve not simply to arouse "pity" and "fear" but also to inform and educate, as well as provoke empathetic understanding.

Fast forward to the 19th Century. The question of use and utility also has a long history in the theory of political economy. In his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, writing in his chapter on Utility, the political economic philosopher Adam Smith hints at the way he believes capitalist social and economic divisions should determine the value of art and moral character:

> The characters of men, as well as the contrivances of art, or the institutions of civil government, may be fitted either to promote or to disturb the happiness both of the individual and of society. The prudent, the equitable, the active, resolute, and sober character promises prosperity and satisfaction, both to the person himself and to every one connected with him. The rash, the insolent, the slothful, effeminate, and voluptuous, on the contrary, forebodes ruin to the individual, and misfortune to all who have any thing to do with him. The first turn of the mind has all the beauty which can belong to the most perfect machine that was ever invented for promoting the most agreeable purpose; and the second, all the deformity of the most awkward and clumsy contrivance.[15]

For Smith, the capitalist, the ideal of the most beautiful art is now an elegant, not clumsy, "contrivance"—"the most perfect machine"— sober, active and resolutely cismasculinist, while the feminine, extravagant queer and rebellious qualities, voluptuous, dangerously soft and effeminate, associated with "deformity," chaos and fears around disability and disabled bodies, is symptomatic of ruin. Smith takes the Platonist argument and runs with it to the "impartial" overseer (or his "impartial spectator") of the factory floor.

By considering Lucretius and Marx together through an emergent new materialist feminist tradition, Robertson's poem is responding to the failures of Marx's or Hegel's dialectic, of Freud and of the Aristotelien/Platonic tradition on the uses of art to fully reckon with their reproduction of value judgments against "feminine"-coded problems of desire, affect and psychology on a mass scale. The poem also responds to ancient epic: "The imperium's fucked up / So how can I screw or work?" In a complex reference which nonetheless speaks of its own complicity, Robertson writes of this "problem" of capital's contradictions:

Sometimes I need a record

Knowing it doesn't matter

And sometimes I need

A flower machine.[16]

This imagery references one of the primary images which undergirds Lucretius's poem, of Venus, "giver of life" with her "springtime's radiant face"[17] and the swirl and swerve of the physics of atoms, also described in *De rerum natura.* The poem's self-aware complicity in the "flower machine" shows a feminist materialist awareness of how even desire and longing can become embedded in systems of embodied exchange and feminine labor. The double-entendre of "record" demonstrates a similar self-awareness of the way in which the lyric subject is embedded in ideology and in structures of feeling. Another double-entendre on "matter" draws our attention to the ways of songs, and of records, historical and musical—to their material and immaterial effects.

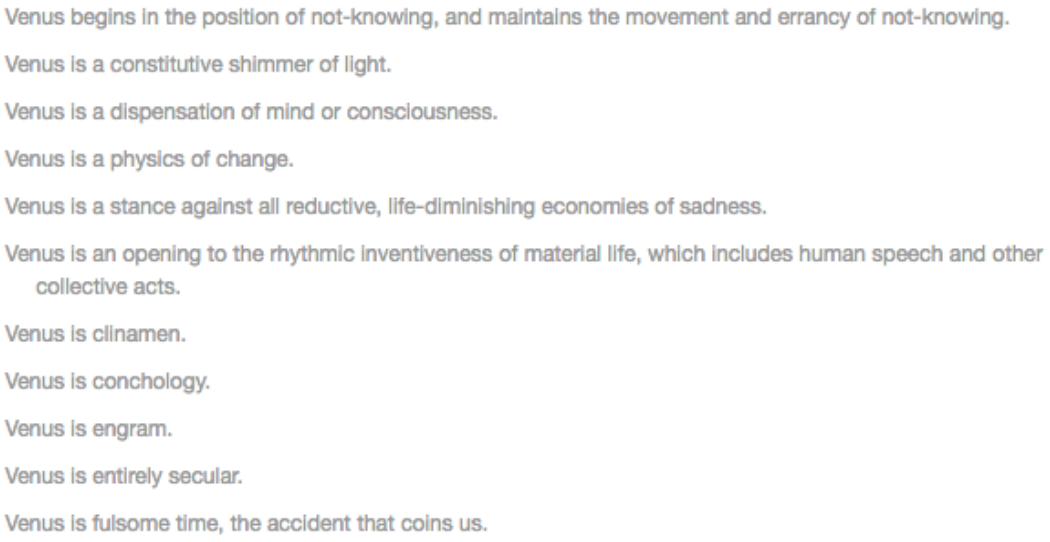


Figure 2.9: Screenshot showing the collective visual form of Robertson's poem

At the same time, Robertson's poem's speaker also seems to retain a great longing for and a hope after the resistance that Marx saw in Epicurean materialisms through Lucretius, and sees the invocation of the "engram" of Venus which is "entirely secular" by Lucretius as a "stance against all reductive, life-diminishing economies of sadness," "a physics of change." This "opening to the rhythmic inventiveness of material life" must be considered as the potential of the collective. A scalar and counterepic understanding of systems is revealed. Both Marx's atom and the wave or clinamen in Lucretius's epic *Der rerum natura* ("On the Nature of Things") are networks of systemic material processes, whether those of nature, or of human art and contemporary politics.

Chapter 3. **The Helens of Troy, New York; the Didos of Carthage, Texas**

Just as there are leitmotifs and tropes of ancient epics—such as catalogues of ships, as in catalogues of Greek and Trojan ships given in both the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, or the moments of extended exphrasis on some artistic and significant object, such as the description of Aeneas's shield and the symbolic engravings smithed upon it by Vulcan, or Dante's ekphraisis of white marble friezes that he encounters on the way to entering Purgatory, or epic simile, also known as Homeric extended simile, such as is found in the *Odyssey*, when a worried Penelope is described as "Like a lioness caught in the toils with huntsmen hemming her in on every side she thought and thought till she sank into a slumber, and lay on her bed bereft of thought and motion,"[1] or as when, in *Paradise Lost*, the fallen angels are compared to fallen leaves:

> His Legions, Angel Forms, who lay intrans't
> Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks
> In Vallombrosa, where th' Etrurian shades
> High overarch't imbowr; or scatterd sedge
> Afloat, when with fierce Winds Orion arm'd
> Hath vext the Red-Sea Coast, whose waves orethrew
> Busiris and his Memphian Chivalry,
> While with perfidious hatred they pursu'd
> The Sojourners of Goshen, who beheld
> From the safe shore thir floating Carkases
> And broken Chariot Wheels, so thick bestrown
> Abject and lost lay these, covering the Flood,
> Under amazement of thir hideous change.[2]

or, as when, in *Paradiso* in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante describes his vision of the "Eternal Light," beautifully marveling, "I saw that it contained, bound by love in one volume, that which is scattered in leaves through the universe, substances and accidents and their relations as it were fused together in such a way that what I tell of is a simple light"[3] —so too are there

repeated lietmotifs particular to counterepics. I admit, I could not resist making my own catalog of epic similes in this introductory paragraph. In this chapter I will argue that there are also repeated tropes of counterepics: those which draw from tropes of ancient epics and transform them, and those repeated tropes of modern counterepic which are being invented as new forms by their authors in order to describe contemporary experiences of technology, media spectacle, and new languages. In this chapter, I will focus on three of these tropes in anti-patriarchal and anti-state counterepics: their transformations of Classical epic female figures like Helen and Dido, their emphasis on Eastern, Indigenous and transnational perorations of the heroines, and their narrative recentering of figures from Muses to Witches.

Many Helens, Many Didos

First, let us consider the way that modern counterepics transform the tropes of ancient epics. In particular, critical counterepics frequently take on the legacy of often demonized or idealized female figures of epic, such as Helen of Troy, Dido of Carthage, Eve in *Paradise Lost*, Penelope of the *Odyssey*, and Beatrice of the *Divine Comedy*. Counterepic writers also represent or invent new characters and new heroines and place them within the matrix of references of classical epic literature. In the first part of this chapter, I will focus on modernist reinterpretations of these epic characters (H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, figures of Dido of Carthage in Muriel Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*) and contemporary counterepics (Bernadette Mayer's *The Helens of Troy, New York*, and Sara Larsen's *Merry Hell*) which center and revolutionarily transform the voices and experiences of the ancient characters Helen of Troy and Dido of Carthage—or, as in Lisa Robertson's *Debbie, An Epic* or Gwendolyn Brooks's *Anniad*, create their own original characters.

All of these counterepics (by H.D., Rukeyser, Mayer, Larsen, Robertson, and Brooks) remake and counter Classical epic tropes, formally and thematically, not just giving voice to female heroines, but also revealing central character perspectives previously non-existent, obscured, demonized or otherwise lost. In this way, counterepics reinvent the notion of the epic hero. However, these works' critiques also counter the way in which the tropes and characters of Classical epic are used in the discourse of writing communities and public life (See also, as two of many examples: heartbroken Yeats calling Maud Gonne Helen in poems, or Robert Lowell calling Sylvia Plath calling Plath a Dido, a Medea, in a letter.) They also reveal how writing communities that are male-dominated often have a history of initially shutting women out except as muses, and not giving them real credit for their exploited labor— emotional and creative. These dynamics also result from some straight men's desire to see women within writing communities as symbolic sexualized objects or demonized figures rather than do the work of reckoning with their works' content, and this is a very gendered power dynamic. (When was the last time you heard a straight male writer referred to like this in shorthand by women, or by anyone—he's such an Aeneas!, or as a Telemachus, a Priam, a Geryon or as some sort of Gorgon? And why the glaring lack of Patroclus and Achilles modern romance?) In counterepics, women, non-binary and queer writers confront the epithets they are given when they dare to diverge from the narrow confines of a literary world's social and political expectations, and also often take on these characters and epithets with pride, reclaiming them as identities of transgressive power.

First, let us look at one of the most famous counterepic modern Helens, of H.D.'s *Helen In Egypt*. Much has now been written on the brilliant modernist writer H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and her poetry—whose tremendously influential work began to be 'rediscovered' in

the 1970s and brought up to the light anew by feminist critics. Her counterepic poems include not only *Helen in Egypt,* but also *Trilogy,* and the *Walls Do Not Fall*. I will concentrate only on *Helen In Egypt*, and H.D.'s complex counterepic treatment of the character of Helen which adapts her story to the alternate version of events suggested by writers like Herodotus and Stesichorus of Sicily, in which Helen wanders East to Egypt and Cyprus. H.D. also blends mystic, animistic and occult iconography and pagan mystery traditions into the poem's mythopoetics.

As Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas notes in an article in *Twentieth Century Literature*, H.D.'s *Helen In Egypt*, which reimagines Helen of Troy's narrative trajectory, was a kind of response to Ezra Pound's *Cantos*.[4] H.D. says as much in her *End To Torment: A Memoir of Ezra Pound*, revealing much about her complex relationship with Pound, who she had known while in college, with whom she had been a lifelong friend and collaborator, to whom she had briefly been engaged, had cared for at times with fraught exasperation, and from whom she had distanced herself in his later, fascistic period; she wrote, in one entry "There is no *reason* to accept, to condone, to forgive, to forget, what Ezra has done."[5] In another entry of the *Memoir*, she complexly links *Helen In Egypt* and Pound's *Cantos*, reflecting on the ways in which their collaborations shaped the both of them as poets, and also how they had diverged in their paths:

> I explained that I had read in the [William Rose] Bénet *Reader's Encylopedia* that Ezra had been arrested and tried for high treason (1945), but was 'judged insane.' ...My story as lived out in the second war in London might well have been that of Dorothy Shakespear; her story could not have been, but becomes in retrospect, mine. The two men, diametrically opposed, the London 'opposite number' of my life-long Isis search, and the Odysseus-Pound descended into the land of the shades in the *Pisan Cantos.* No. There is no resemblance. But I completed my own cantos as Norman called them, again in the Greek setting;

> mine is *Helen and Achilles* [*Helen In Egypt*]. There is resemblance in this, the two men meet in war, the Trojan War, the Achilles of my fantasy and imagination and the Odysseus of Ezra's. They do not meet, they can never meet in life. But the two women, Helen (of my creative reconstruction) and the Penelope (a human actuality) can communicate.[6]

Several features seem especially important to highlight here: H.D.'s references to the pain, moral revolt and shock she feels in relation to news of her friend Pound's politics, public disgrace or infamy; her comparison of her own circumstances to Dorothy Shakespear, who did end up marrying Pound, seemingly his "Penelope" in "human actuality"; Pound's references to Odysseus in his *Cantos*; and her own "life-long Isis search," to which the earlier, London version of Pound she once knew represented an "opposite number."

In mathematics, an "opposite number" represents an additive inverse, a counterpart in difference on the number line. In colloquial speech, "opposite number" is often used to refer to someone who is as far from similar as one could be, but who is somehow equally as powerful, interesting, or distinctive. One of Pound's youthful love poems written to H.D. in his "privately published" the *Hilda Book* references Helen: "My flower's outworn, the later rhyme runs cold/Naethless, I loving cease me not to sing/Love song was blossom to the searching breeze/E'er Paris' rhyming had availed to bring/Helen and Greece for towered Troy's disease."[7] Elsewhere, having written of the misogynistic hatred directed at Helen in her short poem titled "Helen" ("All Greece hates/ the still eyes in the white face,/the lustre as of olives/where she stands/and the white hands), H.D. turns again, in *Helen In Egypt,* to the subject of Helen, taking on the character's own voice. First, having been transposed mysteriously to Egypt, Helen "does not want to forget"; "the potion is not poison," she realizes, "it is not Lethe," the river of forgetfulness, "but everlasting memory."[8] Helen's

underworld journey to rebirth and re-membering echoes H.D.'s understanding of her own "life-long Isis search," and her affinity with the goddess's associations with the powers of magic and resurrection. In a later section, or canto we ought to say, the prose epigraph of the poem's narrator states, "Helen achieves the difficult task of translating a symbol in time, into timeless-time." In order to complete this translation, she must tap into forms of knowledge traditionally associated with the feminine and with those unprivileged by formal education: "She knows the script, she says, but we judge that this is intuitive or emotional knowledge, rather than intellectual." Again, this intuitive path is associated with the ancient mystery tradition and the goddess Isis, and the narrator cautions: "This is no death-symbol but a life-symbol, it is Isis or her Greek counterpart, Thetis, the mother of Achilles."[9] The goddess Thetis is associated with the sea and H.D.'s sea-mysticism. Hecate, a Greek goddess of liminality, gates, the crossroads, and witches, is also associated with Helen in H.D.'s counterepic:

> Perhaps he was right
> to call me Hecate and a witch;
> I do not care for separate
>
> might and grandeur,
> I do not want to hear of Agamemnon
> and the Trojan Walls,[10]

It seems significant that Helen speaks here unequivocally against individualistic heroism ("I do not care for separate/ might and grandeur"). We shall return to the imagery of the witch and Hecate in counterepic a little later on.

In his essay “Seaward: H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt* as a Response to Pound’s Cantos,” Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas argues cogently that H.D.'s image of the flight of Helen down a spiral staircase to H.D.'s mythopoetics is associated with both the sea and rebirth:

> Her late sequences characteristically proceed in a centrifugal-centripetal manner...The spiralling staircase down which Helen flees is obviously another version of H.D.’s favourite image of the sea shell whose involutions spiral back to the groundlessness of the rhythms of the sea, an image of poetry itself. In this sense, Helen at Troy dissolves back into the sea, the shifting matrix of poetry, to be reborn as Helen in Egypt.[11]

By reclaiming these "intuitive" forms of knowledge which are often belittled in misogynistic discourse (as opposed to "intellectual" and "rational" forms of thought and knowledge), and by traveling Eastward to Egypt in H.D.'s counterepic, with the mystery tradition goddesses of Isis and Hecate as her guides, Helen comes to represent and understand a very different path than one of "separate might and grandeur."

With its blend of wry, down-to-earth, radical humor, and a markedly different tone than H.D.'s symbolic vorticistic meanderings, Bernadette Mayer's counterepic serial poem project, *The Helens of Troy, New York* (New Directions Poetry Pamphlet, 2013) also navigates the long legacy of epic depictions of Helen. Mayer's counterepic collection is inspired in part by showtunes, including those of the production "Helen of Troy, New York" and its lyrics, quoted by Mayer in the book's epigraph, "Homer would glory/ in writing the story/ of the Helens of Troy, New York." The book includes many real life photographic and poetic portraits of many Helens, residing in Troy, New York, each titled after a different Helen, many written in the first person from that Helen's perspective, and many of them capturing the individual spoken speech-patterns and snatchets of dialogue from the real-life Helens. Instead of singing "arms and the man" as Vergil does in the *Aeneid*, *Arma virumque*

cano, these poems of the vernacular music sing of women's stories, their fights, with jocular irreverence.

The first of the Helen poems, titled "HELEN CRANDALL WHALEN VILLANELLE" and written in the eponymous form, crackles with working-class wisdom and humor:

> everybody died
> i'm learning to control my temper
> i took it off, it was fun, I loved it
>
> there were cameras in the store
> i don't have to look
> everybody died
>
> [....]
>
> i had to clean other people's houses
> for a dollar a day
> my hair's braided like a family
>
> if you did something wrong, they punished you
> one helen is enough, trust me
> i don't have to look [12]

Another portrait poem, "HELEN HYPATIA BAILEY BAYLY," references Troy, New York's labor history as an industrial steel town, praising and critiquing aspects of its academic institution (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, or RPI). First Mayer tells briefly the story of this Helen's namesakes and life:

> besides not being from ancient troy
> helen bailey hails from austrailia
> her middle name is hypatia, her mother
> thought if her first name was helen
> her 2nd had to be the greek mathematician
> stoned by st. cyril whom she pissed off
> so helen hypatia bailey met a nice man
> named brian bayly & they became the brains
> of troy, he taught geology at RPI

& she astronomy lecturing probably on haley's
comet till he & she, now a helen of troy
retired to a farm near this here troy
that i, the writer, am near to too

In the accompanying photograph, this Helen, whitehaired, smiling, proudly displays a sign that she is carrying which says 'TROY BACK ON TRACK!"

[...] we met in front of the burden
ironworks, once powered by the world's biggest
waterwheel where workers made horseshoes
& bells & stoves & fences around aeries
d'ya think that one of the baileys played the ukulele?
now though RPI's president receives
the highest salary in the country, troy's
proctor's, owned by the RPI, is to be razed
depriving trojans of their heritage again
& poor troy becomes poorer perhaps the poorest?
not something to drink a troy cocktail* to! [13]

*campari, lime, soda, also called a joe brainard

Recording that the historic Proctor's Theatre, once a popular vaudeville and movie house, is now under threat of razing, noting the ironworks's workers' history and material objects they made, and critiquing the Polytechnic Institute's administrator's salary and the wealth gap, finishing off with a tongue-in-cheek campari cocktail image (playfully christened after Mayer's longtime friend, poet Joe Brainard!), this Helen portrait serves as a spirited and critical snapshot of not just the Bailey Baylys, but also a portrait of the city itself, and its urban development, for better and worse. Though the serial poem is a playful account it is also explicitly political. The "HELEN REZEY SESTINA," displaying a love for libraries, flirts with a critical utopian impulse or wish, a kind of quest or journey that would shift perception:

socialism's ok for americans sometimes, e.g. the library
the post office, the schools where people

can learn about ancient troy of all the troys
even the ones without any markets
by the names of price chopper or hannaford, names
that might appear in our dreams were a different

landscape, or map as it were, leads to a different
way of perceiving like books in a library
which can lead you on a quest, already inherent in your name [14]

And one more portrait, of "HELEN WORTHINGTON BONESTEEL" captures the joyous candor of its namesake woman, who looks to be in her 70s or 80s: "i could never understand why/my mother named me helen!...peddled milk/my brother broke his leg/hated school/i got married three times/TROY'S ON FIRE!" (p. 31) If these poems had a soundtrack, along with the showtunes of Proctor's Theatre, which becomes a theme throughout the book, it might include Sly & The Family Stone's "Everyday People" or maybe Joan Jett's accomplished cover of the same. The final lovingly irreverent poem of the volume is "A HISTORY OF TROY, NY (in homage to Ed Sanders, Patti Smith & Howard Zinn)," so it is clear that we must also add Patti Smith to the book's soundtrack. Maybe "People Have the Power." This final poem gives a sort of "peoples' history" (inspired by Zinn), a decolonial history, and significantly references multiple radical traditions of activism and speech (of Ed Sanders, poet and activist; Patti Smith, rocker and poet; and Howard Zinn; peoples' historian):

who knows the thoughts of the people?
who, in accounts at the time, were in number 50
in a place where american indians lived
& nobody owned the land, you could name
anything anything. too bad white people
reared their ugly heads, some would say
there's still a lot of dutch names for things
creeks named kills, valatie, van everything
& a lot of indian names —tsatsawassa,
schaghicoke, shenandoah, shinnecock, schmuck
all the american indians got pushed further & further
west & south, under the aegis of andrew jackson

because white people wanted their land. the miami
originally from ohio, had to go to miami! [15]

This "History" continues the poem series' thinking about the legacy of U.S. and indigenous names and all that is contained in them: culture, colonial violence and diaspora, ownership, beauty, humor, the experience of European immigrants and indigenous peoples of the Americas, and layers of story. The author's way of telling the story is light on its feet but doesn't pull its punches: "people are ghettoized in projects. everybody/thinks it's a shame there's so much crime...when urban renewal happened in the 1960s luckily/troy didn't have enough money to tear all the buildings down." The poem ends with the note "in 1866 a baseball team the haymakers / of lansingburgh played the mutuals of new york"[16] and in this phrase, while seeming to delight in the team names, Mayer also references the former village of north Troy, Landsingburgh, which became incorporated as part of the city of Troy in 1900, another shift in naming.

Muriel Rukheyser's *Book of the Dead*, first published as part of her 1938 collection *U.S. 1*, provides a different radical kind of witness to, and naming of, and mapping of, people and experience. Written after one of the worst industrial disasters, the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster of 1931, in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, in which 700-800 miners died as the result of acute occupational silicosis after being exposed to silica dust during the construction of the tunnel, an estimated three fourths of whom were black migrant workers, paid a few dollars a day, *The Book of the Dead* is a counterepic which positions itself not only against racial structural violence but also against the interrelated structural violence of U.S. capitalism. This disaster is not only enormous but was wholly preventable; had the company furnished the required masks for blasting and digging through silica, rather than prioritizing profit and

"productivity" over people, the workers would have likely lived. The poem and the collection in which it orginally appeared, *U.S. 1*, reference not only ancient Egyptian epic (*The Book of the Dead*), but also Greek and Carthaginian characters in epic, including Helen of Troy, and Queen Dido of the *Aeneid*.

Rukeyser begins her critical epic with a list of many of the names of the dead who passed away following the disaster, from 1930-1935, accompanied by their ages, races, and places of burial. The workers listed are aged from 16 years old to 73. The 16-year-old was named Willie ("Mooney") Bostic, and the 73-year-old was named Jessie Potts; both were black. Following this list of names of the dead, Rukeyser begins with a thoroughly U.S. American image: of the road, driving along Highway U.S. 1, her title's namesake. She begins, as if she is our companion on a road trip: "These are the roads to take when you think of your country/and interested bring down the maps again,/phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,/ reading the papers with morning inquiry." Then she puts us in the driver's seat: "Or when you sit at the wheel and your small light/chooses gas gauge and clock; and the headlights/indicate future of road, your wish pursuing/past the junction, the fork, the suburban station...Past your tall central city's influence, / outside its body."[17]

The ancient Egyptian epic *Book of the Dead*, papyri of which were on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City during the 1930s, recounts an underworld journey, the journey after death in which it was believed the weight of a person's heart would be judged against the weight of a feather. Rukeyser's poem also recounts the journey of every U.S. road trip, a journey of the soul; in this case, a journey in which you will get out of yourself, and in which you will witness, past the "traffic" of large urban centers, not only the sorrows and oppression outside of maps you know, but also other "centers removed and

strong, fighting for good reason." Rukeyser's epic poem references and counters the nationalistic traditions of epic, focusing not only on the oppressive reality of the corrupt corporations that caused the Hawk's Nest Disaster, but also on the strength of resistance of people fighting back along the route, "for good reason."[18]

The poem is arguably one of the first examples of "documentary poetics," in which documentary materials are used as part of poetry's ecosystem, or its dentritic cells. Like much of the best documentary poetics —a kind of investigative poetics, which exposes corruption and prevents forgetting—*The Book of the Dead* is a testament to memory, and to the complexities of recounting, and the structures underlying erasure being fought against by a politicized narrative, a narrative "for good reason." Rukeyser was only 23 when she set out with her friend, the photographer Nancy Naumburg, on an investigative road trip from New York to Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, the trip that would become the basis for *The Book of the Dead*, published two years later.[19] The House Labor Subcommittee conducted a hearing on Hawk's Nest and Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation's and their contractors' negligence; Rukeyser quotes extensively from this hearing and the testimonies of workers and representatives from the corporations, and at times these documentary quotations merge with the poet's embellishments, creating a hybrid form of documentary and poetic commentary and voice.

Of the closure of the House Labor Subcommittee hearing, Rukeyser writes:

> The subcommittee subcommits.
>
> Words on a monument.
> Capitoline thunder. It cannot be enough.
> The origin of storms is not in clouds,
> Our lightning strikes when the earth rises,

spillways free authentic power:
dead John Brown's body walking from a tunnel
to break the armored and concluded mind.[20]

The stanza references both ancient Roman myth and American revolutionary abolitionist folk ballad from the time of the Civil War. "Capitoline thunder" reflects the hilltop of ancient Rome and also Capitol Hill, named after this hill in ancient Rome, on which the House of Representatives and the Senate are built. Using an epic simile of sorts, an extended analogy, she writes of the limits of this State power, and of its "subcommit[ment]" to justice in this cause. The analogy continues, asserting that "The origin of storms is not in clouds,/Our lightning strikes when the earth rises." This revolutionary analogy again references ancient Rome's Jupiter, associated with Capitoline Hill, and the lightning bolts that he was said to hurl from the clouds; she counters by affirming that "Our lightning strikes when the earth rises," referencing both the labor-power of miners and also the eruption of labor strikes, traveling from the bottom up, the grassroots like lightning (interesting note: scientifically speaking, both do occur; lightning striking from cloud to ground, and from ground to cloud, and even a third type, cloud to cloud, but I digress). "Spillways free authentic power" the poem continues, followed by a colon denoting the equivalency made by the extended analogy: "dead John Brown's body walking from a tunnel/ to break the armored and concluded mind." With these revolutionary images she reconceives the violent history of the hydroelectric dam for which the tunnel had been cut, and reminds the reader of the potential of the spillways and the "authentic power" that the oppressed workers produced, like the lightning, reimagining what the liberatory and radical potential of revolutionary grassroots power freed and authentic might look like. The poet follows this with the radical image of abolitionist John Brown's body walking from the tunnel to exact vengance against ignorance and hate, breaking "the

armored and concluded," and closed, racist minds. By using this image of the dead John Brown as a specter of just radical action, she references the lyrics of that famous abolitionist counter-ballad "John Brown's Body," popular from the time of Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry: "Old John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,/ While weep the sons of bondage whom he ventured all to save;/ But though he lost his life in struggling for the slave,/ His truth is marching on./His soul is marching on!" Or, as the activist Medgar Evars once said, "You can kill a man, but you can't kill an idea."

Muriel Rukeyser herself came under surveillance by the State for some forms of "fighting back." As Catherine Venable Moore notes in her introduction to *The Book of the Dead*, describing the 118-page redacted record of Rukeyser's activities prepared by the FBI,

> In 1943, J. Edgar Hoover authorized his agency to spy on the poet as part of a probe to uncover Russian spies; her 'Communistic tendencies' placed her under suspicion of being a 'concealed Communist'...In 1933, the report reads, she and some friends drove from New York to Alabama to witness the Scottsboro trial. When local police found them talking to black reporters and holding flyers for a 'negro student conference,' the police accused the group of 'inciting negros to insurrections.' [21]

Catherine Venable Moore's wonderful Introduction to *The Book of the Dead* also connects Rukeyser's counterepic to expressions and actions of social movements in our own time. Retracing Rukeyser's routes in the poem, driving U.S. Route 1 to the site of the Tunnel, she incisively notes the keen and continued relevance of the poem's critique:

> The document [of the names] *has* expanded, but into a longer list of undervalued, erased lives, as the rivers in West Virginia run their banks, as #WeAreOrlando and #BlackLivesMatter shout over and over to #SayTheirNames. Soon I will wake to #AltonSterling and #PhilandoCastile. Soon I will wake to Donald Trump's nomination for president. The same white supremacy that allowed, condoned, and covered up the mass killing at Hawk's Nest still asserts its dominance.[22]

The final poem of Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* imagines a figure of Dido of Carthage, a woman with "a pointed human crown," as a fertilizing image (some also connect this image to Isis, because of the association with the folded wings[23]):

> In the museum life, centuries of ambition
> yielded at last a fertilizing image:
> the Carthaginian stone meaning a tall woman
>
> carries in her two hands the book and cradled dove,
> on her two thighs, wings folded from the waist
> cross to her feet, a pointed human crown.
>
> This valley is given to us like a glory.[24]

This usage of the image of Dido of Carthage reimagines her as fertile and abundant, as triumphant rather than closed or demonized, a counter-monument; and holding the book which may represent the Book of the title, of remembrance and potential for rebirth and action. Similarly, the possible references to Isis, including the wings folded from her waist to her feet, who, like Dido, is associated with the power of magic and feminine-coded power, forms a new kind of vision, a vision which speaks in contrary praise of "all the belligerents who know the world," and radically proclaims "These are our strength, who strike against history."[25]

There is a final, revolutionary, counterepic Helen, whom I'd like to discuss, but first I'd like to make preliminary note of two counterepics which adopt created characters or heroines. These two books are Lisa Robertson's *Debbie, An Epic* (New Star Books, 2008) and Gwendolyn Brooks's *Anniad*, part of her book *Annie Allen* (Harper & Bros., 1949). The latter work, by Brooks, I read closely and at length in Chapter 5: "Gwendolyn Brooks's Counterepics as Radical Countermemory of Place." Christine Stewart's *Chicago Review* article "We Lunch Nevertheless among Reinvention" considers Lisa Robertson's *Debbie: An*

Epic, asking the question, "If we are subjects branded illegitimate by Rome's fathers, if we are 'Virgil's bastard daughters,' how might we become legitimate?" Noting that Robertson's epic begins with "Insect murmur clots the peartree: emblem/ so castigates rome's green ruin./We lunch nevertheless among reinvention," she sees the Debbie of the poem as "the spectacle [of Rome] dismembered, the buried female subject, unburied."[26]

Lisa Robertson's counterepic *Debbie: An Epic* takes place after the fall of Rome, in the afterlives of epic, beginning in a pastoral landscape closer to Vergil's Georgics, and imagines a spring (pear trees bloom in early spring) of reinvention after the fall of empire, lunching in the ruins. Says Stewart memorably of this image, "The image bores holes in the libraries of Virgil and in the spectacle of Rome."[27] If this epic of Debbie begins in a time well after the abrupt, savage ending of *The Aeneid*, in which Aeneas drives his sword through the pleading Turnus, with Vergil using the same verb for founding the walls of Rome in the first lines of the poem[28] thereby founding Rome in blood, nothing could be a more contrary image than Debbie in the green castigation of Rome's ruins, lunching in the spring casually "amongst reinvention." It should be noted that the visual form of the book itself is a kind of journey, or a puzzlebox. The page that describes "reinvention" includes a series of arrows between its lines which combine to form a larger arrow, as if spurring the reader to forward motion. On the title page, the reader is confronted by a riddle of sorts, a clue, written in small script across the verso and recto pages— "imagine that an explorer arrives is aroused by an unreadable question acts in undreamed-of bilingual events, clear away the rubbish. the visible remains. Good Luck!" Debbie dreams of Vergil: "I dreamt that Virgil mapped my lavish sleep/ I read the curbs of epic lust's *dérive* / And there, saw myself." She also sees the scene of empire and its falsity, "observing this scene from outside," a fêted man "who may speak with moot

authority" under a "fretted roof of gold, torches, jewels, fifty serving maids, a hundred young pages." Though she has recognized herself in Vergil's effort to curb and map the dreams of her own epic *dérive*, and is compelled to witness this opulent scene, Debbie feels "out of [her] neighborhood" of this implicating "fresh redundancy."

Like the journey of Helen in H.D.'s *Helen In Egypt* down the spiral staircase, Debbie's journey in *Debbie: An Epic* is a voyage of involution, of "peroration," of *dérive*, of curling inwards in order to bring forth and share greater truths, and the rediscovery of a power once seemingly withheld from her, power that lives within the missing stories of women and the "parti-gendered." Elsewhere in the book, Debbie proclaims herself a man. At the end of her journey, she has learned that "a hero's real value lies precisely within the failure of his eschatological ambitions." This sentiment is counterepic to the core: instead of the patriarchal ideology of founding gesture of Empire embedded in epic, this adage turns on its head the form of epic, which is really, we are told, about the failure of the hero to meet his teleology, his eschatological ambitions. This then is the "real value." The counterepic's narrator here enters, asking us with sly yet frank stridency, "imagine yourself as Debbie. Then collate these riffs" as "Debbie...feeds the future to our capsized mouths." This is a space of critical rewriting, of the shipwrecks of ambitions, of reinvention of the epic, and against telos—a future left open within human failures of speech, of language, as vessels. The final page of the book proclaims, in all capital letters, a turn towards this reinvention and a new common language: "THIS SPRING/ NEW/ VERNACULAR/ HEARTS."[29]

The visual and material textual forms of *Debbie: An Epic* further this reinvention of the Classical epic and its conventions. Sometimes, the visual form of the poem is closest to a serial prose poem or flash fiction (Figure 3.2), packed into a tight rhythmic paragraph; at other

times, the poem's form on the page is closer to a Situationist dérive or a Dadaistic leaflet, arrows delineating a garden of branching paths of many possible meanings and "emblems." Our eyes or our attention may be drawn to different layers of text struck with different weights, sizes, shades and levels of emphasis, so that we may read non-linearly, first seeing the word "lunch" emerge, or the bolded "insect murmur....tree," almost as if we were walking into a soundscape or another kind of sensory landscape (Figure 3.1). At other times in the poem, such as when proclaiming adages, the text takes on a all-caps character, giving the effect of an ancient stonecarving or proclamation (as in Figure 3.3, "BY REPRESENTING A TRAIT/AS MUTUAL"). This visual form of large text which appears engraved also suits the aphoristic quality of the poem's critical declarations on value and Empire (the three figures follow).

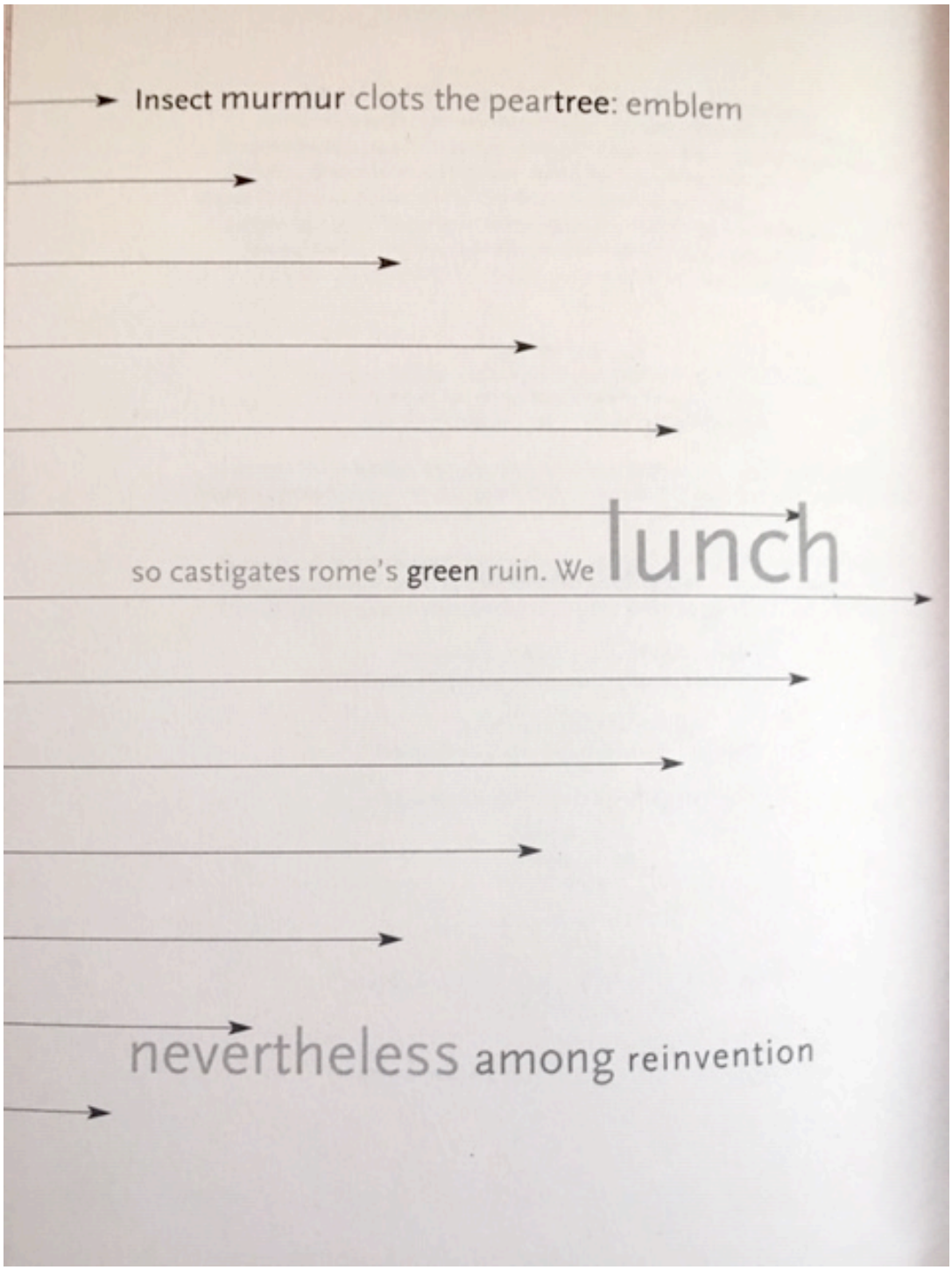
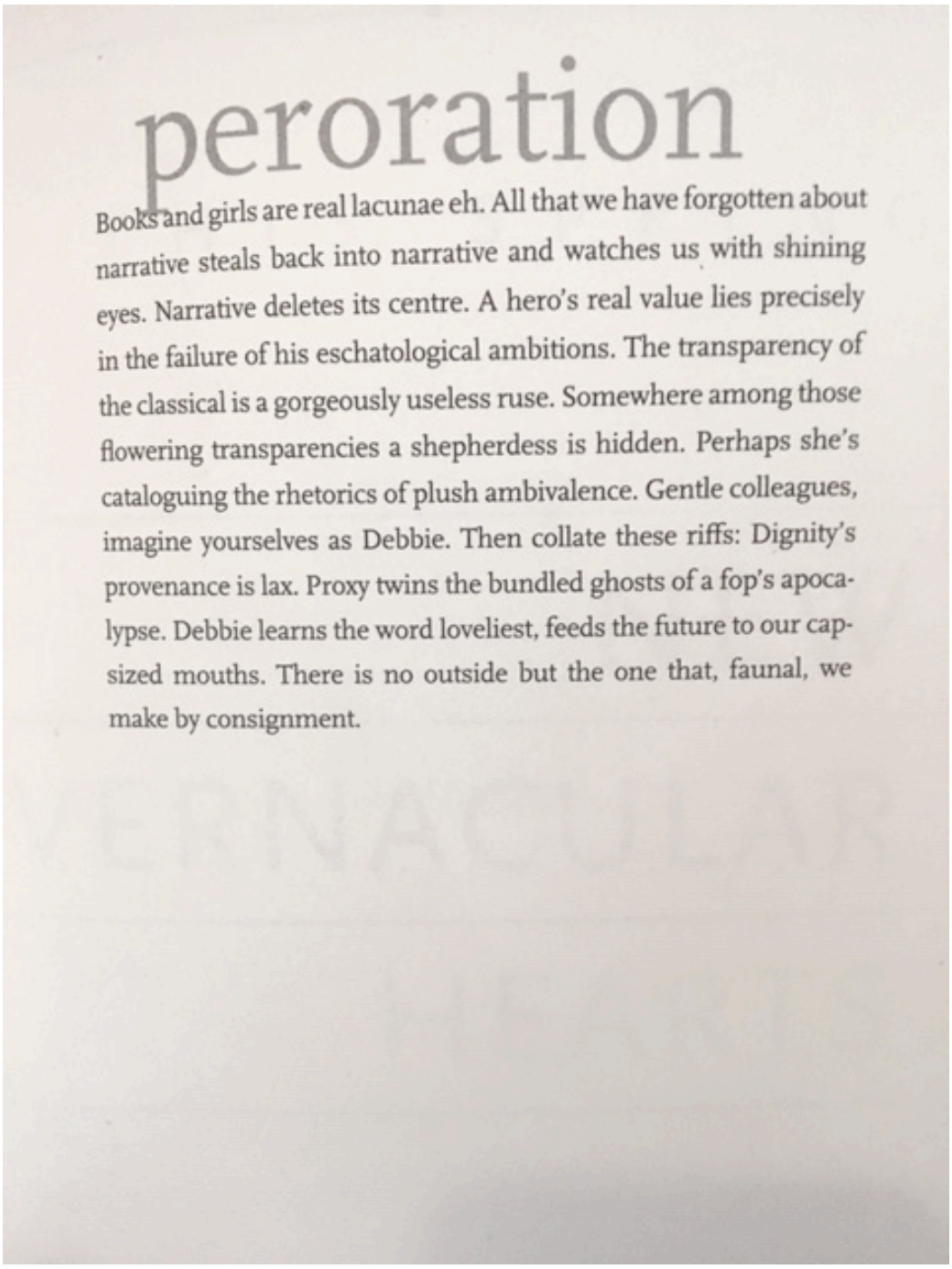


Figure 3.1: Image of *Debbie: An Epic*'s visual form



peroration

Books and girls are real lacunae eh. All that we have forgotten about narrative steals back into narrative and watches us with shining eyes. Narrative deletes its centre. A hero's real value lies precisely in the failure of his eschatological ambitions. The transparency of the classical is a gorgeously useless ruse. Somewhere among those flowering transparencies a shepherdess is hidden. Perhaps she's cataloguing the rhetorics of plush ambivalence. Gentle colleagues, imagine yourselves as Debbie. Then collate these riffs: Dignity's provenance is lax. Proxy twins the bundled ghosts of a fop's apocalypse. Debbie learns the word loveliest, feeds the future to our capsized mouths. There is no outside but the one that, faunal, we make by consignment.

Figure 3.2: Image of *Debbie: An Epic*'s visual form

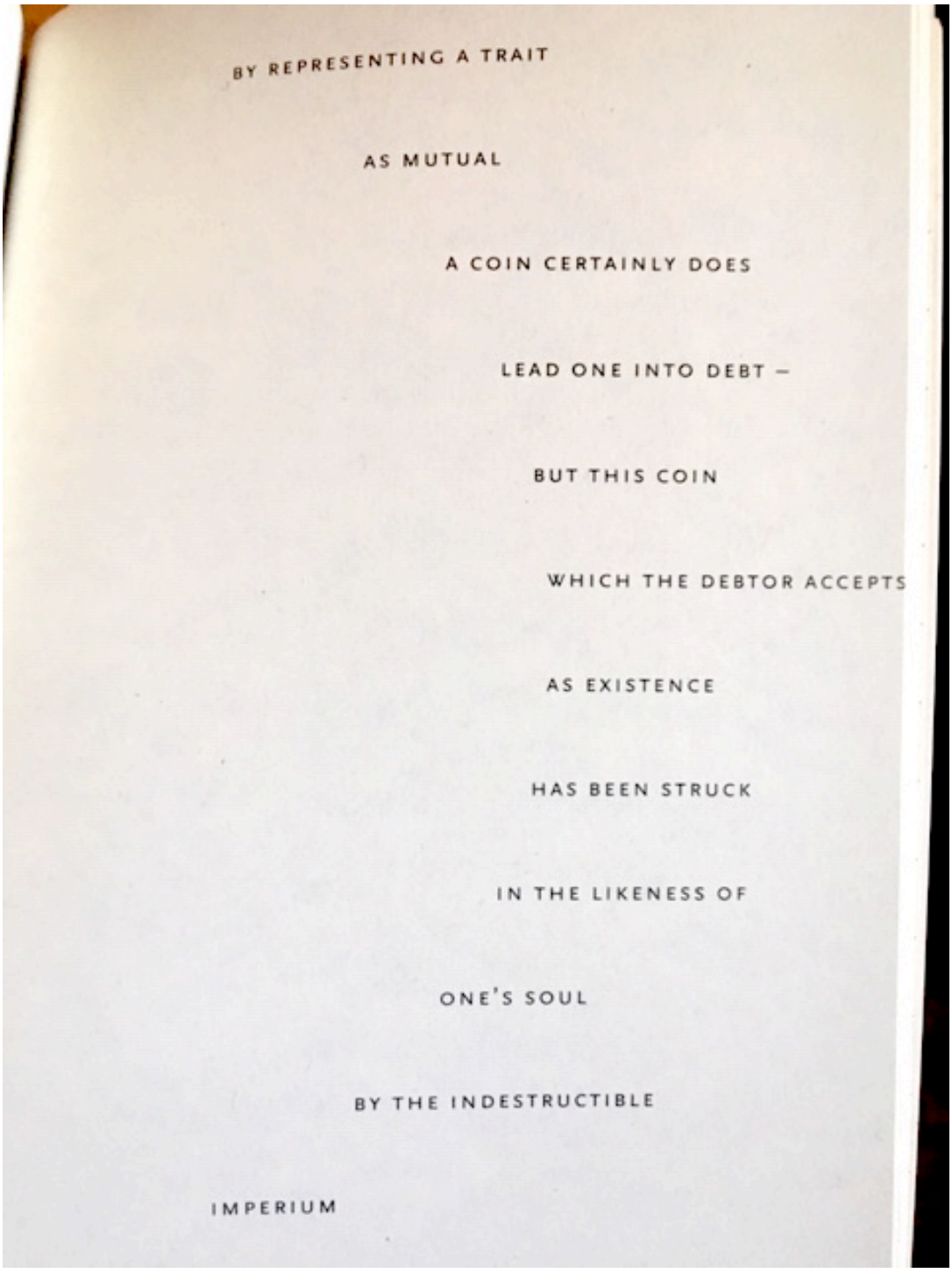


Figure 3.3: Image of *Debbie: An Epic*'s visual form and themes of political economy

Finally, Robertson's poem critiques not only ideologies of the State and empire, but also the material relations underlying the process of the development of capitalism, and the way that the money-form of value becomes imbued with an illusory value, and immaterial ideas such as debt start to be "acccept[ed] as existence." In the Appendix to the first German Edition of *Capital* Volume 1, Marx, discussing various absurdities of the Value-Form under capitalism, and in particular, the money-form, quotes Aristotle, noting the ancient Greek:

> Aristotle clearly formulates first of all the fact that the money-form of the commodity is only the further developed shape (Gestalt) of the simple value-form, i.e. of the expression of value of a commodity in any other commodity, for he says:
>
> '5 beds = 1 house' (clinai pente anti oiciaς) [five beds for a house]
> 'does not differ' from
> '5 beds = such and such an amount of money' (clinai pente anti ... oson ai pente clinai) [for five beds I get the equivalent of five beds]
>
> He sees further that the value-relation, in which this expression of value hides, determines, for its part, the fact that the house is qualitatively equated with the bed and that these sensibly different things would not be able to be related to one another as commensurable magnitudes without such essential equality 'Exchange', he says, 'cannot take place without equality, and equality cannot occur without commensurability.' [30]

Marx, joking here about the absurdity inherent in the money-form of value that the "modern" writer (he again jokes) Aristotle has also noticed ('five beds for one house' does not differ from 'for five beds I get the equivalent of five beds') goes on to imply that Aristotle really had something good going here but "shipwreck[ed]" just short of seeing the hidden part of the value-form that creates the real equivalency—inherent in both the bed and the house, which we under capitalism are led to take for granted— "That is—*human labor*." The "coin" itself, to which Robertson's poem refers, comes to symbolize "only the further developed shape (Gestalt) of the simple value form," fooling us into debt by "representing a trait as mutual."

Under capitalism, we are fooled or forced into believing that these immaterial values (debt, credit, coins and paper, exchange of mass-produced commodities) are attached to our souls, our "likeness." In addition, the congealed human labor involved in the mass-produced object of exchange (a bed, or the labor necessary to pay off a debt) becomes more and more invisible. Furthermore, as Robertson's poem cannily and ironically implies, this form of money and the value of debt which depends upon it will collapse, along with the end of the what once was believed to be "indestructible / imperium." Ruins of this imperium and the "spring" of "new/ vernacular hearts" carry with them a potential for imagining a reinvented story in the vernacular, even as the poem is deeply skeptical of the limits of narrative and of language.

And now a final, and revolutionary Helen: Sara Larsen's book *Merry Hell* (Atelos, 2016) is an incendiary counterepic tale told from the perspective of Helen, full of feminist revolutionary fervor, lament, reclaiming, and daring. It begins with Helen's reply to her detractors, who blamed her from having brought ruin to Troy and to Greece in war, and to the structural patriarchal violence that underlies her stories of birth and abduction:

> you don't like my femme my bones my milieu of
>
> manifesto you load yr aged stories with rape
>
> but you lik e my rent , especially my back-rent
>
> there are so many ways to BE GOOD
> to not go to Hell.
> to accept Paris. to marry it. to do duty.
>
> to adhere patriarchs . to accept story ,
> despite indiginity.

there are so many ways to

static space

to go to Hell.

this is not those ways & this is

NOT that story.

Hell, I'm Helen. [31]

Like Alice Notley's *Descent of Alette*, which Larsen references, or Dante's *Inferno* in which he traverses Hell with Vergil, this poem is an underworld journey. It is explicitly anti-patriarchal, and counterepic, with its heroine refusing to "adhere patriarchs" or to "accept story." Larsen's Helen is a revolutionary, a pétroleuse, who burns barricades, defies cops, and goes on the run in exile. *Merry Hell* is a counterepic that also provides internal critique from within of a social movement and exposes internal misogynistic problems within that movement, while telling Helen's side of the story. The counterepic poem blends vignettes from the ancient world, with the history of the Paris Commune of 1871, of Louise Michel, of the seamstresses of Paris, and scenes from the 2011-12 years of the global occupation movement, and the radical Oakland Commune, or Occupy Oakland. Occupy Oakland/the Oakland Commune was one of many important Occupies from across the country, following the global financial crisis of the early 2000s.

The radical Oakland Commune renamed Frank H. Ogawa Plaza in Central Oakland Oscar Grant Plaza, after the black man murdered by police in 2009, and held the space as a communal/collective encampment, resisting police raids, with tens of thousands of supporters marching to the Port of Oakland, shutting down operations, and voting for a General Strike in

November of 2011. Larsen's poem references moments and memories of that time, noting triumphs and betrayals of allies, rituals of protection, occult mystery traditions of ancient Greece, the aftermath of riots, and she references tactics of street-fighting against the brutal police, who lobbed flashbang grenades at protestors, beat them with truncheons, shot them with rubber bullets and tear gas, and threw some into unidentified "snatch vans,"[32] ("it is the month of lilys and boarded up windows" "it is the month of trash-fire barricades near MacArthur Station"). This Helen, as in H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, must seek the mystery tradition and wander in exile, and like Alice Notley's Alette, she must descend to the underworld in order to tell a story of Hell and of heroines:

classic cunt
I too partook in the Eleusinian Mysteries ahead of uproot from this land
what makes exile and what makes ex patri esp when this whole rich soil earth i s my
land .... she-me experienced Death an d saw hers elf Living..

salt

NOW I AM GOING TO TELL YOU THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD [33]

Sara Larsen's Helen is also explicitly anti-capitalist: "categories of capitalismo/crash/on that ash/i stand/on banks/where earth is broken/no state can bail out this fissure" she proclaims. Helen's counterepic side of the story becomes larger as the poem goes on, and Helen is given a catalogue of epithets, names, echoing the convention of epics like *The Odyssey* in which gods and goddesses and heroes are given multiple names of praise.

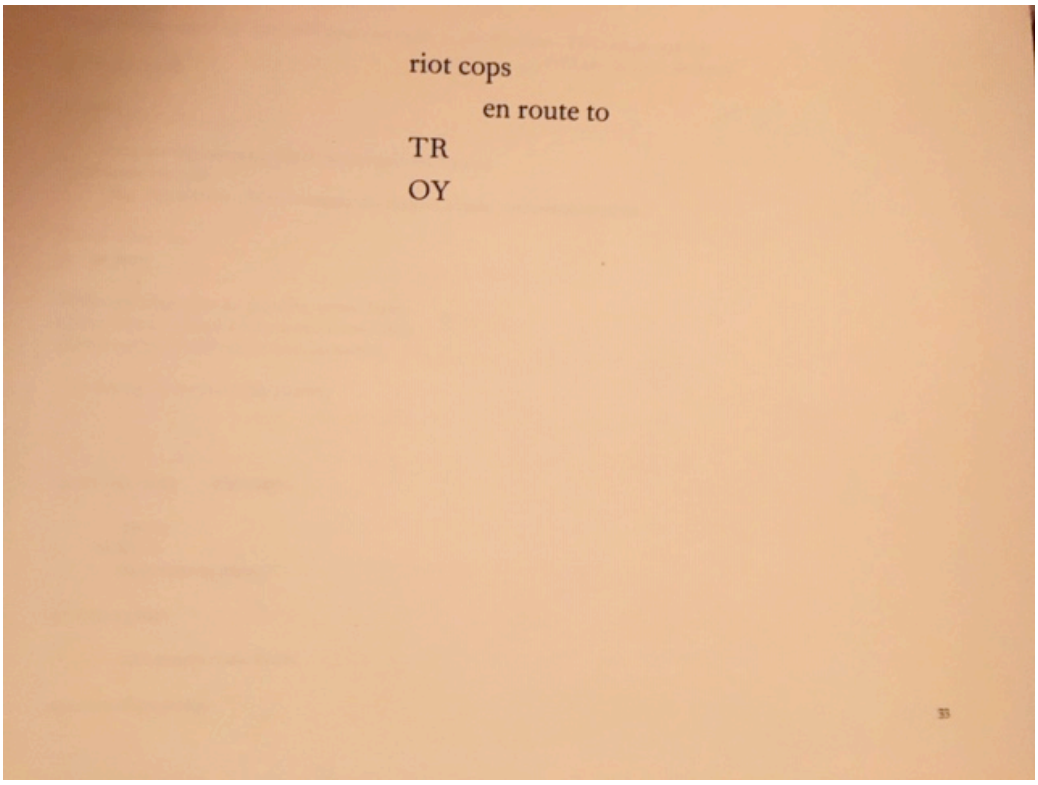


Figure 3.4: Image from *Merry Hell*: Riot cops en route to TROY

the names of Helen
my names

[...]

many-gendered Lady of the Trees
gore maiden
corpse woman
Helen the dirty fucked slut
Helen Briseis traded for timé
Helen siren

Helen Sarai
Helen Inanna
shoot
the sprig who breaks dirt
Helen Ariadne
spider weaver [34]

By applying this trope of the epic, of the listing of many epithets for a powerful or great figure such as a god, goddess, or hero, such as is found in the Odyssey when Athena is referred to as "sparkling-eyed Athena," "Pallas Athena," "the clear-eyed goddess," "flashing-eyed Athena,"[35] Larsen transforms this epic trope into a counterepic trope, allowing for a claiming of "negative"-valence epithets ("Helen the dirty fucked slut"; "Helen Briseis traded for timé") as names of feminist power and names that critique gendered exchange and exploitation. Brisei, the concubine of Achilles in the *Illiad*, also known as Hippodámeia, whom he obtained as a spoil of war after slaughtering her parents and brothers, is here given alliance to Helen, as both women function on some level as contested spoils of war, "traded for timé," goods of "value" or "price," as tokens of battle, chattel. This ties the women, with their different sides and stations, together. Larsen's use of the ancient Greek term "timé," so important to Homer, also appears in her book as a pun on "time." And another epithet refers to "Helen who holds all memory, Helen who holds all future, all time, Helen who is outside of time," drawing our attention to the ways that time can be reimagined and abolished in counterepic. Finally, the Helen of Larsen's poem, while she is outside of time, also experiences the life of a prole, a revolutionary, oppressed by material relations and working to overthrow these relations: "Helen woman of the cannons, woman of revolutionary streets, Helen who has no money, who is broke."[36] In addition, in a reference to both Alice Notley's *Descent of Alette* and to the 4,000 year old *Hymns to Inanna*, Larsen applies the Mesopotamian epithet of the Goddess Inanna to Helen.

Eastern and Indigenous Peroration

The stories of Helen's Eastern peroration or wandering also challenge Western patriarchal conceptions and structures of the Western epic. The turn to Eastern and Indigenous mythopoetics by writers of counterepic acts as a counter to the Western epic tradition and Western patriarchal ideas about gender. The first epics we have by a named author in any language, more than 4,000 years ago, are the *Hymns to Inanna* by Enheduanna, a Priestess of Inanna. *The Descent of Inanna* was written around the same time and region by an unknown author. *The Descent of Innana* includes both ambiguous gendered/non-binary/genderfluid and transgender beings, and a story of the descent into the underworld by its heroine, a goddess, who must free her sister.

Both were written in ancient Sumer, Mesopotamia, now modern-day Iraq and Iran. The turn by H.D. and Rukeyser to Egyptian epic (*The Book of the Dead*) and to the wanderings of Helen across the Mediterranean, to Egypt and beyond (*Helen In Egypt*) is not accidental. Carthage, once part of North Africa, is also referenced by several counterepic writers, as we have discussed. Gwendolyn Brooks, whose life and work are discussed in depth in Chapter 5, complexly references the legacies of the stories of black people both ancient and modern, and her expansive, incisive understanding of what it means to be "Afrikan" amidst the flowering of the Chicago Black Renaissance.[37]

Diane DiPrima's *Loba* and Notley's *Alma, or the Dead Women*, written in the late 60s and the 80s, respectively, include references to Native American forms and myths. Although these writers are appropriating these traditions to a large degree, they are also frequently trying to honor and appreciate these stories and cultures and counteract the legacy of colonialism in some sense which ancient epic stories represent, and enact a liberation of

gender, of ecologies, and a transformation of the very ideas of patriarchal ownership and valuation of women and queer people.

By turning away from the constant references to Greece and Rome in the ideologies and criticism of cismale writers from the 19th century to the modernist era, and imagining these Eastern and indigenous perorations, writers of counterepics look to non-Western roots and civilizations for alternate ways of seeing epic, and also counter Western colonial myths. In addition, by embracing these sources and by highlighting the transnational nature of epics, they challenge the ideologies of ancient epic as the foundation of Western tradition, showing us that in fact non-Western traditions have always been a vital part of epic literature, and that what historically was considered the Classical age of literature, with its historically Eurocentric and white-centered ideologies, has always been diverse and transnational, as were the societies of Classical Greece and Rome.

From Muses to Witches

The women characters in epic have their beauty blamed for wars, like Helen; are made archetypes of fidelity, like Penelope; they are the self-made queen and witch driven mad by love by the curse of the gods, like Dido; or Beatrice the chaste and virtuous ideal who expands Dante's faculties of sight through pain; they are seductresses, like Circe, Calypso and the Sirens; they are Muses, made to bolster and inspire the hero's quest, and when they appear as warriors, such as Camilla, the only woman warrior in the *Aeneid*, they register as a mere blip in the story.

In this chapter, we have seen the many ways that writers of counterepic remake the famous and infamous women of epic, the Helens of Troy, New York and the Didos of

Carthage, Texas, giving them expression and unearthing visions of previously silenced or absent stories. We have also seen some of the ways in which writers of counterepic create feminist interventions into the discourse of radical social movements and have striven to embrace a "people's history," and the ways in which counterepic can also intervene as criticism of the misogyny of literary communities, allowing writers to imagine roles for themselves far beyond the limited and often passive roles of Muses in literary communities, to active participants and creators themselves.

The final counterepic trope that I'd like to name is hence that of the journey of the writer or their heroine(s) from Muse to Witch. Each of the writers named in this chapter integrates the mythopoetics of the Witch figure as master of their own destiny, bodily autonomy, power, and will. Both Helens in Sara Larsen's *Merry Hell* and in H.D.'s *Helen In Egypt* reference being called "witch" by their detractors, a title which they then thoroughly come to embrace and reclaim, wielding this power, which they use to fight back and also to heal. In Larsen's *Merry Hell* Helen is called/calls herself "spell-caster, Helen the witch, Helen the sorceress, / Helen Lilith"[38] Rukeyser's depiction of Dido and H.D.'s depictions of Isis myths reference two ancient figures associated with magic and spells. When the characters of counterepic expressed contrary opinions, demanded equal representation, or refused to be only idealized sex objects, they were called witches, leading them to embrace this moniker. As John Franklin notes in "Lady Come Down: The Eastern Wandering of Helen, Paris, and Menelaus," these magical depictions have some basis in some versions of ancient stories: "The semi-magical quality of Egypt is seen in Homer's description of the phármakon that Helen mixes with wine for her guests; the Nile nourishes the world's strongest herbs, both good and evil, and every Egyptian is a healer."[39]

For a theory of the Witch, a Witch Theory, one has only to turn to the many powerful texts written on the subject in the last 20 years. One important text for my analysis is Silvia Federici's materialist feminist *Caliban and the Witch*, which traces the history of figures of the witch, persecutions of women, and the "history of the body in the transition to capitalism" in the late Middle Ages. Another is Mona Chollet's *Sorcieres,* which builds on the arguments of Federici and others to describe the contemporary importance and relevance of pop cultural and mass cultural figures of the witch to current feminism, from anti-Trump rallies to reproductive justice.

The Witch (as opposed to the Muse) is a contrary figure, and also a queer and liminal one, and a figure that challenges ableist discourses of normality, as New York University folklorist Kay Turner notes in her keynote speech "The Witch in Flight," 2017 at the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting:

> Witches revel in their contrary aspirations. They live apart; they eat children; they help young girls achieve a sense of their own agency. They are lesbian in their refusal to accept Oedipus as the father of all desires. I could go on. Unnatural and abnormal, she dwells on the other side of the binary slash; also anomalous, ambivalent, liminal, magical, and shapeshifting.[40]

No wonder that all of these writers of counterepic embrace and reclaim the figure of the Witch, as an emblem or sigil of agency, and counter-narratives, a figure beyond the binary, of liminality, a figure who already lurks in the background of the ancient epic. As Mona Chollet notes, in *Sorcières: La puissance invaincue des femmes,* this countering and détourneing is not simply contrary, but often revolutionary, defying authority:

> Si on voulait déterminer aujourd'hui ce qui pourrait justifier une telle conclusion, on n'aurait pas que l'embarras du choix. Remettre le monde sens dessus dessous: pas une mince affaire. Mais il peut y avoir use immense volupté—la volupté de l'audace, de l'insolence, de l'affiirmation vitale, du défi

> à l'authorité—à laisser notre pensée et notre imagination suivre les chemins sur lesquels nous entraînent les chuchotements de sorcières. À tenter de préciser l'image d'un monde qui assurerait le bien-être de l'humanité par un accord avec la nature, et non en remportant sur elle une victoire à la Pyrrhus; d'un monde où la libre exultation de nos corps et de nos esprits ne serait plus assimilée à un sabbat infernal.
>
> [To turn the world once again upside down: not a trivial affair.
> But there may be an immense pleasure—the immense pleasure of audacity, of insolence, of vital affirmation, of defiance of authority—to let our thoughts and our imagination follow the paths that the whispers of witches lead us down. To try to define an image of a world which would assure the wellbeing of humanity through an accord with nature, and not by winning for her a Pyrrhic victory; of a world in which the free exultation of our bodies and our spirits would not be likened to an infernal sabbath.] [my translation][41]

The Witch's action is hence one of turning the world once again upside down in order to put it right; literally the origin of the world revolutionary—the revolution of the planet. The witch's power is one of defiance, disobedience, détournement, and "free exultation" and bodily autonomy. For the Helens of Troy, New York and the Didos of Carthage, Texas, and for the writers of counterepics, the Witch figure is an audacity embraced.

Each of these poets —H.D. in *Helen in Egypt*, Rukyeser in *The Book of the Dead*, Mayer in *The Helens of Troy, New York,* Robertson in *Debbie:An Epic*, and Larsen in *Merry Hell*, invent counterepic tropes that transform Classical ancient epics. Not only do many of these writers reference and transform the tropes of ancient epics—including epithets of praise, heroic or epic simile, ekphrasis, and catalogs of ships or other objects, counterepic writers also have invented and referenced their own countertradition of tropes. Several of these tropes are also shared, constituting a modern and contemporary counterepic tradition that is a feminist intervention. Often, these interventions also examine political economy from an anti-state and/or anti-capitalist perspective, foregrounding material feminist questions of labor, debt, and public and private space. As we have seen, these shared counterepic motifs include

the transformation of Classical epic female figures like Helen and Dido, an emphasis on Eastern, Indigenous and transnational perorations of the heroines, and the narrative recentering of epic figures from Muses to Witches.

Chapter 4. **Feminist Post-Conceptualist Counterepic and Mock Epic**

As we've discussed in Chapters one through three, contemporary and modern counterepics transform ancient and Classical epics such as the *Aeneid*, the *Illiad*, the *Odyssey*, and *The Book of the Dead, Paradise Lost,* Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, performing feminist, anti-state and anti-capitalist interventions into the genre of epic and into the historically male-dominated worlds of literary communities. We've also enumerated other common "uses" or critical functions of counterepic literature, and have noted the specific ways in which authors invent shared counterepic tropes or motifs, such as, for example, the turn to Eastern sources by women writing counterepics (i.e. *The Descent of Inanna* and Notley's *Descent of Alette* and H.D. in *Helen In Egypt*) and counterepic poets' radical juxtapositions of time, scope and scale in relation to feminist materialist thought (as in Dickinson's manuscript books and fragments and the Robertson's examination of Lucretius and Marx).

Yet not all counterepics *détourne* ancient and Classical epic sources. In this chapter I want to look at several conceptualist and post-conceptualist feminist counterepic interventions which I argue position gender, language and affect in relation to other historical epic traditions. These three works contemporary works—Trisha Low's *The Compleat Purge* (Kenning Editions, 2013), Kate Durbin's *E! Entertainment* (Insert Blanc Press, 2011), and Jos Charles's *feeld* (Milkweed Editions, 2017) —examine gender and affect in the contemporary world and perform feminist interventions into several other epic traditions: 18th and 19th century epic novels and mock epic tradition, Hollywood epic screenplays and reality TV, and the medieval epic and the lyric serial poem tradition, respectively. Each of these works

perform feminist interventions into these epic genres, radically critiquing structures of gender, work, representation and economics and enmeshing themselves in complex questions of affect.

Calvin Bedient's 2013 essay "Against Conceptualism: Defending the Poetry of Affect," published in the *Boston Review*, makes an important critique of conceptual poetry for a tendency in its politics and aesthetics, throwing down a gauntlet and creating a useful antagonism about the stakes of conceptual and "affective" poetry and the lyric in terms of both aesthetics and real politics. Responding to a major dominant tendency of conceptual poetry which he associates with Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, Robert Fitterman, Oulipo, and to some works anthologized in *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*, including those by M. NourbeSe Philip, Rachel Zolf and others, he seeks to defend the experimental lyric poetry of "affect" from what he views as conceptualism's "swampland of derivative texts, dishonored texts adopted for the sake of recycling, not as a nutrient to memory."[1] In this daring essay, Bedient argues that conceptualism "aims to eliminate affect altogether from poetry." For Bedient, the key dialectics are not just that of the lyric "affective" poetry and conceptual poetry, but of vital expressions of melancholy and embodied militancy on the one hand, and on the other, a lack of affect in which procedure, "cerebral" "play" and disembodied concepts get prioritized over intensity of feeling and militancy. "Melancholy and militancy," he says,

> those contrary but subtly related elements of the poetry of affect, cannot be excised from literature, in favor of methodology, without both emotional and political consequences: misery in the first instance, cultural conformity in the second.
>
> How did we get to this place, where concept has trumped feeling?

> Poetry is accustomed to being berated for having too much of this or too little of that, come back when you are classical, baroque, romantic, avant-garde, or postmodern, you just aren't there yet, you fairly engaging thing. But who could have foreseen that poetry would finally be attacked for being poetry? That the Imaginary, in Jacques Lacan's sense, would be shut down so that writing could operate solely within the Symbolic order, free of affect? Conceptual poetry has rammed against poetry, saying, I'm the honest stuff, the real poetry, in not being poetry at all. [2]

Underlying this bold and incisive critique of conceptual writing's politics (he is absolutely right to point out real stakes here in terms of institutions, conformity, capital, militancy, subsumption to the Symbolic order and politics, and he is, I think, more keenly attentive to the history and nuances of conceptual writing in his essay than he is sometimes given credit) are several assumptions which are nonetheless problematic: 1. that of the idea that conceptual writing always makes a claim of greater authenticity through its self-negation, and the claim that 2. conceptual writing lacks affect or nearly always positions itself against expression of intensity of feeling, a stance that leads to apoliticism. As I will show, none of these assertions hold true when we examine many of the best feminist conceptual and post-conceptual works.

Finally, the poet Bhanu Kapil's response to Bedient's essay, posted on the *Boston Review*'s comment stream, illumines a third problematic, 3. that of the gendered body and racialized body in conceptual writing, of bodily and discursive erasure and the militant potential of "withholding" affect and lyric position:

> ...And having just encountered the "space" of Zong! and the writer of Zong!, I felt that Bedient had got it quite wrong. About the feeling state evoked by that particular text; I am thinking also of Yedda Morrison's Darkness (a text in I'll Drown This Book), and the recent write-up at X Poetics.
>
> There is more to say about why withholding a lyric position might resemble -- might be the very thing — that stands in: for the kind of organ speech: Bedient is writing about here. How the heart, in a T-shirt, is throbbing next to the body in the snow. How do you write into the history of bodies that don't remain intact? That don't get to: express? Perhaps the lack of affect is, in fact, an

> involuntary reversal of an ululation: the call from the body that is not: cried? A cry, that is, that is cut off before it exceeds the bodily position—to be received by others? [3]

Bhanu Kapil refers to *Zong!*, a deeply moving conceptual text by NourbeSe Phlip which is also a kind of counterepic. *Zong!* references and documents a massacre of African slaves aboard a slave ship in the 18th Century, and combining chants, ululations, songs, and quotations from historical court documents. Kapil is right here to consider the other forms that affect can take, which can be: bodies which have differences in their means of expression, or bodies that don't get to feel, wounded or unexculpable bodies within misogynous (and raced, and classed) economies. Clearly there is a disability context also referenced by Kapil when she says "organ speech" as one thing that lyric has traditionally stood in for (as opposed to other forms of speech, which are implied here), and there is also an underlying disability context in the implications of the "history of bodies that don't remain intact," or rather, sustain a transformation due to injury, violence, illness; or, we might add, bodies and people who aren't considered "intact" by the dominant, ableist culture since birth. We might further ask, is the "dishonored" text always against the "nutrient of memory," and is "recycling" always without affect? Another useful text which responds to this debate is Sina Queras's "Lyric Conceptualism, A Manifesto in Progress," begun in 2012, which lists a series of theses which complicate and challenge the distinction between "lyric" and "conceptual." Says Quera's Manifesto, describing this complication, "Lyric Conceptualism accepts the tension between the self and the poetic subject, wrestling always with the desire to give over to the poem and to be the poet in the poem." The Manifesto also proclaims Lyric Conceptualism's openness to the newest forms of art and literature and also notes its groundedness: "The Lyric Conceptualist likely has one foot in the gallery and one foot on the earth. She can make the

distinction between floor and ground. She knows a book and how to read one in myriad forms."[4]

With a hope to keep all of this critical history of this debate about conceptualism in mind and to expand and delineate this debate further, I'd like to consider the questions of affect, capital and the gendered body in the recent work of three U.S. feminist poets, Trisha Low, Kate Durbin, and Jos Charles, all of whose work one might characterize variously as conceptual or post-conceptual, as well as part of a confessional, performative tradition. The three texts I'd like to consider by these authors are Trisha Low's *Compleat Purge* (Kenning Editions, 2013), Kate Durbin's *E! Entertainment* (Wonder, 2014), and Jos Charles's *feeld* (Milkweed Editions, 2018).

'Abject Bravery,' Mock Epic and Conduct Books in Trisha Low's *Compleat Purge*

Raymond Williams's phrase "structures of feeling," is defined in his 1977 book *Marxism and Literature* as "social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available."[5] These are feelings in lived reality, which Williams characterizes as a social and historical relation, a structure in flux, a structure which contains "elements of impulse, restraint and tone"[6] in tension to each other. But what if we were to ask the question, if it wouldn't be too sing-song or doggerel (catamount to?) to do so, What about structures of healing? Are these common to historical periods? Can healing, the experience of whether or not one moves on from trauma, be described as a structure in flux as well? Isn't healing also a "social experience in solution"?[6]

I'd like to first consider the young contemporary (post)conceptual poet Trisha Low's narrative epistolary epic poem *The Compleat Purge* through the lens of the 18th-century genre of conduct books and this genre's traditions, conventions and emergent possibilities. I will argue that Low's book, which plays with the contemporary excess of the Gurlesque, and which is part memoir, part bildungsroman, part juvenalia, part chat log, part mimetic ritual of purgation, part record of assault and abuse, part falsification, part romance and part disavowal, is a contemporary mock epic and a feminist intervention which addresses these structures of healing and challenges gendered ideologies and systems of value.

Mock epics were a popular historical form of counterepic of the 18th and 19th century: the 18th Century novel *Shamela* (or *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andews* by Henry Fielding) skewered the then-popular epistolary epic novel *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson and burlesqued its treatment of the value of women as marriagable commodities with values dependent upon chastity. Similarly, the 19th Century poetic mock epic *Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (which, incidentally, was one of Emily Dickinson's favorites!) was an early counterepic. In this mock epic work, Barrett Browning conceived of herself as writing a "f'emale epic,' 'the feminine of Homer.' As Isobel Hurst notes, "In *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning draws on classical epic, the mock-heroic poetry of Pope and Byron, and Victorian women's novels to create a new kind of epic." Trisha Low's book revives this mock epic tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries, bringing the biting satire and social critique of this genre into the 21st century.

As other writers have noted, *The Compleat Purge* also represents a contemporary take on the conduct book, directly referencing Eliza Haywood's 18th Century conduct book "Fantomina, or, Love in A Maze," and calling to mind elements of the 18th Century epic

novels *Pamela*, *Shamela* and *Belinda*. I'd like to further argue against an analysis of Low's conceptual epic which would simply dismiss it as only a frivolous, childish contrarianism with no politics but neutrality, as Calvin Bedient, the fine and eminent editor and the author of "Against Conceptualism," might have done due to the book's roots in conceptualism. When I say "fine and eminent" I am not being facetious, but sincere. Calvin Bedient is a great editor and this is a fine essay. The dichotomy laid out in this essay is, I think, not quite right. Furthermore, I'd agree with Karissa LaRoque in her *GUTS Magazine* review of *The Compleat Purge* when she says that to dismiss the book simply as a purely confessional memoir is also wrong: "the work, as [as Low] says, is 'easily dismissed as a mirror image,' but to do so trivialises, stereotypes, and even pathologizes writing by young women."[7] With a self-aware punk performative edge, reminiscent of other feminist conceptualist works such as Kate Durbin's *The Ravenous Audience* or Anna Joy Springer's (also counterepic) *That Vicious Red Relic, Love*, *The Compleat Purge* takes up the question of what it means to heal or to refuse healing in a late-capitalist world in which victimhood, market 'value,' and the feminine performance of abjection and growth remain inextricably intertwined in social structures of healing.

But let's return to form and genre, to the structures of the text itself. Low's book is structured in three main parts—the first is arranged into a series of Last Wills and Testaments of Trisha Low, faux legal documents in which Low disburses her possessions, from her "Iggy Pop Raw Power album" to "the Illustrated Greek Myths" to "All the false lashes from Cyberdog," at different ages in her adolescence to young womanhood. The form of this preliminary section is also epistolary, with each purported legal document containing a different set of suicide notes addressed to Low's family members, friends, and significant

others, as well as Guardianship Provisions and Preliminary Declarations. The tone of Vol. 1 is an odd sort of earnestness with dashes of irony, self-aware of its own histrionic melodrama and excess, and also its own juvenile innocence. Vol. 2 of *The Compleat Purge* is written in a parodic form of an 18th Century conduct book, which was a sort of didactic book written to advise ladies on the virtues of moral and sexual "virtue" and the social conventions of manners, courtship and domestic life. This is blended with short epistolary sections, and smatterings of mashed-up chat logs, in which two young women roleplay the two characters who are frontmen from their favorite bands, Fabrizio Moretti of the Strokes and Anthony Rossomando of The Dirty Pretty Things, engaging in internet sex in these guises and talking about their lives' travails (I have inserted screenshots from the ebook text when appropriate in order to retain the visual form of the epic poem/prose epic).

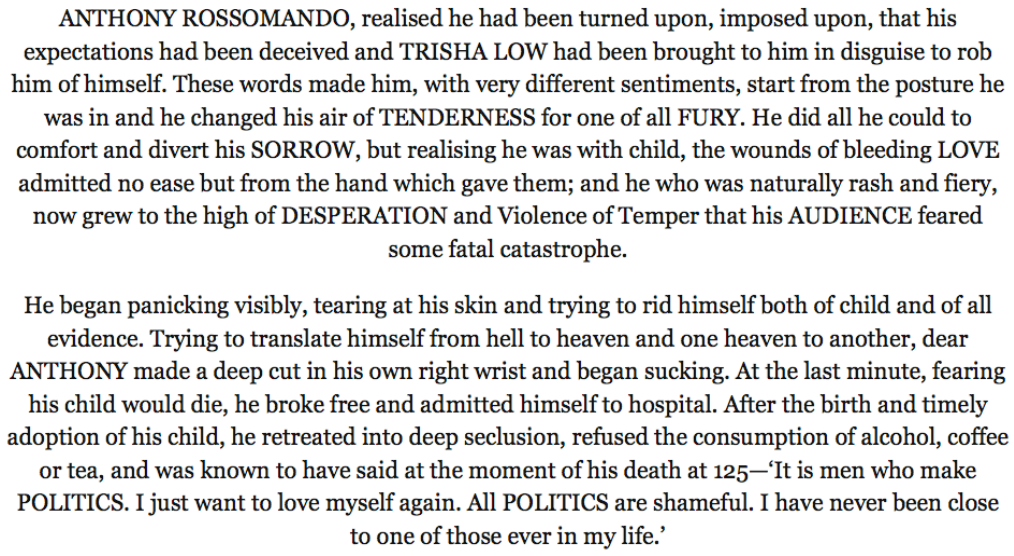
36 Fillette

what does she want? isn't she too young for a disco? a car is like a chick
you soon get tired of it you discover the flaws too late what's the problem?
I didn't look at you enough? how old are you? a typical chick stunt
dip your wick three times in the same chick and forget it it's better to screw a goat
are you the queen of England, dog face? she's outta her skull how old are you?
beat it, little bitch! say you're sixteen how old are you? I wonder
what you want? are you bored? I bet you're difficult is anyone pleased
with you? is your mom appalled at you? are you mad at the whole world?

Figure 4.1: "36 Fillette" from Trisha Low's *The Compleat Purge*, showing rhetoric around girlhood and femininities

The effect of this role-playing blended with the conduct book passages which instruct on sextual virtue and ideals of love for young ladies is a tension between confessional mortification and mastery. Gradually these mashed-up sexts, which appear at first somewhat

frivolous or purely parodic, or the spaces between them, the interstices, reveal Low's character's account of her rape by a man who had roofied, or drugged, her. The final section, Vol. 3, continues the interspersement of conduct book passages:



ANTHONY ROSSOMANDO, realised he had been turned upon, imposed upon, that his expectations had been deceived and TRISHA LOW had been brought to him in disguise to rob him of himself. These words made him, with very different sentiments, start from the posture he was in and he changed his air of TENDERNESS for one of all FURY. He did all he could to comfort and divert his SORROW, but realising he was with child, the wounds of bleeding LOVE admitted no ease but from the hand which gave them; and he who was naturally rash and fiery, now grew to the high of DESPERATION and Violence of Temper that his AUDIENCE feared some fatal catastrophe.

He began panicking visibly, tearing at his skin and trying to rid himself both of child and of all evidence. Trying to translate himself from hell to heaven and one heaven to another, dear ANTHONY made a deep cut in his own right wrist and began sucking. At the last minute, fearing his child would die, he broke free and admitted himself to hospital. After the birth and timely adoption of his child, he retreated into deep seclusion, refused the consumption of alcohol, coffee or tea, and was known to have said at the moment of his death at 125—'It is men who make POLITICS. I just want to love myself again. All POLITICS are shameful. I have never been close to one of those ever in my life.'

Figure 4.2: Screenshot from *The Compleat Purge* showing formal references to conduct books for ladies and mock epics

This figure of the author giving birth to her own politics references a confessional, performative tradition of feminist art. The shifts in gendered identity of the father-transfusion/vampire and the child-self further queer the imagery of healing and birth here. If a characteristic of the Gurlesque is the appearance of cannily performed feminine "excess" or "decadence" then this book is Gurlesque. Throughout the narrative the author or rather, the author as character courts this kind of abject exposure, in a way reminiscent of what Carolee Schneenan and Ana Mendieta performed through their art. The effect of the text overall is of a casual-operatic female subjectivity epic that disavows itself, but also gives you everything and satirizes itself, the gestures of which can be a lot like the painful experience of being female in this world. There's a bravery in this, this giving of everything and still telling in some sense

'nothing', and whether it's "true" or not is part of the tension of the work. Edgeworth's *Belinda* is an 18th Century novel, the narrative of which turns on a similar performative contradiction: at what point does the rake reveal his armature, threadbare and razed, or the coquette her machinations? In a world where lies are a given, when does the true start to appear only as "a moment of the false," as Debord said, writing about spectacle? Does *Pamela's* exasperation of earnestness and innocence beg for its terribly mean-girl and wryly biting mock epic sequel, *Shamela*? Is an abject "Apology for the Life Of" the supposedly 'natural' response when the violence of gender allows only a binary public image, and beauty and innocence induces rage as much as perceived sluttishness and moral turpitude? Such is the terrible stuff of "she was asking for it," cultural residue of the regressive rape culture which very much haunts feminine identity and life today. These questions of violence and value seem to me both very 18th-Century questions and still very current ones, and *The Compleat Purge's* form reflects the mashup of the two eras' responses. Embedded in the maze of these questions is the further questions of the trap of the "virtuous" feminine which on the conduct book as a genre meant to instruct, and which the satirical epic, a genre with a long history from the 18th Century to the 19th Century and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, meant to lampoon or deflate.

A particularly good illustration of the violence of this feminine double-standard (domestic and public identity, virgin/whore dichotomy, the problems of identifying both or either as 'victim' and 'survivor') can be found in the later section of Low's book, when the narrative poem inventively begins to take the form of a knitting pattern:

to place marker how I just wanna look rapeable.

3rd row down side: 12 treble crochets to 4 spaces displaying all of my hospital bracelets to deposit 6 chain stitches of getting ravaged by wolves which is just fucking slutty right? Turn 5 chain stitches to front loop round it's okay, everything will be okay to 4 lacelets that remind you ideal weight 0 pounds before you finish with 1 space of I'm little Miss Mary fucking Sunshine.

4th row down side: taking 7 lacelets turn 4 chain stitches into kissing 4 people and punching about 400, yarning over 5 treble stitches to 2 spaces of turning boy-crazy, girl-panic and 3 bars of writing it all over your arms. Run 6 chain stitches to 3 treble crochets ending the row by place marking being just a supernatural girl lookin' for something creepy in average America.

5th row down side: Bind 3 lacelets of telling your family this place is a prison

Figure 4.3: Knitting pattern formal qualities in *The Compleat Purge* and traumatic memory

The ritual of self-soothing, of healing, is repeatedly traumatized here by the invasion of traumatic memories, advertising and abuse "it's ok, everything will be okay to 4 lacelets that remind you ideal weight"; "how I just wanna look rapeable." This dark play with form shows a tension between irresolvable gender structures, the public and private and gendered violence. It's a work that depicts the violence and contradictions of gender while also stretching or queering it. And this is a thematic and formal project that has a very eighteenth-century connection or predecessor. As Greta LeFleur says in her "Sex and 'Unsex': Histories of Gender Trouble in Eighteenth-Century North America":

> ...the popular narrative, balladry, sermons, medical literature, conduct and hygiene manuals, and fiction that is *also* replete with both recurring and unique images of gender nonconformity paints a picture of eighteenth- century, and particularly late eighteenth-century, reading and nonreading cultures that would have frequently considered gender in dynamic terms. This collection of representations and discussions of masculine women, effeminate men, and

> individuals who did not easily or clearly fit into either category suggests a certain level of widespread cultural familiarity with the possibilities for gendered behavior that existed outside a singular, consolidated, and requisite manhood or womanhood.[8]

Trisha Low does not only engage with the 18th century conduct-book as form but also with the marriage-plot of 18th and 19th century novels:

> TRISHA LOW lay in her white bed and rested her pretty pale cheek on her left hand, because there was a diamond ring shining on its third finger and she was so very very very happy in her new love dream. She had become a soul searcher in her own body and in her head. It was not easy, but Reader, we must believe her.
>
> 'Of course, the fallacy of any inhibiting form can be easily discovered by any female who is willing to objectively experiment with conduct,' she smiled serenely at herself. 'In the promised view of my emotional autopilot's reality, it is the man who carefully plans his campaign to snare the woman of his choice and when that woman finally responds to his maneuvers, his ego will not let him readily discard that for which he has so strenuously laboured.' But after all, she thought, 'A woman who thinks she will easily lose a man whom she has inspired to pursue her will actually know that she has to work at rejecting him, more often than not. As the prized object, it is better to treat him and his formal maneuvers as though one would a worm, although of course this method of flirtation, like fighting capitalism, is flexible in its every application.'
>
> 'But does he love me? Do I ask? It's lovely to know these things, or maybe lovelier not knowing. Oh, I must love not knowing, mysteries, dark corners, hidden in back alleys! It will be okay in the end. He loves me.' Her innocent heart thrilled once more with thankfulness for that the crowning

Figure 4.4: Mock epic and the "marriage-plot" in Low

The author's depiction both mocks and implicates herself as a character, or more accurately, the ideology she recognizes as underscoring heterosexual heteronormative love and value as constructed under capitalism.

In her article "The Girl: Mergers of Feminism and Finance in Neoliberal Times"on S&F Online, Michelle Murphy analyzes the current construction of the image of the Girl in neoliberal contemporary media representation under capitalism. She refers to a market binary of representation and of real investment used by advertisers and producers which she calls the

Girl Effect: "The Girl Effect posits two outcome for girls: the cascade of prosperity and assets triggered by investment in early education, and the declension of suffering for the non-invested girl." In this article she thinks about what the contemporary neoliberal saleable and marketable image of the girl and its gendered expectations serves to obscure or deny:

> In the prominent "Because I am a Girl" campaign, The Girl is animated as a colorful circle, a pulsing pie chart, a blooming flower, or a stop-motion, living marionette—all constituted in an overdetermined vortex of statistical studies that correlate girlness with *either* extremes of poverty and abjection *or* compliant and community beneficial forms of waged and unwaged labor... The Girl functions as an alibi for a host of devaluations produced in capitalist and violent terrains that render life disposable. The militarized implications of designations of devalued life that haunt The Girl are not coincidental.[9]

Low's book engages with this question of value construction and investment which is at the heart of 18th and 19th century popular mock epics: affective, ideological and material, that underlies the structures of feeling in our present era, and how gendered representation and our ideas about how healing of trauma should occur are constructed as politics. *The Compleat Purge* pushes back against the idea that healing is ever complete, or that it should be a tidily-completed didactic narrative or likewise can be resolved by a purely somatic or ideological ritual. This tendency to build up and break down these structures of feeling demonstrates the knowledge that one's belief structures and structures of healing will disintegrate is a kind of abject mastery over them, the knowing or inviting of disintegration of "investment" itself. So the bravery is in the purposeful negation of this investment, its slow but frantic spectacular high-pitched metal surrender ruin. *Like, but seriously*. There's a beauty in the spirit of this subsumption under "imaginary logic" and there's a beauty in simultaneously knowing better, the increasing flimsiness of the belief. It's not the same as just irony, though satire does play a role. The text reflects the ways in which women's affective labor and the performance of

gender is intertwined with capitalist misogyny and its contradictions, and functions as an acknowledgement of these real contradictions that exist. And one well might therefore ask: but does this simply reinscribe and reaffirm the capitalist market commodity cycles of appropriation of images, subcultures and belief as erotic? Well, yes and no. I think mostly no, and that instead Low's conceptual epic sets up a dialectic between wound and mastery, between the breakdown of belief, and structures of feeling, which represents and critiques the dialectic of suffering and investment in which many young women, non-binary people, and femmes find themselves caught.

Reality TV, Conceptual Affect and Kate Durbin's *E! Entertainment*

Contrary to Bedient's essay's claim about conceptual poetry, and with another nod to Bhanu Khapil and Sina Queras, we must note that conceptual poetry can be capable of rich affect, and lyricism, and that this may include melancholy and militancy. Taking this further, we can assert that even apparent lack of affect in conceptual and post-conceptual poetry is in itself a very telling affect. What, then, is conceptual affect and post-conceptual affect? One work that I'd like to consider in this light is Kate Durbin's book *E! Entertainment*, which draws together documentary-style descriptions of scenes from various episodes of reality TV shows, including "The Hills," "Dynasty," and several of the flavors of the "Real Housewives" franchise, to name a few. Kate Durbin's conceptual poem series or epic serial poem is not a counterepic in the sense of directly referencing the Classical epic tradition. Instead, Durbin's *E! Entertainment* counters a different modern epic context: that of Hollywood epic, the epic screenplay and the long-running reality show. For each part of this serial poem, Durbin notes

the channel on which the show appeared, the name of the program, and describes in detail the progression of the action, with documentary attention to the soundtrack, colors, camera angle, product placement and fashion as emblem, blending the language and conventions of screenplay with that of fine art catalogues:

> Channel 7 - Dynasty
>
> Alexis and Krystle are lying on the wood floor, locked in an embrace. Alexis's elbow juts out. Krystle's right leg is blurry and slung over Alexis. Krystle's ankles are bent and she is wearing tan pantyhose. She has on black kitten heels. Their hair is spread all over each other. Krystle's hair is curled like a little girl's and Alexis's is a black hole. There is a brass bed behind them with no bedspread. It has a pink dust ruffle. On the floor around them everywhere are feathers. In the foreground is a small round dark wood table with a crystal vase on it filled with yellow daisies and green filler.[10]

Documentary style is a kind of affective framing, as is the language employed by screenplay. In addition, by affording so-called "trash TV" or TV not considered high art the attention and poetic status of a photographic fine art catalogue, meticulously describing the swirl of colors within the tableau of the Dynasty scene, Durbin creates a balance between absurdist humor and camp (the depiction of the catfight on Dynasty as a frozen high art tableau) and melancholy of the loss and unknowability of girls and women in so many contexts ("Krystle's/hair is curled like a little girl's and Alexis's is a black hole"). Who are these two women in the public consciousness, and what patriarchal relations compel us to watch their competition, with glee and camp, with erotic pleasure, with estrangement? By creating distance between the reader and the content by the use of the third person omniscent narrator and the passive voice, and by refraining from the use of the lyric "I," we also become

even more aware of the staging of "reality" TV for our "Entertainment," as the title of Durbin's book serves to underline. We become aware of what Susan Sontag called "The very insatiability of the camera's eye"[11] and the way in which seeing and looking at the images recorded and presented implicate and involve us as viewers. Though the documentary-screenplay format of the text gives the impression of a disinterested and neutral observer, or of the camera itself, this effect actually makes moments of lyricism and implied affect actually are brought to the foreground ("hair curled like a little girl's"; "Alexis's is a black hole"; the ambiguous double meaning of the two women's bodies "locked in an embrace"). Small moments of editorializing stand out even more, ideologies of privilege are exposed more keenly, and our attention is drawn back to awareness of the camera's framing and the scene's staging ("green filler" added to the vase for the purposes of appearance). There are layers to affect and meaning here—the scene from Dynasty described represents an iconic pop cultural scene of performing feminine competition—yet we are also aware of all the queer camp afterlives of this image. There is humor and there is a kind of melancholic despair in Alexis's hair like a black hole, Krystle's hair like a little girl, the pink dust ruffle, even the black kitten heels.

Another of the sections of the long-form serial poem records the scenes of a different reality show, "The Hills."

> Channel 8 - The Hills
>
> 11.
> "Left this city for a day," sings The Feeling. Shot of two men from the waist down on a sunny sidewalk. One in surf shorts holds a blue Powerade; one in white dress pants walks a Llasa Apso. Shot of a crowd of people on the sidewalk from the waist up. Shot of two blonde girls in pink tank tops and short white shorts, walking toward

> the camera. They are slightly out of focus. Their bodies are fit and tan and they are wearing clogs. Close-up of a black stretch limo with a white Playboy Bunny emblem on the side. The limo passes the camera. A tan BMW passes the camera. "You took me southwards on a plane and showed me Spain," continues the song. A drilling sound joins the song. Shot of the outside of a tan apartment complex. The sign says: "Heidi and Spencer's Apartment, Hollywood, CA." Shot of a blender whirring with purple liquid inside. A man's tan hand presses the top of the blender down. The machine is industrial.[12]

Again the documentary poetics' "affectless" affect lets the moments of humor and moments of melancholy stand out more (from the absurdity of noting that the dog is a Llasa Apso to the ambiguous and mysterious "purple liquid" to the odd and alien Vulcan-like contrast of "they are fit and tan and they are wearing clogs"). In addition, Durbin's book's TV records bear resemblances to studies such as visual artists create, providing a telling and innovative contrast between what is commonly accepted as "high" and "low" art, and our ideas of how meaning is produced in each form are called into question. Both vignettes, from "Dynasty" and "The Hills," with their frozen quality and intense focus, call to mind a Dutch still life with ants marching frozen in time toward a piece of fruit, or Holbein's painting "The Ambassadors," with its distorted skull smeared across the bottom of the canvas below the Ambassadors' opulence. Yet what Durbin's *E! Entertainment* documents is the work of the camera: of the photographer, not the painter; of the viewer sitting on their couch rather than gazing upward at an art museum object. In "On Photography," Susan Sontag argues that there was a historical shift in the aims of representation after the invention of photography: "the point of taking photographs was a vast departure from the aims of painters. From its start, photography implied the capture of the largest possible number of subjects. Painting never

had so imperial a scope."[13] What Durbin's counterepic serial poem ends up critiquing implicitly is this ideology of Empire and of commodities embedded in the spectacle of our modern epic, our everyday entertainment.

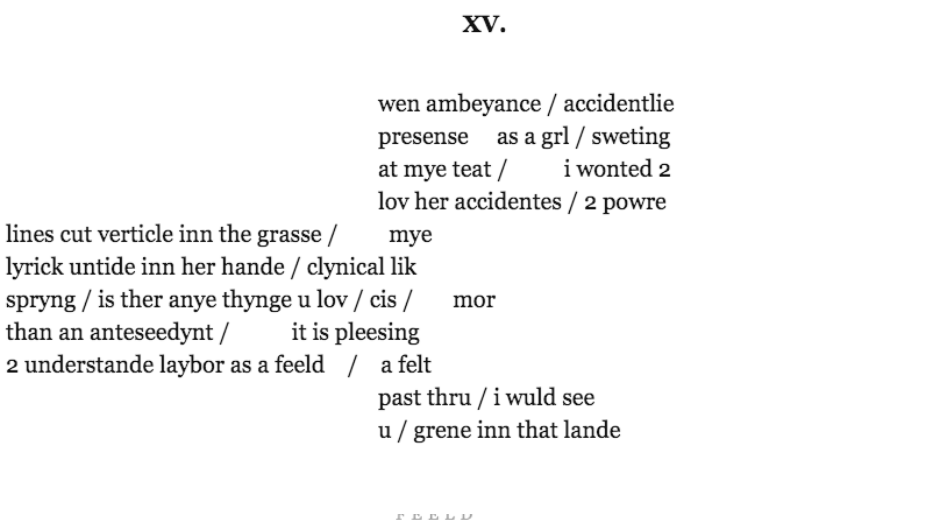
Kate Durbin's book understands this imperialism of the camera limned by Sontag and the aims of product placement underlying the often-scripted narrative of reality TV shows like "The Hills." Every commodity shown is also painstakingly noted in these scenes. Even this, the mention of the "Playboy Bunny" emblem or the "BMW" betray a kind of affect, in that these are not usually things most of us mention when telling stories, and this draws attention to the commodities related to constructions and performances of gender and affluence that underlie the material relations of television production: adspace, product placement in popular shows, the aspirational qualities that manufacturers of spectacle want us to pursue in the form of brands and commodities. Also, on another note, one thinks about how few contemporary novels record a Powerade or even note the pop songs playing, and yet these things are integral parts of our reality, forming our affectual relations to the world around us. Even more perfectly expressing the implicit criticism, our attention is drawn to a singer actually called The Feeling who speaks of a melancholic and short-lived journey: "Left this city for a day." The tone is almost earnest, and almost lyrically, the drilling sound "joins the song" like the sound of industrial capitalism underlying the cultural production of the TV show, and yet, the longing represented by the feelings underlying the scene comes through as real (after all, pop songs do serve to construct our reality and our feelings, whether to tell us how we "should" feel or represent and recall authentic emotional experiences for us--The Feeling). Slyly the poem hints at the patriarchal relations of control underneath all this affluence, fitness, and machinery: "A man's tan hand presses the top of/ the blender down. The machine is

industrial."

"bieng tran is a unique kind of organe": Jos Charles's Serial Poem *feeld* & Gender

Finally, like Kate Durbin's *E! Entertainment*, Jos Charles's *feeld* (Milkweed Editions, 2018) is a booklength serial poem, which performs feminist interventions on gender, representation, and affect. Jos Charles's poem is a kind of serial poem epic, which in describing her own experience also works to describe and allow for the wider experiences of trans* people, by no small feat: the necessity of having to create a new language to describe trans experience. By turns reminiscent of Chaucerian Middle English (Chaucer's medieval epic *The Canterbury Tales*) and contemporary slang, Charles's serial poem, which draws from both conceptual and lyric traditions, transforms language forms of the past and present to create this new language. She uses contemporary words like "cis" (short for cisgender) and "presents as" (which she spells "presense as," describing gender presentation) and combines these with Middle English such as "thynge" and "grene." Like Chaucer's 14th Century epic "The Canterbury Tales," which famously begins, "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote/ The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,/ And bathed every veyne in swich licour,/ Of which vertu engendred is the flour," Charles's *feeld* also describes themes of en-gendering of spring, and represents a kind of reverdi, as Chaucer's epic lyric poem does, imagining Spring's return. "bieng tran is a unique kind of organe" she writes. The lovely lyric unfolding of this new-old language is a kind of metamorphosis, a liminal metamorphosis that underlies many aspects of trans* and non-binary experience, working to invent a "felt / past" and a green

vision implying future. "It is pleesing," her poem's speaker says, "2 understande laybor as a feeld / a felt / past thru / i wuld see / u / grene in that lande."[14]



XV.

wen ambeyance / accidentlie
presense as a grl / sweting
at mye teat / i wonted 2
lov her accidentes / 2 powre
lines cut verticle inn the grasse / mye
lyrick untide inn her hande / clynical lik
spryng / is ther anye thynge u lov / cis / mor
than an anteseedynt / it is pleesing
2 understande laybor as a feeld / a felt
past thru / i wuld see
u / grene inn that lande

FEELD

XXIV.

bieng tran is a unique kinde off organe / i am speeching materialie / i am speeching abot hereditie / a tran entres thru the hole / the hole glomes inn the linden / a tran entres eather lik a mothe / wile tran preseeds / esense / her forme is contingent on the feeld / the maner sits cis with inn a feeld / wee speeche inn 2 the eather / wile the mothe bloomes / the mothe bloomes inn the yuca

Figures 4.5 and 4.6: Two serial poem sections from Jos Charles's *feeld,* showing their forms on the page

In part XXIV, the lyric and material metamorphosis depicted in this serial epic is a metamorphosis of "hereditie" and generation—envisioning the creation or recreation of a trans person as "unique" and as an "kinde off organe," and the poem's speaker as "speeching materialie," speaking materially. The trans person can enter like a moth, as "the hole glomes inn the linden" but a trans person "preseeds / esense / her forme is contingent on the feeld." In

the space of two transformed words, "preseeds / esense," Charles embeds and counters essentialist understandings of gender yet reaches back to the earliest "seeds" of essence of form. Using the variable spellings also hearkens back to the time of Chaucer, when variable spellings in the vernacular were common. In this sense the language is liberatory and counters as well, as spelling "precedes" as "preseeds" changes the meaning of the word, creating a new and alternate or counter- understanding of generation and the origin of heredity and life underlying trans creation and gender transformations, like the lovely lyric delicacy of the moth flying out from its cocoon, blooming in the flowers of the yucca, which it pollinates, "wile the mothe bloomes / the mothe bloomes inn the yuca" which the poem is always working to imagine.

As Kate Durbin's serial poem's conceptual affect works to avoid the lyric "I" in order to foreground the structures of capitalist spectacle and of our own genuine feelings around popular media, both "high" and "low" art, Jos Charles's serial poem, with its elements of post-conceptual affect, embraces the lyric "i" wholeheartedly and earnestly, but still creates at times a critical distance in its contemplative earthiness when regarding subjects such as labor and materiality and language itself, language which the poet reinvents to describe her own gendered and creative, metamorphic experience.

In these three counterepic post-conceptualist and mock epic works (Low's, Durbin's and Charles's), either absence of, fragmenting of, or gratuitous performance of the lyric "I" characterizes the essential or most central "conceptual" and "post-conceptual" affective elements. Whether we choose to call this "lyric conceptualism" (as Sina Queryas) or "conceptual affect" (as Bhanu Kapil) or, in the case of Jos Charles, a reach toward a new "tran" language which yet still "preseeds" the past, these three works by Low, Durbin, and

Charles critique not only structures of gendered affect and value but push boundaries of poetic form.

Part II.

Counterepics and Social Movements

Chapter 5. **Gwendolyn Brooks' Counterepics as Radical Countermemory of Place**

In the archive of the Raymond Danowski Poetry Library in Emory's Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library in Atlanta, Georgia is a remarkable item. In an archival enclosure of acid-free mylar is an Amtrak train ticket, on the back of which is written, in blue pen, in confident, assured script, "My dreams My works"[1]—the last "s" of the word "dreams" written with a small flourish and the two lines followed by an underline for even more emphasis. As a singular item, this train ticket, written in Gwendolyn Brooks' handwriting, might speak to us of several aspects of Brooks' life, aspirations and works. For one, these lines, which would later become part of a 1963 poem to which we will return, were likely written in transit, in a state or process of migration. Gwendolyn Brooks' life began in the midst of a different migration, the Great Migration, the mass movement of over seven million African Americans who left homes in the South in the early 1900s to resettle in urban areas of the North. Secondly, we might ascertain from this train ticket, its lyric fragments with their emphatic emphasis, that Brooks' commitment to poetry, and more broadly, to her own works and her dreams, was determined. It undoubtably was so determined; sustained by a great force of will. Biographer Angela Jackson writes: "Born in Topeka, Kansas in 1917, her family moved to Chicago as part of the Great Migration when she was only six weeks old. Imaginative and curious, Brooks began penning scribes as an innocent seven-year-old. From that day forward, the late Brooks wrote a poem every day for the rest of her life."[2] To sustain such a poetic project, in dreams and works, over an entire lifetime, from seven years old in 1924 to her death from cancer in 2000, is in a very real sense its own epic endeavor.

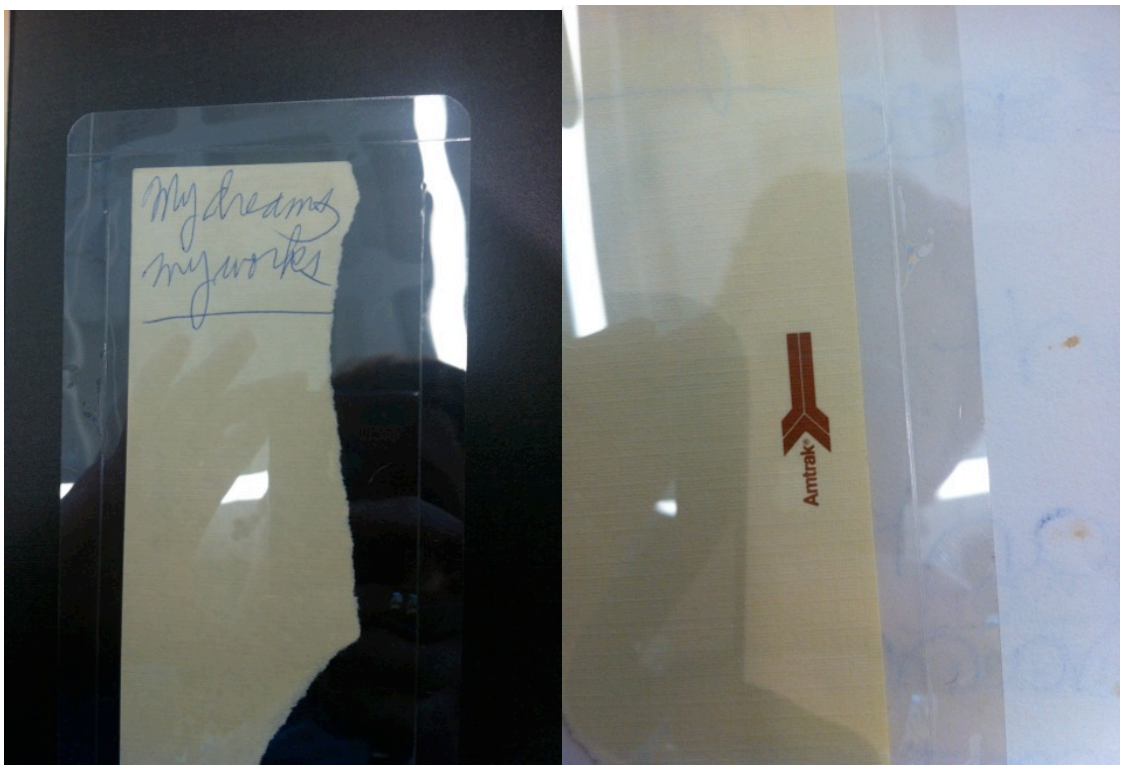


Figure 5.1: Gwendolyn Brooks, Amtrak train ticket, "my dreams my works"

In addition, Brooks wrote multiple acclaimed epic poems, which she simply called "long poems"[3]: a few of these are *In the Mecca, Riot,* "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters In Mississippi...", "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed," *The Anniad* and *In Montgomery*. This chapter will argue that Gwendolyn Brooks's counterepic works "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters In Mississippi...", "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed," *In the Mecca, RIOT, The Anniad,* and *In Montgomery* are counterepics which confront skillfully and variously the realities of being black in the U.S., depicting the minutiae of oppression that her friend and colleague Richard Wright called 'the pathos of petty destinies, the whimper of the wounded, the tiny incidents that plague the lives of the desperately poor, and the problems of common prejudice."[4] In addition, I argue that these epics, written by a poet-activist, represent a radical

countermemory of place which was intertwined with mass social movements (aka "freedom movements" including the Civil Rights, Desegregation and radical Black liberation movements), the Black Arts Movement, the Chicago Renaissance, and Brooks' own activism. Brooks' counterepic poems are informed by Black radical traditions and in many cases by Brooks' confrontation with—and transformation of —the Classical epic and U.S. ballad traditions, and are deeply socially-conscious works of literature which represent a radical countermemory of place.

Brooks' epic poems perform their interventions in many different ways. I have previously named and discussed the principal "uses" of counterepic. These are 1. internal critique within literary movements 2. critique of war, the State, and patriarchal structures, including making women's and non-binary peoples' stories "large" and epic as a riposte to the prevailing attempt to "shrink," obscure, or erase their stories 3. critique of capitalism, the temporality of capitalism and various capitalist forms of structural inequality 4. the depiction of other collective experiences in epic besides statecraft and war, including social movements, and imagining future worlds, and finally 5. internal feminist critique of social movements. Gwendolyn Brooks wrote many different counterepics, which fit nearly *all* of these criteria. Some of Brooks' counterepics span critiques of structural inequality and internal critiques of obscured or silenced community narratives (*In the Mecca*, *"The Ballad of Rudolph Reed"*); several critique the patriarchal aspects of war and are focused on womens' experiences and struggles in the domestic sphere as political (*The Anniad*, *"A Bronzeville Mother.."*); others form panoramas of social movements and uprisings, and are also accompanied by minutaie of social movements and uprisings (*In Montgomery*, *Riot, "A Bronzeville Mother..."*).

In *History, Memory and the Literary Left,* John Lowney argues that Gwendolyn Brooks' "work in the 1960s exemplified what Nancy Fraser has identified with subaltern counterpublics...According to Fraser, 'Subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides.'"[5]

In *Disidentifications,* Jose Estaban Muñoz, drawing from Nancy Fraser, invokes his own definition of counterpublics as "communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere." In addition, he notes that this invocation of counterpublics that he has in mind critiques universialities yet "insists on a Marxian materialist impulse that *regrids* transgressive subjects and their actions as identifiable social movements."[6] I also seek to invoke this definition of counterpublics in terms of collective social movements and transgressive actors. Therefore, on some level, such counterpublics are both inward-turned refuge, withdrawal, and community regroupment spaces and are also places of liberatory, emancipatory potential through their activities directed towards "wider publics." Gwendolyn Brooks' counterepics function within the dialectic of these counterpublics—ultimately forming spaces of countermemory which allow for nondominant narratives and narrative forms. In addition, these counterpublic spaces allowed for the emergence of formerly erased or obscured forms of life and ways of being, within the flowering of 20th Century U.S. American black literary movements that Brooks was a part of, such as the Black Arts Movement and the Chicago Renaissance.

Her works were also a part of larger social movements, engaging directly with wider public political and social liberatory activities and events, and marked by various forms of activism. Though some scholars have downplayed the politics of Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry, preferring to try to declaw her works in an attempt at apolitical appreciation, Brooks was an activist, who wrote about Malcolm X, about Emmett Till and his murderers' trial, about burning Chicago tenements, about the boy who died behind her building, about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Little Rock, about war and loss, about the violence of class structures and poverty, about riots and uprisings, about Jim Crow, and the struggles of women for liberation from oppressive patriarchal conditions.[7]

Brooks' Ballads

Gwendolyn Brooks' undoubtably best-known poem is surely the short, spare, musically poised gem "We Real Cool":

We Real Cool

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

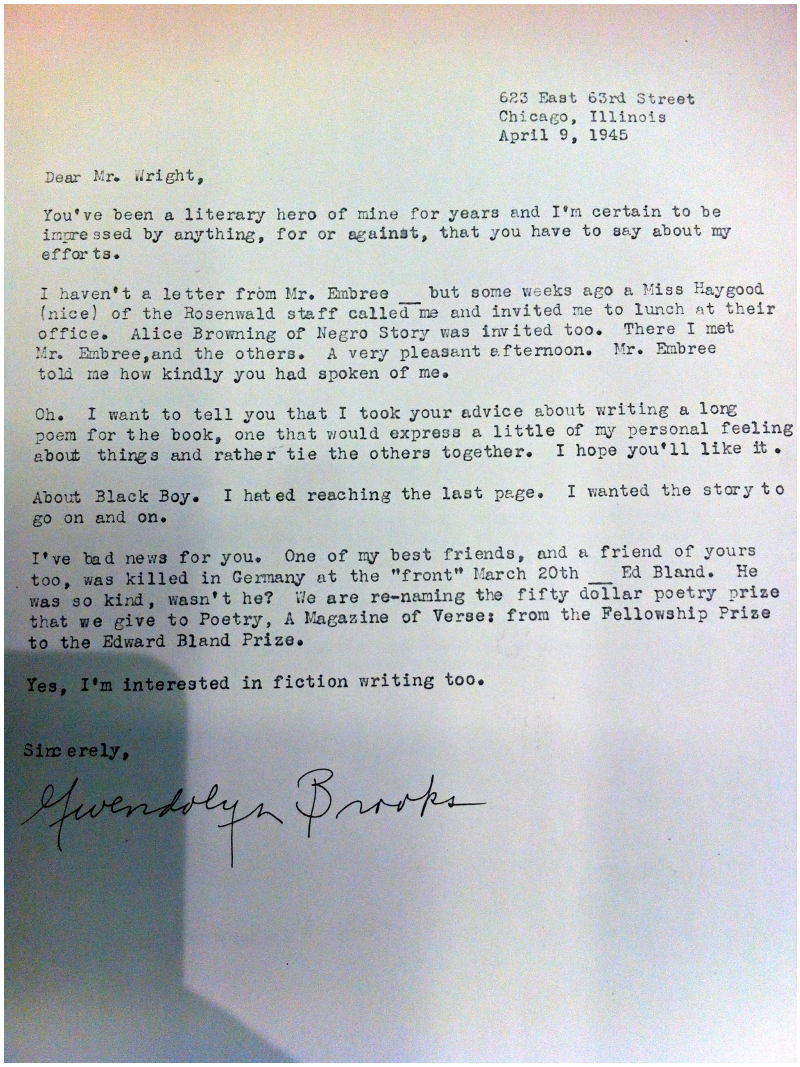
Jazz June. We
Die soon. [8]

In eight tightly constructed lines, each but the last ending in a hanging enjambed "We," which vanishes from the page at the end, Brooks deftly illustrates a scene from her own Bronzeville neighborhood in Chicago. She extrapolates from this scene of seven pool players at the Golden Shovel not only a mood but an entire history, reality, way of communal self-understanding, a delicate balance of a pool cue against the shoulder, and between the fingers, of nonchalance studied, ready for the rapt, sure strike of fear, of fearlessness, of loss. This poem is also remarkable in its virtuosic combination of simple, everyday, honed language with complex form, including internal rhyme, memorable assonance and consonance throughout ("Lurk late";"Strike straight" "Thin gin"; "Jazz June"), and an almost unheard-of rhythmic pattern in most poetry written in English: spondaic meter, in which every single syllable of the entire poem is stressed.

In contrast to the coiled, taciturn, smoky-neon poolhall coolness of her best-known poem "We Real Cool" stand Brooks's many, also remarkable, long poems. The best-known of these are probably *Annie Allen*, for which she won a Pulitzer, containing the mock-heroic counterepic *The Anniad*, and the book-length poems *In the Mecca*, set in the mouldering poverty of a Chicago tenement tower, *Riot* or *RIOT, A Poem in Three Parts*, and *In Montgomery*, set amongst the complex cultures and contradictions surrounding the social movements of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. I would like to discuss each of these counterepics of Brooks' in turn, but first I'd like to look closely at several of Brooks' earliest-written long poems: her ballads.

In 1945, Gwendolyn Brooks met Richard Wright, who suggested that she write a long poem for her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville*. In an April 1945 letter to Wright, attaching a sample from her manuscript, for feedback and commentary from a respected fellow-writer

and colleague, she wrote "Oh. I want to tell you that I took your advice about writing a long poem for the book, one that would express a little of my personal feeling about things and tie the others together. I hope you'll like it." She also notes in her letter that "Yes, I'm interested in fiction writing too." Below I include an image of Brooks' letter to Wright from the Black Print Culture archive collection at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, which holds much of Brooks' correspondence and papers.



623 East 63rd Street
Chicago, Illinois
April 9, 1945

Dear Mr. Wright,

You've been a literary hero of mine for years and I'm certain to be impressed by anything, for or against, that you have to say about my efforts.

I haven't a letter from Mr. Embree __ but some weeks ago a Miss Haygood (nice) of the Rosenwald staff called me and invited me to lunch at their office. Alice Browning of Negro Story was invited too. There I met Mr. Embree, and the others. A very pleasant afternoon. Mr. Embree told me how kindly you had spoken of me.

Oh. I want to tell you that I took your advice about writing a long poem for the book, one that would express a little of my personal feeling about things and rather tie the others together. I hope you'll like it.

About Black Boy. I hated reaching the last page. I wanted the story to go on and on.

I've bad news for you. One of my best friends, and a friend of yours too, was killed in Germany at the "front" March 20th __ Ed Bland. He was so kind, wasn't he? We are re-naming the fifty dollar poetry prize that we give to Poetry, A Magazine of Verse: from the Fellowship Prize to the Edward Bland Prize.

Yes, I'm interested in fiction writing too.

Sincerely,

Gwendolyn Brooks

Figure 5.2: Brooks' April 1945 letter to Richard Wright

A Street in Bronzeville (1945), Gwendolyn Brooks' first book, which records and embroiders on denizens and everyday life in the poor urban black neighborhood where Brooks lived, Bronzeville, contains this first long poem, "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith." The poem is a loving and wry mock heroic poem in at-times-varied pentameter about the neighborhood's storied dandy, "Satin-Legs Smith" the sartorialist who, going out grandly bedecked with cheap flowers made of feathers, has "intimacy with alleys" and wears "wonder-suits in yellow and in wine,/ Sarcastic green and zebra-striped cobalt" and "Ballooning pants that taper off to ends/Scheduled to choke precisely" and "hysterical ties/Like narrow banners for some gathering war." As Elizabeth Alexander notes in her Introduction to *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*, the poem also echoes Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" when it declares bemusedly to its reader, "Let us proceed. Let us inspect, together / With his meticulous and serious love, / The innards of this closet."[9] Brooks was also greatly inspired by American Modernist poets, particularly those inspired by the ballad form: "I greatly admire Robert Lowell." she said. "His "Lord Weary's Castle" had a great influence on me."[10]

In its own way, this poem that sings Satin-Legs Smith represents the soul and countermemory of the Bronzeville neighborhood, its richness and creative spark, its unconventional characters and the way they negotiate survival. Not quite a ballad in terms of form (being in pentameter instead of ballad meter's usual iambic trimeter or tetrameter and carrying only occasional free flourishes of rhyme), "Satin-Legs Smith" would become an early blueprint for some of Brooks's later ballads, which often oscillate skillfully in tone from the mock-heroic to the serious, testing the limits of the form.

In her work of 1960s (such as in her book of 1960, "The Bean Eaters," in which she also published "We Real Cool"), Gwendolyn Brooks continues to reinvent and test the outer limits of the ballad form in a contemporary context. "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters In Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" and "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed," by hearkening back to the ballad form, and daring to confront head on the topical politically-charged news and structural events and conditions of her day, such as the murder of Emmett Till, domestic violence against women, class-based tensions, and racially-motivated violence and anxiety associated with housing exclusion, Brooks summons both the U.S. abolitionist ballad tradition and the contraband songs. Like Emily Dickinson, another U.S. writer with an extensive, epic practice of poetry-writing throughout her life, who sharpened the hymn and ballad, Brooks transforms each popular ballad tradition by injecting tension into the forms. In her very fruitful years of the 1960s, Brooks balances her incisive irony and modernity with the the narrative socially-conscious sincerity of the ballad-form.

Her long counterepic poem "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," begins with a reference to the ballad-form's rhythmic relentlessness and its legacy of communicating narratives of tragedy, oppression, and violence with social conscience, as in the 19th Century's abolitionist ballads and contraband songs, such as Whittier's "Our Countrymen in Chains": "From the first it had been like a/Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood." Though perhaps, as with many of Gwendolyn Brooks's poems, it might be more accurate to say that the poem begins with the key references called forth by its title. In this case, though not explicitly stated in the poem itself, her 1960s readers and listeners would have instantly recognized these references as ripped from the headlines of the last five years. The "Bronzeville Mother" who "Loiters in Mississippi" would

have been quickly recognized as the mother of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old African-American from Chicago who had been brutally murdered in Sumner, Missippippi in 1955, for allegedly making "ugly remarks" and "whistling" at a white woman. Till's mother, Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley, who would in later years become a Civil Rights Movement activist, would have "Loitered" in Mississippi for the trial of her son's murderers. At their trial the same year in Sumner, Emmett Till's killers, J.W. Millam and his half-brother, Roy Bryant, were judged "not guilty" of the brutal slaying after an all-white, all-male jury deliberated for only 67 minutes and were overheard laughing inside the jury room. Said one juror after this miscarriage of justice, "We wouldn't have taken so long if we hadn't stopped to drink pop."[11]

While acknowledging and summoning the ballad's socially-conscious history with this poem, a history of popular speech against the oppressions of slavery, a history that refuses erasure of these oppressions, Brooks simultaneously acknowledges the legacies of the ballad which had often been closed to her and other women in their education, having been made to read and analyze, representing "A wildness cut up,/ and tied in little bunches, / Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite/ Understood—the ballads they had set her to, in school." It's also important to note that Brooks is taking on a persona here, a surprising one, and much of the poem is written not from the perspective from the Bronzeville Mother, Mamie Till, but from the perspective of another mother. The second part of the poem's title, "Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" would also be recognizable to Brooks' audience as a reference to this major trial of the decade and the circumstances surrounding. Brooks makes the very daring and innovative move of telling this story of Emmett Till's murder and his trial from the perspective of the white woman who was his accuser, and the wife of one of the killers. Brooks' poem is so subtly chilling, referring only obliquely to the

circumstances of the murder (the "barn" in which Till was killed, that his killers had smoked celebratory cigars after an all-white jury declared them "not guilty").

And Gwendolyn Brooks so skillfully paints a picture of a woman in an abusive marriage and her guilt at making the accusation. We the readers, privy to the white woman's thoughts in the poem, which is written in the third person, see that she wanted to see her story as a story of a conventional "ballad," a ballad in which she played the role of the "milk-white maid" who, "Pursued/By the Dark Villian" was "Rescued by the Fine Prince." Brooks's version of Carolyn Bryant Donham, the accuser of Till, wants to see herself as part of a conventional ballad tradition of a much earlier and idealized time—a Medieval courtly love ballad in which she plays the part of the damsel in distress. The central figures of the "milk-white maid," "Dark Villian" and "Fine Prince" call to mind the balladry tradition of the *chanson de geste* and epic ballads with chivalric romance such as Ludovico Ariosto's epic *Orlando Furioso* and Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, or epic Arthurian romances in which the central hero is a knight-errant. However, the poem's narrator is unable to shake the reality that this boy cast as the Villian "was a blackish child/Of fourteen."[12] Confronting this, Carolyn Bryant cannot truly cast her husband as a knight-errant of conventional Medieval epic ballads.

Hence Brooks' Ballad is a kind of counter-ballad, referring to the tropes of the conventional ballads while incorporating elements of socially liberatory ballads of abolitionist and contraband song traditions, fracturing the racist fairytale that even the accuser, a white woman of Mississippi, knows is wrong. She burns the bacon which she is cooking for her family, distracted by this guilt and complicity. When her husband strikes her own young child she is haunted by thoughts of blood, "a heaviness, a lengthening red."[13] Trapped in an abusive

marriage, the patriarchal violence which underlies the wife's false narrative is revealed in the poem. The poet's 1960 vision was also prescient of truths revealed in the real-life story. A *New York Times* article of January 27, 2017 reports that Carolyn Bryant Donham, the accuser of Emmett Till and the Mississippi Mother of Brooks' poem, had finally broken her silence and said her claims were false, that she was abused, coerced and remained greatly guilty and sorrowful.[14] It is amazing to realize that Brooks' poem, written almost 60 years before, was so accurate not only about its depiction of racism and the ideologies of white privilege, about the ideologies of many conventional ballads, and Brooks' ballads' position counter to this conventional patriarchal story, but also about this dimension of the story.

The poem ends with a hatred for the false Prince, from whose violence and coercion the Mississippi Mother can protect neither herself nor her children:

> Then a sickness heaved within her. The courtroom
> Coca-Cola,
> The courtroom beer and hate and sweat and drone,
> Pushed like a wall against her. She wanted to bear it.
> But his mouth would not go away and neither would the
> Decapitated exclamation points in that Other Woman's
> eyes.
>
> She did not scream.
> She stood there.
> But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower,
> And its perfume enclasped them—big,
> Bigger than all magnolias.
>
> The last bleak news of the ballad.
> The rest of the rugged music.
> The last quatrain. [15]

Hence, there is no happy ending to this story, as Till's accuser had once enjoyed imagining, except for the blossoming of a "glorious" hatred "burst" into "flower," a hatred which begins to bleed across racial lines, hatred for the true villains of the story, the murderers.

Gwendolyn Brooks' second poem and last poem about Emmett Till, "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till (After the Murder, After the Burial)," which follows "A Mississippi Mother..." in *The Bean Eaters*, provides this last melancholy coda to the story, returning the story to Mamie Till, Emmett's mother, as in a mourning tableau, as she "She sits in a red room, drinking black coffee./ She kisses her killed boy./And she is sorry. / Chaos in windy grays through a red prairie." Hence, back in Illinois, Emmett Till and his mother get the last word, the last image, the last "rugged music," windy and chaotic. The "Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" also shifts landscape, shifts place, from the South to the North, from mother to mother back in the prairies of Illinois. Both the ballad, "A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon..." and the ballad-fragment or coda, "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" are focused on not only deep empathy for the suffering of Emmett Till and for two of the women involved in this real-life story, but also they represent a radical countermemory of each place, of the events of the trial, the narratives and impact of racial hate, and the reality of Till's murder.

Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" performs a similar kind of intervention into, and remaking of, the ballad tradition: it's another ballad that is explicitly socially and politically conscious, again referencing both the abolitionist ballad tradition and injecting irony and disresolution into the sentimentality of the traditional ballad. Like her poems about Emmett Till, the subject of "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" is racialized violence; this time, in the context of urban housing. In a recorded interview held at the Archive for New

Poetry at UCSD, before reading the "Ballad of Rudolph Reed," Brooks introduces the poem in this context, as addressing a broadly systemic problem of race, housing and poverty:

> "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed," a poem of mine which deals with the housing situation, that is the pedestrian way of putting it, has no history in fact, there wasn't any Rudolph Reed. Some of the events in the poem happen, when, almost whenever, a negro invades what was before, as it is said, a "unbroken neighborhood," there is often resentment, and sometimes violence.[16] [my Transcription]

"The Ballad of Rudolph Reed," unlike Brooks' counterepic ballad on Till, is written with rhyming couplets, in a seeming homage to ballad meter. It begins: "Rudolph Reed was oaken./ His wife was oaken too. / And his two good girls and his good little man/ Oakenened as they grew."[17] This sets the stage with a beautiful way of describing the family's brown skin color, as "oaken," similar to the positive description of brown inherent to the black residents' name for their South Side Chicago neighborhood, which they had christened "Bronzeville," and which was such a significant setting for Brooks and her poetics. The family dreams of living in a place where the "plaster" doesn't "stir as if in pain" and won't hear the roaches falling from the ceiling. They dream of a place with "a front yard for flowers/and a back yard for grass." When Rudolph and his family move to a "street of bitter white" in search of this dream, they are at first "too joyous" about their new home to notice the tensions with the neighbors, until they are met with racialized violence, and rocks are thrown through the window, one night a stone "big as two fists," and the next night "a rock big as three."[18] When his baby girl Mabel is injured by one of these attacks, with her blood staining her "gaze," Rudolph retaliates in a rage, attacking the white attackers, hurting four, who kill him, shouting racial epithets. The poem ends with small Mabel's guilt for his death, whimpering all night, as her "oak-eyed mother did no thing/ But change the bloody gauze." The poem shows the

terrible extent in which race, poverty, violence and class are connected in what Brooks called the "housing situation," foregrounding the countermemory of the progression of hope and hate that so many black people in the same situation experienced.

These ballads, socially-conscious long poems that are early forms of Gwendolyn Brooks's counterepics, and which were written during the Chicago Black Renaissance, a blooming of African-American arts and letters following the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, and the Great Migration, which had brought Brooks' family to Chicago, are remarkable both for their complex shifts in tone, their balance of irony, sincerity, hope, and lamentation, and for the way they reinvent and remake the ballad form. These counter-ballads tell the story of systemic problems from a modern, poor and black woman's perspective, a perspective heretofore mostly absent from U.S. American letters. Hence, their significance, and the significance of Gwendolyn Brooks' counterepics that followed, which we will examine in the next section, cannot be overstated.

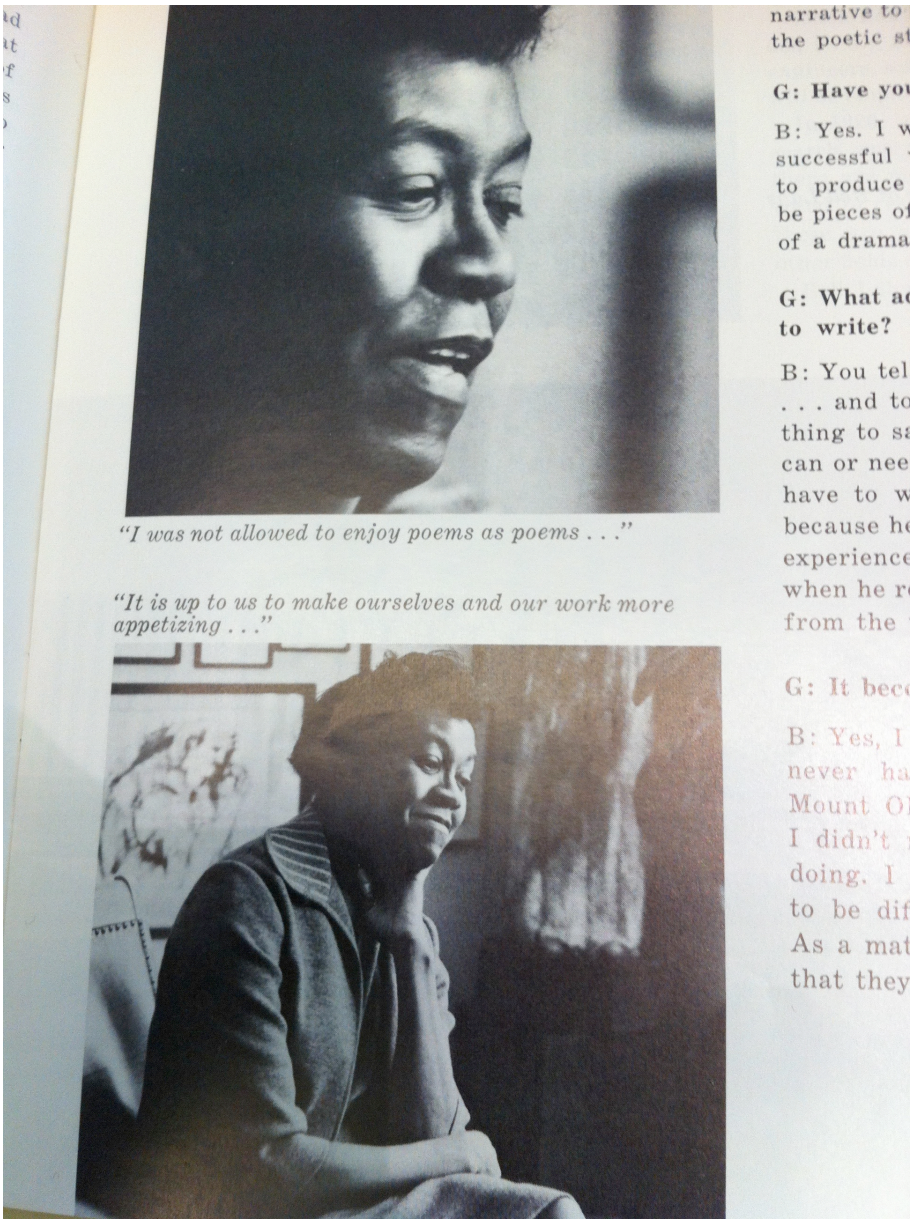


Figure 5.3: Photos, Gwendolyn Brooks interview with the *Illinois Bell News*, February-March, 1965

The City as Epic and the Origins of the Police

Three of Gwendolyn Brooks's radical counterepic poems written in the 1960s and early 70s—*In the Mecca, RIOT* and *In Montgomery*—are rooted in radical social movements

of those years. *In the Mecca* (and its accompanying codices "After Mecca" and "Boy Breaking Glass"), Gwendolyn Brooks' counterepic written in the summer of 1966 is not only a work of mourning, but an indictment of urban poverty and the housing crisis that Chicago's black community faced, and a critique of the black community's internal forms of violence and neglect rooted in systemic oppression. In turn, *In the Mecca* also critiques patronizing media depictions of poor black communities.

Both *RIOT* and *In Montgomery* are also poems rooted in social movements and radical calls for change; and both were inspired by mass movements and current events taking place across the country and in Brooks' Chicago neighborhoods in the 60s and 70s, including, in the case of *RIOT*, the extensive Chicago, D.C., and Baltimore riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, and the mass anti-war protests and riot following the Chicago 1968 Democratic National Convention. *In Montgomery* would constitute a Civil Rights Movement and Montgomery Bus Boycott retrospective that Brooks would undertake in 1971. *In Montgomery*, and its huge cast of characters and contrary perspectives, would represent a broad panorama of social movements and uprisings of the last ten turbulent and transformative years. This panoramic vision was also accompanied with Brooks' portraits of the minutiae of social movements and uprisings, reflecting intersectional realities and complexities of the collective, including endemic contradictions, and internal critiques.

All three radical counterepics—*In the Mecca*, *RIOT*, and *In Montgomery*—provide a radical countermemory of place in that they examine social problems and social movements from a poor, black, activist perspective in the city; these works indict police violence, distrust authorities, and tell the story of massive actions for change. These poems are also variously thinking about the city's legacies and possibilities, as an epic space of structures of racialized-

capitalist and State ownership, and as a place of counterepic social movements, and ownership of space by and for the people. How might we theoretically conceive of urban spaces, of cities and citizens in these context of social movements as pluralist counterepic forms?

In his book *Rebel Cities*, David Harvey discusses the Haussmannisation of Paris not only in terms of architecture's role as crowd control as a feature of modernity, but also discusses this transformation of the urban environment in relation to the birth of the revolutionary Paris Commune:

> ...in 1868, the overextended and increasingly speculative financial system and credit structures on which this was based crashed...The Commune was wrought in part out of a nostalgia for the urban world that Haussmann had destroyed (shades of the 1848 Revolution) and the desire to take back their city on the part of those dispossessed by Hausmann's works.[19]

In his essay "Origins of the Police," which argues that the development of police departments and policing systems is rooted in "response to large, defiant crowds" and claims "the police are a response to crowds, not to crime," David Whitehouse also connects the development of the Commune to a nostalgia or memory of public self-governance. Following a pattern of materialist historicization that Marx and Engels take up in their *Manifesto*, he travels even further back than Harvey, to the feudal property relation out of which capitalist modernity was born. "To get a sense of what's special about modern police," he says,

> **...**it will help to talk about the situation when capitalism was just beginning. Specifically, let's consider the market towns of the late medieval period, about 1,000 years ago. The dominant class of the time wasn't in the towns. The feudal landholders were based in the countryside. They didn't have cops. They could pull together armed forces to terrorize the serfs—who were semi-slaves—or they could fight against other nobles. But these forces were not professional or full-time...In France, in the 11th and 12th centuries, these

> towns became known as communes. They incorporated into communes under various conditions, sometimes with the permission of a feudal lord, but in general they were seen as self-governing entities or even city-states.[20]

Crucially, however, he notes, "they didn't have cops," but instead had their own courts and small armed forces made up of the "townspeople themselves." Hence, when workers took over Paris in 1871, remembering the idealized memory of these communities with a high degree of social equality and self-governance, they named their reclaimed city space the Commune. If we might understand the city itself is a kind of epic of Empire, the reclamation of the city by the common populace creates a kind of counterepic, by collective counterpublics.

Harvey's *Rebel Cities*, for all its great bravura analysis of the history of the taking back of the city's public and private spaces, and for all its crisp contemporary Marxist readings of the urban commons, already seems dated and simplistic, patrician, even, on its treatment of riots and their accompaniments, with Harvey referring to looters in the London riots as "feral capitalists," instead of recognizing the anti-capitalist expropriation by oppressed peoples that is nearly always at the heart of riot and its attendant looting. In Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "RIOT," in her epigraph she quotes Dr. Martin Luther King's famous statement "A riot is the language of the unheard." She goes on to depict the urban protesting and rioting crowd's unmanagability and Otherness as if it were a force of nature:

> Because the Negroes were coming down the street.
>
> Because the Poor were sweaty and unpretty
> (not like Two Dainty Negroes in Winnetka)
> and they were coming toward him in rough ranks.
> In seas. In windsweep. They were black and loud.
> And not detainable. And not discreet.[21]

In this sense Brooks radicalizes the way that blackness circulates in the indiscreet imaginary of the poem. The poem pushes into areas of representation that Nicole Fleetwood, in her book *Trouble Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness,* identifies with blackness's "troubled" associations, blackness as identified with, or attendant to, "always exceed[ing] these attachments":

> Blackness and black life become intelligible and valued, as well as consumable and disposable, though racial discourse. Blackness, in this sense, circulates. It is not rooted in a history, person, or thing, though it has many histories and many associations with people and things. Blackness fills in space between matter, between object and subject, between bodies, between looking and being looked upon. It fills in the void and it is the void. Through its circulation, blackness attaches to bodies or narratives coded as such but it always exceeds these attachments. Blackness troubles vision in Western discourse. And the troubling affect of blackness becomes heightened when located on certain bodies marked as such.[22]

This "troubling" of vision, of circulation, of the indiscretion of the crowd, its sweaty unprettiness, its uncontainability, is given a counter-power here by Brooks in her depiction of riot— which is like a force of nature, too uncontrollable to submit to detention or modulate into a "respectable" response to police extrajudicial murder and systemic violence. By using the phrases "Not detainable. And not discreet" Brooks emphasizes also an opposition to police discourse of detainability, of punitive state oppressive forces which seek to determine what actions and perceptions must determine citizenship and "non-citizenship" and thus state definitions of outlawry, personhood and legal non-personhood. See also Nicholas De Genova's discussion of "non-personhood" for the Global Detention Project, 2016, "Detention, Deportation, And Waiting: Toward a Theory of Migrant Detainability"[23]

Tina Chanter's *Whose Antigone*? and Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* have provided an excellent framework for thinking about who

mourns and how resistance is represented or obscured. In Tina Chanter's *Whose Antigone?* Chanter incorporates the history of slavery into her analysis of ancient and Classical literature. She critiques Hegel's separation of tragedy and slavery and analyzes the ways in which the citizen-alien binary enacted through the law and legal system serves to shore up freedoms for some at the expense of others.

Gwendolyn Brooks' epic poems, such as her poems *RIOT* (1969) and *In the Mecca*, an epic poem which describes a mother's frantic search for her missing daughter in a sprawling, decrepit tenement building called the Mecca, which once was one of Chicago's fanciest apartment houses. The collection also includes poems about Malcolm X and other black radicals:

> Black, raw, ready.
> Sores in the city
> That do not want to heal. [24]

In what ways would the architecture of the modern city shape visual perception, labor and class war in the era between the late medieval market towns and the late 19th century modernization of the capitalist city? What about the modern American city as representation of Agora, of Polis, of public mourning of state violence? What about the loss of infrastructures and the loss of social experience, old forms of social relations and abandoned structures of feeling? How does one mourn those, without a social "body"?

In her article on Gwendolyn Brooks' epic poem of loss, *In the Mecca*, "The Black Flâneuse: Gwendolyn Brooks's 'In the Mecca'," Kristen Bartholemew Ortega writes of

Brooks' mythopoesis of urban renewal, which she develops, or remakes, alongside depictions of rubble, destruction and loss:

> By creating an urban labyrinth of the Mecca, “In the Mecca” rewrites the mythopoesis of urban renewal. The speaker becomes the navigator of the labyrinth, exposing the Minotaur-like murderer and creating a map of the space. Other mythic allusions, such as the resemblance of Mrs. Sallie’s search for Pepita to the Demeter/Kore myth, reinforce Brooks’s simultaneous deconstruction of Eurocentric, urban mythopoesis and construction of African-American urban mythopoesis. The building itself becomes an organic symbol raising a metaphoric African-American urban space from the rubble of the literal razing of the Mecca.[25]

The lost child Pepita, forms the other hole or lack at the center of the poem's narrative labyrinth. Like Antigone, in some ways, Pepita is the "empty signifier," evasive action, or lack about which the poem's narrative turns.

Tina Chanter, considering Hegel's treatment of Antigone, critiques Hegel's own mythopoesis, in particular the assumptions which underlie and support his definition of the tragic hero:

> While for Hegel tragic heroes, as ethical actors, by definition—on account of their particularity... —represent partial aspects of ethical life, he insists both that they were justified and that their claims are equal. Slavery is thereby disqualified as a topic for tragedy, since the claims of slave-owners are neither justified, nor equal to the rightful claims of slaves to be free.[26]

What happens when slavery is 'abolished' legally, but slavery continues 'underground' through systems of murder and incarceration and smaller everyday violences? How then should we read acts of public mourning as acts of liberation, or as acts of recuperation? If Brooks' *In the Mecca* also represents an large public act of mourning, how does this add to our understanding of elegiac epic? This is a question too large for this project at present, but an enduring one that I'd like to pose, thinking about Chanter on freedom and slavery and the

alien/citizen binary alongside Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* as well. My preliminary thought on this is that Black writers of counterepics such as Brooks and Rankine counter not only systems of raced state power but also media representations which obscure the reality of Black U.S. life and history. As social movements such as Black Lives Matter and radical Black movements before them have proved time and again, we must look at all of this in relation to affective representation of the experience of being racially profiled from day to day in this country, the everyday violence and loss produced of this cumulative lived, raced experience.

Many of these enduring central concerns and demands of Black Lives Matter, of personhood, humanity, value, justice, of material and *mattering*, of deep empathy, allyship and recognition, and the immediate end of police violence, were also echoed much earlier by Brooks in her radical works of the 1960s. A clipping of an article from the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Meet Miss Brooks" held in the Black Print Culture Collection archive at Emory, notes Brooks' current "Sympathy for Freedom Movements" as she talks about her book *In the Mecca*. "This will surprise you. It will be a book-length poem about the people who lived in the Mecca Building." The article goes on to editorialize the Mecca Building as "a strange, notorious slum building in South Side Chicago now happily razed," where Brooks had once worked as a typist at 19. "The book will have to do with the life that went on in that building," she is quoted as saying, "I don't want readers to say, "These are poor Negro people!" I want them to say, "These are people!"[27]

Both the poems *RIOT* and *In the Mecca,* also affirm the cause of oppressed people rising up against police and State violence. In particular the final sections of *In the Mecca*, titled "After Mecca" and "Boy Breaking Glass" act as a counter to "broken windows"

policing, the handwringing over property violence used to justify heavier strictures, sanctions and violent repression of black uprisings. The first line of "Boy Breaking Glass" continues the caesura of the title, singing this unlikely hero: "Whose broken window is a cry of art." The explanation for this act of creation, of art, is clear in the poem—lack of privilege, lack of representation, lack of liberty, and everpresent systemic oppression: "Who has not Congress, lobster, love, luau, / the Regency Room, the Statue of Liberty, / runs."[28]

When we have previously discussed the uses of counterepic, one of the uses I have noted is the internal feminist critique of social movements. Brooks' counterepic *In Montgomery*, a retrospective on the years of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which she first published for a popular readership in *Ebony Magazine* in 1971, and for which she invented a term, "verse journalism," examines this and other enduring legacies and problems of intersectionality within social movements and their contradictions. [quote and contextualize Brooks' In Montgomery here] Contemporary writer Amandine Gay would go on to describe the endurance of this contemporary dilemma cogently in her foreword to the French edition of bell hooks' *Ain't I A Woman*:

> At a time in American history when black women in every area of the country might have joined together to demand social equality for women, and a recognition of the impact of sexism on our social status, we were, by and large, silent. Our silence was not merely a reaction against white women liberationists, or a gesture of solidarity with black male patriarchs. It was the silence of the oppressed. That profound silence engendered by resignation and acceptance of one's lot. Contemporary black women could not join together to fight for women's rights because we did not see womanhood as an important aspect of our identity. Racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness, and to regard race as the only relevant label of identification.
>
> In other words, we were asked to deny a part of ourselves, and we did. Consequently, when the women's movement raised the issue of sexist oppression, we argued that sexism was insignificant in light of the harsher, more brutal reality of racism. We were afraid to acknowledge that sexism

> could be just as oppressive as racism. We clung to the hope that liberation from racial oppression would be all that is necessary for us to be free. We were a new generation of black women who'd been taught to submit, to accept sexual inferiority, and to be silent.[29]

Hence, Gwendolyn Brooks' retrospective of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, *In Montgomery,* in pointing out these contradictions, prefigures the vital intertwinings of oppressions and their inseparability from each other that Kimberlé Crenshaw would describe in her influential essay on intersectionality, which like bell hooks's book *Ain't I A Woman* glossed by Amandine Gay in her Introduction above, critiques popular elements of second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s.

Along with internal critique of social movements and representations of economic, State and police oppression, Brooks' counterepics also have thrilling liberatory moments demonstrating the revolutionary potential of collective action. One of the most moving examples comes at the end of her poem *RIOT*, written after protest actions in Chicago. These actions included the Chicago 1968 uprisings after the assassination of Martin Luther King and the mass anti-war protests at 1968 Democratic Convention Protests in Chicago. The anti-war protesters first gathered outside the International Amphitheater, which used to be located at 4220 Halsted Street, right in Brooks' Bronzeville neighborhood. The end of *RIOT* envisions a beautiful moment of Camaraderie and peoples' power after and amid police violence, a collective "shining joy" in which time is suspended and "On the street we smile."

> You rise. Although
> genial, you are in yourself again.
> I observe
> your direct and respectable stride.
> You are direct and self-accepting as a lion
> in Afrikan velvet. You are level, lean,

remote.

There is a moment in Camaraderie
when interruption is not to be understood.
I cannot bear an interruption.
This is the shining joy;
the time of not-to-end.

On the street we smile.
We go
in different directions
down the imperturbable street.

from Gwendolyn Brooks's *RIOT*, 1969

This beautiful and liberatory moment is a moment of directness, of arising, of "self accepting" of blackness, and of belonging, in comradeship, friendship, or Camaraderie on the street together. It is a moment of collective recognition on the street in which we also go our "different directions," a harmony of freedom and acceptance in both the individual and the collective.

The Anniad and Three Dreams Deferred

To recap, first a quick timeline of our real-life story and of Brooks' major works:

Timeline

1916 - 1970s - The Great Migration (African American)
1917 - Gwendolyn Brooks born, her family moving to Chicago when she is 5 months old
1920s - Harlem Renaissance
1930s - 1960s - Chicago Black Renaissance, Southside Chicago, also called "Bronzeville"
1945 - Gwendolyn Brooks's first book, *A Street In Bronzeville*, published
1951 - Langston Hughes first publishes "Harlem" in "Montage of a Dream Deferred"
August 28th, 1955 - Emmett Till's murder
December 5th, 1955 - December 20th, 1956 - Montgomery bus boycott
June 1963 - Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "my dreams my works" published in *Selected Poems*
August 28th, 1963 - Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech
1963 - *The Bean Eaters* published
1964 - Langston Hughes's *New Negro Poets* is published with Brooks's foreword
April 4th, 1967 - "A Time To Break Silence," Martin Luther King's anti-Vietnam War speech
February 24, 1965 - Assassination of Malcolm X
1968 - *In the Mecca* published
1968 - Riots in Chicago, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. following the assassination of Martin Luther King
1968 - Mass anti-war protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, ending in a riot
1969 - *RIOT* by Gwendolyn Brooks published
1971 - *In Montgomery*, Brooks's work of "verse journalism," first published in *Ebony*

Figure 5.4: Timeline, Gwendolyn Brooks, literary works and social movements

In 1950, before the tumultuous and liberatory mass social movement years of the 1960s, before *In the Mecca*, *In Montgomery* and *RIOT*, and after the radical ballads of *A Street in Bronzeville* and *The Bean Eaters*, Gwendolyn Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for her book *Annie Allen* (published 1949). This poem is yet another counterepic, and the last section

of that long poem, *The Anniad*, titled with a humorous touch after *The Aeneid*, explicitly references and draws from the ancient epic tradition thoroughout. Like the other counterepics which we have discussed in Chapter Three, H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, Muriel Rukyser's *Book of the Dead*, Sara Larsen's *Hell I Am, Helen*, and Bernadette Mayer's *The Helens of Troy, New York* and her writings on Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Lisa Robertson's *Debbie: An Epic*, Gwendolyn Brooks' *Anniad* remakes and counters a Classical epic, formally and thematically, giving voice to a female heroine or central character perspective previously non-existent, obscured, demonized or otherwise lost.

While the meter of Vergil's *Aeneid* is dactylic hexameter (Homer's verse is the same pattern in *The Odyssey* and in *The Iliad*), which is notoriously difficult to recreate in English poetry, Brooks' meter in *The Anniad* consists of a form she invented herself, a trimeter made up of two iambs followed by one cretic foot. The decision to repeat the cretic foot may reference not ancient Roman but ancient Greek poems of praise, or paeans, and aeolian poems, both of which use cretic meter. Brooks's trimeter, which begins each line with a rhythm naturally suited to English, which is then followed by a contrary or anthetic cretic twist, is an amazing innovation of counterepic form. Ezra Pound, whom Brooks would have read along with Eliot and other influential Modernists in her informal militant writers' workshop on the south side of Chicago, and who in *The ABC of Reading*, describes modern iambic verse in pentameter as "the meter of moral reproof," might have compared this intially iambic meter with continal cretic twists to "satiric burlesque."[30] The tone, however, of Brooks' modern *Anniad* teeters acrobatically between the mock-heroic to the mournful and the sincerely heroic. "Arriving by another declivity," as Pound might also say, it should be remembered that the iambic foot is also the measure of the heartbeat, and the trimeter that of

ancient Greek song and sometimes Athenian drama. The poem *Annie Allen* and its final part, *The Anniad*, tells the story of its heroine Annie, "a plain black girl" and her life, in dill pickles and domestic labor, in thoughts of streetside vaudeville, in Sunday chicken and discarded flowers, giving heroically-sized space to a voice and character who might well be erased, obscured and not even granted personhood by a white-dominated culture and State.

We began this Chapter with a remarkable object, a train ticket on which Brooks had written "My dreams, my works" emphatically underlined, held in the Black Print Culture and Raymond Danowski Poetry Library manuscript collections of Emory's Rose Library. Brooks begins *The Anniad* with a stanza which references Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" and its "dream deferred," asking the question "What happens to a dream deferred?/Does it dry up/like a raisin in the sun?... Or crust and sugar over—/ like a syrupy sweet?" misdirecting with seeming resignation to "Maybe it just sags/like a heavy load," and ending on the incendiary and revolutionary simultaneous query and answer "*Or does it explode?*" Brooks's *The Anniad* riffs on Hughes's imagined "sweet" dream, which deferred, "crust[s]" and "sugar[s] over," writing of Annie's heroic story as one of poverty, a story forgotten, of a woman, whether by folly or fate, imagining dreams withheld from her: "Think of sweet and chocolate,/ Left to folly or to fate,/ Whom the higher gods forgot/ Whom the lower gods berate;/ Physical and underfed/ Fancying on the featherbed/ What was never and is not."[31] This opening, with its imperative "Think of sweet and chocolate," echoing *The Iliad*'s imperative opening "Sing, Goddess, Achilles' rage," also references and counters one of the common features of Classical epic, the preliminary Invocation to the gods or Muses; here the heroine is both forgotten and berated by the "higher" and "lower" gods, respectively.

The poem is explicitly counterepic in its orientation in other ways. Brooks depicts the other side of war, the women left behind while the soldier is at war, left in the domestic sphere. Dido-esque and Penelope-esque, Annie represents the waiting of the witchy woman figure, and she also weaves and spins alone while her lover goes off to war.

> Watching for the paladin
> Which no woman ever had,
> Paradisaical and sad
> With a dimple in his chin
> And the mountains in the mind;
> Ruralist and rather bad,
> Cosmopolitan and kind.
>
> [...]
>
> Doomer, though, crescendo-comes
> Prophesying hecatombs.
> Surrealist and cynical.
> Garrulous and guttural.
> Spits upon the silver leaves.
> Denigrates the dainty eves
> Dear dexterity achieves. [32]

These themes of waiting, of deferral and dreams deferred, of Dantean journeys through the dreams deferred (such as the journey through the tenement in *In the Mecca*, or Annie's journey of waiting in *The Anniad*, or through her ongoing sympathy for "freedom movements" and their mass actions), and of radical persistence and resistance within oppression and poverty, were very real to Gwendolyn Brooks. When she won the Pulitzer prize for Literature for *Annie Allen* in 1950, Brooks was living one of the South Side housing projects with her husband and her children. In a Library of Congress interview, she recounted that time: "She received a phone call from a reporter and she and her nine-year-old son celebrated in the dark—they hadn’t paid their electricity bill. She recalls being 'absolutely

petrified' when photographers and reporters came the next day, knowing they would discover her secret when they tried to plug in their equipment. However, someone—she never found out who—paid her bill just in time and she was saved from embarrassment." Brooks' daughter, Nora Brooks Blakely, would recall her mother's writing's inextricable connection to their economic circumstances growing up: “I was eating far more beans and chicken wings than I would have liked. When my mother wrote about people in tight circumstances, she was living it.”[33] The will and determination we discussed at the opening of this chapter, laid testament to by Gwendolyn Brooks' scrawl "my dreams, my works" on her train ticket would continue. She would record this determination, to memorialize her own story and the stories not being told or actively being erased, the voices of people like her, black women, in the poem that would arise from the initial scrawl on that train ticket, which references Langston Hughes's "dream deferred":

my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell

I hold my honey and I store my bread
In little jars and cabinets of my will.
I label clearly, and each latch and lid
I bid, Be firm till I return from hell.
I am very hungry. I am incomplete.
And none can tell when I may dine again.
No man can give me any word but Wait,
The puny light. I keep eyes pointed in;
Hoping that, when the devil days of my hurt
Drag out to their last dregs and I resume
On such legs as are left me, in such heart
As I can manage, remember to go home,
My taste will not have turned insensitive
To honey and bread old purity could love.

This short poem, a sonnet, would be published in June 1963 in Brooks' collection, *Selected Poems*. Martin Luther King would deliver his "I Have A Dream" speech later that year, on

August 28th, 1963. In 1964 Brooks would go on to write the foreword to Langston Hughes's anthology of emergent young writers, which he called *New Negro Poets: U.S.A.*, in which was published some of the early work of such greats as Audre Lorde and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka):

> Success is not the reward of every effort. But there is enough magic,
> enough sure flight, enough meaningful strength to inspire a happy surmise that
> here are some of the prevailing stars of an early tomorrow.[34]

Gwendolyn Brooks, a remarkable radical writer, through her force of will, would have the courage to see this "magic," this "sure flight" and these "prevailing stars" even in the face of a historically specific hunger, of waiting, of struggles. Her counterepic poems would intervene into poetic domains hitherto barred to people like her, her works representing a radical countermemory of place, and would confront these struggles, with their hunger and dreams, throughout her life.

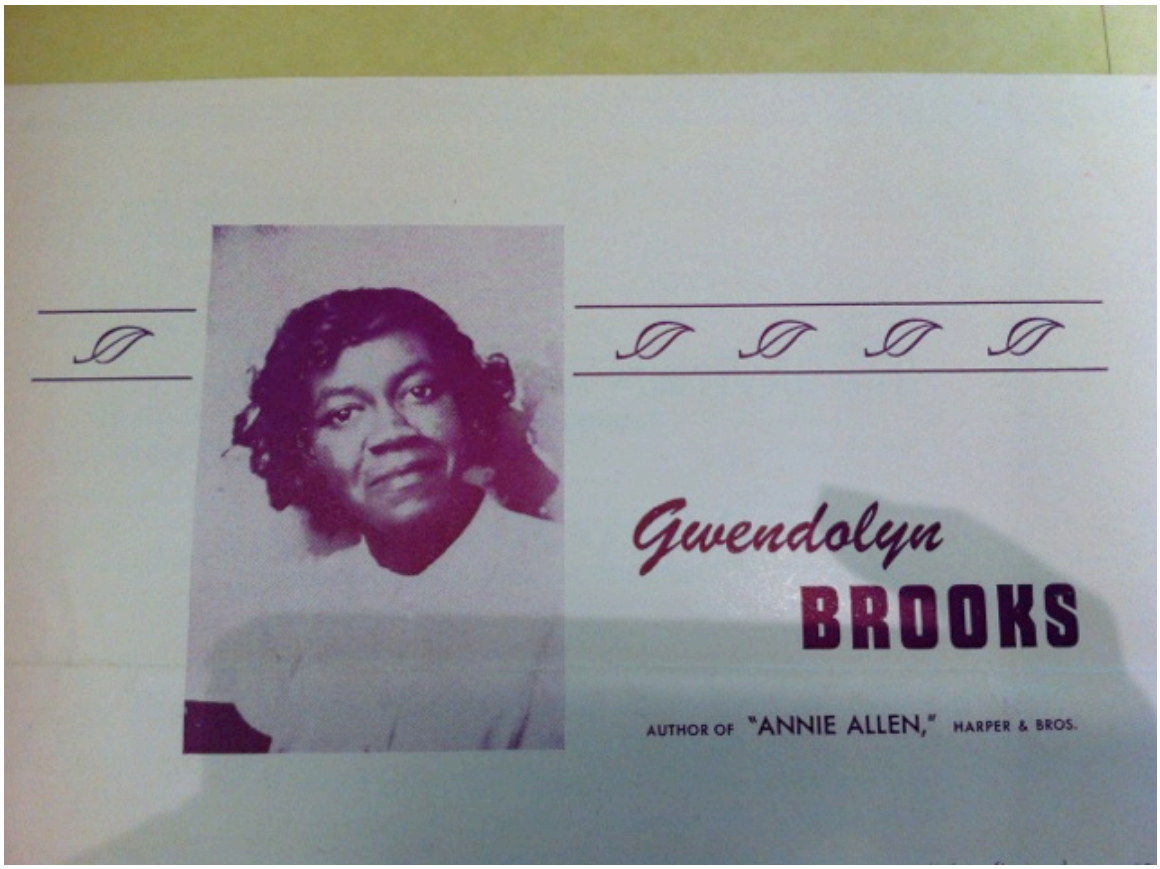


Figure 5.5: Gwendolyn Brooks, portrait

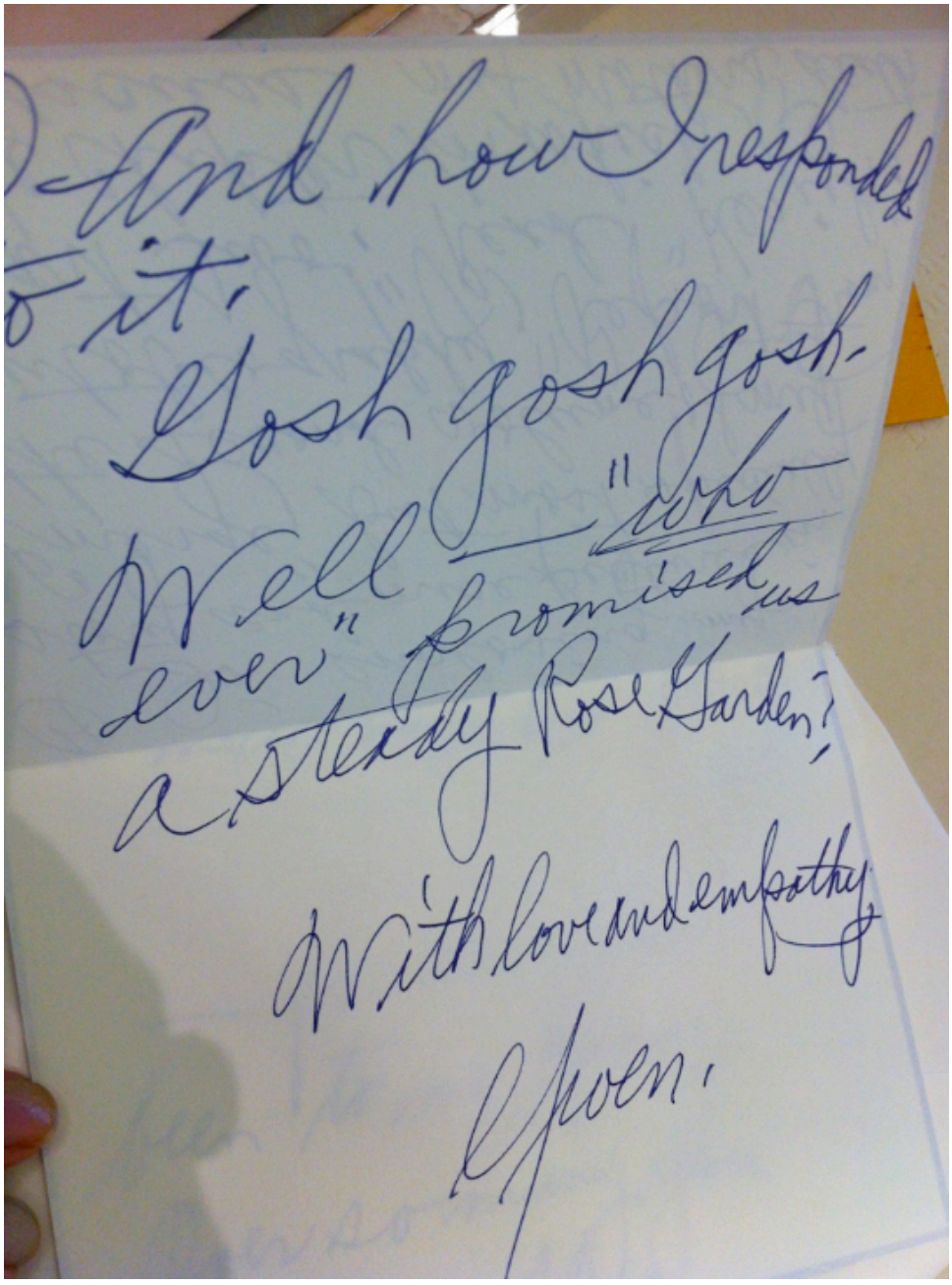


Figure 5.6: "Well–'*who*-ever' promised us a steady Rose Garden? With love and empathy, Gwen."

Chapter 6. **Border Counterepics: Mexican and Chicanx Adaptations**

Introduction

Chapter 6 is divided into two sections, focusing on counterepic forms of border regions, both Mexican and Chicanx adaptations. Both parts of chapter 6 are about poetry and forms of collective resistance: 6.1, "Stars, Seeds, Swarms: On the Present and Future of Border-Area Action Collectives" documents and analyzes recent social movements in Mexico and the San Diego/Tijuana border area, from the era following the 2008 global financial crisis and the Ayotzinapa massacre to the present. Rather than focusing on the political valences of the work of an individual counterepic poem or writer in relation to a social movement, this segment takes a deep dive into the poetry, poetic art and actions these collectives' many members have produced as part of social movements, and considers the poetry action collective itself and its real manifestations as a kind of counterepic network against capitalism, patriarchy and the state.

6.2, "Brujas, Tech Travelers, and Genre-Breaking: San Diego Speculative Counterepic" focuses on the recent cross-genre speculative poetics of three different San Diego Chincanx/Latinx writers imagining resistance in the time of Trump. These three texts are Manuel Paul Lopez's *These Days of Candy,* Alfredo Aguilar's *Here on Earth,* and Lizz Huerta's near-future story cycle *The Wall*. These counterepic works of poetic resistance, whether they are long poems, poem sequences, or poetic prose, confront near-future realities of the border and imagine transformations of culture and politics. Each of these writers references and transforms the epic form, and each also takes inspiration from speculative fiction and science fiction in order to extrapolate on and respond to current forms of oppression and of radical resistance struggles.

6.1**: Stars, Seeds, Swarms**

On the Present and Future of Border-Area Action Collectives

Post-Crisis Poetics Project (Ed. by Brian Ang) and presented at the Buffalo Poetics Conference, Poetics: (The Next) 25 Years, at SUNY, Buffalo NY, 2016

> "Nos querían enterrar, pero que no sabían que estábamos semillas"
> [They tried to bury us but they didn't know we were seeds]
> — popular slogan of resistance
> after Ayotzinapa

> "the state's actions often regulate bodies, in ways both great and small, by enmeshing them within norms and expectations that determine what kinds of lives are deemed liveable or useful and by shutting down the spaces of possibility and imaginative transformation where people's lives begin to exceed and expand and escape the state's uses for them."
> — Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*

The power of resistance comes in unexpected ways. Resistance is not only the power to continuously confront. Resistance is also the power to elude, rebound, resound post-crisis, to counter dominant ideologies and forms of state violence. Resistance can be power which lives deep in the earth, underground, only to reemerge as green resilience after adversity and after lifegiving rain. Resistance is the collective power that fights and stands and speaks truth and mourns and loves and welcomes and creates and yowls again after being beaten, raided, erased, singled out, silenced. Bodies that resist (materially, interpretively, categorically) evade, exceed and expand beyond and escape the state's uses for them.

The era of resistance social movements from the 2009 California student occupation movements to the nationwide Occupy movement, from global occupation movements and global revolutions of the Arab Spring until the backlash and repressions of these movements

from 2011-2012 is an era which has been called the Movement of the Squares for its focus on encampments and the space-taking of centers of cities and institutions: public squares, foreclosed housing developments, banks. In 2011, I wrote some about Occupy San Diego and the global implications of the Movements of the Square on Harriet, the blog of the Poetry Foundation, which were later published in the anthology *Occupy Poetics*, edited by Thom Donovan.[1] Since this time, as occupation tactics have continued successfully on smaller scales to hold and preserve and reclaim autonomous spaces, much resistance has intentionally become less centered on encampments in public squares, but instead concentrated on the often more dispersed shutdown of capital flows and of racist structures of power: blockades and takeovers of freeways, airports, public transportation and roads, shipping and port shutdowns, strike actions, border takeovers, the takeovers and defense of entire cities and communities and regions by the oppressed, especially by people of color and by indigenous movements (see Ferguson and Black Lives Matter, direct actions in Detroit or the indigenous protectors who stand and hold indigenous landspace in encampments against the Dakota Access Pipeline) and the building of collective mutual aid networks to accompany these powerful direct actions.

If the era of previous mass social movements was the era of the Movement of the Squares, and centered, in the U.S., on a powerfully simple popular metaphor of class analysis ("we are the 99%" and its complementary corollary from the 2009 University of California student occupation movements, "we are the crisis"), we are now in the era of decentered, diasporic collective forms which emphasize the intersectionality of shared oppressions to oppose racism, fascism, sexism, xenophobia, ableism and policies and structures of the state which enforce these oppressions. These emergent collective forms take as their metaphors

distributed forms of resistance collectively and communally. Right now, I'm particularly interested in the burgeoning influx of non-hierarchical action collective forms in San Diego and Tijuana as oppositions to a top-down hetero-patriarchal hierarchical society—the uses of reemergent poetic metaphors of counterepic resistance: the rhizome, the network, the constellation: the stars, the seeds, the swarm.

Counter-crisis resistances: Seeds

Candles light up a collective gathering in the Zócalo, Mexico City, October 2014, as part of youth rebellion post-Ayotzinapa, spelling out “FUE EL ESTADO” (it was the State)

But hold up for a minute. This account of the repression of the global Movement of the Squares creating new, dispersed forms of resistance to state violence and control from 2012-present is missing at least one crucial connection. We must also consider the evolution of resistance tactics in the Mexican Spring and how resistance in Latin America from 2012-present—particularly the ways in which indigenous movements in Latin America and resistance to Ayotzinapa’s "crisis of violence" (to borrow a phrase in a letter to me from

Tijuana poet Jhonnatan Curiel) and to the Mexican state from 2014-present—has profoundly influenced the evolution of these emergent dispersed forms of resistance.

Jael Vizcarra, writing of the 2014 Southern California series of freeway takeovers in her article "Freeway Takeovers: The Reemergence of the Collective Through Urban Disruption," (with contributions from collaborator Troy Araiza Kokinis) explicitly connects SoCal freeway takeovers in the wake of Ferguson and the police murder of members of working-class communities of color (see also in San Diego Victor Ortega, Alfred Olango) to a contemporary history of indigenous movements and post-Ayotzinapa resistance tactics, arguing that these tactics are interconnected with migrant populations:

> All the freeway takeovers discussed have in common the following feature: they are popular acts that insist on reformulating a critique in a collective manner that seek to bring attention to the historical and structural roots of the social ailments they address.
>
> California protesters are not the first to target freeways as protest spaces. In fact, freeway takeovers are extremely common in Latin America. In September 2014, Yaqui Indians in Vicam, Sonora blocked Mexican Federal Highway 15 for multiple weeks in protest of toxins dumped in their water supply. Moreover, parents and students have used freeway takeovers to protest the murder of the 43 students in Ayotzinapa, Mexico by the state and paramilitary forces. The frequent use of this tactic throughout Latin America at least serves as an inspiration for this recent trend in California. The tactic is extremely familiar to the many migrants who come from rural regions of Mexico and Central America. After all, contemporary migration from Mexico and Central America is largely facilitated by the displacement [of] rural peoples whose fates have been intertwined with the expansion of NAFTA and transportation of goods along highway systems. The use of this tactic by heterogeneous working class communities of color may even reflect a broader cultural contribution of the migrant population.[2]

In addition, Vizcarra points out that "in SoCal, protesters have been using the freeways as a vehicle for protest and political awareness for decades." She argues that this tactic is part of a broader history of resistance to gentrification in racialized neighborhoods like San Diego's Barrio Logan and East LA, and is vitally intertwined with poetic and artistic forms of resistance such as East LA's ASCO, a radical Chicano art collective active in the 1970s. A freeway takeover might be considered a use of the swarm as tactic. Media has often described these tactics in these terms: "Protests have swarmed bridges, highways, and city streets. Temporary die-ins and walkouts have interrupted business as usual..."[3] And legal defense organizations such as Enjambre Digital [Digital Swarm][4] have emerged post-Ayotzinapa in response to the arrests of students and the attempted silencing of activists in Mexico. Finally, 2016 Anti-Trump and anti-fascist protests across the University of California system have frequently been described using fear-shot language against the swarm by the U.S. mass media. For example, in an article in *The Washington Post*: "Mobs of tearful, angry students protesting Trump victory swarm college campuses."[5]

As a response to this series' theme of "Post-Crisis Poetics"[6] I am thinking about the ways in which recent poetics and activism in Southern California border regions, in Latin America and the Global South more broadly replace a focus on post-financial crisis poetics with a focus on how to formulate a poetic response equal to permanent crisis as manufactured by capital, market reproduction and state violence. With the help of Vizcarra's article which connects Southern California art collectives and the murder of 43 Guerrero Rural Teachers' College students at Ayotzinapa in 2014 to the 2014 freeway takeovers, I want to consider some additional poetic reactions to this state of permanent crisis in relation to trauma, mourning and social movements in contemporary poetics. Tijuana-San Diego border-area

poetics and social movements must be understood in the context of cartel and police violence, the disappearance and murder of 43 students at Ayotzinapa and poetic responses of Mexican and U.S. border poets to these traumatic crises of disappearance and to the surrounding associated insurrectionary direct action.

So why have the tactical metaphors of stars, seeds, swarms emerged as a "post-crisis poetics" in the San Diego-Tijuana border region and beyond in the era following the global Movement of the Squares as a response to an enforced state of permanent crisis? By tactical metaphors I am referring to metaphors that have been used by action collectives in the region as part of their public relations of resistance and as part of the formation of collective identities in struggle which inform material tactics (see also Jeff Conant's *A Poetics of Resistance: The Revolutionary Public Relations of the Zapatista Insurgency*[7] for poetics as one component of resistance). By "tactical metaphors" I am speaking of a formulation that would encompass not only the disruptive "wired" media tactics that Rita Raley describes in *Tactical Media*, but also all metaphors which inform and inspire and accompany forms of on-the-ground embodied direct actions and organizing tactics: strikes, blockades, divestments, takeovers, mutual aid actions.

Review/Backtrack: Post Financial Crisis Poetics and Mexican Resistance 2012-2014

In order to understand the crucial importance of the Mexican Spring to current post-crisis poetics and to the present, we must go back in time, and review the progression of the largely youth uprising. Because it has become clear to me that many otherwise-informed intellectuals and radicals in the U.S. aren't aware of the history and the material context of the Mexican Spring, or how poetry and poetics figures prominently in the larger Mexican

resistance that resulted, perhaps because of the language barrier, the quick succession of events, the lack of good U.S. media coverage during the uprisings, or because of Mexican state media censorship, let's review. Like all histories, this will be incomplete and imperfect. In May 2012, in the run-up to the Mexican Presidential election, then-candidate Enrique Peña Nieto, former Governor, was on the campaign trail across Mexico. The name of YoSoy 132 was initially a response to an attempted smear campaign against the students who protested Peña Nieto's speech at Iberoamericano University in Mexico City, a prestigious private school. These students were opposing Peña Nieto's role in the State's response to Atenco (2006), an indigenous uprising of poor farmers and florists which Mexican police repressed with murder and rape and widespread detention, at a time when Peña Nieto was Governor of the state. Many expected that the largely bourgeois and wealthy student body of the elite private college would support Nieto; instead, the students, shouting "Coward!" and "Assassin!" basically chased the candidate Peña Nieto and his entourage off the campus after the speech, surprising many. After the protest of Nieto's speech on the campus, an Ibero Professor claimed on the PRI-sponsored radio [PRI being the party of the dominant State, which still controls much of Mexican media] that the IAU demonstrators weren't students but hired and paid to protest.

In response to the false accusations—a rhetorical tactic which will be familiar to anyone who has seen the "outside agitator" argument mobilized over and over in response to student protest of all types—the 131 students organized to make public photos of their school IDs in solidarity, creating a public website and a public campus response to correct the accusations. Their bravery and their faces as real young people can still be witnessed on their video posted to YouTube.[8] Over a million viewed their video. #YoSoy132 "I am [the]

132nd"—a conjunction or unity expression similar to the solidarity expression "I am/We are the 99%/we are the crisis" of U.S. Occupy movements repressed on a mass scale shortly before this time, and similar to expressions of Athens and Barcelona as well— became a rallying cry globally as the students demanded a new media, against the corruption and lies of state spectacle and state violence. But this initial protest in 2012 in Mexico, and its initial spread to other private universities, such as Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, ITAM, was to prove just the beginning of what very quickly evolved to become a much larger social movement involving scores of students in the public universities as well, and far beyond the universities, a popular uprising initially seeded in student action.

Enter: poets. Just about a week and a half after Peña Nieto is run off the Ibero campus, 20,000 people, inspired by the demands of YoSoy132, march in Mexico City against Peña Nieto and the PRI, demanding an end to state media corruption and spectacle, many also demanding direct democracy, the end of media censorship, the end of capitalism and class inequity. Students chanted "¡chinga la burguesía!" [fuck the bourgeoisie!] and "¡Si hay imposición, habrá revolución!" [if there is imposition, there will be revolution!] and the tongue-in-cheek chant (a reference to The Revolution Will Not Be Televised?) "¡Esto sí es noticia, que salga en televisa!" [Here's the news, get it on TV!]. Like "anti-Trump" marches in the U.S. at the present time, these marches are referred to as "anti-EPN[Enrique Peña Nieto]." The poet Javier Sicilia marches alongside public university students of UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico), and other public Universities, in memory of his son who was assassinated in March of 2011, expressing beautiful intergenerational, anti-hierarchical, non-patronizing solidarity with the youth involved in the post-financial crisis student movements: "'We are at a historical breaking point, a crisis of the world's

civilization. We are coming through the cracks in the state and the crumbling economy to build something new.' The poet expressed his excitement, 'They are the ones fighting for the present...They are not minors. They are our elders fighting for what we took from them, their present. It's a marvelous lesson and we are here to support them.'" As with Occupy in the U.S., the Arab Spring beginning in North Africa, and global anti-austerity movements overall—the Movement of the Squares—the Mexican Spring was leaderless and anti-partisan in its character and ethos: "'We are party-less. We are not favoring any political party or candidate and we want the media to open up, to stop lying,' said a student at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)." [9]

As gathered public university UNAM students occupied Mexican television station headquarters, smashing televisions, the young UNAM poet Sandino Bucio recited a poem/communiqué against state-manipulation and ownership of media. As we will see, later abductions of poets by police in Mexico, including Bucio, and the abductions and murder of students at Ayotzinapa were to create an environment which vitally and *critically* informs current transborder collectives' work. Here I include a small part of Sandino Bucio's poem/communiqué read during Mexican students' television station takeover/occupation of pro-PRI TV Azteca and mass media company Televisia in opposition to state media corruption and spectacle during the farcical "election."

> We want a television with skateboards, lizards, arcades.[...]with rhymes, discoveries, the fantastic. We want a television with codexes, artisans, dragons. We want a television with fabliaux, galaxies, peyote. We want a television with beats, essays, marvels. We want a media with animations, colors, geographies. We want a media with documentaries, adventure, psychodelia.
>
> We want a television with magic, beauty and poetry. We want a television of art, science and soul. We want an intelligent television, modern and human.

> We want a truthful television, dynamic and free. We want a new television, rare and wise.
>
> ...
>
> We do not want any more shit in Mexican television. We do not want television which misinforms, which thinks only of money. We don't want a television which contaminates, which scams. And, even less do we want a television which tells us how to think and how to vote. We don't want one that enforces an embezzler, a killer, a homophobe, an ignoramus, an entitled rich kid, a figurehead, a joke for a President.
> We don't want your marketing to convince us or to determine our future. The television is ours, we rule the truth. The television is ours!
> [No queremos que su mercadotecnia nos convenza y decida nuestro futuro. La televisión es nuestra, nosotros decidimos qué ver. ¡La televisión es nuestra!]
> [excerpt: my own translation.]

Original posted to YouTube.[10]

This communiqué confronts not only the broadcast lies of state media spectacle in Mexico, but also performs a systemic critique linking this false spectacle to disenfrancisement, corruption, homophobia, and capitalism. One of the most powerful legacies of the global Occupy movements has been the refusal to assign leaders, to insist on horizontalism, in direct counter to state capitalist hieracrchies. Instead of asking for or endorsing electoral politics, the students and poets act, proclaiming their own power and autonomy, and that no one else will decide their future, that "we rule the truth." In doing so, they are waging a material struggle, but also what adrienne maree brown called "an imagination battle." They intervene not only in material action, but also to expand the possibilities of what world is imaginable.

The Poetics of Resistance to Permanent Crisis in Mexico: 2014-present

> "...we are the color// of moreno burnt brown tacos// somos la luz de la cruz// somos los perdidos los desaparecidos// malhumorados enchilados// picosos saladitos astronautas// sometimes i feel we're lost in the closet silence of printed work// amid the screaming vehicles passing by// we are undocumented

> by the scent of yerba buena// somos los que se atreven a cantar// we are the voiceless...// we are all that is// that is all we are// we are taqueros" From the spoken-word collective, Taco Shop Poets, in their Manifesto from *Chorizo Tonguefire*, Calaca Press/Red CalacArts Collective, San Diego, c. 1999

If we regard reemergence of the de-centered and plural collective as response to a state of permanent crisis enforced by the state and capital, we can witness to the reality of multiple fronts of resistance against the enforcement of this permanent crisis state. The border area poetry and politics groups Colectivo Intransigente and Cog*nate Collective have confronted state and cartel violence against poets in Mexican and the San Diego-Tijuana border region of the last several years. Writings and political actions by poets in the collectives express a current poetics of social and insurrectionary movements against state violence, in relation to the politics of mourning as pathways to keep alive as well as mourn the memory of the disappeared.

If the 2012-14 YoSoy132/Mexican Spring mass youth rebellions in Mexico were focused on confronting state spectacle along with class inequities which added to this obscurantism, with the state and cartel murder of 43 young student-teachers of the Rural Teachers College of Ayotzinapa, a majority Leftist school, came a new or renewed focus to the youth movement. The politically-motivated "disappearances" of the 43 which occurred after some students of the College had planned to commandeer buses to protest at an upcoming march in Mexico City on the anniversary of the 1968 massacre at Tlatelolco were originally blamed solely on cartel violence by the State which had also perpetrated the terror. In response to the terror and obscurantism of the State and the police, resistance chants began to emerge and spread, demanding the truth: "Fue el estado" [It was the State], "Con vida los llevaron, con vida los queremos!" [They were taken alive and we want them back alive!].

Resistance direct actions across Mexico, such as the strike at the Women's Rural Teacher's College, were accompanied by demands for the return of the 43. Again the poet Javier Sicilia marched in Mexico City in support. The words on many lips were "¡*Ya basta*!" [Enough!] In June 2015, thousands of Oaxaca teachers of the CNTE teachers union marched to Mexico City, demanding the return of the 43, burning ballots as a gesture of no confidence with the government, blockading gasoline deliveries and declaring an indefinite strike.[11] In October of 2015, on the anniversary of Tlatelolco, and against the killing of the normalistas, many resistance groups, a swarm of about 15,000, marched to the Zócalo (central square) in Mexico City on the Governor's Palace and some attempted a siege, setting the vehicles outside aflame and trying to bust in the door with a massive improvised battering ram fashioned from a barricade.

A debate surrounding insurrectional violence arose when the masked poet Sandino Bucio was identified in a widely circulated photo[12] throwing molotovs back at the police during the November 20th, 2014 General Strike actions, which blockaded Benito Juarez International Airport on the centennial of Día de la Revolución (Revolution Day) in the wake of Ayotzinapa. Even some former allies derided him or critiqued him for engaging in these actions. A week later, the poet was abducted by police,[13] tortured and threatened with terror along with 10 other detainees. They were eventually released after outcry in early December of 2014.

Border-Area Seeds

That the international media has tended to focus what little it has reported on the entanglement of poetry and resistances in Mexico post-Ayotzinapa on several individual male

poets is also significant, and border-area poets and poetry collectives have responded critically to the limitations of this focus. For Aurelio Meza Valdez, in "On Poetry After Ayotzinapa,"[14] writing shortly after and "in the middle of" the massacre, which some like José Manuel Valenzuela have argued is part of a larger pattern of massacre of an entire generation of youth by the State in the post-financial crisis era ("Juvenicido"[15]), poetry was dead and impossible in some sense after this atrocity:

> ...decolonizar los saberes...Todo lo demás son chaquetas mentales. No escribas para que todos vean cuánto te importa Ayotzinapa, escribe porque quieres destruir ese sistema podrido de intercambio de adjudicaciones (positivas, como cuando te dan *like* por *postear "* ¡Basta Ya! Justicia para Ayotzinapa" o negativas, como en las acusaciones de complicidad entre Peña Nieto y López Obrador) en medio de una masacre. Abandona tu posición de privilegio a través de tu escritura.
>
> [decolonize knowledge...All else is mentally masturbatory...Do not write to show everyone to show them how much you care about Ayotzinapa, write because you want to destroy the rotten system of exchange which rewards (positively, like giving a superficial 'like' on a *post* of "¡Basta Ya! Justicia para Ayotzinapa" or negatively, like the accusations of complicity between Peña Nieto and López Obrador) in the middle of a massacre. Abandon your privileged position in the course of your writing.] [Thanks to Raquel Pacheco for her help with translating this passage.][16]

However, even at this time he sees the tactical metaphors of "semillas," (seeds) as compelling and also describes the national anthem of Mexico as a form of regressive and ideology-enforced poetry, the knowledge of which enables Mexican citizenship, preventing one from being identified as "illegal immigrant," and he calls for poetry that would confront nationalism, anti-nationalist poetry which goes beyond parody but reaching into a "symbolic-ritual enaction" which can help create the conditions for real change, a poetry that would enable a new way of collective being in the world, not only of working alongside the people, but "Abandonar el yo y el ustedes para finalmente hundirse en el nosotros" "Abandon the *I*

and the *you* in order finally to plunge into the *we*." Of Javier Sicilia he reminds us that he is one individual poet projected into the public sphere, while the normalistas were a collective group, part of a highly vulnerable population of a rural school.

Imuris Valle, who identifies herself as "student, activist and mother" chronicles her firsthand poetic-critical-activist account of October 2014's march in the remarkable and moving piece "Mar de luces por Ayotzinapa" [A sea of lights for Ayotzinapa].[17] Divided into 43 theses or separate observations from the march, the piece records flashpoints in the swarm in motion, blending realism with flights of eruptive and moody sociality in vibrance. As if recalling Meza's exhortation in his essay to plunge the *I* and the *you* into the *we*, Valle's piece takes motion. "10. - It begins to darken outside and we are in Angel. Suddenly I hear a shout: '*today we light candles/tomorrow barricades*.' I turn and look curiously at the statue of the Angel of Independence, feeling that he/she is one of those who animates me to chronicle the events unfolding at his feet." Her #11 begins: "The torches are lit, it is the time to share fires." She describes as well the scabs in the march who hide their walkie-talkies in their jackets as if preparing notes to write for *The Infiltrator*, the punks who offer to assist old ladies at busy crossings, deeply listening to the accompaniment of Mercedes Sosa, a "collective intelligence" working at a "Gordian knot" ["because we are so many and we are leaderless"], the "shhh" of a motorcycle, the chants "fascist government you slaughtered the normalistas/ but here we are/shoulder-to-shoulder" and she sees the march as actually three different but parallel marches, each with their own separate rhythms. "Lo grito a ritmo de rap" she spits with a rapper's verve. The immensity of the Narcoestado, the narco-bureaucracy. "But I believe in art and in culture/ against dictatorship/that's why I quit my job this Wednesday…"

In any place where speaking the truth in public, or simply saying the 'wrong' thing, can get one killed or "desaparecido" it is of course the case that, as June Jordan says in *Life As Activism*, "poetry is a political act because speaking the truth is a political act"— In a strange paradox—aren't we all?— poetry, as well, tells its truths through artifice, as in Jhonnatan Curiel's poem “El levantón” [The abduction][18] which imagines the scene of capture, abduction, disappearance at a time when in Mexico several young poets had been abducted for speaking up and engaging in political action.

El levantón	**The abduction**
	Translated by Francisco Bustos, Sonia Gutiérrez, Olga Garcia and Jhonnatan Curiel
El día que suceda el levantón voy a estar arriba de mi hamaca emocional estaré tranquilo con todos y con todo no voy resistirme a sus armas no voy perturbar a mi conciencia tranquila	The day of the abduction I will be on my emotional hammock I will be gentle with everybody and everything I will not resist their weapons I will not trouble my contented conscience
El día que suceda el levantón cuando me violenten les devolveré una sonrisa y sabré que jamás odié ni me dejé comprar y por eso me sentiré dichoso	The day of the abduction when they turn violence upon me I will return a smile and will know that I never hated and did not sell out and for that I’ll feel privileged
El día que suceda el levantón estaré listo pues todo lo que pude hacer lo hice amé con oleadas pasión sufrí como las ramas en el árbol seco aprendí a dar pasos en la sangre	

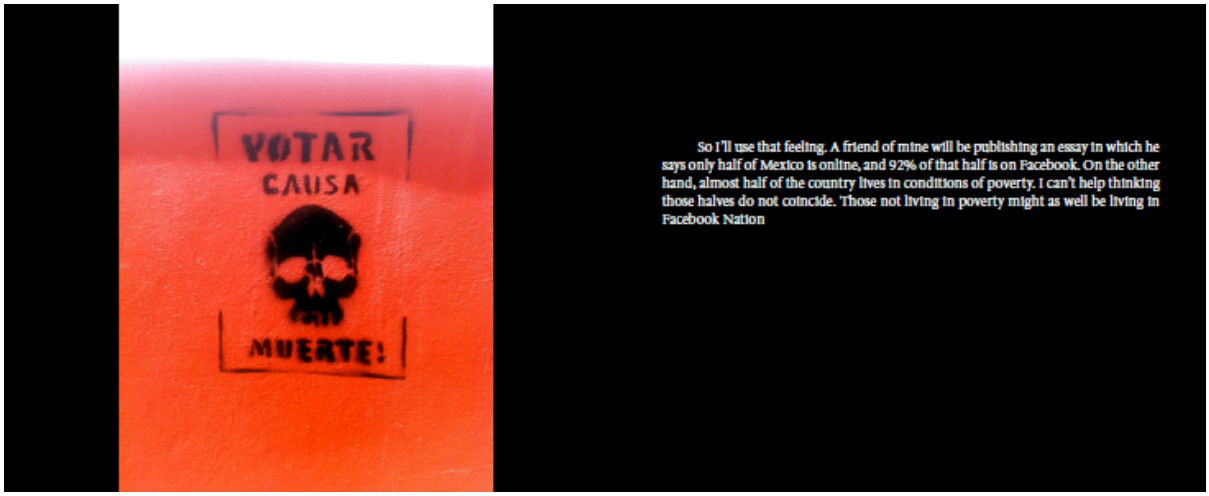
El día que suceda el levantón tomaré un profundo y blanco respiro y sabré que me dirijo hacia una muerte segura yo mismo subiré a la cajuela yo mismo me pondré la capucha El día que suceda el levantón cerraré los ojos como jamás los he cerrado cerraré todo el cuerpo como un párpado dejaré que me cubran las sombras tendré miedo pero hasta el último de mis momentos sabré que todo lo que tengo es lo que soy y todo lo que soy me basta para dejar de existir.	The day of the abduction I will be ready for everything I could do—I did I loved with waves of passion suffered like branches on a dry tree learned to take steps on blood The day of the abduction I will take a pale, profound breath and I will know death awaits me I myself will get into the trunk I myself will put the hood on The day of the abduction I will close my eyes like I have never done I will close all my body like an eyelid I will allow shadows to overtake my body I will be afraid but know even in my last moments that everything I have is what I am and everything I am will be enough to cease existing.

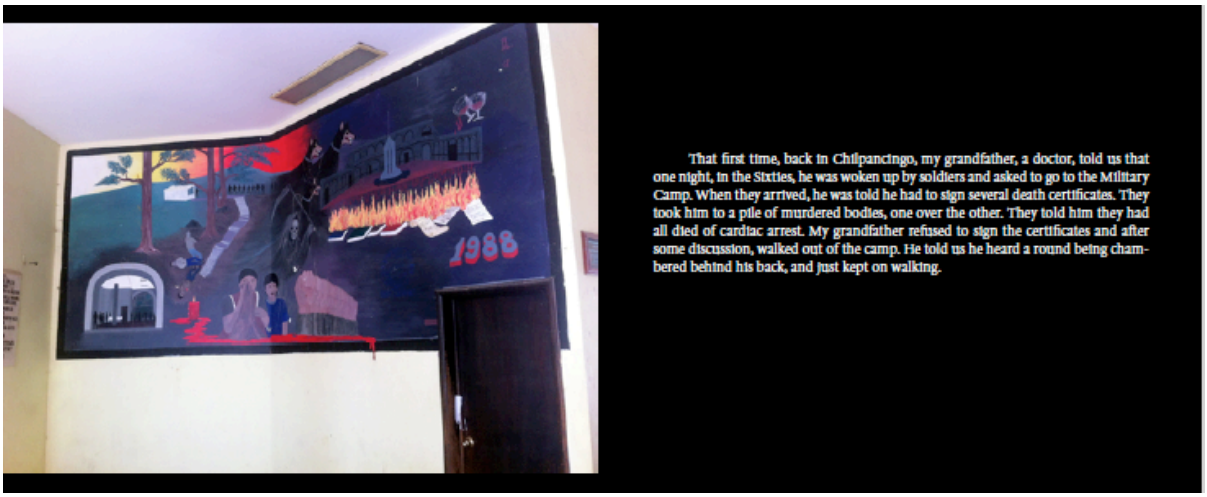
This poem certainly confronts its own privilege with a enacted abandonment, as if to also respond to Meza's call to use writing to abandon privilege. But early on the irony in the piece hints at the impossible and comforting fantasy of this gratuitous self-abandonment in the face of the machinery of state violence, as if it were also a form of privilege, the hammock of presumed choice, or of those who judge other activists secondhand for not resisting according to an ideal. But another remarkable thing happens: where the poem arrives is not at all where it started. It is as if the poem has finally begun to let a tiny bit of the sincere vulnerability and

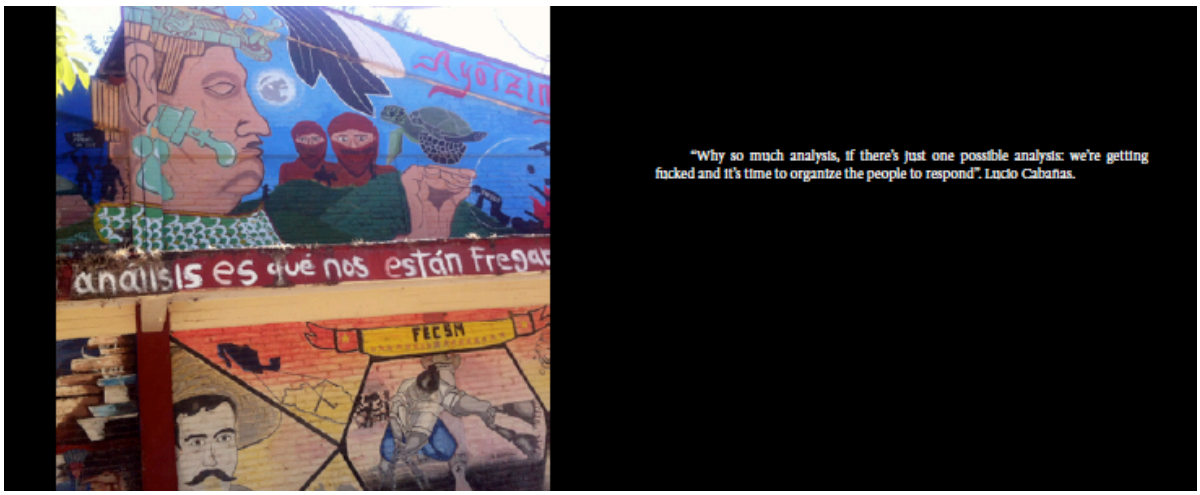
reality and even resistance into its consciousness, even as the *I* melts away in the knowing fiction. If the lyricism of the poem arrives at the "we" it is in the collective translation of the poem, it is in the way that the poem's stanzas recall so many who are mourned in real life, it is in the embodied poet who may speak this at a gathering knowing that it could be any of them facing this tomorrow, not justifiably. The poem confronts the messiness of human experience which is the implicit reality that it draws upon, while expressing a sort of compassion in its rewriting of the scene of capture, and it challenges us to each think about how we might judge others' actions. Curiel's performance for the series LETRAS POR AYOTZINAPA [Letters for Ayotzinapa] makes for an embodied, heart-pumping experience of the rhythm of blood, the sound of blood "son de la sangre"[19] using imagery of the living and the dead, manifesting in trance-like rhythm and performative imagery at times invoking Pre-Columbian indigenous practices. By invoking the rhythm of blood, bodies, earth, fire, the heart within the body, out to the planets, Curiel's poem draws our attention to the violence of memory and also confronts with a resistant and defiant sense of rage in mourning.

Tijuana-San Diego poet and science fiction writer's Pepe Rojo's creative-critical hybrid-genre poetic project, "AYOTZINAPA: A Piece For Facebook Nation"[20] also confronts differentials of privilege and complicity in Mexico, social media perceptions vs. on-the-ground activism, strange moments of humor along with deep mourning. Rojo narrates his journey to Ayotzinapa, five months after the normalistas went missing, and documents past visits, interspersing memoir, political history and images of the place. I cannot read this generously honest work without crying; there is something about the understatement in it under which deep pain resides, and the willingness to face uncomfortable feelings and complexities on the part of the author. The piece engages with visual representation of the

tragedy and with continuing resistances in this place, along with what it means to be a writer and a person (a parent, a Leftist, a child once) amidst such a history.

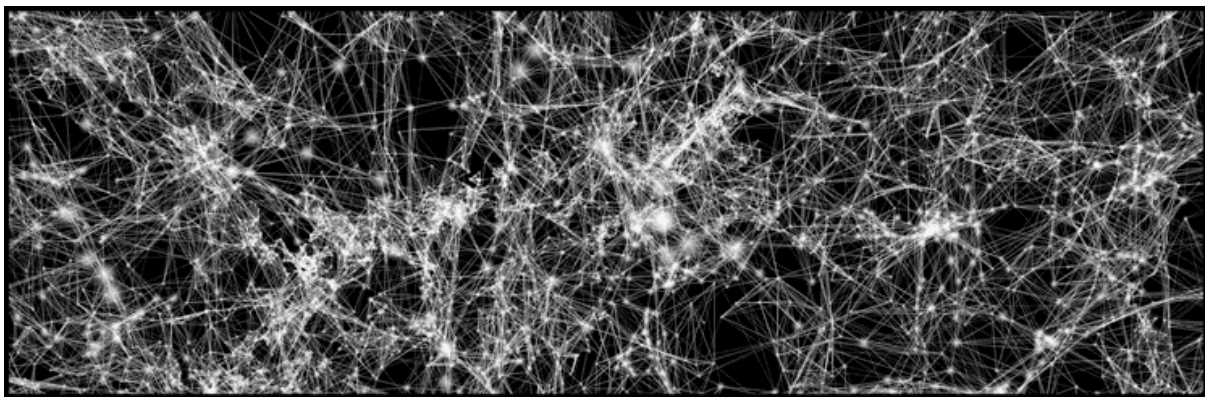






If resistance is also that which can evade, reemerge and resound beyond the state's uses post-mourning and post-crisis, how do we prevent forgetting, how do we respond after what seems like an endless repression, when the heart fills with pain in a world of war, how do we hold and share light? To quote Imuris Valle, "The torches are lit, it is the time to share fires." To quote Pepe Rojo, "So I'll use that feeling."

Stars



"unveiling a deep universality of the cosmic web [of galaxies]." Visualization by Kim Albrecht.
Astrophysics

In Kumeyaay cosmology or My Uuyow (Sky Knowledge), the Milky Way is regarded as the Spine of the Sky. In Japanese and Chinese mythology, and in the writing of some classical poets (Du Fu and Li Qingzhao in particular) the Milky Way represents a great cosmic river. The latest visualizations of the known universe in astrophysics have unveiled "a deep universality of the cosmic web" of interrelated galaxies.[21] Fredric Jameson, who wrote what might be considered the seed of his 2005 *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* while at UC San Diego: his essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture"[22] (published in *Social Text*, 1979, and well worth a re-read) argues against some prevalent Leftist notions of its era, critiquing the limits of Adorno on mass culture, stating "We therefore need a method capable of doing justice to both the ideological and the Utopian or transcendent functions of mass culture simultaneously. Nothing less will do, as the suppression of either of these terms may testify."[23] Since this time, Jameson has maintained the view that utopian and revolutionary desires are a necessity in the face of the age of global capital, and in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and*

Other Science Fictions, uses the metaphor of archipelagos to envision a de-centered and decolonized radical past and present in which islands in the stream become nodes of resistance equal or greater to the powers of the mainland: "In this spirit [which considers the non-communicability or antagonism of its component parts] I propose to think of our autonomous and non-communicating Utopias—which can range from wandering tribes and settled villages all the way to great city-states and regional ecologies—as so many islands: a Utopian archipelago, islands in the net, a constellation of discontinuous centers, themselves internally decentered."[23]

During the University of California San Diego 2016 inauguration day J20 (January 20th) wildcat strike, after an all-day march on the picket, in which students shut down roads and blockaded parking lots and the administrative complex on-campus, three women of color in the STEM fields and members of the Lumumba Zapata Collective, an intersectional, anti-fascist, anti-racist, multiracial, anti-capitalist collective, read from a collectively-written poetic statement which invoked the metaphor of the stars: “Science fact! Did you know that people are made of stars?/These burning clusters of gas collapse under their own weight,/exploding into new elements/Creating the moon, the Earth/the atoms that shape our bodies.” This tactical metaphor of stars, collectively authored, becomes also a way of speaking of the intersectionality of a multiplicities of identities and struggles, internally decentered:

> We are STEM
> And we also are made of stars.
> We also are brilliant and we also are women
> and we are black, we are brown
> and we are Asian, native, Muslim, Jewish, Christian
> We are trans, queer, straight,
> We have disabilities of different visibilities

And we deal with insecurities
And we each
contain multitudes of these identities.

In their use of the constellation and cosmic metaphors, these students, writing poetry for the first time in many cases, joined a long tradition of radical thought and radical poetics. In their oblique reference to Walt Whitman's "Song Of Myself" ["contain multitudes"] they reference an always-transforming work written by a working-class and queer author which at its best legendarily embraces the swarm by decentering the idea of the self outward to encompass multitudes of the collective, including slaves, women, and the poor, to counter the tradition of American individualism, while retaining individuality of expression. In their statement, these students of the Lumumba Zapata Collective foregrounded climate change and denounced scientific complicity in militarization and environmental destruction. Playfully they continued their straight-up science fact poetics against the ethical and social limits of empiricism: "So we must not work LOST in thought but FOUND by answers,/not WITHIN reason but elevated by it./Rational/is not passion, y'all./Empirical/is not the same as ethical/Statistics/are NOT individuals."[25] To some experimental poets and academics, this might read simplistically, but this clever internal slant rhyme and idiom-play expresses one half the critique of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* as if the better parts of Adorno and Horkheimer's philosophical argument were made popularly accessible, warmer, feminist, and decolonized!

Our radical tradition's long history of stellar metaphors also includes those who fought back during the 1969 Stonewall riots in resistance to police, such as Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, civil rights activists who founded STAR in 1970 (Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries).[26] The metaphor of dispersed power which escapes and exceeds the

state's uses in the form of seeds of resistance is expanded outwards to constellations of islands in archipelagos and outward still to star systems and galaxies scattered like infinite seeds throughout the universe: "our universes extend well beyond the university." This is a form of universality and counterepic solidarity which recognizes interconnection and encourages cooperation of allies while simultaneously recognizing "we are not all positioned equally,"[27] striving for horizontalism[28] in collective organization, against the formation of hierarchies, as difficult as this can be to prevent. The Zapatistas themselves also famously invoked the "Encuentro Intergaláctico" [Intergalactic Meeting], "invitó a todas las formas sensibles de vida de otros planetas en la galaxia a participar en el evento. "No sé si realmente vinieron al primer Encuentro Intergaláctico," [inviting all sentient forms of life of other planets in the galaxy to participate in the event]" and the bemused addition, ["I don't know if they really came to the first Intergalactic Meeting. At least, they never identified themselves."].[29]

In their use of stellar metaphors, border-area collectives are invoking this long radical tradition of imagining decentered resistances, demonstrating an always-awareness that seemingly disconnected nodes of resistance actually can represent what Niall Twohig, in his UC San Diego dissertation, *Revolutionary Constellations: Seeing Revolution Beyond the Dominant Frames* (2016), calls "an undeniably interconnected planetary community":

> When we look deeply at the flashpoints of revolutionary life that burn against the backdrop of the historical universe, we reach the same insight. Their physical collapse is never their end. Rather, the ripples of revolutionary life continue beyond the death of the body or the collapse of the movement...Once we break our view from [dominant frames of liberalism], we will be able to reconnect the revolutionary dead to their named and unnamed kin who are scattered across time and space. We will be able to form a constellation from their spatially and temporally to see that they are never alone, that they are never merely a footnote from a dead page of history.[30]

In figuring time and space in this expansive way in a radical cosmology and a living history, we can see beyond the limitations of the dominant view of social movements to a sense of solidarity, community and radical time without sacrificing a complex understanding of difference: a red shift which allows for parallax.

Swarms

Freeway protests on Highway 5 near La Jolla, CA in San Diego circa Dec 2014[31]

Because so much has been said and resaid on the negative valences of the swarm, in the sense of its dystopian character and potential, I am much more interested in the positive

valences of the swarm as the movement of resistances. I am much more interested in considering the ways that the real movement of "swarms" as spontaneous diverse collective formations are described and proscribed and determined by fears around race, class, gender and invading "hordes," and how collectives have embraced and mobilized the swarm.

In her book *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (Verso, 2015), Kristin Ross argues that for Marx, during and after the Paris Commune, one of the things that the swarm comes to represent is a "possibility of multiple paths to socialism" (p. 26), the "'buzzing hives' that were the revolutionary clubs of the Seige."[32] In her chapter in *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* titled "The Swarm," Ross regards the crowd's "swarm-movement" as a sort of network which, as Donald Bruce and Anthony George Purdy in their *Literature and Science* note "resembles a capillary network and contains many elements of unpredictability," concluding that for Ross, the communal "mixed, chaotic and (and spontaneous) constructions" of the swarm include both "barricades" and "vagabondage," as well as spontaneous crowds.[33] Importantly, in a chapter of *Communal Luxury* aptly titled "Seeds Beneath the Snow"—a metaphor that perhaps not entirely coincidentally echoes the popular Mexican resistance slogan after Ayotzinapa "they tried to bury us, but they didn't know we were seeds"—thinking the present toward the future, Ross also asserts that "A strategic position based on non-alignment, one that implies a slavish commitment to neither anarchism nor Marxism, and on association over sectarianism, may well be worth considering today."[34]

In their coauthored article "Arte, literatura y acción colectiva en Tijuana-San Diego," [Art, Literature, and Collective Action in Tijuana-San Diego] which considers political-poetic collective actions in the San Diego-Tijuana border area, Tijuana poets and writers Ana Lilia

Nieto Camacho and Aurelio Meza Valdez reference Deleuze and Guattari's figuration of the rhizomatic swarm of the collective: "lineas de fuga" or "lines of flight," the collective swarm's multiple paths through the liminal border cities.

> Meza and Nieto interview representatives of multiple border-area collectives—including Curiel of Colectivo Intransigente and Misael Díaz, who, with Amy Sanchez, founded the artistic and political group Cog•nate Collective. Members of these collectives affirm the importance of "poética politica" gestures and actions as catalysts for larger social movements and for change. For Díaz, one role of poetry is to move the intimate and personal to a place which not only acknowledges and respects the other but serves as a tool, an artefact [artifact, perhaps punning on "arte" or art en espagnol and on "fact" in English] or device for doing so in the "social and political sphere":
>
> En un momento cuando influyentes pensadores miran con sospecha la producciónartística contemporánea, algunos creadores han dejado de cuestionarse hasta qué grado sus actividades pueden considerarse artísticas. Una prueba fehaciente es la inclinación hacia lo político en Intransigente, la "poética política" de la que hablaba Curiel en entrevista con Misael Díaz. Las acciones de Intransigente, dice Díaz, son "not just a reminder, but a call to action, a demonstration of their fervent belief that speech—as writing, as poetry, and/or as debate—can catalyze change" (Díaz, 2012b). Ese es el gesto que motiva acciones como las Intransigencias o Anastasio Catarsis, pero el público medio no las parece comprender en ese sentido. Y es así como Díaz comprende el camino que llevó a la conformación de Intransigente, en el que la poesía se convirtió en un artefacto para entrar en contacto con otros: […] poetry begins as a way of understanding the self, but ultimately transcends the individual and becomes a tool to understand and better recognize, respect, and acknowledge the other. In this way, poetry moves from the realm of the personal and intimate, to the social and political sphere.[35]

As one example of this power of poetry and speech as a catalyst for change, Meza and Nieto also refer to Colectivo Intransigente's action Anastasio Catarsis, a poetic-political action including a march and a sonic component which the Collective organized after the death of Anastacio Hernández Rojas, an undocumented worker murdered by la migra/border patrol agents at the San Ysidro border in 2010. Colectivo Intransigente[36] "takes its name from the Spanish word *intransigencia*, which Curiel explains as signifying both a refusal to

compromise and the capacity to transgress, to go beyond": intransigency, transborder, transformative, etc. Colectivo Intransigente's poetic dérives go into public spaces: roads, bridges, borders. They travel on buses, creating collective performances together.[37] Cog*nate Collective's Border Line Broadcasts/Borderblaster Transmissions, called "Poetic Dérive," "Open Address" and "Mixtape for the Crossing," variously, involve a moving reading and a mobile soundsystem, with Tijuana and San Diego poets traversing the border. This work examines the economic, social and cultural flows of border and differentials of meaning within these transborder spaces.[38]

Karen Marquez reading at Cognate Space. |Photo by Misael Diaz.

Borderblaster: Listening Station playing Transmission 4, "Poetic Dérive" to pedestrians waiting in line to cross into the United States. Photo by Misael Diaz[39]

The Present

Linking arms in a circle, against the privatization of water and the deregulation of gasoline, in which government subsidies are being removed, and against Pena Nieto and the Mexican government, after news that Mexican government officials had received massive bonuses at the same time and gasoline vouchers, and that cartels would benefit from the general misery, protesters have shut down the border for at least seven straight weekends at the San Ysidro San Diego/Tijuana Border Port of Entry since January 2017.[40] A little of the electric energy can be felt at this film documentation of one of the earlier border blockades, posted to the video site Periscope here[41]: https://www.periscope.tv/w/1lPJqRwgpwMxb. Las Patronas are a collective of women who provide food and water to migrants crossing North on trains to the U.S.[42]

This direct material aid is radical, highly organized, and has been going on for nearly 20 years. Since the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper after the beginning of NAFTA in 1994, an estimated nearly 10,000 people[43] have died trying to make the perilous crossing into the U.S. from Mexico. Now with the U.S. Executive Order and the threat of a further border wall, more than ever border area collective resistance is needed to this repression.

Undocumented migrants reach for bags of food and refilled water bottles thrown at them by women of the border-area collective Las Patronas. Water bottles are strung in pairs for easier catching.[44]

The last two years in San Diego have seen not just the freeway blockades, airport protests against the Executive Order and border blockades, but also the creation of an swarming influx of collectives which engage in direct action and mutual aid, many of which work together. Lumumba Zapata Collective, previously-discussed, is one of these.[45] Other student collectives include LitAction, in its activism against UCSD's Literature Building cancer cluster and other structural actions,[46] the Che Cafe Collective, a radical non-hierarchical music and organizing space saved after a four-month occupation of the building by students while under threat of the San Diego Sheriff who threatened to remove students "by any means necessary,"[47] the radical bookstore Groundwork Books and its Books for

Prisoners, Black and Pink San Diego, the UCSD Faculty Collective, the transborder art action collective Collective Magpie,[48] the seed-bombing, past-future transborder experiment Tierra y Libertad ("all of these gestures are planned to be undertaken with a group of friends in your neighborhood. that's our anarchist nature."),[49] the Electronic Disturbance Theater collective and its material gestures of disruption of the space of the border, such as the Transborder Immigrant Tool, utilizing "burner" phones, and many others. This rhizomatic swarm of border-area collectives is characterized by a merging of poetry and poetics and art with radical politics, with the current generation embracing cross-border, transnational and multiracial, intersectional resistance.

The structure of many of these recent collectives blends communal vision with autonomous praxis, striving to avoid a situation of control, hierarchy or an enforced adherence to an ideological party-line:

> Cada miembro no está condicionado por ninguna atadura ideológica al colectivo y aunque compartimos ideales en común, cada uno conserva su criterio e individualidad con respecto a los demás. De manera individual cada quien es responsable de su formación artística así como el desarrollo de su propia obra.
>
> [Each member is not conditioned to any ideological attachment to the collective and though we share ideals in common, each retains their own opinions/discretion and individuality with respect to the others. Individually everyone is responsible for their artistic training and the development of their own projects.][50]

The collective at its best as a space of radical belonging, not defined primarily by exclusion. It is also, at its best, a space of productive division, not sameness, a space of imaginative possibility, vital, fluid and open to new ideas.

During the LZC wildcat strike on the U.S. Inauguration Day, at UC San Diego, one participant carried a sign: “Toward an Anti-Fascist University”; another bore a quotation from former UCSD student Angela Davis: “Racism Cannot Be Separated From Capitalism.” A raging resistance dance party developed in the midst of the pouring rain, one of fiercest SoCal storms in many years. Participants danced to songs from a Collective Playlist. One of the most memorable moments came when a circle dance formed, participants dancing to what is arguably set to become one of the most powerful protest songs of the last 10 years, the song "Hell You Talmbout" by Janelle Monáe, Deep Cotton, St. Beauty, Jidenna, Roman GianArthur and George 2.0.[51] This song speaks the names of people of color killed by police, repeating the refrain, “Say his name/Say her name” in order to create a manifestation of remembrance. Ricardo Dominguez, along with MFA artists Lisa Korpos and Grace M. Huddleston, developed a gesture for the event, performance in which the dancers of the march could elect to be tied loosely in the same red web, red thread which connected all of them continuously, making visible these lines visible and invisible that connect the constellatory nodes of the collective swarm. So we found ourselves dancing beside our old and new friends and compas, and some we did not know, with red webs loosely entwining us in an interdependency. “Dance close,” Dominquez intoned.

That many of all of these disruptions were performative, symbolic and short-lived does not take away from their power of defiance in a climate of disappearance, or as a poetics of against, or in recognition of, the replicating crisis states that capitalism both creates and inflicts. Poetry intersects with the material dialectic of history insofar as praxis around poetry and poets become lived experience. Making art together (poetry and other art) can be not simply "symbolic" in a collective but can be a form of mutual aid, especially when done in

cooperation with other forms of material support and political action. In her “Mar de luces por Ayotzinapa,” [“Sea of Lights for Ayotzinapa”], Imuris Valle quotes a chant still relevant and pressing now, in an age of growing totalitarianism and the multiple decentered material resistances to its oppressions, a counterepic movement made up of the voices of many, those rootless, poor, and disenfranchised on both sides of the border: “Si el presente es de lucha, el futuro es nuestro,” “If the present is struggle, the future is ours.”[52] They tried to bury us: but they didn't know we were seeds. They tried to bury us, but didn't know we were seeds, stars, swarms.

Chapter 6.2: ***Brujas*, Tech Travelers, and Genre-Breaking: San Diego Speculative Counterepic**

In *Modernity At Large*, writing of the "Here and Now," Arjun Appadurai posits "The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape. "[1] Appadurai frames his analysis in political economy, arguing that "transforming and extending Albert Hirschman's important terms *loyalty* and *exit*, we may speak of diasporas of diasporas of terror, and diasporas of despair." Note that Hirshman, whose argument Appadurai transforms in the context of migration, uses these terms (*loyalty* and *exit*) to describe the ways in which the experience of immigration and emigration to the U.S. by oppressed groups has presented incredibly long-lasting impacts on American ideology (Hirshman: "The United States owes its very existence and growth to millions of decisions favoring exit ").[2] Modifying Hirshman, Appadurai sees a radical potential for action in displacement and the diaspora after trauma, a radical potential which I'd like to call the resilient imagination: quote "But in every case, these diasporas bring the force of the imagination, as both memory and desire, into the lives of many ordinary people ..."[3] In the Introduction to this dissertation, I argued that poetry, radical resistance and science fiction are connected in that each can be a space of empathetic imagination; that the forms of speculative thought inherent to each form can and do have radical potential.

The three works of contemporary speculative literature that I analyze in the conclusion to this final chapter, three counterepic works by San Diego Chicanx authors responding to the current climate, are Manuel Paul López's poetry and hybrid-genre collection *These Days of Candy* (Noemi, 2017), Alfredo Aguilar's post-apocalyptic speculative narrative epic poem

What Happens on Earth (BOAAT, 2018), and Lizz Huerta's in-progress near-future story cycle "The Wall" (2019). Engaging with technologies of resistance, and tapping into the resilient imagination with empathy, I argue—writing this at a time when Trump is again threatening to close the border, and in which multiple protests strike against Otay Mesa Detention Center, and others in San Diego—that these works imagine forms of resistance, resilience, recovery and at times, revolution, within diasporic and traumatic conditions. These counterepics embrace resilent imagination, whether these conditions are brought on post-collapse of infrastructures, of economic systems, of ecologies, or by the task of surviving and fighting back within Empire and within neo-fascist rule.

In addition, I argue that Aguilar's, Huerta's, and López's counterepic writing also breaks genre conventions, using hybrid forms which inhabit the zones between prose and poetry, between speculative fiction and poetry, between post-apocalyptic fiction, fantasy and science fiction; non-binary and liminal spaces which reflect our border region's lived experience of liminal, contested and transformative spaces.

The Empathetic Imagination

In order to understand how these three speculative counterepic works of cross-genre fiction and poetry by San Diego Chicanx writers reflect these liminal and contested border spaces, let's review the connections which I made in my introduction between the three forms of speculative literature, poetry, and activism. We began with the 2019 essay "The Word for Empathy is Sci-Fi," in which Jamie Green claims "All science fiction is work of imagining. *Empathetic* imagining, though, is the real gift... Empathy begets openness, after all, which includes openness to hurt. But it begets more empathy, too—a rising tide."[4] I argued that I

think that we can extend this claim of empathetic imagining not only to science fiction but also to poetry, another genre continually opening outward into numerous doors and windows; in fact, each of these genres, which intersect far more often than one might think, are uniquely positioned for this empathetic work.

In her indispensable genre-breaking book of scholarship and poetry, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria E. Anzaldúa writes that to live in the borderlands means that you must develop a "mestiza consciousness"—a sense of being neither one nor the other, of moving between worlds and within a matrix of mixed cultures, living between contradictions. Using poetry as a tool for scholarship and for activism, Anzaldúa describes the borderlands as a liminal space which threatens violence, in which one lives "caught in the crossfire between camps," and is "stopped by *la migra* at border checkpoints," and then rests in an uneasy "truce," in which you are simultaneously "at home" and "a stranger." And her feminism of the borderlands also includes an intersectional consciousness of trans-gression, trans-nationalism, and trans-gender ways of thinking. She describes the unique way that living in the environment of the borderlands, especially as a Chincanx, creates a need to be neither man nor woman, but a "new gender." One of the sharpest ironies of living this way of border mestiza consciousness is that "in order to survive" "you must live *sin fronteras*/ be a crossroads"[5]: to live in the borderlands, one must live without borders, and be an intersection. San Diego/Tijuana borderlands writers inhabit these contradictions, and the three counterepics of the borderlands I will describe not only "live" on in the crux of *loyalty* and *exit* and in the intersections of the necessities of multiple cultures, but also imagine new fluid ways, *sin fronteras*, to survive.

"it's so beautiful when we can suddenly look up and survive"/
"TRUCHA PORQUE NO HAY TIEMPO"

Manuel Paul López's poetry collection *These Days of Candy* and the long counterepic eponymous poem of the same collection break genre conventions in several ways. López uses a mashed-up hybrid-genre blend of visual poetry, screenplay, and mixtape forms to examine things like identity, artistic process, survival in a repressive era, love, music, and critique of late capitalism. The heros and heroine of this poem are two luciarnagas, or fireflies, named Elias the Doom Boy and Mouse Pad Becky. These two fireflies, traveling from their podunk town of Hard Bent Tube Sock (or is it a literal sock? in poetry we're not sure) go on an epic Borgesian quest to find first an old man named Don Felipe and then to seek the guidance of a tech traveler named Mr. Signal, who is rumored to have the ability to stop time and to hold the secrets of Jorge Luis Borges's Aleph in a portal in his basement. It's a madcap journey of humor and earnestness, a journey for various forms of knowledge.

Let's return to the Appadurai text I quoted earlier for a minute. He goes on to note mass media's potential for local repertoires of resistance:

> There is growing evidence that the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, agency. ...T-shirts, billboards, and graffiti as well as rap music, street dancing, and slum housing all show that the images of the media are quickly moved into local repertoires of irony, anger, humor, and resistance.[6]

López's fractured epic poem blends elements of social media pastiche, mass media and memes (hashtags, superhero merchandise, and the language of online news posts) with earnest philosophizing by a large cast of characters, which includes, besides the two fireflies, and Don Felipe and Mr. Signal, an artistic character named Gronk, Sawfish 1 and 2, Radio Mind, the ripraps, Mama Flesh and Bone, and others. These many characters navigate the borderlands

and their "local repertoires" of multiple cultural spaces with irony, anger, humor, and resistance. A new soundtrack emerges, one that is dialogic, multitudinous, cracklingly musical.

The entire long poem is structured cinematically around the mixtape form, and songs such as David Bowie's "Lady Stardust" (which plays from an ancient cassette when Elias the luciarnaga enters the basement rumored to hold the Aleph at the end) play key roles in the poem's ludic cinematics, as do visual poems in the form of *calligrammes*. Just one of these moments: "I don't understand" says the firefly Elias the Doom Boy, or ETDB, for short. "Because we're an ineffable architecture of love!" responds his friend and fellow firefly Mouse Pad Becky, and balloon-shaped visual calligrammes made up of the repeated word VISION rise on the verso page.[7]

The balance of surreal absurdism throughout the poem with earnestness (another talent that recalls things Borgesian) makes all these collisions of characters and viewpoints more than just passing fancies of language or candyfloss flashes of color. Surely, López delights in riddles: palindromes, like "Alli trota la tortilla" and "puzzle pieces," and finding meanings in drifting radio sounds. By making the "hero" of this counterepic "These Days of Candy" a luciarnaga or firefly, the author draws our attention to one little light's journey and effect on others. Hence the "hero" in this surreal epic is quite small, unlikely as a hero. His path is one of the artist trying to find his way through the borderlands, trying to understand his art, but it is also a collective journey of friendship, as this firefly is just one among many. Confused by the visionary quest and the guides who offer him advice on his journey he also confronts the limits and power of his talents for illumination. There are also elements of the underworld journeys of epic inversion: on his quest to find Mr. Signal, Elias the luciarnaga must ascend a

mountain to its summit; at the top is a Winchell's donut stand; then he must descend into the basement, an overwhelming smell of dough and sugar surrounding him, and tell Mr. Signal he is ready to see the Aleph, which as in the Borges story is a sign containing all knowledge, a vision of everything, knowing he "may never return." In the basement he finds a tape deck, and a copy of "Lady Stardust," which he inserts into the tape deck. A portal seems to open, a portal of glowing light, which he disappears into, merges with, and the door closes, leaving only a flickering bulb in the basement. In the final scene of his epic journey, we see him reunited with Mouse Pad Becky, his firefly friend, and perhaps his parents. Has he passed into an afterlife, a death, or a birth to a new form of knowledge and awareness of life? The poem is ambiguous, the end sad yet joyful in its surreal goodbye.

The poem references not only visionary, surreal epic journeys through language such as are found in Borges's stories like "The Aleph"[8] but also Classical Western epics like *The Odyssey* and *Dante's Divine Comedy*. The chorus of Moaning Malevolents recall the Sirens or the shades of the underworld, and he must pass through the Lost River which "no matter how thirsty you are...you cannot drink from"[9] which recalls Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in the Greek underworld and likewise in Dante's *Inferno*, which to drink from extinguishes memory.

In addition, there are references in *These Days of Candy* to Mexican and Chicanx folklore of The Day of the Dead, in which sweets such as sugar skulls are an element celebrating death as a transition of life, and honoring family members and ancestors. The journey of fireflies recalls the migration of monarch butterflies, who in Mexican and Chicanx folklore represent the souls of those who have passed, and which return every year to the forests of the mountains in fall to overwinter. In addition, the image of the monarch butterfly has been adopted as a symbol of the beauty of migration, of diaspora, of people traveling

under very difficult conditions looking for a better life, for solace, of people living in the metamorphoses of the borderlands. There are also echoes of this in the journey of the luciarnagas. The Winchell's Donut stand with its overpowering smell of sugar and donuts might recall the sweet smells of pan de muerto, or bread of the dead. The figure of Don Felipe is a kind of guide on Elias the Firefly's journey, as Vergil for Dante in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and Mouse Pad Becky perhaps a kind of Beatrice with which he is reunited in Paradise, and perhaps also reunited with in the more mundane world. Don Felipe points the way for Elias the firefly, with a vision of continuous time: "You know the directions to both entrance and exit. In the end, they are synonymous, they are just the same."[10]

As in Notley's counterepics, López's poem "These Days of Candy" contains a radical reimagination of time and memory and an underworld journey, connecting this a collective heroism. "TRUCHA PORQUE NO HAY TIEMPO" proclaims Gronk, the character of the artist: watch out because there's no time—a partial translation and also inversion of Eliot's "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" in Eliot's epic "The Waste Land" seems likely here. "Trucha" is Spanish slang for "look out" or "stay alert": what you say to your comrades when you're looking out for them, and so the tone of this part of the poem blends both a friendly regard and a ponderousness, as Gronk speaks also of the portability of memory, and the brevity of the journeys of life, like a hummingbird that flies through the studio (Figure 6.1).

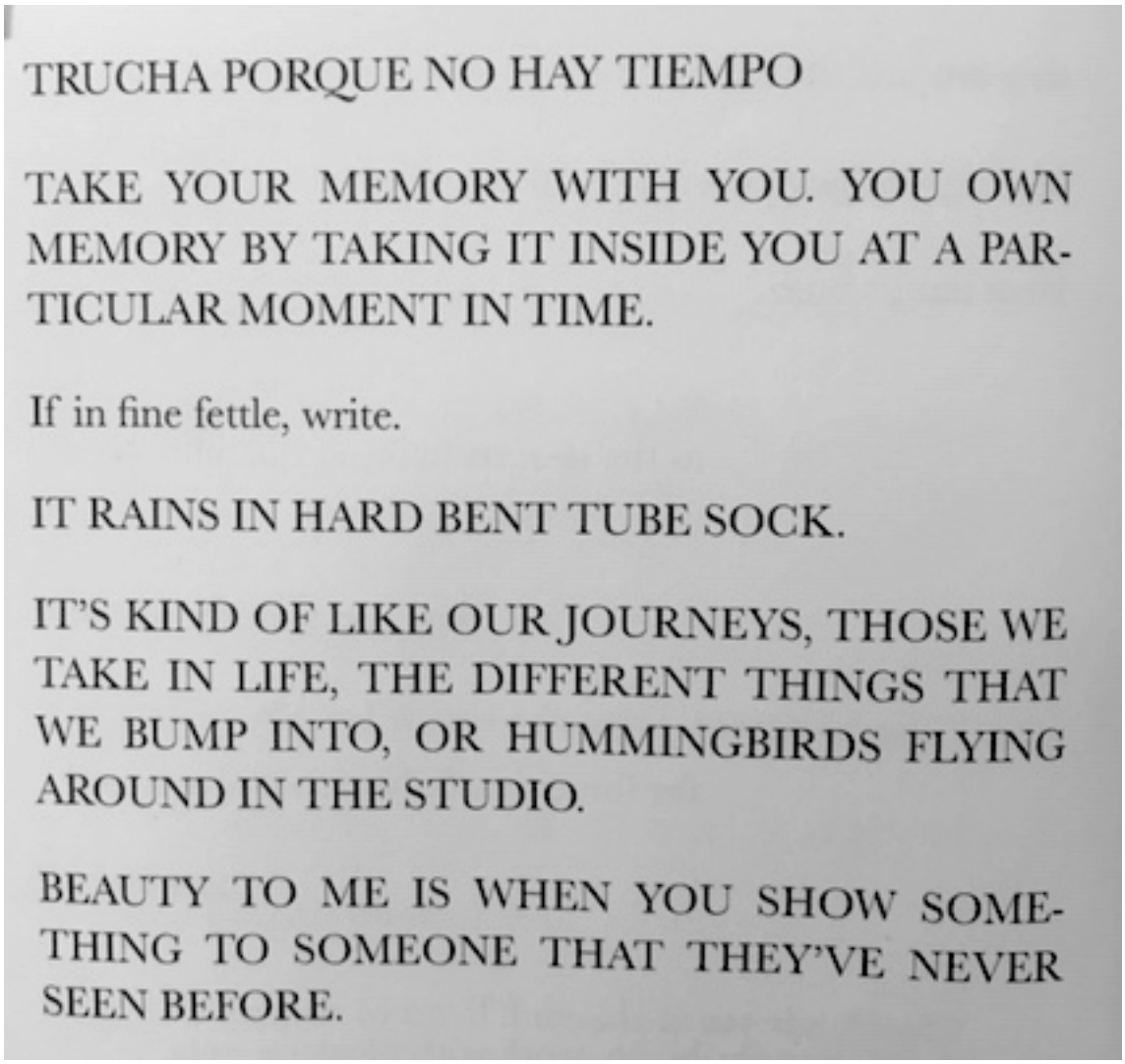


Figure 6.1: Page from *These Days of Candy*

In the end, López's counterepic summons this contradictory vision of brevity and endurance, of the beginning of sight and the end of sight, as the firefly Elias disappears into the door of light and is reunited with his fellow firefly friend, Mouse Pad Becky. We are left with a transformative vision of reimagined time, of reuniting with those we have lost, of seeing things anew in the borderlands crossroads amid contradictions. As in Bowie's "Lady Stardust," the song goes on forever. The band is back together. And he was out of sight.

"it was the end of the world and i needed a haircut."

This wonderful line is from Alfredo Aguilar's stunning 2018 debut book *What Happens on Earth.* Aguilar's book is also a kind of counterepic. The speculative near-future narrative of the poem focuses on the inception of an apocalyptic series of events (climate change disasters, economic collapse, increasing political repression), a revolt, and then the aftermath. If counterepic writers are always in some sense "writing against" a prevailing mythos of teleology, *What Happens on Earth* is writing against a vision of the world which refuses to acknowledge urgently the shifts which need to be made in our world as massive structural problems, such as climate change, mass migrations, and political repression, loom across the globe.

In her book *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making Through Science Fiction and Activism*, Shelley Streeby describes post-2000 speculative texts of "Cli-Fi" (or climate change science fiction and speculative fiction) as texts that

> ...illuminate obstacles to nation-states solving climate change problems, point to direct action as a crucial method, and imagine other possible worlds, rather than hoping that nation-states or captains of industry will save the day. This tension between broad understandings of climate justice as inseparable from decolonization, the redistribution of wealth, and the decentralization of power, insisted upon by movements led by Indigenous people and people of color, on the one hand, and narrower frameworks for imagining the future of climate change shaped by international bodies dependent on nation-states in thrall to the global fossil fuel economy, on the other, is one of the biggest obstacles we face in shaping the climate change disaster that both lies ahead of us and is happening right now.[11]

This tension that Streeby notes is of great concern to each of these writers of the San Diego/border area, in terms of resilient imagination, decolonial solutions to climate justice

problems, and decentralization of power. Aguilar's counterepic is poetry, so perhaps "Cli-Po" would be a better name for poems in this emergent speculative or science fiction genre.

Aguilar's work is full of the poignant juxtaposition of the everyday with lyricism describing situations on the brink, on the edge of ecological collapse and regime changes. When the poem's speaker goes for his haircut, he encounters telenovelas at the barbershop. Parts Four and Five of the counterepic poem contain more Cli-Po: climate change speculative poems. In Part Four, his speaker recounts disappearing glaciers—"we cannot imagine a sky without gaping punctures"[12] and imagines "glaciers melting [and fossil] fishes given back their ancient scales." Part 5 is an erasure poem of Obama's speech at the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris: "the sea is faster/than our efforts/submerged."[13]

Like the glaciers of the poem's previous segments, language is "growing smaller every year." Part 9 centers on censorship, referencing Orwell and Ray Bradbury: "thought is a crime";"the state deemed which books were contraband,/then incinerated them." In this fascist state, the only books left are the Bible and "the history of our glorious nation." However, a smuggling trade of resistance arises:

> soldiers came for the artist in my buiiiding./when they knocked on her door,
> she threw/all her papers out the window—a hundred thin/surrenders. she
> disappeared with them. i stitched letters/under the lining of my coat. i climbed
> over/the wall. i smuggled entire poems out of the country.[14]

Meanwhile fresh water is contested and skirmishes spark over wells. Aguilar's speaker at times glories in the revolution that ensues, and its seemingly brief but electric period of equality. "we tore down the bronze statue of a tyrant" a poem's speaker recalls. With longing for the electricity of that period and its liberation, he says, "*its true*, we said, *once we had*

masters—"[15] Other times *What Happens on Earth* casts a weary eye on the endgame of the revolt, which turns out to have instituted yet another "new regime" of repression. This is not how Aguilar's book ends, but let's go now from these moments of collapse and climbing over walls, to the final genre-breaking work of resilient imagination I want to examine.

"A certain magic of blood"/"Cartilage, beginnings, songs."

Lizz Huerta's poetic science fiction story cycle "The Wall" extrapolates into the future of a completed border wall. The tunnels once created by cartels become, even more than previously, a means to smuggle people and supplies:

> When the wall went up, it was said it was to keep people out. Ridiculous, considering the vast network of tunnels the cartels had burrowed under the political border with the earth diligence of dwarves. The propaganda. Wall to keep the empire safe: strrrrrong empire, empire with mightiest military in the world, mmpire made of blood and theft, human and land. Before the wall was even finished the empire began to strip rights, silence certain people, keep others sparking in their skins of distrust. But most of the inhabitants paid attention to other things, shiny things, scandals. It would pass, hadn't it always? White folks had short memories.[16]

However, the Wall lasts, and spawns food crises, and chemical warfare, yet a complex network of resistances also emerges, including guerilla fighters against ICE troops, those who facilitate crossings, and healers. The story's narrator, Ivette, describes herself as part of a "sisterhood of equality," made up of "gifted brujas," or witches[17] She combines "western" medical training with the traditional and indigenous knowledge taught by her Mamita and the collectivizing of the other women. The basis of their practice as brujas is resilience; planning for times of scarcity for survival, they also embrace a measure of strangeness:

> We supply the markets with plant medicine we cultivate and gather from the land in seasons of abundance, specializing in those that thrive in seasons of scarcity...I live there with a crew of the strangest and strongest among the brujas from the North and a water witch from Gullah territory. She came as a

> trader and decided to stay. Her people moved in and took over what used to be the Southern United States.[18]

In addition, to echo Appadurai's claim, in these diasporic conditions, memory and desire are confronted here by the force of the imagination. In a remarkable passage, the narrator Ivette in "The Wall" muses on something akin to epigenetics' relation to inherited trauma, and a resilient response that includes the "gifts" and "teachings" conferred on the survivors of the collapse:

> We arrived at the point in humanity when we were born because the ancestors of these bodies did some fucked up shit. All of us are the descendants of darkness. Humanity, this hard training ground, has been used to teach us the boundaries of what we can endure, and it has given us a sound for laughter. Time allows us certain gifts unavailable elsewhere: we can cook and grow things, bleed and heal. Age. Create and die.[19]

"The Wall" is the title story of a collection of intertwined stories on the theme of resistance to colonial past and present, wherein, according to its author, "Latinx people come into powers their ancestors hid in their blood during conquest. The collection features working-class protagonists, usually in the border region, who are on the precipice of their power." [20] Another post-wall story by Huerta from the same cycle, "Mouths," is set in El Oasis, a seaside waystation in which a few healers and hustlers eke out a living, Like López, Huerta references the mixtape in connection with survival: "Times were strange, and those that survived the collapse had a jarring mixtape of skills." This also recalls Anzaldua's description of living in the borderlands as living without borders, as a crossroads, an intersection. In the post-apocalypse of Huerta's "Mouths," practical working-class skills and trades, some previously maligned or conventionally undervalued, have become valued on a whole new level, reversing previous class structures: "Plumbers were holy men...sex workers commanded respect and were offered it gladly."[21]

Huerta also extrapolates the current border-region phenomenon of crossing to Mexico from the U.S. for affordable, quality dental care, speculating that post-collapse, this trade would continue, incorporating indigenous healing technology, vulture culture and improvised know-how. The two main characters, El Buitre, or the Vulture, and Fai, another bruja and healer figure who has a knack for producing tinctures and adaptogenic teas, are exemplary of this. El Buitre repairs Fai's mouth for her when she knocks out teeth in an injury while fishing. He tries many different fishes' bones to shape the replacement teeth before finally making a successful transplant by rooting or grafting reshaped whale bone into her body with sea lion placenta that Fai sources herself. Of course he finds himself falling in love with her; Fai in her resilient imagination, surpassing him, sees potential for life everywhere, even amid the waters rising as the result of climate changes: "There are more bones in the sea than you could imagine,' Fai told him, 'Cartilage, beginnings, songs...Fai thought to herself...Life kept going, no matter the destruction."[22]

Huerta's story cycle also extrapolates current conditions of economic inequality and inequalities in access to health care and dental care in the U.S. and California in particular. Currently, "78% of U.S. workers," even many academics!) "live paycheck to paycheck.[23] According to a 2017 study by the California HealthCare Foundation, "In California, 39 percent of the population has no dental coverage; 13 percent is without health insurance."[24] In addition, according the California Health Care Foundation (2019), approximately 13 million, or one third of Californians currently receive Medi-Cal, with low household incomes of $17,500 or less per year (single person household) or $25,000 per year (family of four household).[25] Huerta's speculation imagines innovations and healing practices following the

collapse of unsustainable medical structures and the development of forms of survival during diasporic conditions.

Folklorist Kay Turner, in her 2018 talk on "The Witch In Flight" and figures of the witch or *bruja* in worldwide folklore with special attention to key originary tales of the *bruja* in Mexico, notes, "Witches revel in their contrary aspirations... Unnatural and abnormal, she dwells on the other side of the binary slash; also anomalous, ambivalent, liminal, magical, and shapeshifting. Sitting at the crossroads on a throne of decaying garbage she makes a claim for life beyond dualistic restrictions. Witches bitch the binary."[26] Huerta's *bruja* figures are figures of resilience and resistance, embracing deep decolonized forms of knowledge, collectivity, and discovering their own powers in a post-apocalypse, powers that go beyond conventional patriachal and state structures and border restrictions, liminal powers that straddle boundaries.

Two of the three writers uses the mixtape as a metaphor— Huerta to describe the ragtag spirit of the skills of survival, López as filmic soundtrack for a vision quest of his luciarnaga, the artist figure on a quest through the Borgesian labyrinths of cultural and digital meaning and the mind itself as a kind of radio. And Aguilar's counterepic is punctuated by other sonic echoes, of post-apocalyptic radio anouncements and barbershop telenovelas and harpstrings (in a kind of invocation of the first part of the poem, referencing the ancient epic tradition, like the plectrum of Calliope).

But as we think toward the future of these sonic echoes, in the mixtapes of López's, Huerta's and Aguilar's speculative poetics, and think about contrasting frameworks for climate change justice and imagining possible worlds, let's return to the last poem of Alfredo Aguilar's *What Happens on Earth:*

Lightyears From Now

past spheres that are nothing but ice or vapor,
we will find a home that harbors the small life
of bacteria & plants. nothing else will be there. having spent
our lives inside a spacecraft, we will be unable to hold
our wonder at the clear bodies of water, the vegetation,
the large cold sun. the children will hold up a plant & ask
what is this called? everything on that world will lack a name.
will will have old images that resemble life there. we will christen
everything after a previous life—give ghosts a new skin
to grow into far away, the violence that happened on
the old planet will stay there. no one will have died
here yet & no blood will be spilt. children will point
to the night sky, ask *did we come from there?* & stars will reflect
the distance we put between ourselves & our burning.[27]

In this poem there is a vital tension and double meaning of the ending, "the distance we put between ourselves & our burning" which can be read in at least two ways, heightened by the line break on "reflect" and the lack of other punctuation in the final line. The first of these readings of the line has the meaning "reflect the distance we put between ourselves and also reflect our burning" recalling the memories of lost and grieved past and the distance we created between ourselves. However this line can also be read as "and stars will reflect the distance that we have put between ourselves and our burning" which contains within it a sense of migration beyond the apocalyptic violence of the past. There is hope for resilient imagination, but only if we chose, in the present, to see what is before us, if we prevent this possible future of a lost planet, and a lost world—if we resist here and now.

Conclusion

The process of writing a dissertation is an epic writing process of sorts. The questions that this dissertation asks, which attempt to name and open up new further inquiry into a radical genre, the counterepic, and argue the significance of its common qualities, are immense. I began this work by considering the connections among poetry, activism and speculative literature, during a time of acute illness, connecting each of these threads of critical inquiry and research interests to empathetic imagination, that which allows us to empathize with that which may appear alien, fighting against structures with false and oppressive definitions of what constitutes personhood. And it allows those of us considered alien to see far beyond narrow horizons to new sympathies and solidarities. As Shelley Streeby says in her book *Radical Sensations: World Movements, Violence and Visual Culture,*

> The many displaced people, migrants, and aliens who comprised a substantial part of these movements thereby called into question the inevitability of the nation as the horizon for utopian hopes for justice, freedom, and revolution, and appealed to sympathies and solidarities that extended beyond it.[1]

I see radical poety and poetics as represented in counterepic as connected not only to empathetic imagination but also to anti-state and anti-patriarchal literature, and in the case of many writers, involvement in social movements, organizing, and direct action. I have been lucky enough in my lifetime, following the 2008 financial crisis, to see many poets across the U.S. and globally, who also involve themselves quite seriously in these forms of fighting back.

When I first began researching this topic, I thought that I might exhaust or begin to doubt my belief that the counterepic is a distinct genre; I thought that I might exhaust my supply of counterepics to write about. Nothing has been further from the truth and the reality;

in this process of inquiry I have only become more sure that the counterepic is a distinct genre with anti-patriarchal, anti-authoritarian, and frequently anti-state goals, and I delight to see more contemporary counterepic texts are written all the time. Hence, the significance of these poetic and political interventions endures, and continues to surprise me.

Another surprise has been just how interconnected and collaborative each of the writers here have been, through time, things I learned, previously obscured as much of women and non-binary peoples' history has been historically obscured, or as Lisa Robertson says "girls are real lacunae eh," such as that one of Emily Dickinson's favorite writers was Elizabeth Barrett Browning, that Dickinson loved her mock-epic *Aurora Leigh*, and hung her picture in her bedroom along with a picture of George Eliot, or that Helen Hunt Jackson and Dickinson exchanged a lively series of letters and met in person and were lifelong literary friends, or that Alice Notley and Bernadette Mayer had a Dream Journal project that they collaborated upon together, or that Gwendolyn Brooks and May Miller wrote to each other, and Brooks always dreamed of writing plays, or that Brooks couldn't afford to pay her electric bill in the projects at the time she won the Pulitzer for her book containing *The Anniad*, or that Muriel Rukeyser went on the road trip that her *U.S. 1* describes, with her friend, the photographer Nancy Naumburg, or that H.D. was an out bisexual, or that she published the first poetry by Marianne Moore, and that she was in an open relationship with her same-sex partner, Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman) for more than 40 years, that the two went to Egypt and saw the opening of King Tut's tomb out of coincidence, and that Bryher helped more than 100 Jewish refugees escape in the years from 1933-1939, that an ancient Egyptian woman traveled hundreds of miles by camel and on foot in order to give birth, and that all this was recorded in a letter found in an Egyptian workers' village, that Enheduanna, a Priestess of

Innana, who lived in ancient Sumer more than 4,000 years ago, in what is now modern-day Iraq, was the first named author we know of anywhere in the world. These are just a few of the discoveries I made in the midst of the many years of the writing and researching process. How had I not known any of these things, these parts of literary and textual history involving women and non-binary people, and networks of women and non-binary people and of their particular collective resistance? My hope is that by drawing together these radically counterepic works, and by thinking through aspects of their social and political and literary importance, I uncreate, and counter, some lacunae, drawing some some fragments, previously separated, together.

"If we are not afraid to adopt a revolutionary stance--if, indeed, we wish to be radical in our quest for change," says Angela Davis in *Women, Culture, Politics*, "then we must get to the root of our oppression. After all, *radical* simply means 'grasping things at the root.'"[2] Counterepics work to address these deep roots of oppression in our literary and historical traditions and imagine new forms of resistance beyond oppressions of patriarchy and the state—in poetry, and in life.

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