

ASIAN AMERICAN POETRY, AMERICAN POETRY, AND THE CRITIQUE OF  
IDENTITY: ASIAN AMERICAN POETRY IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXT, 1887-2005

BY

MERTON LEE

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Cary Nelson, Chair  
Professor Leon Chai  
Associate Professor Lisa Cacho  
Assistant Professor Matthew Hart, Columbia University

## Abstract

In this dissertation I attempt a critical evaluation of identity. While I see identity, in the sense of the social categorization of individuals, as a discourse that perpetuates the kind of reduction that impoverishes conceptions of those labeled as “others,” ultimately, identity can’t simply be dismissed. My analysis begins with Asian American poets who I see as challenging the different forms that racism takes across more than a century of Asian American writing. But I go on to suggest that the form these critiques take connect them to the work of American poets who outside of race, seek to contest the reduction of a sense of the full multiplicity of personhood, that is, they defend a certain democratic understand of self.

The first half of my dissertation consists of two chapters that critique identity by appealing to selfhood. My first chapter reads the work of Walt Whitman and Sadakichi Hartmann in the context of Chinese Exclusion. I argue that Chinese Exclusion results in a social death, in that “Oriental” immigrants were defined as not possessing the full social existence conferred by legal rights. Thus I read Hartmann’s early work as a kind of late work; he draws on late Whitman, who he knew. Both poets focus on the fragmentary and personal to object to a presumption that individuals can be known or totalized, which therefore also rejects race and identity. Similarly, my second chapter shows that Marianne Moore and José Garcia Villa’s poetry, directed toward creating what I call the “didactic subject,” is meant to challenge the kind of assumptions that subsume individuals under categories of identity. The didactic subject is a form of self understood to be self-critical and in process, and thus ethical. But in the context of US

colonization of the Philippines, which took a tutelary form, conceiving the self as unfinished risks repeating notions of racial atavism and makes the didactic subject an ambivalent, possibly compromised form of critique.

The two chapters comprising the second half of my dissertation reflect a shift away from challenging identity to appropriating it. My third chapter argues that the poetry of David Rafael Wang and Amiri Baraka attempts to naturalize identity to personality by invoking intensely subjective experiences, pain and sex, as proof for the reality of racial identity. But since race must be constructed to define selfhood, alternative notions of the self have to be disavowed. My final chapter proposes an understanding of identity as multiple, through a critique not just of identity but also the self. In it, I suggest that what Whitman undertakes in 1955, a grounding of identity in the multiplicity of simultaneous experience is affirmed in the postmodern poetry of Linh Dinh. Dinh's work suggests that the multiplicity of identity can't be affirmed, except asymptotically, as a horizon. That model of identity, multiple and never attainable describes identity's continued significance in understanding not only the social, but the personal.

## Acknowledgments

This dissertation owes its existence to some unwelcome advice from Stephanie Foote, then the Director of Graduate Studies. She recommended that my special fields reading list contain not just Asian American literature, but broader contexts of American literature, generally conceived. Although I had come to University of Illinois with no intent to study ethnic poetry, in fact, to study a particular strand of mainstream poetry--the Confessionals--and Foote's advice helped to incorporate that initial intention of my study into my Ph.D. work, I had initially and unwisely, wanted to resist her suggestion, hotly remembering just-learned information on how Asian American students protested the assumption that Asian American literature was not sufficient to justify classes in the 1970s.

That I overcame my short-sightedness owes much to the initial labors of Matthew Hart and Cary Nelson, who seemed to presciently understand that the limits I wanted to impose on my field would be self-defeating, and who also seemed to draw that understanding based on realizations about my writing and research I had at that point not yet become aware of: that I am a digressive thinker who strains to put disparate ideas into meaningful relation. The actual work of creating the dissertation has shown me that those tendencies are at times productive and at times my worst obstacle to being understood.

Having not been a student of ethnic literature in my coursework, I struggled to attract someone to my committee willing to work with a person who seemed like a dilettante. I'm thus grateful that Lisa Cacho agreed to mentor me, especially since the

first writing I showed her was an attack on the pieties of ethnic studies, that I had intended to be exciting, but that really showed a shallowness to my knowledge. Similarly, the guidance of Leon Chai, who also agreed to drift out of his area of primary expertise to join my committee, has shown me that intellectual work is a labor of carefulness and inspiration. Indeed, his vast learnedness and thoughtful approach to a bewilderingly diverse field of knowledge encouraged me to see the value of what might otherwise be the wasted labor of learning things that didn't in the end pertain to the dissertation--that value is that I became less ignorant.

My committee has also proven to be unusually supportive as I've written this dissertation away from campus, in Baltimore Maryland. That distance has meant that Cary opened his living room to me for meetings when I came to town, that Leon and I developed a phone relationship, that when Matt moved to Columbia University, we could meet in day trips, and that Lisa met me on short notice at coffee shops. The advice given in all of these meetings, written down in the three notebooks I filled in the course of writing this dissertation (in fact, it's only through something as ambitious as a dissertation that I came to learn the importance of keeping a notebook), provide a wealth of perspective on my work that I have barely been able to make proper use of, and which exists to me as what Wordsworth called, in a totally different context, "life and food for future years."

I owe to Austin Riede, Donghee Om and Sarah Gray gratitude for advice, mundane favors, and commiseration, not to mention friendship. My mother and father, Young and Jung Lee, along with my sister Ki have all provided both material and emotional support. Mom and Dad especially supported my effort to finally finish the

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Finally, I reserve my most intense thanks for Jess Heley, who provides the ineffable backing to my attempted ambition. I have noticed that it is common to save the most intense praise for one's partner in Acknowledgments sections, and Jess has shown me why this is. The intellectual work that is the purpose and rationale of this dissertation occurs immersed in the personal life one builds through love and care, and at the cost of it. My hope is that in some way this work compensates for the sacrifices necessary in its making, that in some measure it makes her, and our son Abbot, proud.

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## Introduction

### Identity, Literature, Myth

This dissertation proposes a relation between Asian American poetry and American poetry that is not one of opposition and correction--Asian American poetry is not just a condemnation of the American project, at least as I read it through the more than one hundred years this project covers. I do not mean to say that Asian American poetry, or more broadly Asian American cultural discourse, doesn't address race or inequality, it certainly does. What I do want to argue is that Asian American poetry is sympathetic to a strain in American poetry, and American cultural discourse, directed toward self-critique. In fact, it is through what I am here calling "self-critique," but what I mean to develop into a critique of identity itself, that the anti-racist potential of Asian American culture emerges.

My claim that it's by refusing identity that Asian American poetry combats racism, and that American poetry stemming from Walt Whitman is similarly a refusal of identity, might sound wrong in at least two initial ways. First, even the adjective "Asian American" suggests the preeminence of racial identity so that some degree of insisting on identity is necessary to justify the category of Asian American poetry. And then from the perspective of American poetry, what Whitman most obviously does is assume a bardic role, that is, he asserts his identity as an American in order to sing about America. I mention these objections because I agree with them. Whitman does indeed invoke his status as a "rough." But then his point is not that this identity is the ultimate

horizon for his entire personhood. If anything, his objective is expansive; he is not only a rough, but also a “kosmos.” Similarly, the term Asian America was indeed constructed to be a political identity in response to the racist pejorative “Oriental.” But part of the corrective reappropriation of race in Asian America is the openness of Asian America as a category. Furthermore, to claim that personhood is totally constrained by racial category is obviously the kind of racist reduction Asian American discourse is meant to combat.

Thus what I attempt in this dissertation cannot be to argue identity out of existence, though I am attempting to seriously undermine its preeminence.<sup>1</sup> I test the concept of identity against a literature of interiority, or more polemically, a literature meant to express personhood, and find the strong version of identity we might recognize in identity politics, a sense that social identity determines all other aspects of a person, to be a historical construct that doesn't explain the bulk of a history of Asian American race and culture. Instead, what I show is that a boundary between identity and those aspects of personhood that are beyond it is where social discourses like race and racialization are constructed and thus can be contested, in a limited way. Limited because the tension between identity and its opposite is not a simple opposition, but rather a condition of mutuality, in the manner of poststructuralism, in which any concept refers to, and is then dependent upon, its opposite in order to create meaning. What this means is that a sense of identity as a socially coherent form of personhood is both necessary to my project and what I denounce as fictional.

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<sup>1</sup> I adapt the phrasing of arguing identity out of existence from Amanda Anderson's comments on identity politics in *The Way We Argue Now* (Duke UP: 2006) p. 4.

This odd dependence on the very thing I am trying to critique creates a situation that Roland Barthes describes as a choice which “can bear only on two equally extreme methods: either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize,” to make transhistorical claims, “or conversely, to posit a reality which is ultimately impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case poetize,” (Barthes 158). Here Barthes has phrased the two options as a binary only to comment that what he actually proposes is a mixed procedure: “we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness” (159). And while Barthes’s tone is almost elegiac, what he describes is actually a poststructuralist approach to meaning.

My poststructuralist method differs from what Amanda Anderson summarizes as a kind of traditional, poststructurally-inflected critique of identity “that advocates the subversion of identity by any means possible--the denaturalization of what are nonetheless inescapably imposed identities by means of parody, irony, or resignification” (Anderson 5). Instead, what I attempt to demonstrate is more the ambivalence of not only enforced, social identities, but also of subversive, resignifying identities.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, I contend that my approach is better at enabling anti-racist critique. Why? Because I seek to complicate what otherwise is an assumed binary between the kind of poststructural critique that tries to subvert identity and an opposite

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<sup>2</sup> In making this critique of what I, following Anderson, call resignifying identities, I also follow from Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* [2002]. Nguyen argues that Asian American critics tend to read “not for ideological heterogeneity” but solely for “either resistance or accommodation to American racism” (7). Nguyen is thus implicitly skeptical of claims for resistance, as my work is. But then perhaps an irony in Nguyen’s book is that though he avows a concern for heterogeneous ideologies, his literary criticism ends up defending a recognizably and uniform anti-racist perspective, concerned with reading how works respond to racism. Nguyen is thus dependent on the ideological homogeneity he opposes. My work similarly cannot dismiss anti-racism and must take it as a given. But then I am also trying to demonstrate that racism itself is shifting and uncertain, so that anti-racism demands a similarly “heterogeneous” response.

critique to identity, a sense of the universalism of literature, beyond social identity. These two approaches are possible in response to what might seem at first like an example of an uncomplicatedly multiculturalist work, Li-Young Lee's 1986 poetry. Poems from this volume have come to be canonized as Asian American poetry in the push toward multiculturalism of the 1980s and 1990s; and furthermore, Lee's verse seems to prove its multiculturalism having been selected for publication by Gerald Stern, a Jewish-American poet. What I want to show by an excursion into Lee's poetry is how combining these two critical discourses, what we might think of as minority and canonical approaches, ultimately challenges what seems to be at stake in both: identity.

In his foreword to *Rose* (1986), Stern struggles to describe Lee's poetry. He writes that it's characterized by "a certain humility, a kind of cunning" while it's also in "pursuit of certain Chinese ideas, or Chinese memories, without any self-conscious ethnocentricity" (9). Who exactly that last clause is meant to differentiate Lee from isn't specified but what Stern seems to mean is that Lee, despite being multicultural, doesn't take ethnicity to be the subject of his poetry in a political register, instead, his is an ethnicity that is personal, part of memory.

Twenty years later, when Xiaojing Zhou, in the first monograph devoted solely to Asian American poetry, makes Lee not an apolitical poet, but a poet of alterity, her critique reads with the force of an accepted critical model, one that has as its agenda not just avowing multiple cultures but arguing for why the multiculturalist perspective needs to be promoted.<sup>3</sup> Against discourses that claim to know, and thus to control and

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<sup>3</sup> Xiaojing Zhou's 2006 *The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry* is attributed as the first scholarly monograph to focus only on Asian American poetry on the book's jacket.

subjugate minorities, Lee's work reveals a resistance to that knowledge, which ultimately shows that alterity is outside the signifying practices of dominant culture. While not exactly historically contemporaneous, Zhou and Stern see Lee's Chineseness in surprisingly opposite terms, either as something subordinate to an essentially lyric subjectivity of pursuit and loss, or as something that resolutely refuses that tradition.

What emerges in Lee's work, or so I would argue, is actually something between Zhou and Stern. Lee's most anthologized poem, "Persimmons," is from *Rose* and it owes its fame, probably, to the fact that it addresses Chinese American ethnicity, but in the form of a gently postmodern lyric.<sup>4</sup> Zhou emphasizes the figure of Mrs. Walker, a teacher who humiliates the poet for confusing similar-sounding English words, only to misrepresent her own faulty knowledge of things Chinese by having the class eat a disgusting, unripe persimmon. Stern doesn't single out this poem for comment, but since he sees Lee's father as the central figure behind the poems in *Rose*, he'd probably focus not so much on Mrs. Walker, but on the elegiac father, whose old age and blindness isn't a matter of political alterity.<sup>5</sup>

The poem as a whole alternates between Mrs. Walker and the poet's Chinese family, except for one awkward stanza, that Zhou, in block quoting the poem, omits. It's the third stanza which doesn't at first read as a departure. In fact, this third stanza, which is about sex, follows from the sensual eating of a persimmon in the second:

"Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat. / Chew the skin, suck it, / and

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<sup>4</sup> I speculate that "Persimmons" is Lee's most anthologized work without concrete statistical numbers, though Elizabeth Thomason in her entry on Lee's "The Weight of Sweetness" in *Poetry for Students* also makes the unsupported claim that "Persimmons" is his most anthologized poem (Thomason 229).

<sup>5</sup> Stern sees Lee's work as ultimately being about "coming to peace with a powerful, stubborn, remote, passionate and loving father" (*Rose* 9).

swallow” (12-14). But then while the first stanza is enjambed into the second, so that it reads continuously, despite a thematic shift, the second is end-stopped so that the third’s opening, “Donna undresses” comes as a break.

Donna undresses, her stomach is white.

In the yard, dewy and shivering

with crickets, we lie naked,

face-up, face-down.

I teach her Chinese.

Crickets: *chiu chiu*. Dew: I’ve forgotten.

Naked: I’ve forgotten.

*Ni, wo*: you and me.

I part her legs,

remember to tell her

she is beautiful as the moon. (18-28)

Elements of this stanza repeat the implied trauma of the sixth grade. Mrs. Walker, presumably, is white, just as Donna is, on the thin evidence of name and absence of race being explicitly pointed out. And where initially the speaker is made to “stand in the corner / for not knowing the difference / between *persimmon* and *precision*” (3-5), the content of this third stanza also focuses on language as particular words with their foregrounded, specific meanings. But then for “dew” and “naked” it’s notable that the poet knows only the English words, and not the Chinese. The repeated “I’ve forgotten” foregrounds that the speaker is an imperfect teacher of Chinese, and ironically,

foreshadows Mrs. Walker's botched attempt at a multicultural curriculum, bringing a persimmon to class "so everyone could taste / a *Chinese apple*" (42-43).

The subtle parallel between Mrs. Walker and the speaker suggests what should be an obvious point, that Chineseness is cultural, and for that reason it's experienced only indirectly, as something that is mediated through particular experiences, not only for Mrs. Walker but also for Li-Young Lee, or anybody. But then if this parallel does seem subtle, the assumption that the speaker and Mrs. Walker must have an inherently different experience of Chineseness suggests how race implies identity at some presupposed, unarticulated level. In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant write that racial theory "provides society with 'common sense' about race, and with categories for the identification of individuals and groups in racial terms" (Omi and Winant 11). It is through race in Omi and Winant's sense, as a contingent process of assigning individuals to a common sense category, that one expects Mrs. Walker to not know about persimmons and Li-Young Lee to know about them, even as the poem challenges that division.

Denouncing race's apparently natural categorization as constructed, as I argue Lee's poem does, is something of an expected interpretation. In Asian American studies, David Palumbo-Liu undertakes, in his massive cultural history *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (1999), a critique of what he calls "the tendency to situate too strictly the minor only at the margins of the dominant," which in "Persimmons" would be the assumed separateness, the total opposition between the immigrant Chinese-American child and white teacher, an opposition that the poem belies (3). While arguing for a more complex understanding of how the categories of

majority and minority actually interrelate, Palumbo-Liu takes care to acknowledge that racism has the “effect of marginalizing many Asian populations” (3). Similarly, in *Immigrant Acts* (1996) Lisa Lowe argues for “replacing notions of ‘identity’ with multiplicity and shifting the emphasis from cultural ‘essence’ to material hybridity” (Lowe 75). Thus, for Lowe, something like the forgetful speaker of “Persimmons” shows the historical mark of racialization: as opposed to an inexorable Chineseness, the speaker shows a history of displacement and its resulting cultural hybridity.

One implication of this kind of critique, perhaps more in evidence with Lowe, is that what racialization obscures is a historical specificity. When Lowe argues “that the modern nation-state forms abstract citizens for the political sphere, disavowing the racialization and gendering of noncitizen labor in the economic space through the reproduction of an exclusive notion of national culture,” she implies that the erasure of a history of cultural hybridity is part of a deeper mechanism that enables exclusion. And then recovering that erased history would point out the contradiction of an abstract citizen--its impossibility. Thus criticism of race would reveal the inherent injustice of a nation-state that does not address itself to the specific conditions that enables its privilege.

But then if a criticism of race serves this more broad critical project, race becomes curiously ambiguous. On one hand it is false in that it exists to hide the reality of exploitation under a simple otherness. But to make this point is not to say that race is not a real difference and we are all just humans. If anything, it is race’s difference, its position outside the state’s sense of abstract citizenship, that enables that abstraction to be denounced, and goes on to make any claim of a universal humanity suspect. If what

we understand to be racial phenotypes don't mean what racists say they do, any phenotype is potentially symbolic of any trait, which makes abstract citizenship impossible since such a concept will require all possible traits to be included, or else repeat racism's logic.

The key to understanding this impasse, or so I would argue, is representation in the literary, mimetic sense and particularly the relationship between representation and history. Race itself, as Etienne Balibar argues, is an issue of fabricated representations.<sup>6</sup> Not only are "somatic or psychological features, both visible and invisible" contingent in "creating the fiction of a racial identity," the very functioning of race is also symbolic (Balibar 99). Balibar characterizes the "symbolic kernel" of race as ultimately one of genealogy--which is a word that Balibar uses but then qualifies as "the idea that the filiation of individuals transmits from generation to generation a substance both biological and spiritual" (100). Perhaps such a qualification is necessary to avoid confusing this neutral, descriptive use of "genealogy" with Michel Foucault's use of the term, as more or less the intellectual project of what has become New Historicism.<sup>7</sup> For Foucault genealogy as a critical practice should be directed against a sense of "genealogy." Against the idea that in race there are "subtle, singular, and subindividual marks" that create race as a category, Foucault contends that the

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<sup>6</sup> According to Balibar, ethnicity is the fictional construct of a nation. It is by representing various social formations within the nation as ethnicities that the nation then naturalizes a community as the nation. See Balibar 96. Race is distinct from ethnicity in being an articulation of ethnicity tied to naturalizing social differences to physiological differences. Balibar argues that ethnicity is a fabricated representation, using his term "fictive ethnicity," but given that race is an articulation of ethnicity, race would also be a fabricated representation.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault writes that contrary to an idea that historical inquiry uncovers truth, truth itself "has had a history within history" (Foucault 80). This understanding that those givens which seem to offer ways to evaluate or conceptualize history are themselves historical is the project of genealogy according to Foucault.

assumption of the category confers the meaning onto the traits (81), not in the mode of knowledge “slowly detach[ing] itself from its empirical roots [...] to become pure speculation” (96), but in “an empty synthesis” that exposes any origin, even the concept of origins, as a series of “numberless beginnings” (81). Thus what race finally symbolizes is a kind of ahistorical version of history, an essence as origin that doesn’t change with history, but that a naive non-Foucauldian history seeks to affirm.

According to Barthes, “the very principle of myth” is to transform “history into nature,” and thus Barthes’s understanding of myth is also a critique of the symbolizing procedure behind race (Barthes 129). Beginning from the Saussurian sign-signifier-signified triad, Barthes proposes that myth should be understood as a further signification, one that uses the sign itself as a signified, and myth as the second-order signifier. Barthes suggests that just as signified and signifier don’t have a necessary relation in structuralism, the discrepancy between myth and the signs which comprise it makes the myth seem to be both a crystallization of history and something apart from, and deeper than representation. One of Barthes’s sustained examples is a cover photograph of an issue of *Paris-Match* in which “a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour” (Barthes 116). The image is mythic in that it is meaningful at a level beyond the image itself:

I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. (116)

Barthes points out that to read the photograph in this way “one must put the biography of the Negro in parentheses” which suggests that in appropriating a sign, myth makes use of that sign’s emptiness to construct its second-order significance. And yet, historical contingency, like biography, isn’t disavowed or negated by myth. According to Barthes what the myth appears to refer to, meaning, works “like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation” (118). Recalling that the naturalness race offers also works in this mode of calling and dismissing, we could generalize and say that race is myth.

Barthes remarks that contemporary poetry, by which he means nonmetrical poetry, “resists myth as much as it can” (133). This remark is suggestive in considering how culture, for this dissertation poetry, might address politics. In a footnote, Barthes defines classical poetry as “a strongly mythical system” in that beyond the poem’s meaning “it imposes [...] one extra signified, which is *regularity*” (133n.10). The classical poem works when there is an “apparent fusion of the two systems,” metrical regularity harmonizing with content, in the same way that myth works by appearing to naturalize an image with a possibly heterogenous meaning. But after noting this parallelism, Barthes veers off into a side argument: “It is because of an age-old abuse that critics confuse *meaning* and *content*. The language is never anything but a system of forms, and the meaning is a form.” To Barthes, meaning is not content, but form; and the comment that language itself is just a system of forms suggests that what Barthes calls meaning, which after all is only a form, is really the signified fullness referred to by signifiers. If so, classical poetry is mythic in creating the illusion of an inexorable fit between content and meaning, signifier and signified.

That Barthes opposes contemporary and classical poetry on the basis of meter means that for Barthes, poetry is determined by form. Implicitly, what we might call content, the explicit subject matter of a poem, isn't important to Barthes since he goes on to characterize the whole of contemporary verse without distinguishing its genres. To return for an example to Lee's "Persimmons," one might, following Barthes, expect that the difference between "persimmon" and "precision," the confused words that open the poem, is not a real difference, especially since, as V. Nicholas LoLordo points out, these words are metrically identical. And while the poem's ostensible content invites us to see persimmons and precision as requiring if not differentiation than at least discernment, after all Mrs. Walker chooses a persimmon without precision and thereby exposes her cultural arrogance, the poem's form proceeds by a series of substitutions that repeat the accidental connection of persimmon and precision, which then turns into an associational connection: "How to choose / persimmons. This is precision" (6-7). Thus, the sensual eating of a persimmon turns into a sensual encounter of language learning, that in turn, goes back to other confused words of childhood, and so on. The point of these transitions, which when read analytically are arbitrary, is very much in keeping with how Barthes characterizes free verse poetry: "it tries to transform the sign back into meaning: its ideal, ultimately, would be to reach not the meaning of words, but the meaning of things themselves" (Barthes 133). Lee emphasizes the emptiness of signs, their ability to be appropriated, but his point, at the level of form, is the deeper logic of association beneath what is externalized in signs. Thus when Stern characterizes the mythical quality in Lee's verse as one that has as its archetype a search, we can see that the mythical transformation, its significance, is not externalized

as in Barthes' account of classical poetry, but takes place at what appears to be the psychological depth of the poetic consciousness, the subconsciousness below language.

Lee's work then is not about alterity nor about universalism, the two alternatives with which I opened this discussion, but more about the signified's priority over the signifier, and a sense of a sign's lack, to lapse into structuralist jargon. What "Persimmons" foregrounds is an unknowableness that runs through the logic of the poem and belies both the confessional and the political. The poem preserves this irresolution because of its form, its associational slippages, which after all is an open form, nonmetrical, and thus indeterminate. It is actually the openness of form which defines contemporary verse according to Barthes: the "open-work structure of the concept is [...] maximally exploited" in poetry, meaning that the sense of a sign's signified overtakes the signifier (133). And though describing poetry in this way, Barthes seems like he doesn't care about the inevitable materiality of actual poems, his final point is not that contemporary poetry is actually an "anti-language" directed toward meanings instead of signs, but that the whole of poetry and its ostensibly authentic essence are themselves a form of myth, a way to "*signify* poetry" (134).

Myth, if it falsely naturalizes meanings which aren't natural, seems as though it should be the object of critique, and exposed as false. But then such exposure, insofar as it presupposes another truth, would itself be mythologizing. This kind of impasse suggests why poetry as myth, even as "counter-myth," is at best a mixed response that to some extent perpetuates the symbolic logic behind racism. Such mixture isn't because poetry inherently acquiesces to racism--a reading that is tempting if we accept

Barthes's observation that poetry is all the more mythic for trying to resist it--but because conceiving of a social relation totally pure of racism is ironically the kind of symbolization of unpolluted essences that racism is a product of.

The critical work that I propose for opposing racism, and attempt in this dissertation, is one that ambivalently embraces both the limited, historical attempts to rewrite race that poets historically engage in, and the broad vision of a transcendence of race that is the underlying rationale for their projects, and I see in this logical inconsistency a necessarily open approach to identity, which in the end connects canonical and Asian American poets. In fact, pursuing this inconsistency justifies what might otherwise seem like an accident of scholarship, my focus on the post-Whitman American lyric.

As Simon During describes it, Foucault uses the concept of genealogy to "reintroduce memory and purpose into his own work," which is to say that Foucault's analysis of discourses leads to the same kind of impasse as myth criticism (During 125). Foucault's work, too, is split between "organizing its analysis in terms of discourse's 'rules of formation' and providing a 'neutral and true description of statements'" (During 125). His turn toward genealogy is an attempt to put what's ostensibly above history, such as the rules history traces, into history. Thus Foucault writes: "The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled" (Foucault 88).

In *Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry*, Cary Nelson attempts a genealogical account of Vietnam War poetry in arguing that the

two modes most obvious modes of working with the historical trauma of Vietnam in verse, direct address and lyric transcendence both fail to be adequately historical, and that these attempts generally are also versions of rewriting Walt Whitman's poetic project: the creation of a poetry that is simultaneously intimate and a form of public address. But then in Whitman's own work, a public and private poetics is only achieved in his Civil War writings; which means that it's not so much through the assertive force of the great poet that the nation affirms its poetical nature, but through historical violence.

American poetry's myth is not that it isn't political, but that it is. Derived from Whitman, a particularly American free verse is about an open, innocent nation that redeems itself through individual utterance and thus what seems personal is really an affirmation of the person in democracy. Nelson writes that "part of the American poetic myth" is that the "poet's individual, sacrificial speaking revitalizes all our language" (Nelson 4). But then such revitalization invokes the kind of origin that genealogy has to disavow, what Nelson in the context of Vietnam calls "an impossible origin before the newspaper body counts were read." Thus, a sense that literature can be what Barthes calls an "anti-language," the essences that aren't representative but intuitive, becomes a way to prevent language from degenerating into cynicism. But only because literature read in this way disavows history.

If we accept that American poetry constructs a sense of individuality that freights the individual with democratic significance, a dream of openness writ large that still is personal, we can see the politics that underlie this type of poetry in two ways. One, that whatever political context informs the poem, that context can be transcended and

redeemed through the sacrificial utterance Nelson describes above; an imperfect example would be how the racism implicit in Mrs. Walker's treatment of the poet as a child is wryly deflated by the poem's ability to accept Mrs. Walker in her flaws, through memory. The second version of the deep politics in American free verse would be something more exhortatory; and for an example we'd probably have to look not in Lee's work, but at someone like Marilyn Chin. In her poem "How I Got that Name (an essay on assimilation)" (1994), Chin makes sardonic comments that use Asian American stereotypes to stoke outrage.

Oh, how trustworthy our daughters,  
 how thrifty our sons!  
 How we've managed to fool the experts  
 in education, statistic and demography—  
 We're not very creative but not adverse to rote-learning.  
 Indeed, they can use us. (36-41)

What makes Chin's poem both attractive and surprisingly similar to Lee's is that her poem's rhetoric masters the same intractable history of racism that Lee's does, but through an exhortatory mode.<sup>8</sup> Chin's use of the plural first person, which she only uses in the second stanza of "How I Got that Name," clearly refers to Asian Americans, especially in contrast to the "they" who "can use us" (41). In this distinction, Chin is recognizably political in that her use of pronouns proposes modes of identification that respond to a particular social formation for the purposes of correcting the relation,

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<sup>8</sup> In characterizing these two responses to the problem of the political imbrication of the literary, I follow Nelson's reading of two apparently opposite Vietnam war poems, James Wright's "A Mad Fight Song for William S. Carpenter, 1966" and George Hitchcock's "Scattering Flowers." See *Our Last First Poets* pp. 4-9.

implicitly unjust, between they who use, and we who are used. But then the poem is actually just too weird to be simply political in this way. While maintaining use of “we,” the stanza ends in what seems to be a cultural--not specifically racial--critique.

History has turned its stomach  
 on a black polluted beach—  
 where life doesn't hinge  
 on that red, red wheelbarrow,  
 but whether or not our new lover  
 in the final episode of “Santa Barbara”  
 will lean over a scented candle  
 and call us a “bitch.”  
 Oh God, where have we gone wrong?  
 We have no inner resources! (48-57)

It's clear that by the end of this stanza, “we” somehow encompasses something other than the model minority.<sup>9</sup> The very clunkiness of the plural first person, when it really should be the singular, in phrases like “*our* new lover,” “call *us* a ‘bitch,’” raise what might well be the hidden, but central concern in this stanza, a relationship of vicariousness and desire that underlies the interpersonal, and complicates it.

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<sup>9</sup> This later part of the stanza makes a number of interesting comments. For one, Chin explicitly refers to history turning with the effect that life doesn't depend on William Carlos Williams's red wheelbarrow, but on the outcome of a TV show, and that this substitution is wrong, and a reflection of our interiority. But then ironically, Chin herself follows Williams in her progressively more minute descriptions; it is not just the show Santa Barbara, but its last episode, and not any candle, but a scented one (though scent is not perceptible through TV), and what our lover does is also detailed down to a quotation. So then the formal method opposes the explicit content, at the level of its construction, the poem suggests that the modernist lyric is also beyond the turnings of history.

The very triviality which ends this stanza, as opposed to the politically serious “message” of the first part, is pointedly empty. But then that emptiness is bemoaned and grieved in the last lines, thereby invoking something beyond the vacant culture that supposedly is what historically determines life. In fact, the disavowal of meaning in being called a bitch in *Santa Barbara*, is actually an appeal to truth, to faith that language articulates meaning, for the sole reason that it isn’t actual silence. But while language presupposes at least the possibility of audience and thus meaning, it also exists as something exterior to our deep intentions; it is, after all, something we learn to use and don’t invent.

Language itself has the kind of ambivalence that Chin’s poem suggests, between affirmation and negation, and in this, Chin strikes an inescapably Whitmanian chord. Whitman, after all, is the poet of encompassing catalogues that are both personal and not personal enough; for that reason, Whitman’s work straddles a demarcation between personal and political writing, in the way that with Chin we see the plural pronoun shift from one of political address to awkward interiority. In fact, according to Nelson, American poetry’s genealogy itself bears this kind of dilemma, between speaking for a nation, and undermining itself in an affirmation of openness.

In what follows I critique identity as unreal and incomplete, with the intent not to debunk it, but to show that the power of identity comes from what seems like it should be identity’s weakness: that as a concept, identity is always outstripped compared to something like personhood. In fact, to assume that an entire self is determined by identity is perhaps the simplest kind of racism, the kind empirically refuted but

ideologically insisted on.<sup>10</sup> But more to my point, what the relationship between selfhood or personhood and identity shows is that a kind of symbolism is at the heart of any invocation of identity. The relatively impoverished concept of identity refers to some element of personhood; and this reduction, or signification if identity is the signifier and personhood the signified, is why the logic of identity can't help but perpetuate race, and then serves to enable racism.

I begin in a moment in which the unreal or symbolic aspect of racism was retrospectively obvious, the period around the Chinese Exclusion Act. What's striking about this law is not only that it connects race to immigration for the first time but that it does so in the absence of a significant national Chinese immigrant population. Oddly, this groundbreaking piece of legislation, with its discursive break from previous immigration laws that didn't specify race, is based not on the presence of actual bodies but what the possibility of migration means--that is to say, the law is directed toward a symbol.

What does Chinese Exclusion actually symbolize? I suggest that its context in the wake of the Civil War is decisive. In its barest terms, the Civil War showed that the nation could be fractured in response to a problem of racial otherness manifest in slavery. Tellingly, much of the anti-Chinese rhetoric focused on inflated accounts of the coolie trade. Thus an eminent figure like Ulysses S. Grant who initially opposed race-

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<sup>10</sup> The kind of racism I have in mind would be captured in a statement like "all Samoans are smelly." I take this example from an episode of *Saturday Night Live* that I watched some time in the 1990s. The skit, as I remember it, consisted of some famous African American who had lately made a racially-charged remark, obviously I forgotten exactly who, and while apologizing for that remark and other remarks, this celebrity consistently brings up his hatred for smelly Samoans. But while I am claiming that this is the simplest kind of racism, this type of racism also has its own complexities. For example, if someone did hold the belief that all Samoans were smelly, simply having him or her meet a Samoan without body odor would not be enough to change his or her initial racism. Racists see a deeper cause that affirms their racist idea. Slavoj Žižek's remarks on antisemitism make a similar point.

based immigration policy came to embrace it under an opposition to slavery, which came to be conflated with Chinese migration.<sup>11</sup> As an echo of slavery, what Chinese Exclusion comes to represent is the destruction of national identity into a competing regional sense of identity. Thus that conceptions of the nation, articulated in immigration policy, take the form of specifying which races are barred answers a specifically historical trauma, that of disunion and slavery.

My first chapter, “Late Style and the Critique of Identity: Late Whitman and Early Sadakichi Hartmann,” takes the connection of Chinese Exclusion to slavery to argue that one major cultural effect of Chinese Exclusion was the consigning of “Orientals,” after all the immediate aftermath of the successful Chinese Exclusion Act was the immediate targeting of Japanese immigrants, to a kind of social death. I appropriate the term social death from the work of Orlando Patterson whose comparative history of slavery suggests that the slave’s deprivation of belonging “in his own right to any legitimate social order” means that the slave doesn’t have a social existence, except through his or her master (Patterson 5). While the restriction of immigration is not slavery, it did establish Chinese immigrants as categorically illegal. This categorization creates what Mae M. Ngai calls an “impossible subject,” a subject “whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility” (Ngai 5, 4).

The prevailing theme of Hartmann’s early poetry as I read it is not directly politics nor race, but negativity, invoked through a form of aestheticism drawn from both

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<sup>11</sup> In an 1879 visit to China, Ulysses Grant himself goes on record opposing Chinese immigration because “they....do not come of their own free will....Their labor is not their own, but the property of capitalists” (qtd in Gyory 186).

Whitman and European Symbolists. Hartmann favors intense subjects, sexuality and death, but more than that, the impasses and failures of his poems show that sexuality and death are in some way unrepresentable, constitutively absent for Hartmann. At the same time, Hartmann attempts to write a poetry directed at the self at its most intense and indescribable, a self that is not a consistent social agent, but a fragmentary, partly absent paradox. Understanding selfhood as something knowable only in heightened situations, and for that reason only fleetingly present, emphasizes selfhood's absence, its impossibility. That Hartmann's work has this perspective makes it sound curiously like late work, artistic expression directed toward death. But then for Hartmann, it isn't a biological death that his work addresses, but a social death. What Orlando Patterson described as the condition of sociality for slaves: unable to "in his own right to any legitimate social order," the slave's public existence is denied in itself and only exists through his or her master (Patterson 5). A kind of disavowed existence persists in slavery according to Patterson. And while the restriction of immigration is not slavery, it did establish Chinese immigrants as categorically illegal. This categorization creates what Mae M. Ngai calls an "impossible subject," a subject "whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility" (Ngai 5, 4).

Late style, in the manner that Edward Said sought to emphasize it, describes on one level the manner that the body is always implicated in cultural production, that the broad dimensions of personal life situate a work into clichés of timeliness: in youth origins are created; after youth works address narratives of growth and fulfillment, and finally late works address death. And at this superficial level, Hartmann's early work and Whitman's late work would have nothing to do with each other. But for Said, truly

challenging late work is not a completion of these initial moments of creation, but more like their negation. Using Theodor Adorno's reading of Beethoven as an example, Said writes that late Beethoven, and I argue the late Whitman as well, saw his early work-- Said describes it as "vigorous and organically whole" (10)--as an impossibility. Instead, synthesis itself comes to be seen as "the vestige of an individual human subject sorely aware of the wholeness, and consequently the survival, that has eluded it forever" (Rose Subotnik qtd in Said 11). In other words, late work marks the profound humbling of an art that was directed toward universality or wholeness.

Whitman's sense of his early work's unfulfilled status can be gleaned from his late life assessment of it. Whitman comments "I sometimes think the *Leaves* is only a language experiment" (qtd in Matthiessen 517). This quotation might be just one of any number of suspect authorial comments except that in establishing Whitman's canonicity, F. O. Matthiessen leans heavily on this characterization to make Whitman a kind of modernist.<sup>12</sup> But then such an assessment stands in stark contradiction to what in 1855 is pointedly not a noncommittal project of experiment, but a poetry directed at immortality--after all, the "greatest poet" must open "the eternity which gives similitude to all periods and locations and processes and animate and inanimate forms, and which is the bond of time" (*LG* 23). That such an ambitious statement turns into "only" an experiment indicates Whitman's late style: a sense of individual limitation, a refusal of

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<sup>12</sup> Matthiessen reads Whitman as a kind of modernist, whose work is not formless, but actually highly formal in that the poem's use of language is both what determines the poem's overt content, and reveals what is paradigmatically American about Whitman. Matthiessen even reads Whitman's approach to language, that it is not "an abstract construction' made by the learned" but that words were "the product of human events and customs, the progeny of folkways," as being against the grain of nineteenth century conceptions of language, which tended to divorce mind from body, and therefore see language as not materially-determined (Matthiessen 517, 518).

transfiguration.<sup>13</sup> In Whitman, this realization takes the form not only of comments that distance him from the polemics of 1855, but also his late poetry, which even he characterizes as “little tags and fringe-dots (maybe specks, stains)” (*LG* 637).

Whitman’s late work therefore repudiates the ambitions of his early work and in so doing challenges the synthetic imagination of that earlier work. All periods and locations and time itself are not finally subordinated to poetic speaking. Instead, to late Whitman such utterances are just not possible. In the late poem “Good-Bye my Fancy,” death is not part of a mystical whole, but rather a fragmenting silence, as opposed to something like “Song of Myself” which famously proclaimed it just as lucky to live as to die, as though life and death could be equally made present. Adorno notes that “The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it”-- subjectivity--“takes leave of the works themselves” (qtd in Said 10). Furthermore, “Touched by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; its tears and fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with Being, are its final work.” We might then generalize that what ultimately characterizes late work is this engagement with a disabling negativity of such scale, connected not to the “I” but to what overwhelms and exceeds it, that no pretense of overcoming it is convincing. Thus, something like identity in both race, as in Hartmann, and cultural-nationalism, as in early Whitman, can only be regarded as failures and incompletions, not as something to be strongly or convincingly avowed.

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<sup>13</sup> This late Whitman, who registers his own failures, is not the monumental figure of American open form poetry; instead, in Nelson’s analysis, twentieth century poets have had to rediscover Whitman’s failure in their own work, to a similar refusal of transfiguration and affirmation.

Whitman and Hartmann's refusal of identity appeals to personality, and this sort of intervention opposes the logic of Chinese Exclusion, what I argue is an attempt to deny personhood by using identity to connect race and nation. Restricting immigration is a solution to racial division because it deflects that division to a border beyond the nation. But this sort of deflection only defers the problem of race and identity, which resurfaces in a transnational context.

For the American context I examine, the transnational dimension of race is obvious in the colonization of the Philippines. But I read this colonization as a transformed colonialism, a colonialism meant to address anticolonialism. Considering that the originary mythology of the US is itself based on an anticolonial struggle, it becomes less paradoxical to characterize US colonialism as a colonialism justified by its own critique. This new colonialism differs from an older version in a shift from a rhetoric of civilization to one of education, meaning that the colonial subject was enjoined not to become American, but to see him or herself as the subject of an educational process that affirms his or her own Filipinoness (ironically defined by US policy and rule). According to Julian Go the educated self relates to the stated goal of US colonialism, which is the surpassing of colonialism itself in political independence, by making government "parallel with *individual* self-government [...] Power had to circulate in and through sovereign individuals, rather than being imposed upon them" (Go 43). And as Meg Wesling points out, part of the ideology of American education was that a nation's distinct character should be learned as moral instruction (Wesling 44). So then Filipinos were asked not only to hold US values, but to hold those values to the extent that they'd

articulate their own Filipino-ness in the terms of an American discourse of educational self-fashioning.

Thus another form of identity emerges, which like an anticolonial colonialism, is enabled by its own critique. Identity, at least for Filipinos under colonization, becomes not simply what one is, but rather what one must be made into through education. This version of identity is what I read Marianne Moore and José Garcia Villa as challenging in the textual form of their impersonal poetry in my second chapter. Thus “Textual Ethics and the Didactic Subject” reads the idiosyncratic religious poetry of Villa as a challenge to identity under tutelary colonialism in that Villa takes the truth of identity not to be its eventual attainment, but its defining inability to be attained. In this, as Moore notes in a review of Villa, Villa strikes an ironically deep American chord, that of Puritanism, which Moore sees a repudiation of the kind of Americanness that would claim to know what is right to do, in other words, the kind of Americanness that can engage in a colonialism that appropriates anticolonialism.

If Villa takes the logic of tutelary colonialism not to its ideological stopping point but to its logical end, Moore can be said to do a similar thing in her didactic poems of the 1940s. For both poets, these similar projects require a conception of the poem less as something to be interpreted, in that interpretation requires the poem to be explained in some other discourse, and thus implicitly denies the unending metaphysical emptiness both poets are interested in--Villa explicitly in his religious poetry, Moore in her project of didacticism in which modernist impersonality becomes self-critique. Thus Villa and Moore can both be thought of as taking up what Robert Kern describes as the project of high modernism, creating a literary “style concerned with presentation rather

than interpretation, so that reading might become seeing, or direct encounter, and language might become reality, pure experience” (Kern 5). I finally argue that what is superficial to both Villa and Moore, their poem’s odd textual styles, should be seen as central to their joint ethical concern: to oppose exploitation by insisting on the unknowability of selves.

In the first half of this dissertation, identity is a presumed relation to power that is withheld from minorities and its critique emerges as attempts to point out identity’s lack, first by invoking the self, then by embracing negativity. In the second half of the dissertation, we notice a drastic shift. Identity is no longer associated with hegemonic power, but with specific social positions. In other words, identity politics emerges. I argue that we should understand this change as the audacious project that ethnic politics attempted in the 1960s and 1970s: the appropriation of racist discourse to oppose racism, an obvious example of which is the construction of Asian American panethnicity from the racist pejorative “Oriental.”

To make a racist reduction of diversity into otherness a positive ground for identification works only through a radical critique of racism: a demonstration that racist discourse can be appropriated. But that critique means that even in its affirming mode, identity is not the natural category racism, or even anti-racism assumes. In my third chapter, I argue that it’s this crisis of meaning that the ethnic poetry of the 1960s and 1970s addresses. “Pain, Sex and the Reality of Ethnic Nationalism: Amiri Baraka and David Rafael Wang” suggests that more than just subordinate poetry to politics, Baraka and Wang attempt something more ambitious. Their work recognizes that a politics of

identity is fragile because identity is so immaterial. That immateriality needs to be made material, and Baraka and Wang attempt this through pain and sex.

I argue that Baraka's poetry of the sixties is not just incidentally violent; violence is central to what he attempts. Like Moore and Villa, Baraka attempts to give a poem immediacy, through the special province of literature, the imagination. For Baraka the imagination becomes the way that an immaterial identity can be realized because it is through the imagination that unreal sensations are made present. But then for the imagination to operate in this way, not to just be fanciful, its sensory aspect must be stressed. I follow Elaine Scarry's argument on pain in describing pain as sensation without object, Scarry points out how hard it is to describe what pain feels like, which then makes violence a way to imagine sensation through the very thing that most affirms reality--our personal immersion in the world of sense.

Wang deliberately imitates Baraka and claims him as an influence, and they both share the problem of making identity real. Wang's bisexual pornographic work supplements Baraka's violence in its account of identification. In Wang's poetry, sexual desire is contradictory, a wanting to have but also a wanting to give up that shows identity to be fluid. But then Wang's attempt at explicitness, I argue that he tries to convert sex from intimate relation to external object, is an attempt to limit the potential of personal interiority to challenge identity. After all, in creating a sexual response from an external source, what pornography shows is the derivativeness of something that might otherwise be taken to be intrinsically personal--sexuality.

The attempt at appropriating identity that I see Baraka and Wang as exemplifying nonetheless does finally fail to avoid the problem with identity's symbolic logic, that it

requires exclusion. Thus the initial embrace of identity in ethnic nationalism can't overcome identity's constitutive ambivalence. In my final chapter, "Postmodern American Ethnicity: Linh Dinh with Walt Whitman," I propose a concept for understanding identity as both impossible and necessary. I adapt Gilles Deleuze's theory of a body without organs to propose an Americanness without organs, which I demonstrate through a reading of Whitman's ideal of Americanness, evident in his 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, read with the contemporary work of poet and blogger Linh Dinh, whose work takes up Whitman's project.

What Whitman proposes that Dinh's work also suggests is an account of identity not as an abstract unity, but as a shifting multiplicity. This key revision to the notion of identity at first seems like it would lack a basis in what defines identity, similarity--consider the closeness of the words identity and identical. But what emerges from Whitman is an understanding that an identity based on multiplicity is actually an identity based on the immediacy of experience, specifically on temporality. After all, time presents a model in which unity is not made at the expense of richness; a single moment connects and holds a bewildering diversity--as Whitman's paratactic poetic technique suggests.

But then Whitman, and the Whitmanian tradition of poetry that this dissertation examines, is not just about the multiplicity of experience, but also about transcendence. The critique I have so far offered of identity is a version of this tension insofar as identity is also torn between what we experience as selfhood, and what that experience means at a larger scale, although multiplicity changes the terms of this ambivalence. Dinh's work, though not stylistically similar to Whitman, nonetheless is similar in its immediacy

and multiplicity. But the key difference is that for Dinh transcendence is finally not possible. Instead, if we experience the self as multiplicity, we are always in process, engaged in a kind of continuing self-fashioning. That context makes identity not a consistent, unvarying concept, but a shifting provisional adaptation of competing identifications. Thus I propose that the Body without Organs provides an analytic for understanding dispersed identity in Dinh, and also a way to conceptualize identity without having to decide between exclusion and dissent.

Lastly, my dissertation ends with a conclusion in which I consider Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, a text that Lowe sees as a repudiation to an aesthetic of narrativity and realism that instead exemplifies "an aesthetic of fragmented recitation and episodic nonidentity." But rather than see *Dictee* under the analytic of a challenge to identity, the mode that the first half of my dissertation is in and thus a reading of *Dictee* I am ultimately in support of, I want to suggest that *Dictee* also presents a version of identity that reading the text as disjointed does not show. If we read what seem to be narrative disjunctures not under the assumption of narrativity, but of lyricism, what emerges is a text marked less by fragments than by moments of poetic closure. What this series of closures suggests, I argue, is something like an "identity without organs." Thus I conclude by applying the analytic my dissertation culminates in to a text made canonical through its embrace by ethnic studies critics.

The stakes of my project are ultimately related to the problem of racism in that identity constitutes race's underlying logic. Balibar comments "*racism is not receding, but progressing* in the contemporary world" (Balibar 9, original emphasis). This claim is all the more provocative since he writes it with the understanding that our concept of

racism comes from the Holocaust and slavery, and therefore he implies that now, we face a racism that is worse in that it is more widespread and more dispersed.

Understanding the labile quality of identity as what enables racism's dispersed, mutating character suggests the difficulty of, on one hand, opposing racism, but also the inevitable challenge to racism built into the instability that all identity bears, compared to something sometimes thought to be universal, though by no means uniform: selfhood.

## Chapter 1

### Late Style and a Critique of Identity: Late Whitman and Early Sadakichi Hartmann

That Sadakichi Hartmann is a marginal figure, not widely studied and not recently published on,<sup>1</sup> is something of a surprise since in terms of dates of active writing, he is among the first American of Asian descent writing, definitely the first publishing poetry.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he was decidedly not an unknown figure in the sphere of his literary culture at large. He had personal relationships with Walt Whitman, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Heyse among others in the 19th century, and Ezra Pound and George Santayana both admired his work in the 20th. By the 1920s he was involved in Hollywood, playing the role of the court magician in Douglas Fairbanks' *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924). And finally, his friendship with the John Barrymore, W. C. Fields circle in the 1930s was made into a bestselling memoir, Gene Fowler's 1954 *Minutes of the Last Meeting*.

Retrospectively, perhaps the area Hartmann found the greatest success in was art criticism, and Jane Calhoun Weaver's book, *Sadakichi Hartmann Critical Modernist: Collected Art Writings* (1991), attempts to draw attention to his once prominent criticism, but as Weaver notes, "the period of Hartmann's greatest activity [1890-1915] has not yet attracted great scholarly interest among art historians" (1) and Hartmann's histories of various artists are sometimes marred by plagiarism (18). Nonetheless, that

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<sup>1</sup> According to the MLA International Bibliography, the last English language journal article published on Hartmann appeared in 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Yone Noguchi, another early Japanese American poet, first published in 1895 in the journal *The Lark*, (*The Lark* 1:1, May 1 1895) while Hartmann's first publication was a broadsheet poem "To America" from 1886 according to a biographical synopsis in Hartmann's papers.

Hartmann's art criticism was well known suggests that his aesthetic pronouncements might recover a particular strand of early Asian American artistic practice.

One example of Hartmann's art criticism, an 1894 essay on American art, builds to intense praise for Whitman, even mimicking Whitmanesque parallel clauses:

If you are a realist read W. Whitman, that great democratic spirit, who had all the universe for his country, whose muse embraced our republic in rugged, rhapsodic lines, who related the most minute peculiarities of life and soared to the most sublime regions of the spirit. Never did the New World produce a poet so independent and individual. He knew but little of the refinement and technicalities of art, he did not believe in abstract beauty, but every page of "Leaves of Grass" and "Specimen Days," contains innumerable inspirations ready to burst their bounds and overflow imagination. The sooner Walt Whitman becomes a household book in every artistic family, the better for our American art. (73)

The logic of his argument shows a looseness that's characteristic of Hartmann's criticism, moving from Whitman as an inspiration to realists to a paradoxical assertion that though Whitman isn't directly useful for artists, he could be an inspiration to "every" young artist. But then even as Hartmann's prose wanders in loose associational half connections, he insistently asserts Whitman's transcendence. Whitman records "the most minute peculiarities of life" but what's significant is not these details but that by evoking emotion from the mundane, Whitman's poetry inspires artists to "burst their bounds and overflow imagination." Hartmann is obviously trying to be ruggedly rhapsodic himself in this kind of statement, but if so, his point is only that much more

emphatic: why Whitman is important is that his work surpasses the bounds of the self, even outstripping that privileged romantic faculty, the imagination.

Hartmann's pronouncement might well seem to not say very much. His comment suggests what Robert Pinsky calls "the romantic persistence," a long continuity of seeing the figure of poet in terms similar to how Hartmann sees Whitman. "The romantic poet is attracted through intense perception, to dimness. The more actively he perceives the natural world he loves, the more alienated he is from it, for its quality is to perceive nothingness" (Pinsky 49). Pinsky's point is not so much historical, but thematic, and thus general. And thematically, not only Whitman, but Hartmann's own work can be seen as "romantic." However, my point is not simply to put Hartmann into a general category of poets who can be said to use a romantic style, broadly conceived. Instead I attempt to read Hartmann's style into his historical circumstance. I argue that his particular attraction to alienation, negativity and intense perception is an appropriation of romanticism that should be understood through history, specifically as a cultural response to the discourse of Chinese Exclusion.

The first step to understanding Hartmann's pseudo-romanticism, and his connection to Whitman, would be to understand his conception of nationality. Nationality, as Mae M. Ngai observes, will eventually become the preeminent context to understand not only territories and people, but the notion of rights themselves. And though she quotes Chief Justice Earl Warren's 1958 comment that "Citizenship *is* man's basic right, for it is nothing less than the right to have rights," the fact that inalienable rights are effectively displaced from an eighteenth century conception of universal human rights to rights that emerge only through citizenship in a nation suggests the

scale of this transformation and its obvious long foreground, to misuse Emerson's comment on Whitman (qtd in Ngai 10). The importance of race and nationality is apparent as early as an 1870 naturalization bill in which Senator Charles Sumner "offered an amendment to strike the word 'white' from" the bill and thereby to depart from the nation's first naturalization law signed by George Washington in 1790 (Gyory 50-51). Andrew Gyory notes that the bill was rejected, then approved, then rejected again twice (52). This ambivalence shows that a discourse of racial equality that followed in the wake of the Civil War still exerted some appeal, even while fears of racial disunity persisted and ultimately triumphed. Additionally, a "similar amendment specifically allowing Chinese to be naturalized also lost," which reveals that under the question of naturalization, the question of whether Chinese immigrants should be accorded the full status of citizen was already explicitly raised and rejected (52).

Though he immigrated in precisely the year that the Chinese Exclusion Act passed, 1882, Hartmann did not make Chinese Exclusion an overt part of either his poetry or his cultural criticism.<sup>3</sup> But some of his prose, a memoir and a work of art criticism, does put forward a critique of nationality as immaterial, and undecidable. In fact, given Whitman's importance to Hartmann that he begins his book *Conversations with Walt Whitman* (1895) with an account of nationality implies that nationality was a central concern, at least to a young Hartmann.

As Hartmann records it, Whitman would not have regarded him as an American poet, remarking upon their first meeting, "And you are a Japanese boy, are you

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<sup>3</sup> Hartmann lists 1882 as the year of his immigration in an outline that accompanied his unfinished autobiography in typescript in Box 27 of his archive at University of California Riverside.

not?" (Knox 66).<sup>4</sup> Hartmann seems to take this question as something of a sign of Whitman's perceptiveness, noting in parentheses that with the exception of small boys, Whitman was "the only person I met in those years who recognized my nationality at the first glance." And while this comment seems to suggest that Hartmann also sees himself not as primarily American but Japanese, his response to Whitman is a complication of the question and not an answer to it. "My father is a German, but my mother was a Japanese and I was born in Japan." This response seems to affirm that he is indeed Japanese, especially in the way Hartmann narrates this exchange after his parenthetical remark, except his connection to Japan occurs in the past tense verb "was." And while his father is German in the present tense, this nationality both applies and doesn't apply to Hartmann in that he doesn't claim to be German, merely the son of a German. Whitman's response to this answer is reticent acceptance, "H'm--Come in" (67).

If Whitman actually doesn't get Hartmann's nationality right at first, it's interesting that Hartmann nonetheless endorses Whitman's guess as a form of recognition and thus essentially correct. What's implied is that there is a stronger form of mistaken identity more often attributed to Hartmann, which here goes unstated. The date of this meeting, November 1884, occurs between the first Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and a stronger prohibition in 1888 that excludes "all persons of the Chinese race" (qtd in Takaki 111). So the context for Whitman's interrogation of Hartmann's race is increasing anti-Chinese racism. That Hartmann is only too pleased to distance himself from the Chinese suggests not only the extent to which Hartmann practices ethnic

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<sup>4</sup> According to George Knox, Whitman sometimes referred to Hartmann emphasizing his nationality, at one point even referring to him as "that damned Japanee." See Knox 48, n 10.

disidentification, “the act of distancing one’s group from another group so as not to be mistaken and suffer the blame for the presumed misdeeds of that group,” but also that the difference between Hartmann and Chinese-Americans is decisive (Espiritu 20).<sup>5</sup> That Whitman can see the difference proves that the difference is real; it can be identified based on close inspection by a careful observer--or rather not so much by observation than by intuition, not only Whitman, but very small boys also see him as not Chinese. That this differentiation occurs at this subtle, but immediate level of knowledge suggests that what differentiates a Chinese American from a Japanese American bears the objective reality of nature, not a potentially changeable difference in culture.

But when Hartmann does resort to the supposedly natural basis of nationality, parentage, he actually has no answer for what his nationality is, only a series of relationships in time, which then does suggest that nationality is at least partly contingent on time or development. In fact, the temporal quality of these relationships takes on a subtle emphasis in the shifting verb tenses that describe his relationship to his parents’ nationalities. Nationality becomes a negotiated and ambiguous term, under which an apparently natural meaning disintegrates, so that in the end it’s up to Whitman to determine what to take away from Hartmann’s genealogy.

If the ostensibly neutral term “nationality” is ambiguously between nature and culture, I want to draw out the implication of racial difference behind this term. Indeed, Whitman seems only tangentially concerned with Hartmann’s race, and he certainly

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<sup>5</sup> As Yen Le Espiritu points out, the common practice of differentiating among Asian immigrant groups characterized a historically specific response to racism that is a far cry from the panethnic Asian American consciousness of the late twentieth century. It’s perhaps an obvious point to make that Hartmann doesn’t fit the rubric of late twentieth century Asian Americanness.

doesn't bear only negative prejudice toward Hartmann, at one point remarking to Horace Traubel, "I expect good things of him—extra good things" (Traubel II 321). And if we look at Hartmann's overall narrative of his first meeting with Whitman, race does emerge as a unifying theme, but only in light of what Hartmann admits is his selective memory of the meeting, implying that it's Hartmann more than Whitman who is invested in race.<sup>6</sup>

Hartmann's preoccupation with race in the larger discourse of Chinese exclusion shows that even if racial classification is enigmatic, it is nonetheless of central importance to Hartmann. Considering the Chinese Exclusion Act, Takaki notes that "support for the anti-Chinese legislation was national, coming not only from the western states but also from states where there were few or no Chinese" (111). The fact that anti-Chinese sentiment was independent of an actual Chinese immigrant presence suggests that the issue is on the one hand abstract, but for that reason all the more immediate a problem to Hartmann. Takaki explains the widespread support for Chinese exclusion as "symptomatic of a larger conflict between white labor and white capital." That Chinese Exclusion operates at an abstract level, in a theory of ethnic categorization inflected by economic anxiety, and Takaki's analysis suggests that the abstraction of racial category slips into further abstractions of economic forces in such a way that Hartmann's specific ethnicity seems on the one hand a challenge to this discourse but also surpassed, made irrelevant by it.

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<sup>6</sup> Hartmann states that he was too caught up in Whitman's "appearance" and "milieu" to "remember much of this first conversation" but interestingly, he describes Whitman's appearance in racial terms as "a spiritually deepened image of contemporary Americans." Also he inserts a moment from a later meeting in which Whitman remarks "I never forget that my ancestors were Dutch" (Knox 67).

Takaki's explanation of why Chinese exclusion was so popular has passed into critical orthodoxy, but the structure of this historical narrative suggests something more complex than logical causation. While Takaki reviews the economic problems of the 1870s as among the causes of wide support for Chinese Exclusion, the effects of exclusion are far-reaching and significant. According to Ngai, the passage of this first immigration law "produced the illegal alien as a *new legal and political subject*" (4, original emphasis). Her specific wording, that the law creates a new subjectivity as a legal status shows that exclusion maintains a dual significance as both abstract category and personal attribute. Indeed the ambiguity between the problem of race and concrete people who are attributed that race and hence that status as social problem, goes some way in explaining why as soon as 1892 leaders who led the effort to pass Chinese exclusion, like Denis Kearney, "began to attack the Japanese as another 'Oriental menace'" (Azuma 37).

If the new legal status of illegal immigrant lacked concrete specificity, its definition would potentially be still up for grabs. Indeed Eiichiro Azuma's analysis reveals that the Japanese American elite consciously tried to position themselves in relation to the discourse that defined the Chinese racial formation. "Ironically both [Japanese] diplomats and the immigrant elite agreed with the exclusionists on the key point that the 'inferior' quality of Japanese laborers and prostitutes paralleled the excluded Chinese." Their own complicity with the rhetoric of exclusion was meant to emphasize that Japanese American merchants and community leaders were more like whites than Chinese immigrants, especially since the Japanese represented a modern nation-state. Furthermore, as Azuma points out, the class that Japanese migrant laborers were

drawn from often were thought of as an ethnic minority in Japan, as less Japanese than the elites.<sup>7</sup> In this distinction Azuma's analysis of the diplomatic agenda of imperial Japan, which was carrying out an expansionist foreign policy, is important.

According to John Namjun Kim, the Japanese of the early twentieth century, especially "the Kyoto School of philosophy [...] regarded what we today call Japanese imperialism not as a system of subjugation but as a project of cosmopolitan liberation from European imperialism" (Kim 74). Kim is explicit in acknowledging that Japanese Imperialism should not be regarded as "a movement toward global liberation" at any stretch of the imagination (75), but its theorization, especially in the figure of Miki Kiyoshi, the subject of Kim's essay, is an important example of a particular anticolonial theory. Miki posits a unique position for Japan's cultural identity and therefore its international position based on a rejection of both the West, which Miki sees as undergoing a crisis of fragmentation after World War I, and Chinese Sino-centrism which he sees as what consigned China to atavistic degeneration. In Miki's thought, Japan avoids these problems through its cosmopolitanism. As he reads history, Japan's reliance on first Chinese culture and then Westernization shows "that Japanese culture consists in nothing more than the absorption and preservation of the most 'excellent' aspects of foreign cultures" (Kim 87). It is precisely because what characterizes Japan is not positive attributes but rather critical distance, that Japan has a mandate to expand

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<sup>7</sup> Azuma's analysis accounts for the relative recent advent of the Japanese state, so that it is only in the 1870s that a governmental sense of Japanese citizenry arose. Given that Japanese immigration began in 1885, that a sense of Japanese identity would be uneven among emigrants is a reasonable conclusion. And in fact, Azuma suggests that it is "only after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 did the state achieve any notable integration" of rural Japanese peasants (26).

across Asia. Indeed, in Miki's thought, such expansion amounts to the spread of a potentiality rather than the imposition of an imperial power.

Drawing from historical documents, Azuma presents evidence that a form of immigrant cosmopolitanism also existed in Japanese American communities, but as one might expect, these communities tended to more strongly assert "Japanese-white likeness, East-West parallelism" (8). Although Hartmann was not part of the west coast Japanese immigrant community, the thesis of his 1903 history *Japanese Art* focuses on establishing a Japan-Europe parallelism, arguing that the evolution of Japanese art can be understood as a version of the evolution of western art, in which "primitive art was a religious art" succeeded by a renaissance such that "the glorious epoch of the Fukugawa Shogunate corresponds to the age of Louis XV" (Hartmann vi).

Around the 1908 Gentleman's Agreement, in which Japan agreed to end emigration of laborers to the US, Hartmann produced *The Whistler Book* which Weaver calls "the most graceful exposition of Hartmann's ideas" (Weaver 4). At first gloss, it might seem odd that when anti-Japanese racism succeeds in barring immigration that Hartmann focuses on a figure from the 1890s and refines the implied cosmopolitanism of *Japanese Art* into something less political and more aesthetic. But then we know that Hartmann's preoccupation with race emphasized its intangible character, an intangible character present in the law's own inconsistency. According to Ngai, the defeat of Sumner's 1870 amendment meant that in naturalization law, only two races were specified, black and white, and the bar to citizenship in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act "remained outside the main body of naturalization law" (Ngai 37). And though Hartmann himself was naturalized on October 12, 1894 in the Superior Court of New York City the

fact that he was naturalized as that outcome became increasingly unlikely for people of Japanese descent must have cast that naturalization as something less than a full conferral of all the rights of US citizenship.<sup>8</sup> That very ambiguity, that he may or may not be barred from citizenship, means that what otherwise should be the most concrete determinant of an individual's social identity is actually something inferred and interpreted, and thus something that does relate to aesthetics. Thus, his turn toward the aesthetic is not a repression of the political but as a response to it. *The Whistler Book* is Hartmann's attempt to bracket the explicitly political for a deeper and more transcendent sense of what Japanese culture is like.<sup>9</sup>

*The Whistler Book* does not seem to be about race in any obvious way.

Hartmann opens the book, which has the long subtitle "A Monograph of the Life and Position in Art of James McNeill Whistler, together with a Careful Study of his more Important Works," with an oddly vague but also personal account of the white chrysanthemum which we are told is Hartmann's favorite flower.<sup>10</sup> Why is it his favorite? "That is more than I can tell. The unconscious movements of our soul activity cannot be turned into sodden prose" (Hartmann *Whistler* 1). Hartmann proceeds in a digressive manner for another page before asserting: "those human beings who are sensitive to the charms of the chrysanthemum [...] must hail from the same country in which my soul

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<sup>8</sup> A statement that Hartmann made on March 11, 1942 protesting being classified as a Japanese alien enemy, specifies when he was naturalized.

<sup>9</sup> Hartmann's sense of what characterizes Japaneseness has a parallel logic to Miki's, both depending on the capacity for Japan, as a modern Asian nation, to challenge attributes meant to designate Asia and the West.

<sup>10</sup> This section of the book was printed separately in *The Stylus* Volume 1 Number 1, December 1909. *The Stylus* was a "magazine devoted to art and self-expression" that Hartmann edited with a focus "exclusively to Sadakichi Hartmann's works" (*The Stylus* 1:1, prefatory pages).

abides" (2). Only at this conjunction of nation, soul and aesthetic experience does Hartmann bring in Whistler: "Whistler was busy all his life painting just such white chrysanthemums." It's clear that the chrysanthemum represents Hartmann's connection to Whistler, and that the abrupt transition from his poetical disquisition on white chrysanthemums to Whistler veils an assertion that he and Whistler are the same nationality.

What this nationality might be is specifically addressed in the last chapter of the book. Hartmann notes that on a concrete level, Whistler's nationality isn't obvious, "three nations--England, France and America--claimed him as their own" (234). And in the end, Hartmann doesn't argue for a particular answer to the question, though his interpretation of Whistler's American nationality is interesting. Hartmann acknowledges: "Of course, one can simply settle the matter by saying that as he was born in American of American parents, he is an American" (236). But the rest of the discussion makes plain that this simplification of nationality by birth ultimately settles nothing. Hartmann's logic here explicitly reprises what is implicit in his earlier answer to Whitman on the same question, emphasizing the undecidability of nationality by showing the inadequacy of the most common definition. So instead of settling the question of nationality, Hartmann shifts the question to the national character of art, and here, he asserts for Whistler a Japanese-Americanness.

True enough his subject matter was, with the exception of "L'Américaine" and a few portraits, strictly Continental. But the spirit was strictly Japanese and--American. Or, I would rather say, his form of art

conception was Oriental, but the essence, the under-rhythm of his personality, was after all American. (237)

Part of the suddenness of this statement would be mitigated by Hartmann's earlier analysis of Whistler's technique in which he imagines Whistler could "not come out boldly and say: 'this is the Japanese way of doing things. I disengage the poetical significance from an object or fact in Eastern fashion. I have learned this from the Hiroshige prints'" (62). And then to clarify, Hartmann goes on to place Whistler's "wit and sarcasm" as explicitly American (238). But nonetheless it is significant to note that Hartmann is indeed claiming Whistler as Japanese American, not on a concrete level which after all decides nothing and is almost insignificant, but in art.

Hartmann's assertion of a Japanese American cultural identity for Whistler anticipates the arguments that two challengers to Asian exclusion would mount before the Supreme Court in the 1920s. Analyzing *Takao Ozawa v. U.S.* (1922) and *U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), Ngai notes that both Ozawa and Thind made their cases through two arguments, first "on the grounds of their adherence to American ideals," or their cultural identity, and second by arguing that "within the terms of the law"--the naturalization law that specifies only white and black races--"they were white and therefore also racially eligible for citizenship" (43). This second, racial argument was made by appealing to the discourse of scientific racism; Ozawa cited anthropological findings that "identified the Japanese as Caucasian or white" and Thind claimed that "because marrying outside of caste in India is strictly forbidden" he was "a pure Aryan" (Ngai 44, 45). Deciding these cases against Ozawa and Thind, the court therefore had to disavow scientific racism and its construction of race as real and

verifiable by shifting the definition of white from science to “the understanding of the common man” (qtd in Ngai 46). In so doing, the court ironically showed that race was immaterial and cultural. But more significant than just the cultural aspect of race, the finding itself emphasized the dimension of power that underlies how race is defined.

If nationality becomes the means by which individuals are endowed with rights, the power to deny nationality because of race turns into the power to impose domination, potentially even total domination. To potentially be denied US nationality and yet to live in the US is then to face what Orlando Patterson calls “social death,” to belong to a community without a recognized social position within it (Patterson 38). Patterson’s larger project is a monumental comparative study of slavery across time and geography, and thus he makes huge claims. One such claim is that the nature of social death must be mediated culturally, and that one such representation of social death is what he calls an “intrusive” form of social death. “In the intrusive mode of representing social death the slave was ritually incorporated as the permanent enemy on the inside--the ‘domestic enemy,’” (39). Thus, even though Asian exclusion was not slavery, it did make possible a social death.

I’ve suggested that Hartmann’s awareness of his own potential social death motivates an intensely aesthetic understanding of nationality, but what’s not yet clear is that social death is a decisive part of his poetry. The extent to which Hartmann’s poetry responds to a form of nonexistence isn’t fully clear until it’s read in the context of Hartmann’s idol’s poems on death, Whitman’s late work.

## Late Whitman and Personality

Michael Moon makes the argument that throughout his career, Whitman was preoccupied with using text as a means of creating an almost physical contact between bodies, and thus implicitly his writing has always been intensely personal. That this textual embodiment is “impossible” is something that Moon readily acknowledges, but at the same time the impossibility of capturing actual physical presence in a poem motivates Whitman’s revisions, specifically in his substitutional, paratactic poetics.<sup>11</sup> For example, in analyzing Whitman’s 1855 *Leaves*, Moon describes how Whitman attempts to represent physical presence by using an allegory of the poet’s relation to nature to depict a fluid form of identity that connects poet to reader.

A relation of mutual specular doubling links “poet” and “geography”: he “responds to his country’s spirit” not only by “incarnat[ing] its geography” but by in turn endowing the country’s “rivers and lakes and natural life” with specular male bodies, mirrors of his own and those of other “fluid” men. (75)

Whitman uses allegory to depict fluid identity, but this fluidity comes at the cost of a body’s physicality, and thus its singularity as well. What Moon recognizes in Whitman is an emphasis on the specular, that vision allows for the kind of transformation his verse enacts, as opposed to a more concrete experience of the body. Such physical experience is more intractably singular, because after all direct sensory perception is

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<sup>11</sup> Moon notes that Whitman’s revisions also track with the development of cultural discourses of the body in the nineteenth century and that this shifting historical ground necessitates Whitman’s continued open-ended engagements with trying to place the body in poetic discourse.

limited to senses arising from a single body, and thus if Whitman attempts to convey the personal, he doesn't do it in his best known work. In fact, it's only when Whitman abandons an attempt to incarnate the whole of a nation that Whitman's work turns genuinely, and problematically personal. It turns toward death and becomes late work.

Moon ends his study with the 1867 version, even as he acknowledges that "Whitman effectively redirected the patterns of meanings in each of the successive editions of *Leaves of Grass*" including the edition of 1891-92 (1). This would hardly qualify as an omission since critics have tended to either ignore or dismiss Whitman's late poetry. For example, although he evaluates the poems in a somewhat outdated insistence on literary value, M. Wynn Thomas's contention that the late work shows that "Whitman's powers [were] long and steadily in decline" (Thomas 3) is hard to meaningfully contest given the contrast between something like "Song of Myself" against Whitman's fragmentary short poems in the last two annexes. These last poems are further marginalized by Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price's observation that the "deathbed" edition is not really an edition at all, but rather "a reissue of the 1881-2 edition with supplemental material" (Folsom and Price 127).

But in his essay "Whitman's Aging Body," Benjamin Lee argues that Whitman's late work is not simply a diminished form of his earlier poetry, but instead should be read as developing Whitman's thematic of the body. Lee finds that in contrast with Whitman's earlier, metonymic method, in which "the body exists [...] as *the* privileged site of sympathy and sensual contact between poet and reader" (Lee 39), the late Whitman shifts to metaphoric language that ultimately invokes an absence. Lee reads this absence as taking up Whitman's project of communicating physical experience

since his own physical experience becomes more and more characterized by “the pain of aging” and a failure of communication, and no longer by the possibility of partial, serial substitutions that characterized his earlier metonymic physicality.<sup>12</sup> Lee illustrates this significant stylistic shift in Whitman’s poetry by first examining the late poem “As I Sit Writing Here,” which he reads as a poem that refuses identifying the poet’s selfhood with the body. Then, another late poem like “The Dismantled Ship” goes on to mark a more explicit metaphoric logic, intensifying the gap between self and body through the displaced figure of the ship. Notably, nowhere in “The Dismantled Ship” is Whitman’s physical state explicitly mentioned, so that this brief, seemingly descriptive portrait of an object is implicitly, but not directly, metaphoric.

Lee’s use of metaphor to characterize what Whitman is doing is a somewhat strong usage of this term, but one that is nonetheless apt since it’s obvious that the pathos of a poem like “The Dismantled Ship” lies in the unstated comparison to Whitman’s body. Lee’s thesis is that this absent comparison “speaks to us of pain’s power to alter language” and ultimately invoke the body (39), but interestingly later poems tend to sometimes drop even the implied comparison with the physical body. These poems might well take Whitman’s metaphorical rhetoric further than the poems in his first annex (1888), focusing not on comparison but on rhetorical transformation itself. Or to put it another way, these even later poems go beyond invoking pain’s inability to be communicated to broach the absence in any communication.

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<sup>12</sup> Lee’s claim that physical pain would become central to Whitman’s experience makes biographical sense since Whitman’s physical ailments were intense by the late 1880s. David S. Reynolds notes that upon his death, the “autopsy revealed that Whitman’s doctors had vastly underestimated the extent of his maladies,” which Reynolds lists in a full paragraph, before concluding “He had suffered, it seems, from almost everything but a heart problem” (Reynolds 588).

The title poem of the second annex (1891), “Good-bye my Fancy” is brief and fragmentary, and it departs from even the implied metaphoric of “The Dismantled Ship.” Instead the poem seems to oddly insist on its status as a blank utterance, since its content is a repetition of the poem’s title, which is also the title of the annex, along with not only a long parenthetical, but also a footnote.

Good-bye \* my fancy--(I had a word to say,  
 But tis not quite the time--The best of any man’s word or say,  
 Is when its proper place arrives--and for its meaning,  
 I keep mine till the last.) (LGV 732)

In this poem, the most emphasized text, the title and verse, are also the least meaningful. The parenthetical comment that forms the rest of the poem raises the question of temporality as a time that is deferred, while also dividing the saying of a word, unsaid in the poem, from its meaning, which is withheld “till the last.” But how exactly this parenthetical relates to the phrase “good-bye my fancy” is unclear and since it is presented in the text as an interruption, the relation may well be tangential.

The footnote of the poem detaches the poem’s clearest signifier of time from its temporality. The note begins “Behind a Good-bye there lurks much of the salutation of another beginning” - in other words, the note serves to qualify good-bye to mean also hello--not to mark finality in time, but indeterminacy. The placement of the note, mid-phrase, also serves to suspend the sentence’s progress in time by interjecting the supplemental text to make the experience of reading the sentence discontinuous.

But despite the poem’s temporal difficulty, the footnote and parenthetical commentary also supplement the main poem with an element of the personal. The final

line's idiomatic phrasing suggests that the deferral of meaning has a capricious air to it and the note's second paragraph also strikes an informal tone: "Why do folks dwell so fondly on the last words, advice, appearance of the departing?" Ultimately, if the poem coheres, it coheres insofar as the reader grants the poet his caprice to withhold, or rather than caprice, his fancy. And it is perhaps this less stable effect, this collusion between reader and poet against the difficulty of the poem that suggests why this annex is suitable to conclude *Leaves of Grass*.

But while the second annex is the last set of poems in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman appends a prose afterword too. Folsom and Price note that as an afterword, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" is symmetrical to the 1855 preface. "If the preface is brash, irreverent, and forward looking, 'A Backward Glance' is dignified, conciliatory, and retrospective" (127).<sup>13</sup> As the book's conclusion, Whitman attempts to sum up *Leaves of Grass* in this essay, first in terms of its purpose: "to articulate and faithfully express [...] my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of [...] current America" (LG 444). Central to his purpose is "Personality" which he capitalizes and modifies with the particular word "aesthetic." This goal of personal expression is then qualified in the second explanation Whitman offers of the book, its situation in terms of literature as a whole. It's in this mode of contextualization that Whitman's notion of "aesthetic Personality" gains specificity. Whitman writes that among "the world's reading" there are "dozens more" poems that "transcend (some of them immeasurably transcend) all I have done or could do" (LG

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<sup>13</sup> Folsom and Price's contrast between the preface and "A Backward Glance" seems to reiterate what Benjamin Lee noted about the relative valuation of early Whitman versus late Whitman. It is not that late Whitman repeats early Whitman and is therefore not essential reading, but that the late Whitman is no longer original.

447). His use of “transcend” turns out to be somewhat facetious since the specific qualities he sees these other poems surpassing his own in are “pictorial talent, dramatic situation and especially [...] verbal melody.” Beyond these technical concerns, Whitman uses the term “aesthetic” to refer to not only “the objects in Nature” and “all special exploitations of the mind and soul [...] but the quality, just as inherent and important, of *their point of view*” (447, original emphasis). Following this statement Whitman appends a note that calls point of view “the last essential reality, giving shape and significance to all the rest” and moreover, he attributes this sense of point of view, as that which is transcendental, or at least transcends poetic device, as Immanuel Kant’s.

The Kant note seems to be more rhetorical than explanatory however. Whitman certainly doesn’t use Kant’s terminology much less provide references to specific works. Whitman does not explain why point of view should be the “last essential reality” and instead lets the phrase hang, ambiguous but strongly worded. But what does seem significant about Whitman’s use of Kant here is his use of Kant’s categorization of reality into “objects in Nature” and “mind and soul” with point of view serving as a mediating faculty between these two categories.

To Kant, objects in nature and the concepts with which to organize experience have no necessary relationship, or in Kant’s words “the sensible cannot determine the supersensible” (Kant 32). But this profound division, which Kant characterizes as a “great gulf”, nonetheless belies our common experience. After all, we do not labor to make sense of the ordinary diversity of our empirical experience. For that reason, Kant argues that we presuppose some connection between our experience of objects in Nature with mind and soul, even if such a connection is both not demonstrable to

reason and not based in observation. This presupposed connection grounds nature with thought through “purposiveness.” Kant begins by accepting that an object’s reality may well differ from our cognition of that object. But so long as our concept “contains the ground of the actuality of this object” (17), this is, that a concept has some minimal basis in fact, then our concept is at bottom real. Kant’s crucial point though, is that this basis in the actual is reflective, “obliged to ascend from the particular in nature to the universal” (16) in a speculative fashion, but nonetheless, as long as even a small element of our cognition of an object is part of that object, we can intuit that connection. And this concept that connects phenomena to laws is what Kant terms “purposiveness.”

It’s important to emphasize that in purposiveness the presupposition occurs in a subjunctive verb tense, as what will have been: purposiveness is a potential that is reconstructed from the actual, through reflection. Purposiveness then has a decidedly untimely character, neither an actual precursor to experience in that it is always assumed and never experienced, nor properly a result of sensation. This account of temporality suggests that a poem like “Good-bye my Fancy,” which prolongs its time through deferral while also denying the sequential aspect of time, takes the poem out of experience even as it claims the immediacy of the particular. That passage out of experience is what Whitman calls “the last essential reality,” which means that what Whitman privileges as most real is not what we sense, but something “supersensible,” to use Kant, that sense suggests. Thus, this poem makes the point other of Whitman’s late poems do, that the internal experience of the self is incommunicable, but it makes that impossibility itself the subject of the poem, as the poem’s reticent suspension.

Not that I mean to suggest that “Good-Bye my Fancy” explicates Kant’s theory of how sense perception leads to cognition, nor do I mean to claim some kind of major importance for the poem. In fact, it’s minor status is why such a poem in Whitman’s late phase can seem transcendent. Because the poem is fragmentary, its emptiness gestures toward a more radical emptiness, that of death, but does so in the properly Kantian manner. According to Theodor Adorno, death appears in art as incompleteness: “it leaves only fragments behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself” (qtd in Said 9). Understanding Whitman’s late work as late work in this sense, as artwork that shows death, means that something like Whitman’s comment in “Backward Glance” that his poetic technique is only secondary to a concern for “the last essential reality,” which after all seems like an excuse for not exerting himself to make a poem good, actually proposes how finally in Whitman’s late poetry, he does attempt to make poetry a form of intimate connection, what Moon saw as the impossible aim of Whitman’s entire oeuvre. This more complex sense of the connections between Whitman’s comment and his late poetry is possible through one last turn toward Kant.

Kant poses the question of whether pleasure in perceiving an aesthetic object precedes cognition, which seems a drily technical concern. However, the stakes of this question is nothing less than whether subjective experience is communicable, since it’s not sensations and objects that are communicated, but concepts (Kant, Guyer 102). Here Kant addresses Whitman’s foundational problem, whether the body can be disseminated as text. And to Kant the answer is yes, but only under the special condition under which both perception and cognition are in agreement, in other words,

in an experience of the beautiful (96). Interestingly, an experience of the beautiful proceeds by a logic of subtraction. Whether something is beautiful depends on “satisfaction or dissatisfaction” according to Kant, but a satisfaction that is “*without any interest*” (96, original emphasis). In other words, a beautiful object enables a sense of satisfaction that has a subjective component removed from it and in fact, Kant suggests that this subtraction itself has a pleasurable aspect.<sup>14</sup> So when Whitman proclaims in “Good-Bye my Fancy” that he’ll “keep [his] till the last” this withholding becomes crucial for the possibility of making a private pleasure communicable, and therefore makes this poem about how the incommunicable is paradoxically invoked and made known.

As though to suggest a revision, Whitman returns a fourth time to the phrase “good-bye my fancy” in the final poem of the annex, this time marked with an exclamation point, as though to symbolize emotion. Indeed, in contrast to the reticence of the first poem, the first lines of this poem directly offer the poem to a kind of sentimental conventionality that detractors of Whitman’s late work characterize it with. The term “fancy” is given an immediate metaphorical referent in the second line: “Good-bye my Fancy! / Farewell dear mate, dear love!” (1-2), and this connection proves a tempting line for interpretation. The banal potential of situating the “good-bye my fancy” phrase in romantic love is made obvious in the 1951 Joan Crawford movie, *Goodbye, My Fancy*. Kenneth Price notes that a recitation of Whitman’s poem occurs in a scene in which the film’s protagonist, Agatha Reed, reunites with a forbidden love from college. “They recite together ‘Good-bye My Fancy!’ [...] Agatha then rips up the old [departure]

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<sup>14</sup> The pleasure in what everyone finds gratifying is called the “agreeable” in Kant’s terminology. See p. 95.

note and says ‘Hello my Fancy!’ before they share a long kiss” (Price 49). Clearly, what had earlier suggested temporal ambiguity can now be read as a failure of will, seeming more like melodrama and less like a broken poem about death.

Against such a reading, one might want to read the poem’s more intimate pronominal address and its reference to a lover with Whitman’s likening of the soul to a lover in the fifth section of “Song of Myself.” Certainly this connection seems affirmed in the sixteenth line of the poem, which figures “you” as something supernatural. But then this late poem eschews the earlier poem’s erotic contact for an assumed relation between the relative abstraction of merely being called a lover, and where in “Song of Myself” the profusion of detail comes to define the capaciousness of love, the silence in this late poem becomes something uncertain. Whitman precedes the conclusion of the poem with a sequence of three anaphora:

May-be we’ll be better off and blither, and learn something,

May-be it is yourself now really ushering me to the true songs, (who  
knows?)

May-be it is you the mortal knob really undoing, turning [...] (15-17)

What most emerges from these lines is uncertainty since each line begins with its emphasized “May-be.” But in contrast to the paratactic effect of these “May-be”s, the three lines actually trace a kind of progression. First, line 15 begins in optimism while also suggesting that the poem’s goodbye is really a hello to something new to be learned. From here, line 16 intensifies the previous line’s optimism and transforms the promise of learning into an imminent discovery of truth. But then the penultimate line of the poem returns the sense of good-bye as an ending against the suggestion of line 15,

a transition that the previous line prepares us for via the parenthetical rhetorical question, “who knows?”, which we note also strikes the colloquial tone Whitman favored in the first “Good-bye my Fancy” poem. And the net effect seems to reprise that earlier poem in that the good-bye is also a hello, not as a synthesis but as an inconsistency. If thought of as a hello, Whitman suggests that nonetheless the mortal knob is being undone, and if as a goodbye Whitman suggests there might be something unforeseen to come.

Perhaps the question to ask in light of Moon’s point that each of Whitman’s successive revisions reconfigures meaning at the level of the book itself is what ending *Leaves of Grass* with this poem suggests. Insofar as it seems to rewrite the first “Good-Bye my Fancy” poem, “Good-Bye my Fancy!” suggests that what was withheld in that poem is now in some way being expressed, perhaps in the figure of the “you” explicitly and somewhat intimately addressed here. But then this reading only emphasizes how the poem fails to live up to the “best of any man’s word or say.” So then if anything, these two poems seem to emphasize the anticlimax of heaping two annexes and a concluding essay onto a work that kept refusing its ending by reappearing in newer versions. It becomes hard to resist the prevailing attitude that even Benjamin Lee could at best suspend and not counter, that Whitman’s late poetry shows *Leaves of Grass* ending with the gradual extinguishing of Whitman’s poetic power.

But then if Moon is right and “the generative contradiction at the heart of *Leaves of Grass*” is “the desire to imbue a text with full physical presence” (Moon 73) the falling into silence and fragmentation at the end of *Leaves of Grass* must be read as an

intensified attempt to put the body into writing, particularly its vulnerability to time.

According to Shierry Weber NicholSEN, Adorno's aesthetic theory similarly places the work of art in time, so that the initial aesthetic unity of a work comes to give way under the pressure of history. "History has uncovered and made evident the original contents within the works; they are visible solely by virtue of the disintegration of their gestalt-like unity in the form of the work" (Adorno qtd in NicholSEN 35). So then emphatically publishing his late poetry implies that Whitman insists on emphasizing aesthetic failure as a mode of the particularity of the text, its real, mortal status.

Toward the end of "A Backward Glance" Whitman writes: "No one will get at my verses who insists on viewing them as a literary performance, or attempts at such a performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism" (LG 456), and this disavowal of the aesthetic is meant as an avowal that *Leaves of Grass* is "an attempt, from first to last, to put a *Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record." But then Whitman also makes the claim that something that served as the "bases and object-urgings toward those 'Leaves' from the first" is "the word Suggestiveness" (451-2). And here it's not that Whitman's particularity is fully and truly on record, but rather that the "reader will always have his or her part to do, just as much as I have had mine" (452). Betsy ErkkilA characterizes "the active role of the reader required by Whitman's indirect method" as paradigmatic of his aesthetics (ErkkilA 91), and it follows that if the reader has to actively construct the text as much as Whitman himself did then *Leaves of Grass* is a form of mediation which must be aesthetic insofar as it presents an object for others to make personal meaning of.

Hartmann's aesthetics also emphasize suggestiveness, although as Weaver points out Hartmann never codified exactly what he meant by this term. Hartmann did insist on "poetry and feeling in art as a necessary adjunct to the beautiful" and referred to art of this kind as being in "the suggestive style" (Weaver 27). That Hartmann linked aesthetic beauty with poetry and feeling indicates the decisive influence on Hartmann of Whitman's desire to also connect his human specificity with the possibility of literary expression. This is not to say that Hartmann merely adapted Whitman's emphasis on the suggestive in his art criticism. "The suggestive style was one of poetic mysticism and psychological intensity" writes Weaver, "Hartmann characterized it as embodying the poetic idea [...]; above all, he emphasized that the art of suggestiveness rested on canons of ancient oriental art" and so suggestiveness was "opposed to the Western classical tradition which resulted in a 'craze for originality'" (27). Repudiating originality, Hartmann seems to be close to the late Whitman's no longer innovative verse, to an emphasis on how what can't actually be communicated might yet be conveyed in art. One difference is that Hartmann sees unoriginal creation as not inherently American as Whitman seemed to, but instead as specifically Oriental, a claim that explicitly connects questions of aesthetics to cultural representation.

### **The Orient in Hartmann's Early Poetry**

Hartmann was boldly unafraid to proclaim his expertise on Japan: a handbill for his lecture "A Plea for the Encouragement of American Art" notes that his book *Japanese Art* "has popularized Oriental esthetics perhaps more than any book of the

day;” and from 1904 to 1906 he was giving a lecture titled “Japan, As It Really Is.” But *Japanese Art* relies heavily on secondary literature, especially W. G. Aston’s *A History of Japanese Literature* (1899), and in a letter soliciting bookings (at the fee of \$100 per lecture) Hartmann quotes a blurb from *Boston Evening Transcript*<sup>15</sup> which asserts that his “half Japanese parentage gives him free entrance to the Japanese heart.” Hartmann’s reliance on a preexisting discourse of Japan and a sense that authentic knowledge is a matter of blood suggests that an actual lived relationship to Japan is in some way irrelevant, and this substitution of a cultural idea of Japan for contact with Japan is problematic, or in some way irrelevant, that to Hartmann the Orient is really more an idea.

As Edward Said notes in the influential text *Orientalism* (1978), just this sort of disregard of the difference between discourse and its inevitable fallibility characterizes not only Western institutional knowledge about Asia, but also overlaps with Western political power over the Orient. Said states: “the Orient (‘out there’ towards the East) is corrected, even penalized, for lying outside the boundaries of European society” through “a process that not only marks the Orient as the province of the Orientalist but also forces the uninitiated Western reader to accept Orientalist codifications” (Said 67). Hartmann’s popularization of Orientalist codifications and his invocation of his Oriental essence would thus seem to be complicit with Orientalism. But Hartmann’s later comments in support of anti-colonialism and his sense that Western aesthetics would be improved by an embrace of Japanese artistic practice seems to mean that Hartmann

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<sup>15</sup> This is a paper that Hartmann frequently wrote for in the 1890s.

opposes the larger project Orientalism.<sup>16</sup> One conjecture to make might be that Hartmann engages the discourse of Orientalism, partly seduced by its veneer of mastery, and partly as its subject and this ambivalent position is articulated in Hartmann's sense that the aesthetic of the Orient has a negative force, a force that dissolves or surpasses attributes. That aesthetics provides a way to challenge the authority of Orientalism is a paradoxical result of Hartmann's own Orientalism.

In the first eight pages of George Knox's 1976 book *The Whitman-Hartmann Controversy*, Knox relates Hartmann's origin three times, that he was born around 1867, "the son of a German trader and [...] a Japanese mother, Osada, who died in childbirth" (5), and that "in 1882 [he] was sent to America by his 'venerable father,' supposedly at the instigation of his new stepmother" (13).<sup>17</sup> Knox relates these facts with scholarly neutrality, but it's hard not to wonder: why repetitively invoke this origin story?

In what is ostensibly a biography of Hartmann, the 1954 bestseller *Minutes of the Last Meeting*, Gene Fowler also relates Hartmann's birth, with the difference that Fowler presents the tale in the style of a novel, with direct and indirect quotation, and interspersed by comments. At a moment of high sentimentality, as "his mother lay dying" Hartmann says that she "had given him his Japanese name, and explained that

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<sup>16</sup> Hartmann writes: "Anybody familiar with colonization and not a raider himself should feel ashamed of belonging to the white race" (*White Chrysanthemums* 117).

<sup>17</sup> George Knox is credited with catalyzing the resurgence in interest in Hartmann in the late 1970s. According to his obituary "Professor Knox literally invented the field" of Hartmann studies. "University of California: In Memoriam." <http://content.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb267nb0r3&chunk.id=div00031>. University of California Academic Senate. 1999.

'*sada*' meant 'virtue,' and '*kichi*' meant 'good fortune'" (Fowler 51). What follows this wrought account is something Fowler seems to intend as comic relief:

"The moniker means 'Gimme some dough,'" said [W. C.] Fields.

"Gentlemen," said [John] Barrymore, "Sadakichi is the mating call of rabid, though sacred monkeys, playing among the acorn towers of Angkor Wat." (51)

These comments are both racist, and something else. Fields' comment, that Hartmann's name means "gimme some dough" might not pertain to ethnicity, but to biography since Hartmann actually did frequently solicit his acquaintances for money. And Barrymore's comment, with its mock complexity, might also be intended to parody Hartmann's tendency to assert cultural pronouncements supported more by opinion than argumentation. But then both comments are predicated on the incomprehensibility of Hartmann's Japanese name, its foreignness, along with the supposition that this foreignness can nonetheless be translated by two white males. All of which makes this a scene of bonhomie and racial difference.

After this interruption, Fowler quotes Hartmann as saying "Her body was cremated in Kobe [...] where the Kutobiki waterfalls spray the mountain slope. Her relatives, still scandalized by her marriage to an Occidental, strewed her ashes along the dusty road for donkeys to walk over." Saburo Ota, a Japanese scholar who conducted research on Hartmann in the 1970s, has shown several historical improbabilities of Hartmann's account, not the least of which is the rareness of donkeys in Japan. That the donkeys are an invented detail makes Hartmann's own narration, with its prosodic detail intended to excite pity, not the sober counter-narrative against

Fields' and Barrymore's racist joking, but part of a broader context of Oriental representation that all three participate in. Hartmann's special concern though is sentiment.

Hartmann's early poem "To My Mother" (1887) returns to the story of his birth and understandably sentimentalizes his mother in a somewhat elevated diction:

A woman's death created me, must therefore not  
 My love hang over all the world! - Poor mo-  
 ther, my life shall expiate thy premature demise. (lines 1-3)

The worst effect of this awkward enjambment is that the divided word "mo-ther" might enact the poet's interrupted relationship to his mother, as though to force the merely denotative letters of the word into a form of connotation.<sup>18</sup> And similarly, a sense of forced connection arises in the asserted logic between the first and second lines: if his mother died in childbirth, then as her child the poet's love must "hang over all the world." Hartmann's unelaborated logic repeats the vagueness of what his mother's death means, both are foggily abstract. Both of these attempts to enact the content of the poem at the level of its form end up showing the limits of both at the poem's melodramatic ambition.

Significantly, the poem's failings converge around the "mo-ther" who functions both to excuse the poem's elevated language and metrical lapses, as symptoms of emotional intensity, as well as to explain the poem's illogic, since it is obviously meant to

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<sup>18</sup> Early drafts of this poem show Hartmann composing it in long prose lines, which suggests that dividing "mother" is perhaps not intended as an enjambment. However, in the typescript that seems to present the most finished version of the poem, line 1 extends into the right hand margin further than where the uninterrupted "mother" would have reached. Also, Hartmann's capitalization of "My" in line 2 suggests that he is establishing line breaks and that the stanza is not simply one long prose line.

emote and not reason. But in this role, “mo-ther” works by exceeding the bounds of the poem, by making the poem about an emotion we accept insofar as the poem’s actual status as a poem is both flawed and self-consciously poetic.

No wonder then that in a 1922 comment Hartmann defends the poem as “an honest overflow of sentiment, not yet trimmed like boxwood in a gentleman’s garden.” Hartmann’s defense strikes the same note as Whitman’s defense in “A Backward Glance:” an assertion of the aesthetic personality as that which exceeds or overflows cultured craft, and therefore is expressed in imperfect poems. But not all mistakes affirm this aesthetics of honesty. In the second stanza Hartmann romanticizes his mother’s grave “under the hills / Of Kobe” (4-5), by enlisting nature’s gifts

[...] to beautify thy grave,

While winds and birds sing everlasting funeral

Rites to thee, my mother dear. (6-8)

Hartmann writes that this material was “unfortunately chosen” because of its cultural blindness: that in 1887 with his “German middle-class sentimentality” he wrongly assumed that his mother was interred instead of cremated. This time Hartmann offers no defense, and in fact, concludes his 1922 comment with this reflection: “The saddest of all this matter is that I have never been able to greet the land of my birth” (*Early Poems* 2). With this admission, Hartmann confesses that “To My Mother” isn’t based in any way in Hartmann’s actual experience, neither of his mother’s death nor of the Japan he associates his mother with, while also re-inscribing the longing with which the third stanza closes the poem.

The unknown that the dead “mo-ther” represents in Hartmann’s poem works in something of the same way as the ambivalent figuration of the Whitman’s fancy in “Good-bye my Fancy!” With the shift to imagining his mother as a grave in Japan, Hartmann draws an abstract death into a more legible materiality, just as Whitman seems to address a lover in his poem. But where “Good-bye my Fancy!” ends by enacting a progression that affirms unknowing, an affirmation that takes place partly because of Whitman’s folksy tone, in Hartmann the unknown is negative in that the emotional effectivity of the poem comes about only through the pathos of Hartmann’s mistakes, and despite his later attempt to excuse this particular lapse, the poem’s effect depends upon his lack of a real relation to Japan.

In fact, as though registering the error of the second stanza the poem’s final stanza explicitly acknowledges what Hartmann reiterates in his 1922 comment - that he has not been to Japan:

The day will come when I shall kiss that sacred soil,  
 And to the floweriness that from thy ashes rose,  
 Each kiss shall tell the secret of my life [...] (9-11)

As in the later comment, that Hartmann hasn’t been to Japan turns from a fact to a displaced potentiality with the difference that in 1922 Hartmann is less certain that he’ll ever actually “see the country which he most longed to visit” (*Early Poems 2*). But in either case the anticipated visit to Japan isn’t ever an actual relation to Japan, a point that the stanza’s sustained image, of Hartmann kissing the Japanese soil, tries to bridge

through sentimental intensity.<sup>19</sup> But whereas kissing the ground is an image of concretion, since what is more solid than the ground, in the next lines this solidity turns vague. In line 11, we are still in the moment of the kiss, but in the previous line the soil being kissed is also somehow the “floweriness” from “thy ashes.” Kissing the soil is sustained through these three lines only because Hartmann substitutes floweriness for flowers, so that he might well be kissing the floweriness of the soil or possibly flowers. Perhaps even more importantly, this substitution makes Hartmann’s lack of knowledge, that he wouldn’t know that flowers would not sprout from a nonexistent grave in Japan, irrelevant. His focus is not on flowers, but floweriness, and not on Japan but Japanness.

But because the poem is about his Japanese mother, Japan can’t be made inertly abstract. The figure of a suffering Japanese woman in Japan seems to suggest what would become the powerful Madame Butterfly myth.<sup>20</sup> Addressing the Japanese Club of San Francisco in 1916, Hartmann states that although “he knew nothing about his mother’s birth [...] he would most prefer to believe that he was the son of a romantic woman like Madame Butterfly” (Ota 3). As in “To My Mother” Hartmann’s remark shows a sense of Japan as mood and not actuality, but this comment seems to make the importance of a suffering Japan more explicit.

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<sup>19</sup> In his 1922 comment, Hartmann ends by comparing himself to Friedrich Schiller, writing “Will my fate be like that of the author of ‘Wilhelm Tell,’ never to see the country he most longed to visit” (2). This obviously European reference interestingly equates Schiller’s distance from Switzerland with Hartmann’s distance from Japan. On one hand this reiterates the cultural blindness of Hartmann’s “German middle-class sentimentality” which erased the specifically Japanese content the poem aimed for, but on the other hand, the connection emphasizes that Hartmann is not solely Japanese and is quite at home in a German context.

<sup>20</sup> John Luther Long’s “Madame Butterfly” is from 1898, but Pierre Loti’s novel *Madame Chrysanthemum* is contemporary with Hartmann’s poem, both from 1887.

Yet Hartmann's mention of Madame Butterfly here is not straightforward. As Susan Koshy points out, the Madame Butterfly type is by no means a static archetype. In fact, Koshy suggests that the most prevalent image of Madame Butterfly, Giacomo Puccini's, had to be revised to purge itself of troubling critiques against imperialism in Asia and that historically, the Madame Butterfly story's purportedly sympathetic view of Asia in the early twentieth century was sometimes taken to be just that, actual sympathy. Furthermore, the setting of Madame Butterfly takes place in a modernizing Japan, as opposed to a generalized Orient. In this context, the Madame Butterfly figure "goes from being the unknowable object to the suffering subject in the asymmetries of power produced by Japanese entry into modernity" (Koshy 32). So then it's not that Madame Butterfly represents only the romantic trope of suffering femininity, but that this suffering is tied to specific geopolitics.

Hartmann's poem is also suggestive of international power, but only suggestive. The first lines move from a specific death to a nebulous love that must "hang over all the world" (2). Then, the final line of the poem concludes the ambiguous phrases of the first stanza by moving from soil to an explicit address to the persona's mother: to "Thee I owe what I may give of Beauty to this world" (12). This line doesn't meaningfully clarify the relationship between his Madame Butterfly-like mother and his aesthetic sensibility. In ending, Hartmann doesn't further address his mother, but instead appeals to his own desire to be an artist, augmented with a complex mediation between mother and world. At first, one might read this turn as bearing an incipient elitism, that as he has somehow been consecrated as a great poet, but such a reading is undermined by this poem's mood of melancholy. As line 11 makes clear, that the poet draws beauty from his

mother's death isn't obvious, but "secret." The freighting of symbolic beauty with the elegiac makes the project of giving "Beauty to this world" implicitly failed but thus only more beautiful. And the poem's failure to explicitly connect Hartmann's mother's death with his poetic aestheticism shows that the figure of his mother bears a residue of the political that is meant to remain outside explicit statement.

And yet, this moment of repression seems exactly where to focus attention. Hartmann's pronoun use insistently addresses his mother as "thee" in elevated diction, but the poem opens by invoking mother in her most general aspect, as simply a woman, perhaps because it would be both grammatically redundant and oddly confusing to say "My mother's death created me." So the phrase's clarity depends on suspending for a moment the poet's relationship to his mother in favor of her status as a female. This generalization only appears at the beginning of the poem but it nonetheless suggests that the intense emotion of the poem can be put abstractly into relationship with "woman," as the more general category of mother. And since the poem operates on the suggestive level of the abstract, the intense emotion that somehow makes the world a substitute for the mother, seems as though in its logic of unstated transference, the desire to give beauty to the world as an expression of love can be rooted in love for women in general and not only mother. In other words, what abstraction enables is the breach of the incest taboo, risked but ultimately repressed in this poem in limiting abstraction to mother, and excluding the broad category of women in general through even more sentimental insistence on the figure of the mother.

It's interesting to note that in 1887 Hartmann felt able to imaginatively generalize the specific Japanese context away, but that in 1922 he must address the reality of

Japan as culturally separate and unknown. Even in this acknowledgment, the purpose of the 1922 comment is a defense of the poem as mistaken but genuine. In short, Hartmann asks us to substitute the emotion that the poem takes pains to evoke for the poem itself. But in reading the poem this way, we must also suspend both Hartmann's failure to represent Japan and the sexuality that mobilizes the intensity he means to invoke. In Fowler's memoir, Barrymore at one point calls Hartmann "a living freak presumably sired by Mephistopheles out of *Madame Butterfly*" (Fowler 7), and this quip seems to characterize Hartmann's animosity toward his father with the tragic fantasy his mother represented. But perhaps more significantly, it suggests the romantic subjectivity Hartmann seemed invested in, one in which failure connotes genuineness.

Because the most concrete moments in the poem, the mother's death, the hills of Kobe and the soil and flora of Japan, turn out to be vague, inaccurate and totally out of the direct experience of the speaker, the final effect of the poem is an odd emptiness. In this emptiness, this early poem of Hartmann's seems curiously like late style: a poem that is interrupted by what is impossible for it to represent: an authentically Japanese identity. And like Whitman's late work, Hartmann's early poem doesn't merely omit the void it can't express, it becomes about that very void. The poem's most blatant missing connection, its transformation of desire for the mother to desire for the world, is not quite sexual, which after all would render that absence in some way present at the level of content. Instead, the unknowable mother is at the heart of a whole series of abstract exchanges, and her unknowability is somehow the motive of a more general desire, its cause. Jacques Lacan briefly refers to the Oedipus Complex as a "cultural intervention" that "decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into being mediated by the other's

desire” (Lacan 7).<sup>21</sup> Culture, as Patterson suggests, is the means by which one’s position of power or powerlessness is made natural. What Hartmann’s slight tilt toward the Oedipal suggests is that the intimate self is not original, because it is not fully present. Absence makes everything somewhat foggily interchangeable. Thus, even the self who feels an most intense emotion based on absence is not fully unique. Lacan suggests that desire, which is a drive based on absence, is cultural, and thereby makes power part of the deep truth of subjectivity.

“To My Mother” registers two important features of Hartmann’s other symbolist poetry; first, that intense emotion and the intimacy it implies is the aim of his poetry and then second, that the revelation of this intimate self nonetheless has a cultural aspect, something that renders the text as a poem, and Hartmann as a poet, significant. This poem shows more failings and impasses, and even tries to poeticize failure, but in the work I now turn to, Hartmann’s focus on sexuality enables him on the one hand to write about something that bears intensity at its basic biological level, and on the other, is a cultural mode for what’s intimately personal.

### **Racial Sexuality in Hartmann’s Symbolist Poems**

According to Hartmann’s autobiography, one of his late nineteenth century poetry readings in Boston’s Chickering Hall provoked a career-killing scandal as he veered into sexually themed material (“My Second Boston Season” 1). While Hartmann doesn’t

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<sup>21</sup> Lacan’s remark on the Oedipus Complex that I am referring to is from his famous essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I/Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.” Thus the specular image of the infant’s wholeness contrasts with his or her real physical limitations and directs desire toward the wholeness that the mirror image possesses.

record exactly what poem prompted what outraged response, instead portraying himself as entirely engrossed in giving the reading, we might turn to a verse from his manuscript *Naked Ghosts*, which he dates 1887-1892:

The gates of virginity are yielding to the nervous longing of youth, the halls  
of womanhood are widening with nature's sublime truth. (4: III).

Hartmann's elaborate metaphor for sex seems almost humorous, or else bathetic, but to characterize it in this way is to miss its odd mixture of explicitness with the self-consciously artistic. The awkwardness of the metaphor, that we move from gates of virginity to halls of womanhood, isn't necessarily just a mixed metaphor; it also suggests a graphic movement from vulva inward to vagina. But more interestingly, the verse depicts stages of female arousal in concrete terms, but also as responses to male penetration which is abstracted as "nervous longing." Apparently, a "society pet" Hartmann describes as an old actress "opined that one did not mention anatomical details, no matter how symbolic, in the presence of ladies" ("My Second" 1). This comment provokes the question to whom Hartmann gave this reading, and in the text of a newspaper write-up he quotes from, it becomes clear that his audience was "mostly of the female element" and "well up in the social-literary set." Ann Laura Stoler narrates what she calls a "familiar" historical narrative that might explain why Hartmann's sexual poems read out in front of an upper class, largely female, and presumably white audience was provocative. Stoler writes that as discourses became increasingly focused on social health, especially in the wake of imperial discourse, "child-rearing" became a matter of imperial and racial duty, and white women became "the bearers of a more racist imperial order and the custodians of their desire-driven, immoral

men” (Stoler 35). In other words, the figure of the white woman as the subject of sexual desire and not its morally restrained object, was deeply threatening to precisely the most bourgeois conceptions of femininity.

The write-up goes on to record that as Hartmann read, “Young girls’ cheeks began to crimson, and matrons’ faces to become set.” And that by the end of the reading, “The feelings of the few men present may be imagined.” That the male reaction is left unstated now raises a genuine question. Was the spectacle of a mixed race man exciting a physiological response from women young and old the cause for outrage, or salacious interest? Given that a violent male reaction would emphasize the scandalous nature of the reading, which the article seems to focus on, one might reasonably conclude that the male reaction was more prurient than prude, and moreover, since Hartmann’s poems are indirectly symbolic, their generalizability might have been more conducive to vicarious imagining than distanced judgment.

Indeed, at least in the poem I cite above, Hartmann even risks an effusive overstatement and explicit male worship, which shifts focus onto female sexuality more than on a competitive male threat. An idealization of masculine desire comes with the apparent conversion of “the nervous longing of youth” to “nature’s sublime truth.” The poem’s shifting metaphor of female arousal implies a corresponding shift in the male terms, which would exalt the male penis as “nature’s sublime truth.” But rather than neatly follow this logic, the image turns into a moment of excess. If the verse describes female arousal, at first the causal response is clear: the gates yield to longing. The second clause is much more ambiguous. Although the halls widen, this verb isn’t necessarily transitive, as yielding is. The possibility that widen may be intransitive

suggests that the halls may themselves widen, not in response to male penetration but through female arousal. In this reading, “nature’s sublime truth” wouldn’t have to be read as a phallic metaphor, but rather as something more general, the mechanism of sexual arousal itself and for that reason a more general notion of sex.

What seems pornographic about Hartmann’s poem is not that it depicts sex, but actually the metaphorization that sex undergoes in the poem. After all the sex in the poem is all too generic, and in a way uninteresting, except that it is clumsily draped in overstated imagery. The particularly pornographic quality is the poem’s formalization of sex into a “sublime truth.” Frances Ferguson notes that pornography isn’t just exposure; it “offers up not sex but the sexiness of sex. [...] Its various procedures revolve around creating an ictus, or emphasis, that converts visibility into perspicuousness” (21). Hartmann creates this emphasis through a clumsy metaphor whose own clumsiness makes sex overly visible even as it makes sex abstract.

But this conversion of sexuality into “perspicuousness” depends somewhat on context, since as the old actress’s comment makes clear, there is at least the pretense of masking of the sexual content in symbolism without which Hartmann probably would not have attracted a large female audience in 1888 Boston. Also, Hartmann’s suggestions that sex is actually something abstract and sublime seem neutral enough, but situated in the rise of discourses on miscegenation the sense that sex is important and untenable could take on a political implication. As Koshy notes, the post-Civil War period was when “Southern Democrats coined the term *miscegenation* to denigrate the black quest for political equality, deploying a sexual metaphor to connote a political threat” (Koshy 4-5). Furthermore, Hartmann’s physical presence itself suggests

interracial romance, “as the fruit and sign of forbidden desire” (18). But then as Knox remarks, the poems seem “hardly ‘erotic’ by current standards” (Knox 111), and probably not erotic given that among the print culture of the nineteenth century was widespread reading of pornographic books, at least prevalent among working class men (Reynolds 202). So then Knox’s observation suggests either the stereotype of Victorian-era sexual prudishness or else something more immediate to the circumstance of the actual reading. Stoler makes a suggestive point that seems to indicate that the answer is both a widespread cultural attitude about sex, and the immediate response of Hartmann’s actual auditors. She draws on Michel Foucault’s theory of the rise of sexuality in the nineteenth century to argue that as discourse on sexuality spread to be both an individual concern and a social one, the pressure toward normalization intensified into something all-consuming, both individual and social at once. In fact, a special area of overlap of both the private and public sexuality became “a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species” (Foucault qtd in Stoler 34). Given Hartmann’s tendency to abstraction in his early work, that what is most personal is also depicted in general terms, Hartmann’s sexual poems seem to offer a convergence between aesthetic theory and a political discourse that developed into a regime for managing sexuality in the twentieth century, which importantly, is refracted through race.

The title of Hartmann’s manuscript that includes his erotic poems is drawn from a phrase in his poem “White Lady of My Desire” (1892). The racial context seems

obvious on the level of the title, but the poem itself moves into the symbolic terrain Hartmann favors in these early poems.

Sleep on and smile thy radiant smile amid  
 dawn-flowers, frail and white, while naked  
 ghosts kiss thy body's soul as they pass in  
 their magic flight, and I stand lone and  
 shivering in the white and withering night. (1-5)

The two instances of whiteness in the poem are objectively descriptive, first as an adjective for “dawn-flowers” and second as a paradoxical description of night and it's notable that these descriptions are all peripheral. The woman in the title exists in the poem only in the elevated second person address of “thy.” The poem's overall effect becomes one of displacement, the descriptions of first the smile, the flowers, then ghosts and night are only suggestively related to the woman, but nonetheless seem to establish the poem's tableau as one that is weighted with its undescribed but most significant presence, the titular white lady.

Despite the possessive pronoun in the title, the persona figures in the poem more as a voyeuristic presence than agent; the sexual contact of the poem is on a spiritual level: between ghosts and a soul. In fact, the speaker takes on an air of anguished isolation in the final line's associational connection. Night's inversion into whiteness signals an intensity that can't help but act in metaphorical relation to the unfulfilled sexuality between the desired lady and the speaker, partly because they are connected in white surroundings. There is after all an almost causal logic between the frail flowers and a night that is explicitly withering. But rather than establishing a relation between

these two terms, it's important to note the ambivalence that figures the relationship but also points out its nonrelation, the capacity for metaphor to mix referents indefinitely, to constantly shift to the periphery.

The lone poet of unfulfilled desire is a sentimental persona, but also as the witness of scene, the poet enacts a drama of viewing. After all the intensity of the emotion in the poem arises not from sexuality but from watching, and it's on this level that whiteness bears the most emotion. The progression of images in the poem suggests a kind of arrangement suspended in the syntax of the poem's single sentence, the odd metaphoric connections that nonetheless seem to return to whiteness. The poem's emphasis on whiteness becomes finally an emphasis on form. The poem is actually an imperative sentence, a command to *sleep* which is implicitly passive even as it suggests the poet's creative agency. But as Leon Chai points out, even if a sense of form is "the ultimate result of aesthetic consciousness," form itself "figures as something less than the whole of art's relation to life" (Chai 136-7). This means that the formal awareness the poem develops through its trope of whiteness suggests something else: "the drama of human relationships that inform the spectacle" is actually "the highest possible 'subject' for appreciation" (137). And we return to something, the thematic of romantic suffering, that is essentially sentimental in its dimensions.

But as much as whiteness suggests a formal motif in the poem, its title explicitly establishes the woman as white. As Koshy points out in her analysis of D. W. Griffith's movie *Broken Blossoms* (1919), the unfulfilled interracial love between the film's gentle, spiritual Asian man and victimized white woman suggests not the immanent possibility of this kind of love, but its impossibility: "romance operates a discourse of reciprocal

desire and compatibility that in plotting the tragic impossibility of union across Anglo-Asian racial divisions naturalizes and entrenches them” (Koshy 69). In other words, because of the emotional intensity of the failed romance, the sense that what really matters occurs at a more intense, more spiritual level, this poem, like Griffith’s film, articulates the failure of connection at the material level of actual intercourse. For that reason, the poem substitutes naked ghosts, as both nonexistent and immaterial, for actual contact.

One might be tempted then to read the nonoccurrence of sex in this poem as a way to mitigate the threat of miscegenation. But then such a reading misses the particular prominence of sex in the poem. Its metaphor of whiteness as an awareness of form suggests that the poem’s sexuality might bear an emphatic effect beyond the mere visibility of sex, but as emphasis this effect will have to be indirect. The poem does indeed seem to be about sexual visibility, with the woman as the object of the lustful gaze of the speaker. But Hartmann effects a subtle transformation so that the woman comes to seem lustful herself. From the first line, we are told she is unconscious and this detail at first seems to confirm her status as object, but in this unconsciousness she smiles and participates in sexual pleasure. The net effect is that sexuality is part of her unconscious being, that she is suffused with sexuality. The poem comes close to pornography insofar as its formal and descriptive effects begin to suggest a displacement from the poem’s content to a sensibility that is sexual, but also abstract. It’s this air of abstraction, the sense that nothing happens in the poem which makes it about a woman subordinated to desire, because she’s unconscious and still sexual. Since she is strangely absent even as she expresses lust, the real subject of

the poem is not so much the woman herself but the enactment of a desire that moves into the realm of non-signifying, and therefore, the absence of actual sex becomes only secondary. Arguably, the fact that the woman is overcome with desire connotes a racial threat all the more strongly, at least insofar as it depicts the white woman not as restricting sex to its purely moral and non-perverse function, racial reproduction, but as an end to itself, even if the poem's speaker is excluded from sexual contact.

So ultimately, a poem like "White Lady of My Desire" derives its air of sexual transgression not from the poet sentimentally lusting, but from a series of displacements. In this it shares with "To My Mother" a quality of lateness common, paradoxically, to Hartmann's early poems. Another 1892 poem that seems to address race in its title and takes up similar imagery is the more mythic poem "Melody in Black and White." Whiteness is used in a schematic, symbolic way, again associated with the woman's skin; "Gertrude" is described as being "as white as marble" (1). But despite these similarities, the shift in "Melody in Black and White" away from the sentimental, first person perspective into something more allegorical suggests that this poem presents a case in which to explore Hartmann's Symbolist aesthetic at a greater intensity. The poem is narrated from the third person as a romance between Gertrude and "Knight Death, who is her suitor" (2). This figure is unavoidably awkward, not only by introducing an outdated chivalric context, but also as a personification of not only a clichéd unrepresentable, but what all late work aims at: death.

But in noting what's clumsy about the poem we also mark its intensification. As Jim Hansen observes in his essay on allegory's role in New Formalism, symbol is

ultimately mimetic.<sup>22</sup> “As the key figure for tragic pathos, the symbol transmutes that which has been lost within the context of an individual work of art into an eternal, indivisible and essential unity” (Hansen 670). It’s this sense that individual specificity leads into a transcendent ideal that affirms language’s ability to represent experience. The metaphoric displacements in “White Lady of My Desire” are ultimately rooted in the tragic air of the persona’s lament. But by replacing persona with a rhetorical figure, a personification, “Melody in Black and White” does not transmute itself into something that reads as unified. Instead, it registers its different trajectories in such a way that its poetic representation feels inadequate. Hansen notes, that allegory “becomes the formal feature [...] of the transient and the irretrievable” (671).

Perhaps one instance of this poem’s nonrepresentational quality is its more complex use of color. Instead of adhering to the woman’s whiteness, Hartmann seems to use contrast in a more pictorial mode, as in the third stanza:

She rends her robe to lure him to the ebon depth of her shame, but the  
naked knight desires no light from the darkness of his dame. (3)

Here darkness predominates in the description but it actually connotes two different things: first Gertrude’s vaginal opening and then more generally concealment.

Hartmann’s figural language enacts a smaller form of allegory that makes these two moments of darkness seem like two instances of the same sort of furtive shame, but the sexual emphasis of this stanza depends on Gertrude’s exposure, her attempt to use her own shame as a sexual lure. Interestingly, Knight Death would rather have her stay

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<sup>22</sup> Hansen’s claim that symbolism is mimetic uses the concept of mimesis to suggest representation, and draws from Walter Benjamin. Benjamin emphasized the mimetic faculty over instances of mimesis, arguing that the “gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else” (qtd in Nicholse 140).

covered; the fact that she is performing for his gaze is ultimately more overt than what he wants, and draws a contrast with the unconscious woman of “White Lady of My Desire.”

What is so threatening about “the ebon depth of her shame?” In commenting on Otto Weininger, Slavoj Žižek points out how Weininger’s theory of feminine sexuality, that woman “is sexuality itself” (Weininger qtd in Žižek 141), ultimately conceals an impasse at the heart of subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> Žižek summarizes Weininger’s position in more detail as follows:

Woman is not capable of a pure spiritual attitude, she cannot aim at truth itself [...] When she seems to assume such a spiritual attitude, closer observation never fails to discern a ‘pathological’ sexual interest lurking in the background (a woman speaks the truth in order to make an impression on man and thus facilitate her seduction of him, etc.). (138)

A similar pathology underlies the notion of shame in Hartmann’s poem. Gertrude’s willingness to expose herself reveals more than just her genitals, rather she shows the extent to which shame itself is a means of seduction. Shame as personal emotion is a ruse that masks something more radical: her own embodiment of sexuality, which is to say, her own allegorical status as sex itself. Needless to say, her sexuality exceeds the logic of normative racial reproduction.

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<sup>23</sup> According to the digitized version on Google Books, the work Žižek cites, *Sex and Character* was published in English translation in 1907. My claim for connecting Hartmann’s work with Weininger is only loosely historical and based on the possibility that an unelaborated form of Weininger’s sexism could well be part of Hartmann’s cultural milieu fifteen years before *Sex and Character* appeared. More historically problematic is the theoretical notion of subjectivity, central to Žižek’s Lacanianism, which is definitely ahistorical to Hartmann, but I use it here only as a synonym for the general term “man.” In other words I want to suspend the question of theoretical subjectification.

In claiming Gertrude as an allegorical figure, we risk broadening the scope of allegory beyond a personification of Death to something more ambiguous. Her proper name indicates not so much an idea as a person. In fact, contrary to the abstraction that allegory is meant to embody, proper names are examples of definitional simplicity. A name is meant as a label and not as a description. But as a simple marker, the name becomes not a sign but rather a pointer, merely an indication that Gertrude is there, without any claim as to what qualities characterize Gertrude. For that reason, Paul de Man suggests that a name is actually a trope, which has “a substitutive relationship that has to posit a meaning whose existence cannot be verified” (de Man 56). Precisely because whatever characterizes Gertrude is not in her name, while nonetheless being articulable by nominative convention, the name acts as the substitute for the person. De Man does not state that a name functions allegorically, merely as a trope, and this difference is significant. His insistence that a name is not a sign is based on recognizing that what would be represented in a name, its meaning, has an unverifiable existence. In other words, the personhood denoted by Gertrude infinitely exceeds the name.

In addressing allegory de Man first questions the force of language. He concludes that the effectivity of language depends on two modes of persuasion, the rational persuasion of critique, and persuasion by pleasure which acts by fiat.<sup>24</sup> These “two functions are radically heterogenous to each other” such that “the necessary choice between seduction and truth remains undecidable” (69). And yet this is a forced

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<sup>24</sup> This distinction is perhaps clearer in considering the more immediate pleasure of asserting a position as opposed to carefully delineating it. De Man notes that the rhetoric of pleasure is a discourse of power that “is pure performance” and “usurps the claim to epistemological rightness” from argumentation (68).

choice in that to not decide is to side with seduction, even as the real choice is still undecidable, which is an insight that skeptical reasoning enables us to make. De Man remarks, “[t]he (ironic) pseudoknowledge of this impossibility, which pretends to order sequentially, in a narrative, what is actually the destruction of all sequence, is what we call allegory.” So then to de Man allegory marks the moment of this forced choice, the uneasy combination of two incompatible levels.

In the fourth stanza Hartmann introduces the only explicit reference to music in the poem, which takes place as a metaphor.

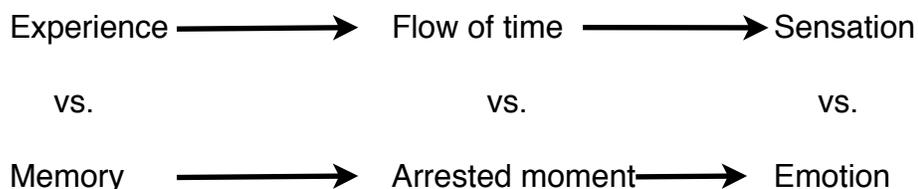
He squats upon the inky ground, and claws a deep hole with his clattering bones till the grave grows deep, till the grave grows wide to the music of her groans. (4).

At the descriptive level, Gertrude’s groans seem to indicate merely the repetition of a particular sound, but they are also in response to Death’s digging. These two activities are similar, both repetitive and possibly rhythmic, but digging results in the grave becoming larger. If rhythm suggests a sequence, and sequence time, then the growing grave makes an obvious metaphor for life’s passage toward death. That Gertrude’s groans are sexual is also obvious, and the stanza’s ending gesture seems to emphasize this aspect in order to keep it in view. If the metaphor operates at these two levels, sex and death, the contrast between digging and music also becomes significant. In contrast to digging Gertrude’s groans aren’t productive and in that sense seem more purely to mark time than to culminate. For that reason the groaning is more formal than digging, which is dependent on its specific activity. The fact that groaning punctuates the growth of the grave in parallel with it but not partaking of it, suggests that the

ultimate importance of the grave is somehow beyond itself and that it's the music and not the hole that captures this significance.

Why should music be so significant in this poem about death and sex? The poem's title implies an importance on the level of form, that each occurrence of white or black marks the motif that occurs in the way a melody does. But also, music seems to confer a certain mood to the poem such that moments like Death digging to Gertrude's sexual moans seem to symbolize something vague and unknown. Chai states that music makes "our experience of the passage of time [manifest] an inherent form" so that ultimately "music presents an analogy to our existence" (Chai 206). Our experience of time can occur in two ways, either as a sequence of moments in a continuous flow, or as discreet events that seem to arrest time in memory. Music's structuring of time into form, in recognizably repeated moments that comprise a motif, enable the experience of time as moments. But the ability of music to assume the status of a trope, to not only make us aware of time but to represent time itself as Chai claims it lets us do, depends on a chiasmic reversal.

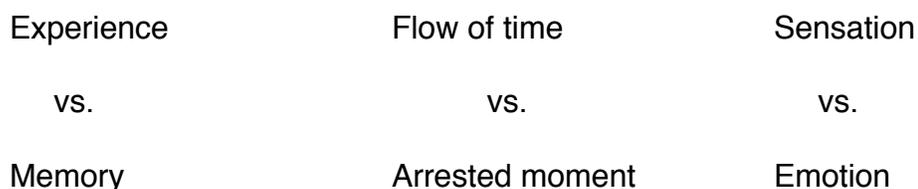
At first it seems sensible to state that we experience a flow of sensations in the present, and that memory is outside this flow of sensation. If the content of experience is sensation then the content of memory must be something else, not immediate sensation, but something more motivated by emotion, at least if what we remember doesn't just passively come before our senses, as with experience, but rather is stirred in some way. Making these distinctions suggests a binary between experience and memory:



But then, a particular form of experience, an experience of something repeated, results in another mode of perception:

a perception of the recurrence of a sensation [...] occurs only when the actual sensation recurs. We 'experience' it, then, at the same moment as the actual sensation. But in addition the recognition itself, as a perception of recurrence, specifically concerns the relation of one experience to another in time. (Chai 206)

The experience of a sensation that reminds us of a prior experience enables us to actually experience two moments so that what we perceive of time is outside of time, which is to say that we experience not the flow of sensations, but the relation of two moments of time. This means that the experience of the present moment becomes not merely sensory but also emotional, tied up with what prompts us into memory:



At the same time, memory is no longer the sensation of an isolated moment since that moment is now in relation to the present, and the relation of these two moments

suggest a flow of time. Furthermore the present sensation causes the memory and repeats the content of the memory itself, so that ultimately the experience of a motif, or a musical melody, entails a chiasmus that destabilizes the difference between memory and experience.

The significance of this destabilized binary is ultimately that the formalization of time through music makes possible a movement beyond either experience or memory. It's this movement that de Man characterizes as the mode of allegory, a doubled relation to meaning that is finally irresolvable. The music of Gertrude's groans contrasts the finality of death even as it suggests that the process of dying is embedded in each moment of experience, in life's occulted present. That these groans are carnal, suggestive of strong physicality and sensation, emphasizes the uneasy doubleness of the poem. So then music in this poem establishes Gertrude as the properly allegorical figure, even more so than Knight Death because her sexuality pervades the poem while also withholding a final significance. This significance, ironically, is the meaning of Gertrude not as a figure but as a life, since what is irresolvable about her, and her sexuality, is what experiential living means, or in other words, the meaning of life.

The poem's conventional nature, that it is a poem of courtly love between knight and lady, affirms the allegorical status of Gertrude. According to Žižek, the courtly lady is not meant to depict an actual woman, but rather an inhuman idealization (Žižek 90). As an inhuman ideal, the courtly lady generates anxiety, and it's this anxiety that Hartmann's poem resolves in its conclusion. "Melody in Black and White" ends by implying Gertrude's death, but just as digging a grave has a metaphorically sexual aura, the final stanza takes on a pornographic emphasis. The grave becomes "the nuptial

bed” (5) and at this moment Gertrude is made into an object, that is, into a properly inhuman courtly lady. She is dragged down and “wrapt tight in her mantle of raven hair.” That she is still somewhat clothed seems to recall the third stanza, that against her desire to be naked the Knight wants her covered, except it’s not clothing she wears, but her hair. Although described as a mantle, as an image being wrapped in hair suggests bondage. These images of Gertrude’s helplessness conclude in the last clauses of the poem as a disavowal of her sexuality: “darkness embraces her sinful life under the moonlight’s laughing glare.” The sexuality which earlier in the poem intensified its effect is finally characterized as a sin, which Gertrude is punished for. But this punishment is not the reestablishment of a rational, moral order, but rather the salacious excess of display; the moon watches in evident amusement, trivializing the intensity and destabilization that her sexuality seemed to carry. Gertrude’s allegorical status and the anxiety it provokes becomes the poem’s most pressing point of tension, and closure arises only when this generative rhetorical trope is confined and deprived of its power.

It’s worth remarking on the typicality of a figure like Gertrude, especially within the context of Symbolist literature. Sarah E. Maier lists various types of women frequently used in Symbolism but focuses on the figure of Salome as she appears in J. K. Huysmans, Gustave Moreau and Oscar Wilde. Wilde’s play *Salome* ends much like “Melody in Black and White” with Salome’s death, and thus with the similar effect that her death “allows fin de siècle culture to culminate its long, fantastic, ritualistic indictment of woman for her criminal demand for independent sexuality and desire” (Maier 222). Maier argues that these depictions of Salome reveal a historical

shift from “sentimental and early Romantic literature [in which] the feminine is linked with an expressive aesthetic that provides a vehicle for the cultivation and articulation of feeling” to what under Symbolism becomes “parody, and the preoccupation with surface and style” (Maier 217). This note of parody is a particularly distinct trait of Huysmans, according to Arthur Symons who quotes at length a passage from Huysman’s novel *A Rebours* (1884). That Symons selects a passage depicting Moreau’s painting of Salome’s dance affirms Maier’s point on the significance of the Salome femme fatale figure.

She was no more the mere dancing-girl who, with the corrupt torsion of her limbs, tears a cry of desire from an old man; who, with her eddying breasts, her palpitating body, her quivering thighs, breaks the energy, melts the will, of a king; she has become the symbolic deity of indestructible Lust, the goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty [...] (qtd in Symons 252)

Salome’s debased status as a sexual object becomes allegorical--note her transformation into personifications of lust, hysteria and beauty--and makes sex something that is both impermeable to meaning and destructive, a kind of negativity that stands in contrast to an earlier construction of feminine sensibility as an inherent closeness to genuine affect.

Like Salome, Hartmann’s Gertrude also allegorizes sex, which means that she externalizes sexuality without also having the interiority that characterizes romanticism, and in departing from romanticism, Hartmann’s work is not only a version of a nonspecific romantic persistence. Behind sex, there is a radical void, the death of

meaning. Thus, part of Gertrude's status as a parodic allegory expresses de Man's sense of language's irrational dependence on pleasure; the superficiality and nonmeaning that makes language's referential quality possible is part of the pervasive emptiness that Gertrude's sexuality gestures toward.

Also, it's important to note that the first successful law limiting Chinese immigration, and thus the first law to ever restrict what had before been an immigration policy whose openness was thought to express American democracy itself, was explicitly directed at controlling sex, the 1875 Page Law. Analyzing the Page Law, Koshy notes,

Although prostitution was widespread in California and women of different nationalities participated in sex work, Chinese women were identified as a singular moral and public health danger: They were identified as carriers of unusually virulent strains of venereal disease and as corrupters of young white boys. (11)

Koshy's observation suggests that what the Page Law affirms is a version of sex much like Hartmann's depiction of Gertrude, except what dehumanizes Chinese prostitutes isn't just a socially-empty form of sexuality, but the reading of a debased and empty sexuality as a property of race. And as Hartmann's prose meanderings suggests above, race marked a kind of limit to national identity, a way that some people within a nation could be denied the status of nationals, and consigned to social death.

Koshy goes on to point out that the exclusion of Chinese women from the US based on their "imagined Oriental licentiousness" meant that "sexual contacts between white men and Asian women overseas emerged largely in the context of the sexual

license and power afforded white men in treaty ports, military bases, or as occupying forces in Asia” (11). At the same time “immigration law made marriage the precondition for the continuation of these relationships in the United States.” Here, the racialized sexuality of Chinese women mirrors sex under slavery. In defining slavery as an extreme form of social domination, and social death as characterizing how slavery was culturally represented in slaveholding societies, Patterson suggests that some element of social death is present whenever domination occurs. Patterson notes,

There was little variation among slaveholding societies with respect to the sexual claims and powers of masters over female slaves: I know of no slave- holding society in which a master, when so inclined, could not exact sexual services from his female slaves. (Patterson 173)

What this common element of slavery “often resulted in [was] ties of affection between” male master and female slave (230). Furthermore that affection was “reinforced when the slave woman bore a child for the master” to the extent that many societies “automatically freed the concubine--especially after she had had a child.” Thus the status of Chinese women, subordinated to a racialized version of their social position, remarkably mirrored the general form of sex under social death, which after all, is not to be beyond the pale of society, but to be inconsistently incorporated.

That inconsistency becomes the great subject of Hartmann’s early work, and what gives it a version of what Said diagnosed as the quality of late work. And if the political context of Hartmann’s work isn’t obvious in the work itself, I argue that it is apparent in his work’s fragmentation, and his perhaps surprising use not of Whitman in

1855, the ambitious Whitman, the Whitman who attempts to embody all of the US in verse, but of the Whitman he knew in the 1880s, obsessed in his poetry with death.

## Chapter 2

### Textual Ethics and the Didactic Subject: Marianne Moore and José Garcia Villa

In a dense, perhaps contradictory review of José Garcia Villa's 1942 volume *Have Come, Am Here*, Marianne Moore begins with a global assertion, "Depth is not the fashion," before going on to describe Villa's poems; they are "bravely deep" (Moore 394). Moore doesn't explain outright what she means by depth, but later in the review she makes a crucial distinction between obscurity and mystery, writing that "a poem deprived of its mystery would no longer be a poem" and to think otherwise is like "dissect[ing] a rose to determine its fragrance." Depth then, seems to be a quality of resistance in the text of the poem itself, a kind of gnomic, unforthcomingness. To say that depth is not the fashion is not to say, as we might have initially assumed, that a certain kind of poetry has fallen into disfavor among the readers of poetry that the review is addressed to, since poetry itself is deep, but that a hostility to depth is more generally out there, somewhere in the culture.

Who hates depth? This first paragraph also makes the review's only mention of Villa's race, describing him as a "new poet, 'a young native of the Philippines,'" whose "work is for the most part new to print" although the "final wisdom encountered in poem after poem merely serves to emphasize the disparity between tumult and stature." Moore begins with an emphasis on newness and youth, and characterizing Villa in an

uncited quotation as “a young native of the Philippines” links youth to being Filipino.<sup>1</sup> Such a formulation can’t help but recall William Howard Taft’s infamous phrase “little brown brothers” in which the imperial rule of the Philippines was justified through tutelage--that through colonization, immature Filipinos would be made to learn self-governance. But then Moore repudiates such logic by characterizing Villa not as immature or unfinished, but as having “stature.” Depth, it would seem, belies facile racial stereotypes.

Stature, if read into the loaded context of US Imperialism as I suggest, might imply a kind of completed self, since the supposed goal of tutelary colonialism was democratic self-governance. So it seems contradictory for Moore to then say Villa’s “poems about divinity,” which are the bulk of the poems in *Have Come, Am Here*, are “deadly to self-esteem.” But Moore’s full meaning, and this is perhaps what she means by depth, would have to be that the truth of the self is a kind of humility, and indeed the review ends by citing three lines of Villa’s,

How shines my dark world  
Upon the sun! and gives it  
Light ...

as “humility’s paradox.” Here we might point out that Moore earlier associates “certain paradoxical avowals” in Villa’s poems as what makes them “bravely deep.” Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Yu, in his much cited account of Villa’s modernist reception, comments that Moore converts “the Filipino poet into the ‘Chinese master,’ a move that identifies him with modernism’s ‘Chinese’ inspirations, with subtext rather than text. She curiously puts his actual national origin in quotation marks [...] as if this information were irrelevant or of questionable veracity” (Yu 47). Yu’s concern in his essay is to bring out the orientalist assumptions necessary to making Villa a modernist poet, as opposed to a postcolonial poet, and insofar as my own argument in this chapter is that Villa intervenes in the problem of colonialism, my work is in sympathy with Yu’s. However, I don’t agree that Moore simply substitutes China for the Philippines in her understanding of Villa, because I’m inclined to see Moore as enacting a similar position toward colonialism as Villa himself.

stature means a kind of self-critique, in seeing oneself as dark, one actually produces light.

Moore, as her biographer Charles Molesworth notes, often used reviews to express “questions of self-definition” (Molesworth 162). We might then see her meditation via Villa on depth as a kind of self-review, relating to her verse in the 1940s, what’s often called her didactic poems. In fact, as early as 1936 Moore argues in a lecture that “depth of utterance is better than a pinnacle of self-sufficiency” (qtd in Molesworth 318). Parts of this lecture show concerns Moore later puts into the essay “Feeling and Precision” (1944). Her overall argument is that technique, or the precision of an utterance, entails a willingness to err, and it’s this risking of imperfection that art is staked on, that also reveals the deep personal conviction beneath what seems singular in art.

But if this thesis seems to rehash high modernist idiosyncratic impersonality, Moore ends by invoking one of the most pressing moral crises of the twentieth century, the holocaust.

Professor Maritain, when lecturing on scholasticism and immortality, spoke of those suffering in concentration camps, “unseen by any star, unheard by any ear,” and the almost terrifying solicitude with which he spoke made one know that belief is stronger even than the struggle to survive. And what he said so unconsciously was poetry. So art is but an expression of our needs; is feeling, modified by the writer’s moral and technical insights.

(402)

This conclusion to the essay is enigmatic to say the least. One approach to interpreting it might be to seize upon what Moore means to say about art through this quote. If so, Moore makes what at first appears to be a bold assertion, “that belief is stronger even than the struggle to survive;” and this comment comes from an unexpected context: a professor’s lecture, not an artwork. But in departing from the explicitly artistic, in the paragraph previous to what I quote Moore discusses Rembrandt and Bach, Moore proposes that what art gives us is something beyond the question of emotion and technique. That beyond, which constitutes art’s purpose to Moore, is a concern that is ethical: what does someone else’s suffering, unseen and unheard, have finally to do with us? Moore ends with an expository summary of her views on art, but a perhaps better way to make sense of her turn toward history is to think of her opposition of depth and self-sufficiency. Placing “belief” into poetry through Jacques Maritain’s unconsciously poetic lecture suggests Moore’s ideas of depth, that mysteriousness which is part of poetry, and its opposition to a sense of self as self-sufficient.<sup>2</sup> Instead, what all of Moore’s comments on depth, fashion and stature mean is an attitude of selfhood that subsumes itself for the sake of its own correction. I call this the didactic subject, and its elaboration, in the work of both Moore and Villa, who shared her modernist literary circle, constitute these poets’ attempt to critique oppression, which to

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<sup>2</sup> The connection between Jacques Maritain and the holocaust is not accidental. Maritain, as Richard Francis Crane points out, has a reputation of being an “outspoken critic of antisemitism” who is supposed to have advised Pope Pius XII to publicly denounce the persecution of Jews (Crane 25). That Moore gives the topic of the lecture as “scholasticism and immortality” contributes to her tone of understatement even as Maritain’s thought in the 1940s increasingly centers on the Shoah, in that his theological investigations turned toward struggling to answer how God could permit the evil of genocide. And while he came to assert that Jews were enacting Christ’s sacrifice, he also strongly condemned “the bystander mentality that he sometimes saw in the democratic world” (42).

them was tied, more and more, to an understanding of the world as solely material. But then what the didactic subject means in its historical context is hardly unproblematic.

US colonization of the Philippines forms the immediate historical context into which I want to situate my analysis in this chapter, but this context can be read in at least two ways. Sometimes, critics tend to emphasize the continuity of US colonialism with colonialism in general, which is to say, it is an imposition of the colonizer's culture and extirpation of native culture for the purpose of establishing dominance, culturally and economically. But then this critique is one that is already in circulation in the late nineteenth century and one that proponents of the annexation of the Philippines addressed. What they created, at least in rhetoric if not in policy, was an anticolonial colonialism, which positioned US colonialism against European colonialism by assuming not necessarily the universality of US culture in all its manifestations, but the importance of native cultures for achieving self-rule. Its goal wasn't the direct governing of a global empire but rather an attempt to make such governing obsolete, through the spread of democracy. But it's possible to see this American form of colonialism cynically; is it to be in Mark Twain's words, "a government according to our ideas" or "a government that represented the feeling of a majority of the Filipinos, a government according to Filipino ideas" (6). But importantly, in either case, a more or less structural Americanness is imposed, either directly as in Twain's first option, or indirectly, as the

assumption that the genuine character of a nation resides in its folk, which also assumes the universality of the form of nation, arguably itself an American construct.<sup>3</sup>

This ambiguity is managed in the tutelary form of colonialism that takes shape in the Philippines, in what Julian Go stresses is a “semiotic system in-practice” (Go 4, emphasis removed). What Go means is that the project of tutelary colonialism can’t be thought of as being just one of political domination; it is also one that aims at a process of transformation directed, finally, at the level of culture and identity. Go cites an official who remarks that the American colonial project should “serve as an instrument of instruction constantly at work training the habits, methods of thought and ideals of the people” (qtd in Go 7). Thus, something like Moore’s suggestion of a didactic subject, one who engages in a humble self-questioning, becomes the kind of subject imagined by tutelary colonialism.

Somewhat ironically, tutelary colonialism engages the moral use of art that Moore intends in the practice of didactic subjectivity, the kind of valorized humility of the incomplete subject.<sup>4</sup> But then what’s notable in the practice of tutelary colonialism, at least in Meg Wesling’s account, is the prominence of the literary as a tool for creating the kind of transformed subjectivity American colonization attempts.

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<sup>3</sup> In claiming that the modern sense of nation is American in origin, I mean to say that it is rooted in the relation between new world colony and old world Europe, as in Benedict Anderson’s influential account of the origins of nationalism in *Imagined Communities*. I deal further with Anderson and nationality in the chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> Moore commented “I am inclined more and more to feel that MORALS in the old-fashioned Sunday-school sense of the word” (original emphasis, qtd in Molesworth 318). But then as “Feeling and Precision” should make clear, morals would not be unrelated to art. She ends her comment by writing that morals “have a bearing on technique” so that we might conclude that an emphasis on mystery in poetry, and its hostility to self aggrandizement, is the moral technique Moore proposes.

Wesling first tries to explain the significance of literature in American education in the late nineteenth century. What we witness is an emphasis on both morality and nation, especially in the paradigmatic example of Horace Scudder, a teacher and writer of children's readings, also the editor-in-chief of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Scudder positions the literary as a replacement for religion in education, remarking that as schools became "more and more secularized [...] it is to literature that we must look for the substantial protection of the growing mind against all ignoble, material conception of life, and for the inspiring power which shall lift the nature into its rightful fellowship with whatsoever is noble, true, lovely and of good report" (qtd in Wesling 88). Scudder could thus be seen as intensifying an Arnoldian defense of literature, not only would literature be the best of what's been thought and said, but in being the best it would supplement materialism with a sense that "the nature," the inmost aspect of self, was actually immaterial. This sense of the necessity of spirit is an important context for thinking about Moore and Villa's work in the 1940s, in that an overall crisis of materialism, and a turn toward metaphysics can be discerned in several cultural contexts and discourses.

For now though, we might ask a more grounded question. Given that the dominant model for the education of racial others in the US had been that of industrial education, as in the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute and the Carlisle Indian Training School, where Moore worked briefly after college, why did US education in the Philippines embrace academic, specifically literary study? Wesling's answer to this question runs through several steps. First she locates the origin of a sense of literature's transformative potential in the sentimental novel, which diffuses into American culture at large the assumption that "the white, middle-class home [was] the

center of civilized life” (81). That sentiment is also behind the establishment of schools like Hampton and Carlisle; Wesling notes Harriet Beecher Stowe’s involvement in an industrial school for freed slaves (82). What that means is that the governing ideology behind such schools is the ideology of sentimentalism, that contact with white, middle-class domesticity provides an irresistible model for righteousness for the racially benighted. In the Philippines, direct contact with the American white, middle class couldn’t occur materially; it would have to take the immaterial route, via literature’s spiritual critique of the all too material.<sup>5</sup>

Moore and Villa are poets who have been difficult to reconcile with the critical paradigms one might want them to fit. Moore avoids the autobiography and explicit politics that Kristen Hotelling argues are qualities critics define as feminist, thus making her seem not feminist (Hotelling 76). And Villa, though he was once famous in both the US and the Philippines, has come to be seen as practicing an apolitical modernism that became “an easy target for charges of irrelevance, neocolonialism and elitism” according to Jonathan Chua (Chua 23). But for Moore and Villa, the explicit positions that both sex and anti-colonialism would promote suggest a model of self completion which itself is problematic--perhaps even the deeper problem that belies sexism and colonialism. The didactic subject, who renounces herself for the self to be, relies on a logic of self-otherness. Whether this depth, as Moore would call it, suffices in the face of actual sexism and colonialism is a problem I attempt to explore in the remainder of this chapter.

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<sup>5</sup> Wesling also points out that another advantage to literature as a model of white normative domesticity for Filipinos was that literature could present “an ideal Americanism, the perfection of national culture to which no singular colonial representative could aspire” (11).

## Villa's Anticolonialism

In addressing the inevitable question of Villa's diminished status, the political implication of his work seems partly to blame for why his work fell from fashion. In the American context, that Villa's impersonal non-ethnic verse became marginalized by the 1960s seems related to the rise not only of confessional verse, but a turn in avant-garde poetry itself toward questions of ethnicity.<sup>6</sup> In the Philippines, Villa initially was a controversial figure who attained canonical status in the 1960s, but who by the 1980s was read as insufficiently anticolonial. Recently Villa can be said to have undergone a resurgence, marked by Timothy Yu's important 2004 article on Villa and modernism, along with the 2008 Penguin edition of his collected poems. The back cover of the Penguin edition notes that "Villa had a special status as the only Asian poet among a group of modern giants" and even this tagline suggests an incoherence in what Villa's poetry ultimately says about racial politics. If his "special status" depends on his racial difference, it must be noted that race is not an explicit theme of his poetry. In fact, Villa has been read as deracinated, as overly attached to a Western universalism. So then, the two things that make Villa special are his race and his commitment to Western modernism and the relative acclaim he commands seems to depend upon which of these elements is prized at any given moment. But what the narrative of Villa's reception reveals is an underlying assumption that modernity and Filipino ethnicity are

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy Yu speculates that Villa's reputation suffered in the turn toward autobiography in confessional verse in his essay "The Hand of a Chinese Master": José Garcia Villa and Modernist Orientalism" but he makes a much more comprehensive argument about the underlying focus on ethnicity in post-war avant-garde poetry in *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (2009). I will have further comments on this book in the next chapter.

mutually exclusive, and it is precisely in dissenting from that assumption that Villa makes his strongest, anticolonial, anti-racist critique.

Comparisons between Villa and Carlos Bulosan are unavoidable in that the two writers are roughly contemporaneous and both Filipino American modernists. However, Bulosan's form of modernism is the opposite of Villa's. Where Villa focuses mostly on developing an idiosyncratic modernist style, Bulosan's modernism "is driven more by a rejection of colonial narratives of power than by a need to subvert preexisting literary genres or norms" to use Joshua L. Miller's words (Miller 241). Miller focuses, interestingly, not on Bulosan's much read *America Is in the Heart* (1946) but on his earlier collection *Laughter of My Father* (1944) which was "an immediate best-seller upon publication" (238). The title story of this collection appeared in December 19, 1942 issue of *The New Yorker* and it is clear why such stories would be popular, but also why Bulosan's work becomes important in a political context.

Bulosan writes with an understated wit while lightly invoking folkloric and anthropological norms. Narrated in an economical first person, Bulosan inserts a few macaronic words, *pala pala* is a dancing pavilion, in the midst of a story about trying to please his father (Bulosan 24).<sup>7</sup> Additionally, as Miller points out, the story which supposedly relates how Bulosan came to emigrate to the US, ends up as a satiric critique. The sentimental content of the story is intended as an "indictment against an economic system that stifled the growth of the primitive" (Bulosan qtd in Miller 244). Bulosan describes his town as "fifty grass houses perched on a low hill" and all of the

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<sup>7</sup> Although *Laughter of My Father* is published as a collection of short stories, in *The New Yorker* Bulosan's story appears as an essay, not as fiction. The boundary between autobiography and fiction is notably blurry in much of Bulosan's fiction, including *America Is in the Heart*.

village's residents are "farmers, because their ancestors had been farmers" (Bulosan 24). In the Philippines in the 1930s, about three quarters of a workforce of four million had low paying agricultural work, roughly like what Bulosan describes, according to Luis H. Francia's 2010 book *A History of the Philippines: From Indios Bravos to Filipinos* (Francia 173). And although independence was essentially promised to the Philippines in the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act the commonwealth status imposed upon the Philippines enforced an economic dependence on American goods. Bulosan's writing condemns colonialism, not through strident argument but in an engaging emotional register that is more apparent in *Laughter's* folkloric pretenses than in the more direct condemnation of racial injustice and colonialism in *America Is in the Heart*.

Granting that Bulosan is "a foundational Asian American writer," as Miller puts it (238), Villa's relatively marginal status seems related to the fact that Villa has the opposite orientation to literature and politics as Bulosan. According to Jonathan Chua, Villa's criticism initiated a distinction between literature and propaganda which previously "did not exist as a category separate from the act of writing" (13). Thus, Villa provides terms with which to denigrate cultural nationalist work, in that stories Villa objected to were often moral tales of Filipino essence intended to discourage American influences, as Chua writes (9). Villa's critical prose, which took the form of polemical explanations for his annual lists of the best Anglophone Filipino writing, would be read as politically regressive. The criteria Villa applied to rank literature wouldn't be seen as universal as Villa claimed, but "American or Western, inevitably carrying the biases specific to their origins and history while appearing to be universal and timeless" (Chua 13).

But calling Villa's critical standards American or Western implies that what Villa seeks in his criticism, a cosmopolitan Anglophone Filipino literature, is impossible. The possibilities of literary creation are either to invoke a non-modern ethnic essence or to concede to colonization. But the falseness of this opposition becomes clear in considering Bulosan's modernism. After all, the ethnographic folklore of Bulosan's tales aren't a fantasy of authentic Filipino-ness but a reflection of that fantasy's painful untenability, and the properly critical dimension of Bulosan's work depends on seeing it motivate not nostalgia, but a more just future. Similarly, if Villa seems to be insufficiently Filipino, one must ask what implicit notion of Philippine identity is being invoked. In reading a series of Villa's annual commentaries, we notice that he evaluates Filipino literature in a narrative of development, this means that the ultimate aim of his criticism is to see the best Filipino writing attain the status of the best of literature itself, and in this, Wesling's comments on the use of literature as an embodiment of the best of a culture to justify tutelary colonialism can't be ignored. Still, Villa's work implies that the Filipino-ness of Filipino literature is not a defined substance, but a process of becoming.<sup>8</sup> Villa's modernist style should not be read as universalist or blankly cosmopolitan, but as attempting to create a Filipino literary identity that is not primarily nostalgic, even while it problematically depends on a didactic subject.

I argue that Villa should be read as what Matthew Hart calls a "synthetic vernacular" poet. Hart uses "synthetic" to signal "a poet's attempt to sublimate the tension between local languages and the 'desperate attempt at a new inclusiveness'" (Said qtd

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<sup>8</sup> Villa's use of his supposedly universal standards of good literature often entail a slippage between referring to the best Filipino writing and the best literature. In a comment in 1936 Villa explicitly writes "My concernment with the Philippine short story is a concernment of love for the Short Story itself" (*Critical Villa* 167).

in Hart 9). The combined term of “synthetic vernacular” suggests that a departure from the fetishization of an originary ethnic essence in an attempt to root an as yet unfounded identity in particularity. As much as Villa’s verse is about mystical seeing, as in the verse Moore cites, this transcending vision is not blankly unconditioned. What makes Villa seem like a poet of the high modernist notion of universal literature, his focus on innovative technique in usage and in reversed consonance, should also be read as an attempt to represent his own difference from colonizing, standard English. And in his obvious concern for how Anglophone Filipino literature develops, Villa’s formalism is an attempt to “embrace the formal and ideological complications between the universal and the particular,” as Hart puts it.

To make a further point on the stakes of recovering Villa’s anticolonialism I want to draw attention to Villa’s class position. Villa was among the political elite and not, as Bulosan was, part of the agrarian proletariat. Miller points out that Bulosan’s stories satirize and condemn not only colonial administrators but also “Filipino aristocrats” (Miller 244). This connection of US Imperialists and the Filipino upper class underlies the assumption that Villa’s cosmopolitanism is really a form of imperialism, but it also has a complex history. Villa’s father was a physician and chief of staff to Emilio Aguinaldo, the nationalist military leader who appointed himself the president of an independent Filipino government at the end of the Spanish American War, but who was forced to take the oath of allegiance to the US when he was captured in 1901. Although Aguinaldo was then marginalized, political power for the next decades remained concentrated in his circle with US colonial policy giving progressively more power to the existing political class of the Philippines under tutelary rule. Manuel L. Quezon, the

president of the Philippines through World War II had been a lieutenant in Aguinaldo's army and initially attained power through US sponsored elections in 1907 (Francia 67).

But if this historical synopsis suggests that the authentically Filipino perspective is local and democratic, it's surprising to note that the American colonial state in the Philippines also regarded the so-called "average native" as the real Filipinos. That rural, working class Filipinos supported resistance tended to be read not as a genuine complaint against US imperialism, but as a rejection of feudal conditions maintained by the Spanish culture of imperialism and the native elite. In his analysis on the archive of the Philippine Commission, Daniel P. S. Goh argues that rather than proceed from the "Orientalist representations that saw the native as 'incorrigibly inferior' and 'radically different'" the Philippines were more often situated in a Darwinist context (Goh 115). Reading Filipino society as feudal "simultaneously recognized and disavowed cultural difference" in that while native Filipinos were backward, as in Taft's famous rhetorical figure of the little brown brother, they have the potential to become fully modernized like the US itself.

Given the two orientalisms, one that consigned Filipinos to permanent backwardness, the other tutelary, how should we read statements by the Filipino political class that seem to accede to colonialism? For example, the Philippine Assembly wrote a resolution which states "on behalf of the people of the Philippine Islands [The Assembly conveys] to the President of the United States, their profound sentiments of gratitude and high appreciation of the signal concession made to the people of the Islands" (qtd in Go 170, Go's emphasis removed). Is this the mark of an

oriental corruption about which nothing can be done, or is it an attempt to manage a new political context?

To see the Philippine Assembly's resolution as merely endorsing colonial policy presupposes that the aims and intentions imported from a context of early twentieth century American progressivism was articulable to a briefly independent Spanish colony in Asia with, obviously, a very different history. Stated in this way, it should be more persuasive to argue that the collision of US colonial discourse with the already developed Filipino context would be a complex process in which the Assembly's statement is neither purely American nor purely Filipino. Focusing on the political elite of the Philippines under American colonialism, Go argues that the discourse of colonization is not unproblematically transferred, nor is it just a means of violent coercion. Instead, "colonized groups tame the otherwise disruptive force of foreign intrusion while nonetheless accepting some of its terms" (Go 9). Thus, the statement of gratitude to Theodore Roosevelt's concession to allow an American controlled form of self government uses the discourse the US introduced in a particular Filipino context.

Go's work focuses not only on the Philippines but also on another colony the US seized in the wake of the Spanish American War: Puerto Rico. Go's comparative approach shows that when the US set up a similarly devised House of Delegates in Puerto Rico, rather than meet with sycophantic praise, the establishment of this governing body met with boycott and protest. And while it might be tempting to attribute this difference to large scale explanations on how Puerto Rico and the Philippines are different, US policy was very similar in both colonies, as were local patronage systems. Instead, what Go's analysis shows is that a more specific difference determined the

diverging paths of Puerto Rico and the Philippines under US rule. What seems particularly decisive is that under Spain, Puerto Rico had essentially a one party government, while no such party system reigned in the Philippines. This factor meant that when the same US-influenced multi-party government was established it was more disruptive for Puerto Rico than the Philippines.

Notably absent in explaining the difference between Puerto Rican resistance and Filipino acceptance is an account of popular anticolonialism. In fact, while armed resistance persisted into the nineteen teens in the Philippines, no such violence greeted American occupation in Puerto Rico.<sup>9</sup> So instead of continuing to privilege a notion that the authentic folk of a dominated colony is its majority, laboring class, it becomes important to consider how elite classes adapted discourses to their own contexts and not to simply read their response as a weak acquiescence to US power. In fact, that the political elite were regarded by the US as exploitative and corrupt matches up with an assumption that their role under colonialism should be simply condemned. Instead, if we fully take Go's point, that anticolonial and postcolonial politics are much more complex than a binary between power and resistance then it's plausible to suggest that part of Villa's current marginal status can be explained because his attempt to forge a cosmopolitan Filipino literature in English shows the mixing of discourses and contexts but has been misread and turned invisible.

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<sup>9</sup> Francia points out that the 1902 declaration that the Philippine American War was over was justified only by the surrender of two insurgent generals, General Malvar and Aguinaldo, but violence persisted in other parts of the Philippines almost a decade past the official end of the war. See pp. 154-160. Go discusses the Puerto Rican reception to US forces as an attitude of overall welcoming across "[n]early all sectors of Puerto Rican society" (Go 55). While Go's point is that much of the native context between the Philippines and Puerto Rico are the same, he does analyze the difference in initial response to US occupation in chapters 2 and 3.

In that case, Villa's rejection of nationalist literature which most obviously breaks with a popular anticolonial localism--the kind of writing we would recognize as political--is also a rejection of his own marginalization in US colonial discourse which is historically rooted in early twentieth century progressivism. And as a double rejection, Villa's conception of literary English as something defined more by form than content can be understood as something of a "determinate negation" to use Hegel's language. Hegel contrasts a skepticism that sees nothingness as the result of thought from a deeper perception that nothingness characterizes the process of thought itself. Confining negation only to the result creates an empty nothingness that "cannot get any further [...] but must wait to see whether something new comes along and what it is, in order to throw it too into the same empty abyss" (Hegel 51). Skepticism as Hegel defines it here is at bottom conservative in that novelty is reduced to sameness, the sameness of negativity. On the other hand, Hegel defines determinate negation as nothingness "which has a *content*" but in this paradoxical statement which seems to suggest that nothingness really is something, what really defines determinate negation seems to be its form. Determinate negation is meant to explain the "necessary progression and interconnection of the forms of the unreal consciousness" (50). So if a series of forms shows a movement away from error then its content isn't the particular errors which must be recognized as mistakes, but rather nothingness. Nothingness is then a mistake to be realized, present through the entire series of gradual correction. The end result is thus not an empty negativity but rather the arising of "a new form" which is formal in that it is the "transition [...] through which the progress through the complete series of forms comes about of itself" (51).

Villa, in his polemical essays directed at the reading public at large, is obviously not so theoretical, but like Hegel he is concerned with a process of refinement and concludes that form best describes this process, while a focus on shifts in content is blind to the larger movement. “All art moves towards the refinement of its form: art assumes the stature of art, *not because of what it says, but because of its form*” (Villa 226, original emphasis). While Villa phrases this assertion as a general aesthetic principle, the essay itself is an argument on poetry, and the immediate purpose for his pseudo-Hegelian observation is to reject the idea that the embrace of the “proletarian trend” in Filipino poetry represents “a sign both of intellectual and esthetic enlargement.” In definitively stating that the content of poetry is ultimately secondary, Villa argues that the uses of language are subordinate to language itself. Implied in that argument is an unstated corollary that poetic language moves toward a negation of language’s prosaic, utilitarian function.<sup>10</sup> Villa’s conception of the separateness of the poetic from both prose and from the content of poetry finally rejects the particular dimensions of English as the colonial language. As Martin Joseph Ponce observes, Villa’s condemnation of realist prose carries with it a rejection of the use of English in colonial education as what is merely utilitarian (Ponce 8). Villa’s sense of the negativity of poetic language is then finally a rejection of colonialism as well.

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<sup>10</sup> Villa actually ends the essay with a long quote from Virgil C. Aldrich, who at first romanticizes the idea that a writer might just as well escape out of the ivory tower as escape into it. But as his hypothetical writer becomes seduced into writing what sounds like 1930s protest poetry, he concludes that such a turn is a failure. Instead, Aldrich claims “The artist, as artist, cannot wholly abandon the ivory tower” (emphasis removed). But ultimately Aldrich strikes an ambivalent note in which the “practical motives” that characterize the real world outside the ivory tower “makes puppets of us all.” Villa does not further comment on the quote, but that it ends by asserting the ultimate determination of “us all” by the “social milieu” suggests that art’s transcendence is really a false consciousness.

To be consistent with his theory of English as a potentially universal language, Villa's aesthetic theory in the early 1940s has to also be strongly anti-representational. And in his increasingly radical renunciation of content, in 1941 he proposes a poetry that may have "no subject matter at all" (228), Villa doesn't conclude that poetry must then ultimately also be empty, but instead bases poetry in metaphysics. In praising the poet Nick Joaquin, Villa describes Joaquin's poems as endowed with "great metaphysical seeing [...] which knows how to express itself in great language" and then also reveals a "genuine first-rate Mind" (229). It should be pointed out that these terms don't seem to privilege metaphysics. Indeed Villa goes so far as to praise the lowly pragmatic quality of skill in about equal terms as metaphysical vision and the personal quality of intelligence, before finally hedging his claim that Joaquin is great by writing "he is *potentially* our greatest creative writer" (original emphasis). The status of being potentially great rather than great is explained in the fact that Joaquin has not yet written much, which seems to make the point minor. But if mere quantity can disqualify a writer from greatness it seems clear that what Villa considers a great poet is not a matter of art's capacity for self refinement, that it actually has a lot to do with real limitations: language, thought, skill, and even publishing with its implicitly market-driven logic.

If Villa gets drawn into the work aspect of artwork despite his commitment to art's nonutility, its distinction from propaganda, then to some extent a totally idealized art is unthinkable for Villa, even with an appeal to the powerful discourse of Western universalism. Six years before his essays on Filipino poetry, Villa's compromised view of art's transcendence finds roughly similar expression in Martin Heidegger's attempt to

isolate what defines the artistic quality of art. According to Dominick LaCapra, the context for Heidegger's thought is "an uncertain interregnum, a 'no longer and not yet' after the departure of the old gods and before the hoped-for coming of the new" (LaCapra 123). In other words, Heidegger is "paradoxically waiting for some 'big bang' in culture and existing after it, especially after what Nietzsche famously called the death of God." That Nietzsche ushers in a new era imbues philosophy with a lingering potential, even in the context of the broad upheaval characterized by a discredited Christianity that casts doubt on the tenability of universal Western discourse. So when Western universalism fails Villa, the fact that Heidegger's comments on art respond to the diminished status of that very same universalism means these two different writers converge in a shared, widespread metaphysical disappointment.

Heidegger begins "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935-6) with what seems to be a specialized and limited inquiry, the "question concerning the origin of the work of art [which] asks about the sources of its nature" (Heidegger 17). But as neutral as this opening sounds, the fact that the essence of art is something that needs analysis to find it implies a deeper problem at the basis of knowledge; and through this problem the essay can be said to address the possibility of meaning itself. Regarding art, Heidegger initially seeks to ground the origin of art in its "thingly character," but then suggests such a turn is a dubious analytic reduction (19). He points out that privileged terms like art or God are difficult to regard as mere things. But even so, the "thingness of a thing is particularly difficult to express" (31), which puts the basic attribute of objective existence into a kind of metaphysical immanence. If Heidegger initially acknowledges an idealist

bias against mere things, his review of “Western thought” shows that the philosophical tradition itself fails to adequately theorize thingness.

Heidegger implies that thought has a kind of destitution, first in epistemological obscurity and then in the failure to understand even concrete objects. But pointing out the limits of thought affirms a paradoxical convergence of essence and object that corresponds to a religious perspective. Heidegger’s turn in the mid 1930s is toward a convergence of poetry and philosophy according to LaCapra (123), but this turn itself might be contextualized in the crisis of late modernism. Like Heidegger, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr surveys philosophical metaphysics to suggest that the western worldview has reached an impasse in his book *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941). Niebuhr comes to argue for a specifically Christian perspective, claiming that what is paradigmatically Biblical about Christianity is that “both the transcendence of God over, and his intimate relation to, the world are equally emphasized” (Niebuhr 135). As a result the finite reality of the world should neither be denigrated nor subsumed to idealism. Instead, the human capacity for self-transcendence must be regarded equally along with “the final limit of our own consciousness” (140). Arguing that this sense of transcendence with limitation distinguishes Christianity from other religions, especially mystical traditions, puts a perhaps surprising emphasis not on the possibility for universalization, but on the opposite, the affirmation of limitation. And though Villa, Heidegger and Niebuhr should be thought of as occupying very different positions in national and historical contexts, their thought turns inward in what I argue reflects a diffuse but perceptible crisis of materialism.

## Villa's Sacred, Queer Poetry

*Have Come, Am Here* is a difficult volume to summarize. Villa makes use of two broad divisions “Lyrics” and “Divine Poems,” but what differentiates lyrics from divine poems is not clear.<sup>11</sup> “Lyrics” are further divided into four loosely thematic sections. The first section forms an overall introduction to the book, with poems that are thematically and formally similar to what comes in “Divine Poems” along with a few that work as suggestive, partial *ars poeticas*.<sup>12</sup> By sheer numbers, religious poems predominate but these poems are idiosyncratic and vary in tone so that it's not obvious to say that *Have Come, Am Here* should be read as a book of religious poetry. Instead the case can be made, and indeed I argue it, that Villa engages religion in the context of metaphysical thought at the moment of late imperialism in the 1940s that both Heidegger's and Niebuhr's thought is part of.

If the book as a whole is hard to characterize, then the task of offering a paradigmatic example of Villa's poetry is similarly difficult. Moore's dense, associational review seems to take up almost accidental examples of Villa's poetry in the midst of struggling to convey what the poems as a whole mean. In a *New York Times* review, Peter Monro Jack explicitly picks a poem at random before coming to claim that if “one isolated the philosophy of the poems it would be to say that the poet brings God to

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<sup>11</sup> Villa includes a note on his version of rhyme, reversed consonance, but in this prose addendum he doesn't explain the ostensibly more content derived distinctions between lyric and divine poems in his lexicon. By 1949's *Volume 2* Villa seems to have broadened what he calls “Divine Poems” to include poems without as recognizably biblical or religious content, thus suggesting that in the earlier volume this distinction is not definitionally precise.

<sup>12</sup> It's been suggested that the plural of “ars poetica” should be “artes poeticae” but according to *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature* (1995) *ars poeticas* is valid (p. 74).

him” (BR 12). Jack uses the impersonal first person pronoun to introduce a hypothetical division of philosophy from poetry in what would ostensibly summarize Villa’s poems, but even in this heavily qualified claim, Jack does seize upon what makes Villa’s poems seem to fit Heidegger’s sense of art. The work of the poems is to draw the divine back into a destitute world. Or to put it in terms closer to Niebuhr’s, Villa’s poems show the immanent, divine quality of personal experience, specific to biblical revealed religion.

The book opens with a poem that mentions God about halfway through, but whose real topic is the unspeakable in poetry.

It is what I never said,  
 What I’ll always sing--  
 It’s not found in days,  
 It’s what begins  
 In half dark, half light. (1-5)

The poem addresses the question of what Villa’s poems are ultimately about, but not as a clarification. Instead, the persistent subject of the poems is what Villa never states but always sings. This distinction between speech and song recalls his opposition of the language of poetry and prose in his critical writing, and it implies that the topic of his poetry is poeticization, the transformation of content away from its direct, denotative meaning into an unstated, enigmatic, artistic experience.

The logic of the poem proceeds by mimicking a kind of negative theology. In the first line, the poem clarifies what “It” is not and then after this strong negation, makes descriptive but not definitional statements. The combined effect of both transcendence and this irrational uncommunicability suggests a sacred function for art which belies the

passing mention of God. “It” is “Where the first flower dove / When God’s hands lost love” (8-9). God is used in the poem to indicate a time which corresponds to a place, and while the precise action is ambiguous, “dove” is in the syntactical position of a verb even as the rhyme suggests that the word is a bird. But despite this ambiguity, the specification of place and time make it clear that what’s divine is in what is concretely real. By that logic anything specifically invoked in the poem takes on an implied divinity. And it’s only by that accumulated sense of the sacred that what should read as a profound anticlimax in the poem’s final line, “It” seems to be a “Wreath” (14), reads instead as a final metaphysically ambiguous statement.<sup>13</sup> The “Wreath” must be something transcendent and inchoate, not an actual, mere wreath.

But if the poems are really about this uncommunicable mystical beyond, the concreteness with which this poem ends in the image of the wreath reads as a kind of falling short, a disappointment. In claiming that the “It” of this poem is in all of his poems, Villa suggests that a key element of the entire volume is that it is not quite divine. Ponce detects a similar characteristic across Villa’s broader oeuvre, which he provocatively labels as queer. Ponce argues that for Villa queer is “an especially appropriate and elastic term that can be used to describe and elucidate the two most salient, overlapping features in Villa’s work: his self-styled experimentalism and his thematization of non-normative erotics” (Ponce 49). The sexual aspect of Villa’s literary queerness is read by Denise Cruz as Villa’s emphasis on questioning heterosexual

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<sup>13</sup> The final two lines of the poem read “O, but it’s all of it there / Above my poems a Wreath” (13-14). The assertion in line 13 that “it’s all of it there” also adds to the sense that “it” can’t be just a wreath.

reproductive eroticism by focusing on nonconsummation (15).<sup>14</sup> But if the poems are all about falling short, then poem 1's invocation of this generative principle, modeled on the mystical assertions of a negative theology, comes to seem overstated. What's missing is a sense of religious ecstasy; apophatic assertions of the divine tend to have an irrational intensity, the certainty of high faith. And it's this aspect of religiosity that Villa closes the first section of lyrics with.

The passionate intensity of that poem, numbered 16, comes when the speaker has contact with God, which reduces the poet to a kind of giddiness reflected in line 9's unpunctuated repetition: "And found Him found Him found Him." This excitement makes religious ecstasy queerly erotic, as the first line of the poem suggests. Union with God begins in something at least associationally ascetic, a "desire to be Nude" (1). Villa sets off "Nude" with the slight orthographical mark of unusual capitalization and in Villa's polemics on writing in English it's notable that he uses the religious term "grace" to connote a not necessarily grammatical externalization of poetic essence (*Critical Villa* 269). "Nude" then, suggests something other than mere nudity in an attempt to call down some sort of poetic sacredness into language.

Villa's attempt to make language bear this spiritual otherness isn't totally removed from the colonial context. Though Villa's essays take pains to seem technical, he bases the judgments he makes on Filipino literature on versions of the same criteria repeated across various essays, his argument against merely correct English suggests

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<sup>14</sup> Cruz refers to and builds upon Ponce's analysis. She emphasizes critical comments Villa made against the melodramatic love story, especially in Filipino prose while analyzing short stories from Villa's 1933 collection *Footnote to Youth: Tales of the Philippines and Others*. Later I address a similar poetics in Moore, which Benjamin Kahan also reads as queer, though with Moore, her textual strategy of nonconsummation is one of celibacy.

the extent to which his aesthetics break with the tutelary goal that still persisted in newspaper prizes for Anglophone Filipino writing - to demonstrate acculturation to American English usage. So then “Nude” in this line, along with the lack of punctuation in line 9 must be read in this anticolonial context along with the enigmatic religious valences Villa is invoking.

Nudity in this poem has a density that its capitalization indicates, and it is only partly salacious. In discussing an earlier, more overtly sexual poem that also begins by invoking nakedness, the first line is “I am naked,” Ponce reads nudity as an explication of “Villa’s own poetics” (Ponce 82). This earlier poem, “Song of a Swift Nude” (1929) goes so far as to portray sex:

There was a man clung to me and he was big  
and tall and his arms were as wrought iron.  
The muscles of his body rippled as he sowed  
his song into me and I quivered bravely.  
He was weak when his song was ended and I  
became strong with it. (qtd in Ponce 79)

This poem was part of a collection called “Man-Songs” that Villa published in the *Philippines Herald Magazine* under a pseudonym which led to his conviction for “obscenity and corruption of public morals” as Chua notes in his endnote for Villa’s selection of the best Filipino stories of 1929 (Chua 48). Chua points out that Villa saw himself as innocent, and his defense of “Man-Songs” is that the public misread the poem. “If the physicalities involved in my poems are offensive to [the public], why can’t they go deeper? I am sure they will find something beautiful behind. Unearth, unearth.

Do not be prudish and you will soon see in a new light” (Villa qtd in Ponce 81). What makes Villa’s verse seem obscene is a kind of naive reading that fails to engage sexuality. Instead, Villa intends his poems to be read in a metaphorical becoming Naked. Ponce writes “To ‘unearth’ [...] connotes spiritualizing, making not-of-this-earth, a process of divinization that [...] his later poetry repeatedly performs” (Ponce 82).

In comparison to “Song of a Swift Nude” poem 16 seems downright tame, but nonetheless the sexual context is present in the later poem’s first line as in the earlier. In fact, the first line of poem 16 is perhaps more erotic than the declarative opening of “Song of a Swift Nude.” Rather than just announce nudity, poem 16 links it with subjective desire: “In my desire to be Nude” (1). That this line forms only a dependent clause adds to the suggestiveness of the desire to be nude, and in incompleteness, this line is more erotic in the expectation that this desire will lead to some act. But then in contrast to “Song of a Swift Nude” Villa shifts away from sexuality by the second line.

Line 2 answers the first unexpectedly, turning the desire for nudity into the act of dressing: “I clothed myself in fire.” The rest of the first quatrain takes up the fire image, with the last two lines listing destruction of walls and a roof, with the consumption by fire as a kind of becoming Nude, so that the fire “Burned all these down” (4). If the fire consumes what is notably external, the clothing of fire works as a paradoxical avowal, to recall Moore’s words. And the tension between clothing and an agent of purification, fire, recalls Villa’s defense of “Man-Songs,” nudity is a purification to essence, not a dwelling upon the surface.

Out of this purifying fire, which connotes purgatory, the speaker “Emerged myself supremely lean / Unsheathed like a holy knife” (5-6). Unsheathing implies getting naked

and if we start with this association first, that the self turns into a knife is a reasonable extension of the metaphor. But as the poet becomes an object, specifically a tool, by the next line, tool use, that definitively human trait, is attributed to God. All of these transformations seem to come together in an allegory. The human undergoes a purification which reduces him to an essence. This essence is a tool of God's. In other words, the allegory treats the Christian trope of surrendering to God's will.

To Heidegger the status of tools, or equipment as he calls it, is important in thinking of the inherent existent quality of things in general. As I stated earlier, Heidegger points out that the thingly character of objects is oddly elusive. For that reason, something like equipment, which is categorically defined by its utility to our will, should be less resistant to our thinking than pure objecthood. An advantage of theorizing not things but equipment is that the nature of equipment, "the equipmental quality of equipment" has an intuitive essence, "its usefulness" (Heidegger 32). In fact, when an equipment is most purely functional, it disappears into its use so that we don't even think of its separate existence. But then equipment is also vulnerable to time: "A single piece of equipment is worn out and used up" (34). What remains is what Heidegger calls "reliability," which is meant to also suggest that an equipment lies ready to be used. What finally defines equipment is actually a kind of double existence of both usefulness and thingly existence.

At the end of the second quatrain Villa turns away from the knife's erasure in God's will with a syntactical stutter that corrects line 7 with line 8. As I noted, the speaker emerges from the fire

Unsheathed like a holy knife.

With only His Hand to find

To hold me beyond annul. (6-8).

Villa's punctuation in these lines goes against expectation. In line 7, "with" continues the thought from the previous line, even though that line is end stopped; and though this line ends enjambed, because it seems to complete line 6, one is tempted to read an unmarked period at "find." In that case, line 7 suggests a kind of resting that its content also implies. The entire trajectory from desiring to be Nude seems to rest in the quest that has "only His Hand to find." But then "to find" does not actually conclude the thought; in fact, it is replaced by the start of the last line of the stanza, in which His Hand isn't merely found, but actually holds. The difference marks a change in volition, not what the speaker finds, but what God does, but at the same time the speaker goes from a knife to a person, even as the personhood implied by the first person pronoun stays close to object status in Villa's use of the objective case; the holy knife has both a oneness with God's use and its own existent status "beyond annul."

Villa's language use helps to establish the ambivalent effect of this quatrain's divine connection, and its idiosyncratic use should recall Villa's expository claims on poetic language. He definitely sees language as a medium, as something that mediates access to a poetic essence beyond the words themselves; and this access depends on the words being set off from common usage, what Villa derisively calls "Bourgeoise ratiocination--the process of ordinary logic" (*Critical Villa* 255). But then the very fact of Villa's nonstandard use invokes nonliterary contexts. Babette Deutsch explicitly connected his poetic voice with his nationality: "The fact that he is a native of the Philippines who comes to the English language as a stranger may have helped him to

his unusual syntax” (qtd in Yu 48). And Peter Monro Jack casually characterizes Villa’s diction as bearing “a kind of foreignness [...] as if he were making up his idiom in each poem instead of writing absent-mindedly in the way of the ordinary versifier” (Jack BR12).

We might be inclined to read these critical pronouncements from the 1940s as simply racist, but part of the estrangement in Villa’s poetic language does suggest a type of vernacular use of language, one that Pascale Casanova argues has a kind of structural presence in world literature. Casanova’s thesis in *The World Republic of Letters* (1999; 2004), is that against a solely national perspective, literature can be thought of in relation to other literature. Specifically, Casanova traces the intertextual relation between texts from writers peripheral to great literary capitals, as the young Filipino Villa would be, to those who write, or have their work consecrated in places such as Paris, New York, as the later modernist Villa’s work would be in the 1940s. Casanova sees this relation between literary backwater and literary capital as one in which “dominated” writers, to use her adjective, attempt to wrest creative autonomy away from literary centers through aesthetic innovation. Reading Alajo Carpentier’s early polemics on magical realism, Casanova quotes his comment that Latin American writers must eschew imitation and instead “find methods of construction capable of translating with greater force our thoughts and sensibilities as Latin Americans” (qtd in Casanova 253). That Carpentier focuses specifically on form and not content suggests his similarity with Villa, a similarity we read as significant not based on nationality, but on relative position in what Casanova calls, as her title indicates, the world republic of letters. And based on this sense that a new form makes possible the expression of an a

marginalized content, not in imitation, but on its own terms, we can read Villa's modernist style need not as universalist or blankly cosmopolitan, but as attempting to create a Filipino literary identity that is reflected in its difference from standard English, even standard literary English.

Villa's stuttering use of verbal infinitives subtly makes the language waver even as the "to find / To hold" replacement spreads the poem into a metaphysical expansiveness. As I noted, "to find" marks a subjective, personal narrative that ends as a religious experience, which negates the self in "To hold." What's more is that this absorption has a curious intermediate status, as a metaphor for equipment that is between use and thing. It's interesting to note that the infinitive form of a verb is its basic, unconjugated form, the form of the verb that lies ready to use in the potentiality of its reliability. Heidegger remarks a verb not in specific reference to a noun "remains indeterminate and empty in its meaning that [...] can fill and determine itself 'according to the situation'" (*Metaphysics* 95). And while Villa uses these verbs specifically, they carry the valence of this indeterminate potentiality. Heidegger goes on to a fragment from Goethe to consider the status of language: "Over all the peaks / is peace" (qtd in *Metaphysics* 94). Focusing on the status of the verb "is" Heidegger claims that this "'is' simply cannot be paraphrased" but "not because it is too complicated and hard to understand, but because the verse is said so simply." In other words because there is an irreducible, object-like quality to the sense of this word, it has "a rich manifoldness of meanings" (95). And sensing this universal scope in a single word creates the potentiality for a spiritualness that isn't nostalgic for doctrinal faith and possibly is relevant to the technologic, material world.

In regarding equipment Heidegger comes to an interesting convergence with Villa. From equipmentality's doubleness, both object and use, Heidegger proposes that two definitive movements can be discerned. On one hand, the merging of object into use suggests its creative aspect that reveals an intuitively persuasive sense of what defines the tool. This Heidegger calls "setting up a world." On the other hand, the tool's lying ready, its resistant objective status suggests the object's mysteriousness, and in Heidegger's terms, this aspect of the tool is self-secluding, which he calls "setting forth the earth." Finally, what defines equipment and in generality all works including art, is this doubleness and its prevailing trope is one of concealment and unconcealment - of nudity.

Heidegger intends this trope of concealment and unconcealment to be broadly applicable, indeed universal. After establishing that "setting up a world and setting forth the earth" is what is central to work and artwork, Heidegger shifts terms and restates his question as not about the essence of art, but "how does truth happen in the fighting of the battle between world and earth? What is truth?" ("Work" 48). While Heidegger begins intuitively connecting truth with unconcealment he ultimately concludes that truth is profoundly ambivalent, that we might not be able to tell truth from untruth. And in that truth as unconcealedness contains its opposite, concealment, the "nature of truth is, in itself, the primal conflict" that we see at work in art (53). Villa ends poem 16 with one last metaphoric transformation, from knife to poem. Such a move is characteristic of Villa's religious poems, as poem 1 showed. But what might seem to be an assertion of closeness between religion and poetry might instead be read, via Heidegger, as the

religious content of language, especially poetic language with its manifold, unconcealing, world-opening character.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, at the level of language Villa's poems attempt two related objectives. First, he tries to construct an Anglophone Filipino literature that shouldn't be read as assimilative even though it doesn't engage a backward-facing fantasy of an authentic, pre-colonial identity. Its goal, and this is the second objective, is to create that Filipino poetry as a transcendent, spiritual essence. Religion is a discourse of the sacred with sacredness as something that is nonrational and yet inherent in the world, in objects. This quality of immanence in both language and other equipment helps to clarify that Villa's verse enacts a kind of synthetic vernacular that has universal aspirations, universal not in the sense of a secular philosophic account, but in a religious sense.

## Representations of Animals

Moore's review, with its rhetorical figure of a "hogs-hair brush in the hand of a Chinese master," makes a metaphor of poetry to painting, but it does so through a problematic detour that equates Villa to a Chinese master, a comparison all the more

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<sup>15</sup> Heidegger's nazism isn't directly in evidence in "The Origin of the Work of Art," nor in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935). Both of these works stem from courses he gave in the mid 1930s, arguably reflecting a turn away from directly ideological work. As LaCapra suggests, Heidegger's notion that origins represent a lost authenticity is a view sympathetic to conservative revolution, and perhaps the deep struggle Heidegger uses to characterize the essence of art and truth implies a justification for violence. But if so, these readings aren't central or definitive to understanding Heidegger's claims, which after all, are continuous with a line of thought begun prior to his involvement with nazis.

But if as LaCapra argues, the division between human, animals and the animal in humans has "consequences or implications [...] for interactions both among humans and between humans and other species," then what might be important in explicating the ethical content of Heidegger's thought is the status Heidegger assigns to animals (LaCapra 150). LaCapra points out that "Heidegger claims that the animal, like the plant, has no world," essentially, it is all earth (128). This opens up a more troubling possibility for a deeper, implicit racism possible from Heidegger's metaphysics. I take up the question of the ethical status of animals in the next section of this chapter.

complicated in that it is directed toward technique, and not overtly race.<sup>16</sup> The comment actually refers to specific poems, Villa's "leopard poems" which have the effect of paintings. And while she leaves this point at a mention, Villa's poems of objects, Moore lists "watermelon, yellow strawberry" and "giraffe" along with the leopard, tend to be depicted almost childishly, without regard to sense. That Villa's poems do not depict objects as just uncomplicated things puts his work in sympathy to Moore's, especially in regard to the animal poems Moore is known for. Even in depicting real animals or objects, Moore tends to complicate depiction and not simplify it. For that reason, both poets might bear out Jean-Paul Sartre's comment that imaginary or fantastic objects "do not appear, as they do in perception, from a particular angle; they do not occur from a point of view ... they are 'presentable' under an all-inclusive aspect" (qtd in Stamy 62). Villa's poems could be regarded as paintings not as representations of something real, meaning that the poem contains a total perspective, a full knowledge. And to Moore the painter's accuracy is a form of restraint charged with personality, which makes paintings a tempting rhetoric figure because of their ambivalent state between object and person, universality and its limit.

There are two leopard poems in the third section of *Have Come, Am Here*, and in neither poem is the leopard merely an animal. The leopard is more abstract in poem 36, which begins with a conceptual assertion: "The distinction is in Fire and Division:" before continuing after a colon to the "Ferocious and beautiful Leopard that thrives / On the rose-imagination" (1-3). This opening connects the leopard with fire, at least in

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<sup>16</sup> I address Moore's Orientalism in more detail in the next section. My mention of it here is meant to show how this overt instance of Orientalism is tied to an underlying logic that isn't directly racial, but related to representation of objects and the perspective implied by possible approaches.

connecting the distinction of the first line with the images of the next two if not also by echoing William Blake's "tyger." And if the next stanza is opaque, "Supreme visionary Guard begetting poetry: / Magnetizer to Confrontation till the archives / Cry in luminosity" (4-6), the third stanza's connection of the leopard with fire recalls fire's use in Poem 16, as an agent of purification or unconcealment. When Villa writes "leap, Leopard-mind, / Bring figuration of Fire" (7-8) the word play in "leap" and "leopard" connects a more abstract version of the leopard, its mind, with an action, leaping. But in that the mind's leap is to create a linguistic version of fire, what the poem entreats is that the leopard leave the language material of poetry, its "archives" for "luminosity," the consumption of language in its spiritual other.

The leopard as a leopard is only minimally invoked in poem 36, present only as far as a cliché of being ferocious and beautiful. The other leopard poem, poem 33, is at once more visually focused on the leopard; and eyes are a recurring image. The poem opens not by describing or presenting, but in positing: "I think, yes, a leopard in Dufy blue would / Be incomparable" (1-2). Villa's reference to "Dufy blue" is no longer obvious, but it seems to be a reference to fauvist painter Raoul Dufy whose works tended to use a bright blue.<sup>17</sup> In any case, making the leopard blue amounts to making the leopard unreal, in fact, deliberately unreal in order to be "incomparable." In as much as the leopard is meant to be singular, the speaker also maintains an individual prerogative: while the poem's first words "I think, yes" seems incidental, through this clause the conceit of the poem is offered as a personal fancy. If the leopard isn't literally

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<sup>17</sup> I found a reference to "Dufy blue" in a 1971 *New York Magazine* article by Albert Goldman in which Lenny Bruce is supposed to have "had this thing that every room in which he camps over night should be painted Dufy blue--rhymes with goofy blue" (36).

ekphrastic, the unreality of its color and the speaker's act of imagining suggests that the description of this leopard is put onto the page in order to create its image. The poem has the effect of a painting.

The next sentence also spans a line break and while it seems visual in nature, Villa introduces something nonvisual, death, except death is what the leopard's eyes see. Continuing from the conceit of imagining an incomparable leopard Villa continues: "Provided his eyes are green / And see death like two flowers" (2-3). Because the poem focuses on play, imagining the leopard, its ability to see death seems like one more improbable trait that says more about the poet's imagination than death. In fact, if these lines are really more about the imaginative faculty than the content of the poem isn't really the leopard, but the speaker. But then eyes that see death recalls the verse Moore cites for its puritanical seriousness, "I saw myself reflected / In the great eye of the grave." If so far the poem has been a playful imagining of a leopard, the terms of its imaginings are themselves subject to play, as the leopard's eye goes from something that is seen as color, to something that sees death, even if death itself appears as "two flowers."

The transition from the first stanza to the second is marked by three sharp changes. First the abandonment of a description of the leopard, as though in describing its color and eyes the image is complete. Second, abandonment of the easy colloquial tone, replaced by awkward syntax which registers linguistic difference. And finally the speaker's perspective shifts from viewing the image from outside it to entering the image: "Myself would / Bring him me all in dazzling gold" (3-4). This last thematic shift is perhaps most striking in that it enacts the abasement of the speaker from a creator

who judges the aesthetics of his creation, its incomparability, to a gift or sacrifice. The rest of the second stanza emphasizes that in this abjection is an acceptance or embrace of death: “Lie / At his feet for God’s sake awaiting death. The / Blue paw will have its incomparable law” (4-6).

If death seems trivial in the first stanza, it can be seen as merely two flowers, the second stanza treats death as a complex and more profound disruption. What precisely causes the tonal and thematic shifts in the two stanzas isn’t clear, but it is notable that if the imagined leopard can be fully comprehended in a way that real leopards can’t, it is nonetheless adequately described at just color and eyes. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe the face in similar terms, as a surface with holes (Deleuze and Guattari 167). But to them, the face is not a visual metaphor for a theory of meaning, though it seems that way at first. The surface is “a white wall upon which” signs are inscribed, with the hole as a black hole of “consciousness, passion,” so that the combined face seems to symbolize a whole meaning: both sign and person who uses that sign in an intersubjective context. But the face is not just a metaphor since it plays a real role in communication; and in discussing faces, or faciality, Deleuze and Guattari even insert free-indirect discourse on how someone might read a face: “He looked at me queerly, he knitted his brow, what did I do to make him change expression” (115).

Because faces question signification, as in the intersubjective speech Deleuze and Guattari imagine, the face itself is beyond any given sign. In this sense the face would be “postsignifying” to use Deleuze and Guattari’s terms. And signification, the account of signifieds and signifiers, creates the appearance of knowable, full signs insofar as what is signified exceeds the sign, because this excess “reimparts the

signifier, recharges it or produces more of it" (114). But as a result the "ultimate signified is therefore the signifier itself, in its redundancy or excess." Redundancy because if the sign corresponds to some real entity it represents it is strictly speaking a double, and excess because the sign refers not to real entities but other signs in the matrix of signification. So finally, the face is like the ultimate signified: it is also redundant to what is said, but seems to offer the truth or meaning of what's said, as excess.

And to return to the question of why the leopard's face is complete and instantiates a radical turn in the poem, we could say that the face crystallizes the sense that signification aims beyond itself. And after our confrontation with the face, the distancing of the leopard image, in the form of the speaker who points out the imaginary quality of the poem, can be dismissed because the stakes of this poem, as with the others we've looked at, is to finally go beyond language. Transitioning to the third stanza, Villa writes "The / Green eyes incomparable words" (6-7). This sentence fragment testifies to the postsignification of the face, which is to say that through eyes, Villa raises the question of knowledge, as a single word that is beyond all words, a word that would be "incomparable."

Using Deleuze and Guattari in analyzing Villa departs from the tight historicism of this chapter, but it's not my intent to take for granted a historical consistency that would guarantee that different ideas from different contexts can be yoked together by virtue of sharing the same temporal moment. Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that in any "given people, period, or language, and even a given style" different semiotic systems proliferate, so the question becomes one of which system predominates enough to characterize a historical moment. An account concerned with excavating effaced,

minority discourses, as this chapter is, requires a means to penetrate beyond just the dominant. But if their account of faciality seems too tied to its own context of poststructuralism, Deleuze and Guattari associate faciality in terms close to the metaphysical concerns of Niebuhr and Heidegger. They write: “If it is possible to assign the faciality machine a date [such a date would be] the year zero of Christ and the historical development of the White Man” (182). Why Christ? Precisely because Christ represents the immanence of the ordinary; what Deleuze and Guattari call “the facialization of the entire body” (176).

Villa repeats the word “incomparable” throughout the poem as though establishing that the singularity of the imagined leopard justifies both the exercise of imagining him and the speaker’s self-subordination to the leopard. The poem ends in another paradoxical avowal: “compare me to your incomparability” (12). But if this blue leopard has been imagined to be incomparable, the speaker should not compare favorably to the leopard, and so the last sentiment of the poem is one that is in awe of a created thing in its separateness from its creator.

But this awe should not be taken to be the sublime awe of nature common in Romantic poetry; and the difference between Villa’s treatment of his leopard and something like John Keats’ treatment of the nightingale shows that Villa’s playful tone is decisive. It’s under the guise of humor that something like comparing the speaker to the incomparable leopard is paradoxical and not contradictory. Cleanth Brooks claims that the success of gnomic utterances in poetry is not primarily their moral content, but their play, so that something like Moore’s tendency toward moralization makes her statements, Brooks cites “Art is unfortunate,” “punctuality is not a crime” as a few

examples, seem true and appropriate because of their “high level of concrete observation, the absence of cuteness, the refusal to talk down” (Brooks 181).

Helen McNeil writes that in Moore the “Romantic and modern terror at the gap between subject and object does not exist” (McNeil 547). Instead, Moore’s work, especially her animal poems “used the material world as a means to abstraction” (546), which means that ultimately the “mind’s meditative play merges with the object” (547). McNeil’s comments suggest that the effect of Moore’s animal poems are remarkably similar to Villa’s, that both write a poetry that attends to specificity in order to get beyond the specific into a larger transcendence. Perhaps one way to phrase this concern would be Moore’s own “gnomic” comment: “The power of the visible / is the invisible” from “He ‘Digesteth Harde Yron’” (1941). As Molesworth points out, this particular statement comes from Moore’s mother, though “the moral thought of the poem is indebted to Moore’s reading in Reinhold Niebuhr and Bliss Perry, among others” (Molesworth 308).

If the moral of “He ‘Digesteth’” is in fact that the power of the visible is invisible, this line is hardly delivered with the directness of a fable’s moral. The lines are set up in the previous stanza by a similar phrase, but this does not add to clarity. After Moore lists what seems to be opulent or ornamental uses of the ostrich, she writes that all of these examples “dramatize a meaning / always missed by the externalist” (47-8). That Moore does not state this meaning makes it tempting to feel as if a sufficiently sympathetic reader would know exactly what meaning is dramatized, but it seems more to her point that such a meaning itself cannot be externalized. In other words, there seems to be an internal meaning to the decorative.

But what complicates the sense that a use of ostriches for decoration is somehow good is the poem's disdain for men hunting ostriches in the third stanza, and the emphasis at the end of the poem. The last stanza refers to the ostrich's status as one of the few not extinct big birds: "This one remaining rebel" (60). Here the moral seems much more in line with a Sunday-school sense of morality, that man has been destructive. But this condemnation seems to make something like serving "Six hundred ostrich-brains [...] at one banquet" exemplify not opulence but waste (42-3). And if the moral of the poem is the importance of the invisible, how such a metaphysical statement relates to real instances of injustice seems to be what Moore avoids explaining in her claim that externalists will miss what she means.

Wallace Stevens glosses "He 'Digesteth Harde Yron'" in the all Marianne Moore issue of *Quarterly Review of Literature*, which incidentally Villa edited.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Stevens quotes the stanza that supposedly dramatizes internal meaning and writes:

Here the sparrow-camel is all pomp and ceremony, a part of justice of which it was not only the symbol, as Miss Moore says, but also the source of its panoply and the delicacy of its feasts, that is to say, a part of unprecedented experience. (145-6)

Stevens reads the significance of this stanza as a commentary on symbol. But what's notable about the ostrich's symbolic value is that it is experienced, real also. The combination of the ostrich as symbolic and its real dimension is actually described by a word Stevens seems to use colloquially, ceremony. The religious connotation implies

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<sup>18</sup> Stevens's essay also appears in his book *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*.

the aspiration Stevens has in using symbol, something that has a depth of meaning beyond merely substituting images for concepts.

Stevens goes on to offer an oblique example of Moore's dictum on the invisible in the second section of his essay. Here Stevens abruptly abandons literary exposition for an autobiographical fragment on his visit "last September [to] the old Zeller house in the Tulpehocken" (147). After explaining that the Zellers are a family of religious refugees who settled in America in 1709, Stevens describes "the cross with palm-branches below" that hangs above their door as what shows "that the house and those that lived in it were consecrated to the glory of god [sic]." And while the cross is clearly symbolic the consecrated life turns into a romanticization of "their laborious lives" which is "happy in the faith" (148). This narration is capped off by a moral: "Their reality consisted of both the visible and the invisible." That Stevens comes to this idea not through the poem but through his experience is perhaps the model of internal dramatization that Moore has in mind. Nonetheless, the explicit meaning would then be that life needs to be suffused with religion.

If such a meaning accords with the late modernist crisis of meaning that I've been tracing through Heidegger, Niebuhr and Villa, it can't be said to predominate in Moore's poem. After all, the ostrich is symbolic not of faith but of justice. And Moore only asserts the symbolism of the ostrich. The first mention occurs in the first stanza:

[...] the large sparrow

Xenophon saw walking by a stream--was and is

a symbol of justice. (5-7)

Xenophon is occupied not with the symbolism of the ostrich, but a practical account of its habitat and speed (Xenophon 24). That the ostrich represents justice is just part of what Moore adapts in her own descriptive account, and typical of Moore's poetics, the poem is more interested in description than establishing a literary symbol. By the second mention, the symbolism of the ostrich is consigned to the past "anciently / the plume of justice" (23-4) and brought to bear not on the ostrich, but just his plume.

But the fact that the ostrich's symbolism is both cited and external shouldn't suggest that the symbol is therefore unimportant. In fact, such a move is characteristic of Moore's poetic ethos. Miller writes that Moore's position between feminine sentimental poetry and a poetry of masculine authority is shown in Moore's acknowledgment of "the contingencies of her perspective and positioning" (Miller 27). That the ostrich's symbolism is cited and therefore at a distance is the honest expression of Moore's acknowledgment of the mediatedness of her experience of the ostrich and a refusal to write a poem of mastery.

So while the poem is primarily descriptive, its mode of description doesn't readily affirm McNeil's point on Moore's sense of the continuity of subject and object, in that the object is treated with an acknowledgment of its separateness. But then Stevens argues that "He 'Digesteth'" is only superficially factual. At a deeper level it isn't so much a description of the ostrich but "an abstraction" (Stevens 144). What the poem seeks to describe is not the "fluctuating facts of the world" but a "communion with objects which are apprehended by thought and not sense." This process, which Stevens describes as ascetic, is how Moore attempts to incorporate real things into a poem, or as she

famously put it in “Poetry” (1921), there can be “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”

Stevens draws from British philosopher H. D. Lewis’s essay “On Poetic Truth” (1946) and the platonism he sees at work in the poem is also part of Lewis’s essay. Lewis takes pains to explicate Plato’s expulsion of poets from the republic, on the one hand affirming, as Stevens does, that ascending into abstraction is an experience of truth, of something rarefied but ultimately familiar “in the sense that it is akin to our own minds” (Lewis 149). But then on the other hand, Lewis writes approvingly of poetry’s concreteness and even its unfamiliarity: “poetry has to do with reality in that concrete and individual aspect of it which the mind can never tackle altogether on its own terms, with matter that is foreign and alien in a way in which abstract systems [...] can never be” (154). The key to Lewis’s commentary is the implication that poetry supplements what an asceticism must leave out:

For the grip by which abstract conceptions cohere and by which our thought is enabled to pass from one truth to the other, as in a system of geometry, presupposes some principle which cannot be itself explained in that way, and whose nature can only be discerned by a noesis, a glimpse or intuition. (149)

Lewis argues that Plato must exclude poets from the republic because in his rationality Plato must disavow his nonrational, poetic presupposition.

Lewis concludes his essay in a manner that reflects his unease with Britain’s turn away from global empire and a sense of Western culture’s lateness. Reasoning that poetry’s power derives from its capacity to dishabituate, Lewis writes that modern poetry

faces the distinct challenge of trying to present something new in a very rich tradition, and that “poetry in the Georgian decades was living on its capital” and for that reason was moribund (164). But this crisis is not restricted to poetry, if anything, poetry reflects the exhaustion of Western humanism at large. Lewis cites Niebuhr as a theologian who articulates “the need to infuse into the ages of enlightenment an awareness of reality” - reality in the sense of poetry’s individual, nonsystematic reality, “a reality that forces itself upon our consciousness and refuses to be managed and mastered” (165).

Finally, Moore’s practice of a poetry that is both abstract and idiosyncratic should be read beyond its aesthetic modernism into its historical moment, where its ethical dimension emerges. Moore writes:

The power of the visible  
 is the invisible, as even where  
 no tree of freedom grows,  
 so-called brute courage knows.  
 Heroism is exhausting, yet  
 it contradicts a greed that did not wisely spare  
 the harmless solitaire (49-55)

The spiritual power of the visible is something Moore situates at the level of the organism, and heroism does entail critiquing the greed and harm of an all too human rapaciousness. Hidden in the compactness of Moore’s diction is the claim that animals are courageous, but she makes this claim without personification. Instead, the poem’s abstraction dissolves the barrier between human and animal enough that the relation between human and animal has a continuity, which demands an ethics.

## Moore's Orientalism

The subject of Moore's verse is not the self, or not directly. Instead, a range of references comes to suggest a perspective, and then both object and perspective make something like a personality apparent behind the poem. And perhaps without this sense that a poem "meant something to the person who wrote it" it risks being just a "piece of jargon" and not literature, as Moore writes (508).<sup>19</sup> So as indirect as the sense of self is in her work, it is nonetheless decisive. And yet at the same time, the indirectness is itself important in that as an abstract quality that emerges from the poem's detail, Moore is able to give both what she treats and the self that is implied, a quality of being described but not defined. And to defend a certain amount of opacity, Moore cites Niebuhr who she says "is not famed as easy reading." Niebuhr writes, "The self does not realize itself most fully when self-realization is its conscious aim" (qtd in Moore 509). Niebuhr's comment suggests both self-discipline, eschewing a conscious aim for self improvement, and a larger ethical sense of then having the correct view to attain a greater awareness.

Moore's disciplined respect for what is other than human is notable in her animal poetry, which Elizabeth Bishop undertakes to explain the uniqueness of. Bishop faults even Shakespeare for an underlying condescension to animals, which Moore avoids in her refusal to personify. Bishop calls the descriptive quality of Moore's work "somehow *democratic*" but what she sees as democratic is that Moore's minute observations of

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<sup>19</sup> In her essay "Idiosyncrasy and Technique" (1958) Moore writes of Stewart Sherman assembling words at random in apparent parody of Gertrude Stein. But she writes that Sherman's "piece of jargon" "gave itself away at once as lacking any private air of interest" (508). Moore thus implies that the private interest of the writer as a human self conveying messages is a basic experience of literary reading.

animals maintains their otherness (135). Surprisingly, this democratic treatment of animals is not paradigmatically American, but rather Chinese. Moore's "unromantic, life-like, somehow *democratic*, presentations of animals come close to their treatment in Chinese art," writes Bishop (135). And while "democracy" is not an unproblematic term, for example Niebuhr sees it as masking a pretense to innocence, the idea that a more just relationship to otherness can be found in China and adapted to America seems to suggest a non-exploitative form of American Orientalism.<sup>20</sup>

Said focuses largely on Europe in *Orientalism* and his turn late in the book to US Orientalism situates that discourse in the context of twentieth century American power. And while he suggests that the cultural capital of European Orientalism continued to exercise authority in the US, he does remark that the American version is essentially a social science (Said 290). This observation bears out in the colonization of the Philippines as a policy of societal transformation through education. And as I argue, the supposition that American democracy is inherently compatible across the world is part of the ideology of American international intervention. But what Said does not stress is that this specifically American strain of imperialist ideology implicitly critiques European hegemony in favor of a universalized Americanness.

Cynthia Stamy characterizes Moore's Orientalism as a subversive Orientalism precisely because Moore's use of China suggests its value as "form of critique of resident institutions, prominent persons, or the contemporary state of affairs" (Stamy 16). And contrary to Said, Stamy describes an American Orientalism that opposes

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<sup>20</sup> Writing in the early 1950s, Niebuhr critiques a Jeffersonian vision of American "innocency" as a form of nationalism, not a truth, while also condemning a similar innocence in communist ideology, that without property justice would prevail.

European hegemony which emerges from Transcendentalism. Part of her argument is that Moore belatedly practices a Transcendentalist version of Orientalism.<sup>21</sup> Stamy cites from Emerson's 1844 journal in which he characterizes "men of talent" as "conversant with surfaces" which characterizes "Paris & the western European," while "other men abide by the perception of Identity; these are the Orientals, the philosophers, the men of faith & divinity, the men of genius" (qtd in Stamy 13). That an intuition of truth is lost in western culture but definitive of the East suggests that the Transcendentalist project of locating divinity not in orthodoxy but in private experience is ultimately in sympathy with a kind of Orientalism. To Emerson the Orient provides a spiritual counterpoint to European materialism and America's destiny is to negotiate these two precedents.

This Orientalist strain in Emerson's work prefigures the sense of spiritual impoverishment that contextualizes Moore's turn to moral poetry in the 1940s, and therefore Moore's diverted focus on the self can be seen in two contexts, that objects and the other provide spiritual estrangement from a disenchanted world, and relatedly that Eastern culture is a proper supplement for Western worldliness. Stamy argues that much of Moore's method has an Oriental influence. Her syllabics form "a link with the Chinese language, in which each character (or word, in Classical Chinese) is a single syllable, and verse is composed according to number of characters per line" (Stamy 114). Also, Moore's tendency to span disparate elements without explicit connection shows that she draws not so much from haiku, as imagism does, but rather from the

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<sup>21</sup> Stamy points out that Moore "always skirted contemporary [Chinese] history and politics" which was characterized by "social and political turmoil" (11). That Moore seems unconcerned with China in anything but a cultural context is typical of Orientalism, but that she is otherwise concerned with questions of the ethical relation of nations suggests a pointed non-engagement with anything but an ancient China. Also, Moore doesn't engage in the social science aspect of how the Orient should be managed in international relations which suggests that her interests are atavistically nineteenth century, as opposed to aligned with America's power in the twentieth century.

Chinese *fu* style of poetry. According to David Hawkes, the etymology of “*fu* comes closest to the English word ‘enumerate’” (qtd in Stamy 90). And this cataloging tendency is meant to “explore the reciprocity between man and the natural world and deduce from observations of this interaction an abstract notion or eternal verity” (Stamy 91). In other words, Moore’s treatment of animals is an adaptation of the *fu* style.

If the *fu* practice accords with Moore’s work, that her work ascends to an abstract “verity” also has an Oriental valence: Daoism. While Confucianism is typically taken to have been the most influential Chinese philosophy for modernism, Zhaoming Qian argues that Moore’s aesthetic draws from Daoist sources, and even though in 1938 Moore closely read Arthur Waley’s translation of *The Analects of Confucius*, she would have been influenced by a “Daoist aesthetic [which] saturates even works of art with strong Confucian ideas” (Qian 64). Specifically, Qian argues that modernists would have found an affinity for elements of Daoist aesthetics such as “observing things in terms of things,” “forgetting the self” (Shao Yong qtd in Qian 69), along with favoring “spirit over physical likeness, intuition over logic.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, Daoist aesthetics would provide a philosophical justification for an antirepresentational poetics, in line with Moore’s work.

Qian’s argument is not, however, that Moore’s aesthetic is derived from Daoism. Instead, his point is more measured. Her encounter with Asian art proves influential because she is already predisposed to privileging the object. Indeed, Qian reads “her biology lab work at Bryn Mawr” as what “foreshadows the start of her career as an

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<sup>22</sup> Shao Yong is a Daoist thinker who lived from 1011-1077. Qian quotes from the text “On the Observation of Things” (*Guan wu pian*). Qian goes on to explain that the method for attaining the Daoist aesthetic is to forget the self and “give free play to other creatures” (Qian 242, n. 18).

objectivist” (70).<sup>23</sup> Like Qian, Kenneth Burke sees Moore as objectivist, but in contrast to symbolist and imagist (Burke 486). In fact, Burke qualifies Moore’s objectivism as bearing a form of symbolism, in which the selection of objects reveals “a concern not merely for the withinness of motives, but for the withinness-of-withinness of motives, the motives behind motives” (487). The idiosyncrasy of Moore’s range of references suggests that at some displaced level, what Moore mentions is ultimately determined by her intention.

Moore herself comments on the apparently personal basis of work that has the exactitude of a quasi-scientific poetry in “Humility, Concentration, and Gusto” (1951). The three terms of the essay’s title each explicates a quality of Moore’s own verse, with humility corresponding to the kind of restraint remarkable in her treatment of animals and objects.<sup>24</sup> Concentration describes the succinctness that Stamy sees as part of Moore’s adaptation of Chinese ideographs; and Moore acknowledges that concentration “may feel to itself crystal clear, yet be through its very compression the opposite” (Moore 422). So while the effect of humility and concentration might be obscurity, both are essentially impersonal, in fact they might both be said to exclude personality.

Moore introduces “gusto” as a kind of mistake. Citing a cute verse by Edward Lear, she notes that he goes from “Pig” to “Piggy” in order “to fit the rhythm” but then the

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<sup>23</sup> As Qian points out, Moore retroactively affirms a strong affinity to Daoism in her work. Upon reading Mai-mai Sze’s *The Tao of Painting* (1956), Moore resurrected a 1909 poem she’d revise into “O to Be a Dragon” (1959), thus suggesting at least a pseudo-Daoist thread throughout her entire career.

<sup>24</sup> Moore does not claim that the essay explains her poetics, but rather that humility, concentration and gusto are “Three foremost aids to persuasion” (Moore 420). Interestingly, Moore opens the paragraph in seeming reference to the Cold War, citing Commander Stephen King-Hall’s comment “the object of war is to persuade the enemy to change his mind” as pertinent to “times like these” (qtd in Moore 420). In other words, persuasion is taken as Moore’s topic in its broader importance to the necessity of changing hearts and minds to win wars.

odd emphasis nonetheless is “a virtue as contributing gusto” (423). Emphasis along with a sense of the writer behind the lines contribute to the effect of gusto; and it can be described as Bonnie Costello does, as “the feeling of pleasure accompanying bafflement” (qtd in Kahan 523). Benjamin Kahan goes so far as to argue that gusto is part of the effect of Moore’s poetry, specifically in the tension between explicitness and obscuration. Kahan interprets Moore’s frequent professions of wanting to be clear with her persistent indirectness as enacting a kind of queer textual erotics. Rather than see Moore as aiming at eventual clarity and thus resolving a problematic equivocality, Kahan proposes that Moore does not seek a teleological outcome. Instead, the combination of exactness with unclarity just is. Kahan goes on to argue that the difficulty that this approach to writing creates has its own pleasure. The mode of pleasure in Moore’s poetry could be read as queer, since as with Villa, her texts tend both to criticize heterosexual love, famously in “Marriage” (1923), and to locate desire in alternative practices. But Kahan argues that rather than read Moore’s work as being homoerotic, it more properly should be regarded as having a specifically celibate mode of desire. Kahan writes: “celibacy can be read as accommodating multiple identities. This multiplicity often takes the form of socially objectionable desires - pedophilia, impotence, masturbation, and especially homosexuality” (515-6). But then celibacy is not a code for some other sexuality, and Kahan does not understand celibacy as a form of self-censorship. Indeed, Kahan refers to Foucault’s famous repressive hypothesis, that we are enjoined to speak about sex as the truth of our being, and offers celibacy as a refusal of the form of power practiced through sexual hermeneutics.

If power is conventionally thought to impose itself upon an otherwise free person, Foucault proposes a radical reversal: the very notion of individual freedom is itself a construct of power.<sup>25</sup> Foucault addresses the apparent deadlock of his account of power by proposing that rather than see the self as an identity, the self should be thought of as self-fashioning, as something that progresses through a set of practices, which he calls the “care of the self.” Ethics therefore comes to the forefront of Foucault’s thought since the task to confront in opposing power is actually the problem of which practices of the self enable which types of truth.

Focusing on Foucault’s study of Hellenistic culture, Edward F. McGushin describes the practice of the self as a process of self-directed criticism. In Greek thought, the “self inherently tends toward error” (McGushin 106). But this natural state is not the true self. Instead, through “care one is able to achieve the truth of oneself, to become who one truly is, by rejecting what one has made oneself into.” McGushin situates Foucault’s turn toward this model of self-correction as indicating something of a break in Foucault’s thought. Whereas he might initially be seen as a kind of theoretical archaeologist, whose role is to “study the space in which thought deploys itself, as well as the conditions of this thought, its mode of constitution” to use Foucault’s own words (qtd in McGushin xvi), McGushin sees his turn toward care of the self as “etho-poetic,” as concerned primarily with opening up to new thought. Moreover, while Foucault’s

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<sup>25</sup> Perhaps Foucault’s most famous example is the discourse of sexuality and while it is well known, it is difficult to summarize. Foucault begins by noting that sexuality is “elusive by nature” (Foucault I: 66). And the basic intimacy of sex is taken up by Christian confession as a problem of hiddenness which must become explicit. And while confession has the effect of problematizing sex and suggesting that a discourse of sexuality has an instructive purpose, it is the rise of science and medicine in the nineteenth century that Foucault sees as pursuing a more aggressive form of normalization. As a result, sexuality “was no longer accounted for simply by the notions of error or sin, excess or transgression, but was placed under the rule of the normal and the pathological” (67).

project of diagnosis is typically seen as at odds with someone like Heidegger, McGushin remarks that Foucault's etho-poetic turn might be more similar to Heidegger's concerns (xvi).

Foucault himself characterizes his turn toward thought that is directed away from explanation and toward the unforeseen as an "‘ascesis,’ *askēsis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought" (Foucault II 9). In part, it's through the concept of askesis that Foucault justifies turning toward a context far removed from the contemporary in his inquiry into sexuality.<sup>26</sup> The very process of undertaking this research has the purpose of being a work that is self-critical, that seeks change "through the practice of a knowledge that is foreign to it." Foucault's thought then, comes to emphasize a mode of critique we have been tracing throughout the chapter, a sense that the relationship of the self to the other creates the possibility for a relationship to truth, whether in Heidegger's metaphysics, the immanence of divinity in Niebuhr, or in subversive Orientalism.

For the all Marianne Moore issue of *Quarterly Review of Literature*, Villa published two of Moore's poems, one of which appeared under the journal's masthead in its opening pages. This poem, "By Disposition of Angels" has a thematic similarity to Villa's leopard poem in focusing on the singularity of the other-than-human.

Messengers much like ourselves? Explain it.

Steadfastness the darkness makes explicit?

Something heard most clearly when not near it?

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<sup>26</sup> Foucault consistently points out that the Greek context of *History of Sexuality Volume 2* cannot be easily transposed into the contemporary moment. On one hand he writes that the Greek "arts of existence" which the book examines are of "unquestionable importance in our societies" but also that their assimilation into Christianity altered a great deal (10-11).

Above particularities,  
 These unparticularities praise cannot violate.

One has seen, in such steadiness never deflected,  
 How by darkness a star is perfected. (1-7)

The abruptness of the first line perhaps recalls Moore's concentration, and indirectly might suggest her adaptation of a Chinese idiom, but in terms of interpretation, it seems mostly likely that "messengers" refers to the angels in the title. That Moore demands explanation and explicitness when dealing with angels might seem at first skeptical, but as the second half of the stanza shows, such questions show that angels are above particularities, and should be left in their indistinctness. The poem can be read as a kind of askesis precisely because it eschews description for the virtues of steadiness and the unknown.

We might recall that the first lines of the first poem in *Have Come, Am Here* invokes the unsaid and that what is unsayable is to Villa the ultimate content of all his verse, the "great word without sound" that is "what I never said" (10, 1). Moore ends "By Disposition of Angels" similarly with the sense that apart from language, there is a depth of meaning.

Star that does not ask me if I see it?

Fir that would not wish me to uproot it?

Speech that does not ask me if I hear it?

Mysteries expound mysteries.

Steadier than steady, star dazzling me, live and elate,

No need to say, how like some we have known; too like her,

Too like him, and a-quiver forever. (8-14)

Read with the first stanza, Moore transitions from stars to concrete objects, which then take on the significance of the star that perfects itself in darkness, and we can read the resistance of the thingly quality of things in the indifference of star, fir and speech to an observer. Moore's gnomic comment, which might here serve as the poem's moral is that "mysteries expound mysteries," and phrased as an observation, this comment might well be read as a condensed summary of what both Moore and Villa's poetry seeks to treat as subject matter.

This chapter has shown that the aesthetic formalism of Villa and Moore pursues formal innovation as estrangement in order to challenge a culture of materialism with spiritual otherness. Religion allows Moore and Villa to use their specific identities as non-male and non-white (respectively) as a foundation for a relationship to truth and self-transcendence that can be deeply critical of political injustice, while engaging injustice at the level of ethics, which as Foucault describes it, is "a form of relation to the self that enables an individual to fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct" (Foucault II 251). It's the encounter of the self with other that the poems stage which put forth a more just relationship of self-questioning and openness.

Poetry like Moore's, that depends on nonrational, apparently fanciful connections, has been vulnerable to complaints of randomness. In fact, David Hsin-Fu Wand's 1971 essay, which cites only sparingly from Moore scholarship, quotes A. Kingsley Weatherhead's unsympathetic assessment that Moore's work shows "fanciful items [...] that the poet had not initially intended," that the poem's details get the better of the poet (qtd in Wand 472). But Wand points out that Moore's technique is similar to

“the *fu* subgenre of Chinese literature” (473); and that ultimately Moore’s poems’ span of reference and style makes two mythic animals, the dragon and the kylin, apt symbols for her work at large.

Miss Moore has, through her assimilation of the Vital Spirit of the mythical Chinese beasts, managed to soar like the dragon and glide like the kylin from poem to poem. [...] In inhaling the *ch’i* (breath or vital spirit) of the dragon and the kylin, Miss Moore has miraculously transported the essence of Cathay, or classical China, to the soil of American poetry.

(482)

Wand seems to suggest that Moore’s straying afield of herself puts her in mythic connection to “the essence of Cathay” but this claim decisively dates Wand. After all, “Cathay” as a cultural construct of a past China, mediated by scholarship, which nonetheless expresses the truth of China, its essence, is exactly what Said’s *Orientalism* so influentially objected to. At points through his essay, Wand finds it expedient to invoke his authority on China, not explicitly, but in assertions of what might “astonish any Chinese” (475).<sup>27</sup> Beneath Wand’s claim that Moore’s work is somehow essentially Chinese is the sense that he can make this assertion on the basis of his own Chineseness.

Wand wrote poetry as David Rafael Wang, and under this alter-ego he positioned himself in the 1970s as an Asian American poet, acknowledging as an influence Amiri Baraka, among others. And in an essay from 1965, “American Sexual Reference: Black

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<sup>27</sup> Admittedly, these assertions are rare, occurring in what I cite above and also on p. 471. However this rhetorical strategy is so unorthodox in the context of Asian American studies that these few moments of willingly portraying himself as a native informant is striking enough to deserve comment.

Male,” Baraka argues that what makes “[m]ost American white men [...] trained to be fags” is their alienation from the real (Baraka 243). In contrast, “the black man is more ‘natural’ than the white simply because he has fewer *things* between him and reality” (249). Baraka’s argument shows a decisive shift compared to the abstraction which was important to Moore and Villa’s poetics, in which abstraction is suspicious and rootedness, as solid as race itself, should be what culture aims at. Baraka writes that while Western white art has critiqued the “unfeeling materialism and murderous assertions of self-sufficiency” it is nonetheless “the concentrate of this culture” (246). The artist is then an “extremist” of his “society’s tendencies.” Baraka then asserts “the most extreme form of alienation acknowledged within white society is homosexuality. The long abiding characterization of the Western artist as usually ‘queer’ does not seem out of place” (246-7). Homosexuality itself becomes a symptom of the nonreality of Western culture, which isolates itself from the physical by exploiting nonwhites. Opposing racism entails first affirming contact with reality, but in poetry, this contact despite what Baraka asserts, can only be mediated. Thus, in the third chapter, I read Baraka’s violent poetry with Wang’s surprisingly homoerotic verse and argue that what the poetics of cultural nationalism ultimately depends on, is an immediacy that adapts a version of the Whitmanian lyric.

### Chapter 3

#### **Pain, Sex and the Reality of Ethnic Nationalism: Amiri Baraka and David Rafael Wang\***

In the first half of this dissertation, I argued that work that seemed unconcerned with establishing an oppositional ethnic identity nonetheless worked to oppose racism, and that this opposition wouldn't be obvious to us because the kind of interventions poets like Hartmann and Villa attempted were directed at what they saw as preceding politics: cultural meaning. My supposition was that the idea that race logically precedes culture--that it's an identity that exists prior to a cultural work and thus determines it--is a later historical creation. In a very schematic outline of history, the origin of that idea, the privileging of racial identity, would seem to emerge at a specific point: the ethnic nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. This chapter examines that period and indeed, I read poetry from that period as affirming the creation of racial identity as the paradigmatic marker of individuality, or to use the phrasing of the period, "consciousness raising," which after all implies the basic nature of identity since it resides in the consciousness. But then even this notion of consciousness raising has a history. As James Smethurst points out in his history of the Black Arts Movement, the "long foreground" of the Black Arts Movement is actually rooted in two Communist political theories, the first directed at a "folk-based avant-garde" and the second premised on a "popular avant-garde" (Smethurst 23-24). Given that these two

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approaches to culture are Communist, emerging out of Communist party congresses, their ultimate aim was more the production of Communist ideology, than something like, say, the paradoxical infinitude of human interiority. Turning to Asian American literature, William Wei similarly sees a Communist approach to art as definitive, citing the influential status of Mao Tse-Tung's "Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art" (Wei 64). Thus we'd expect that the poetry of ethnic nationalism would be one of political certainty, a social poetry free of a vexed, individual consciousness. But the texts themselves belie such a conclusion.

Instead, what we observe is a poetry that doesn't assume the seamless connection of individuals with a political program, but treats them both: on one hand attempting to advocate for an understanding of identity as conflictual, specifically of racial oppression as an unbridgeable division in US society, and second attempting to see in cultural difference a broader, modernist impulse--the desire to regenerate society through an art vivified not by a degenerate false consciousness but the truth of actual experience. This doubled character of ethnic nationalist verse is confirmed by chance by the two figures I examine in this chapter, each of whom had doubled existences corresponding to a devotion to politics or a devotion to art: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and the less well known David Rafael Wang/David Hsin-Fu Wand.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Referring to the writing of these writers who produced work under both names raises a question of consistent reference. In what follows I will refer to writing produced under a given name as though it were the work of an author with that name. So for example, when Wand writes an essay with descriptions of Wang's work, I phrase it as though Wand described Wang, though it is the same person.

## **Pain in the Black Arts Poetry of Amiri Baraka**

What does the exclamation point at the end of the title of Amiri Baraka's poem "Black People!" mean? Is it the mark of address, as though to continue Baraka's poem "SOS" which has as its purpose the "calling [of] all Black people" (2); or is it just to show simple excitement, as though the poem's call to take whatever you want is itself exciting? In fact, these two possible readings are at odds with each other and reflect a larger incoherence in the poem. Toward the end of the poem Baraka writes: "We must make our own world, man, our own world" and then again similarly "let's make a world we want black children to grow and learn in." These appeals to black nationalism, which the first quote implies will be a nation different from the US and which the second quote clarifies is nation that is ideal and perhaps utopian, and which suggests the political goal of his earlier hailing of black people in "SOS," ultimately has no logical connection to the more lurid but libidinally exciting appeal to take not only "those stoves and refrigerators, record players in Sears, Bambergers, Klein's, Hahnes', Chase and the smaller joosh enterprises" but also to "take what you want" up to and including "their lives."

The fact that these two appeals, one to an ideal to be realized through the political aim of the poem, the other an appeal to the pleasure of giving in to desire, the desire of commodity capitalism, doesn't have a logical, necessary connection suggests the eclipse of logic in what is essentially a provocation for war. War, in Elaine Scarry's analysis, is fundamentally the act of injury, but as she points out, injuring persistently falls out of view in the discourse of war, especially in its particular illogic. Scarry points

out that the “rules of war are [...] arbitrary” like any contest, and no political, geographical or social outcome is necessarily guaranteed just by the mere fact of war (Scarry 62). But then war is more effective than some other type of contest because “the legitimacy of the outcome outlives the end of the contest”--Scarry imagines that after a conflict decided by chess game the method of this decision will necessarily seem trivial and unconvincing. In contrast, with war,

so many of its participants are frozen in a permanent act of participation: that is, the winning issue or ideology achieves for a time the force and status of material “fact” by the sheer material weight of the multitudes of damaged and open human bodies. (Scarry 62)

Thus, at least Baraka’s appeal to take white lives isn’t just consistent with his vision of a black utopia to come, but part of the means by which that political hope could be realized. Scarry emphasizes materiality, as though to suggest that the arbitrary decision that war authorizes comes to seem nonarbitrary in its connection, which again isn’t a logical connection, to a material object, the body. Scarry thus suggests another reading of Baraka’s appeals to take the latest consumer electronics, not just to fulfill a capitalist commodity fetish, but to materialize and challenge the arbitrariness of conventional ownership. In fact, it’s through ownership that murdering whites enters the poem, after all, “their lives” are just another example of the “shit you want” (Baraka line #?).

Scarry suggests that war’s overall function is to connect an immaterial ideology to the materiality of bodies; this sort of connection also occurs in the poem. Baraka’s meditation on money, “money dont grow on trees no way, only whitey’s got it, makes it with a machine, to control you” leads into “you cant steal nothin from a white man, he’s

already stole it he owes you anything you want, even his life” (Baraka 225). Thus something abstract, control, takes on first the character of money, which seems to embody control, in that “only whitey’s got it;” by bypassing money, looting turns into a rejection of white control--obviously not because racial oppression really is a matter of property relations mediated by money, but through a symbolism that is enforced violently.

Baraka’s equation of white lives with objects is perhaps where the poem is at its most violent, and it’s hard to think through what the logical implications are for a moment that eschews logic this starkly. Furthermore, the poem’s call to black people to get things seems at odds with Baraka’s more insisted upon theme in the volume *Black Art*, the collection “Black People!” concludes: the transcendent, spiritual nature of black identity. In fact, 26 pages earlier, far from advocating murder the similarly titled “Black People: This Is Our Destiny” is almost wholly not about objects; as “destiny” suggests in the title, this poem is about the world to come that the end of “Black People!” invokes.

Interestingly, “Black People: This Is Our Destiny” begins with an image not of division and exclusion, but of inclusion. In fact, the poem begins not just with an image of inclusion, but a form that uses comma splices and repetition to itself seem inclusive.

The road runs straight with no turning, the circle  
 runs complete as it is in the storm of peace, the all  
 embraced embracing in the circle complete turning road  
 straight like a burning straight with the circle complete (1-4).

Read with “destiny” in the title, the first line seems to establish the inexorable quality of what Baraka images the black future to be, a road with no turns; but then this first line’s

enjambment, pointedly against syntax, includes a circle. Intuitively, if the poem is about destiny, a road makes more sense than a circle, the kind of sense that a line like “race is only direction up” affirms (7). But if the circle seems like a less intuitive image, it at least suggests how the teleology of the black race is also present at its origin--making it explicit that destiny embodies both a sense of immanence and transcendence. Race might be directional, but it is also “where / we go to meet the realization of makers knowing who we are” (7-8). By the end of the poem, this destined circularity turns oddly inclusive.

[...] vibration holy nuance beating against  
 itself, a rhythm a playing re-understood now by one of the 1st race  
 the primitives the first men who evolve again to civilize the  
 world (17-20).

The “1st race / the primitives” suggests Baraka’s sense of origin and evolving again suggests culmination, but what is regenerated isn’t just the first men, but the world--put under emphasis by being placed alone at the poem’s end.

Does “world” here include whites? Based strictly on “Black People: This Is Our Destiny” I argue that it does. The massive completeness this poem equates with God includes “the endlessness of all existing feeling, all / existing forms of life” (12-13). “Existing” emphasizes an immediate presence; in fact, with an almost Whitmanian logic, immediacy contributes the sense of the infinite that makes Baraka’s notion of

completeness seem metaphysical.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, by definition, “all existing forms of life” would have to include the existing, present life of whites.

But then such logic doesn’t necessarily mean that Baraka intends to include whites in the destiny of black people. “Black People!” asserts that whites have to die in order to create the black world to come:

We must make our own

World, man, our own world, and we can not do this unless the white man  
is dead (19-21)

Baraka doesn’t really mount an argument here; he only suggests that the world that we must make our own has to be a world “we want black children to grow in,” which already means that that world is defined by race (22).

Why must we make our own “World?” In “Black People!” the answer seems to be that white control amounts to a kind of theft. Although Baraka states “you cant steal nothin from a white man, he’s already stole it he owes / you anything you want, even his life,” when we ask what exactly the white man has stolen from “you”--the exhorted black people of the title--the answer would be everything, since there is nothing that you can’t be in the wrong for taking back (8-9). Thus the poem suggests that in not the world to come but the current world of the poem, black people are totally victimized by white theft. This implied thesis makes it clear why white people must be reduced to objects whose very lives can be stolen with the same logic as commodities. If the white person

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<sup>3</sup> In the next chapter I make the argument that Whitman’s metaphysical appeal in the paratactic lists he favors in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* operates with a similar logic. By juxtaposing a potentially infinite series of specific items, Whitman attempts to material a sense of the infinite itself.

has stolen everything from blacks, then when black people steal it back, there is nothing left to a white person.

“Black People!” seems to make white people into first objects and then nothing. But strangely this position of nothingness is neither nonexistent nor irrelevant; after all, it must actively be excluded in the new “World” Baraka envisions. The poem thus attempts to define white subjectivity as a kind of pseudo-Hegelian negativity. In so doing Baraka inverts what Frantz Fanon describes as the ontology of blackness in the “Fact of Blackness” chapter of *Black Skins, White Masks* (1967), making Fanon’s comments on black racialization apt for Baraka’s poetic racialization of whites in this poem.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, Fanon too imagines an all black, non-divided subjectivity, though not in the post-revolutionary future as in “Black People!”

Instead, Fanon imagines a pre-colonial society, which sounds oddly impoverished in that such a situation presents “no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience [...] being through others” (Fanon 109). Fanon then mentions Hegelian “being for others” before writing that “every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society.” The Hegelian “being for others” that Fanon invokes, then passes over, describes the moment when pure being goes from a state of existence to reflexiveness; an “I=I” that introduces the crucial self-difference between a metaphysical totality, and awareness of that totality, with awareness paradoxically suggesting a distance from that totality. Thus, Fanon begins to imagine a Hegelian ontology for the colonized, which after all would reiterate a colonial discourse of

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<sup>4</sup> Fanon actually describes the impossibility of a black ontology, but his discussion on ontology suggests a perspective that does ask metaphysical questions about basic assumptions and might therefore be loosely called an “ontology,” despite Fanon’s discomfort with adapting this term.

civilizing, since colonization would have as a positive effect the sublation of primitive wholeness for “being for others.” Notably, Fanon doesn’t even finish this line of thought and simply abandons “every” ontology, claiming that for the colonized “there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation” (110). This impurity is actually the impossibility of an in-itself blackness, a blackness not aware of its differentiation; according to Fanon “not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.” Thus the untenability of a black ontology results not from a lack of “being for others” but from a lack of an original moment of metaphysical wholeness.

Hegel begins *Phenomenology of Spirit* not with self consciousness, but sense certainty; Fanon describes the “implicit knowledge” of what his body does when he wants to smoke in slow, phenomenological detail (111). This unselfconscious sequence of thought affirms the self as body, in a form of sense certainty. But then the self-body connection of established in smoking is “assailed at various points”—that is, in racist encounters that single out Fanon’s blackness, such that “the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema” (112). Fanon’s adjectives replace body with skin, both of which seem physical and thus at the level of sense certainty. But as Fanon makes clear two paragraphs later, this substitution is a reduction--the substitution of physical presence into object. Race is not an attribute of sensation, but rather “an amputation, an excision” that places blackness into a negativity, a negation of the general category of “man among other men.”

An object that has the effect of negativity--that renders presence into an object according to Fanon--seems paradoxical because objects tend to connote not negation

and absence but existence.<sup>5</sup> But then the way that Fanon describes race, as “an amputation, an excision” renders race into a wound, thereby suggesting one negativity that is immediate, pain. Pain is the overall subject of Scarry’s text which I used above to describe war, and her description of pain suggests how the negative object of race, blackness in Fanon’s genealogy and whiteness in Baraka’s prophecy, is finally necessary for the transcendent moment in both Fanon and Baraka’s notion of revolution.

Fanon was not a cultural nationalist and though Baraka name-drops Fanon, he doesn’t share Fanon’s conception of blackness, as Darieck Scott points out. According to Scott “for Black Power writers and activists, blackness describes a social and economic condition, a vibrant culture to be endorsed on its own terms, an essence and a kind of telos,” as we see in Baraka’s “Black People: This Is Our Destiny” (Scott 35). For Fanon, “blackness [is] a strategic instrument in a contest for political supremacy.” But despite these differences, it’s notable that in either Baraka or Fanon, blackness is to some extent disavowed, either in favor of a purer form or a revolutionary transcendence. There is something finally counterfactual about blackness, perhaps best called imaginary in that within blackness there is some trait that surpasses or differentiates itself from the known quality of blackness.

Scarry claims, in a strikingly totalizing statement, that pain and imagining “are the ‘framing events’ within whose boundaries all other perceptual, somatic, and emotion events occur” (Scarry 165). Feeling pain and imagining can be thought of as in these

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<sup>5</sup> Fanon writes: “On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object” (112). Thus what Fanon describes as the substitution of body for skin results in the objectification of the self, the subject, as entirely determined by the skin.

terms on the basis of what Scarry calls “intentional state” and “intentional object,” but which might simply be called sensation and object. Pain is objectless, but is a state of sensation; similarly imagination has an object but that object isn’t able to be sensed-- Scarry points out that if one imagines, one must imagine some thing. And if all other perceptual, somatic or emotional events carry some form of feeling state and object, then it becomes clear why pain and imagining would frame these other categories of experience. As an example Scarry contrasts touching wheat to looking out at it (165). In touch one feels not only the object, the wheat, but also oneself feeling it; thus touch makes us aware not only of the object but of our own body. And since it makes us aware of the body itself, touch has a proximity to pain. In contrast, in seeing wheat one’s eyes don’t tend to have “any self-conscious state of feeling;” one has more of an awareness of the object of sense than the sensation of sensing (165).

But Scarry’s point isn’t just that pain and imagining are opposites and that senses partake more of the qualities of pain or more of the qualities of imagining. Instead she proposes an intimacy inherent to pain and imagining. Taking as an example something like “dying of thirst and ‘seeing’ water on the next sand dune,” Scarry suggests imagining is not just the neutral calling to mind of what doesn’t exist (168). Instead imagining that answers pain externalizes an otherwise incommunicable internal state. “The more exactly the object of desire or hunger or fear fits or expresses the state, the more precise a projection of the state it is, the more will it seem to have been generated by the interior state itself and will be considered a visionary solution,” Scarry remarks (168). Interestingly, what constitutes “a visionary solution” is the extent to which an object can be imagined that seems to function as the object of a state of sensation

without an inherent object. Here the capacity for imagination to call forth objects that “are not *passively* available as an already existing ‘given’” enables the sensation of personhood itself to transcend an uncommunicable state of pure experience via symbolic objectification (167).

In assessing Baraka’s poems in *Black Art*, Jerry Gafio Watts describes them as “formulaic harangues against whites and whiteness and celebratory invocations of parochial blackness” which are nonetheless “the best poems that Baraka wrote as a black cultural nationalist” (Watts 234). His harangues against whites include in its formula violence, even genocide, as in “Attention Attention,” a poem that like “SOS” calls black people together, only now with the added proclamation that “All greys must be terminated immediately / End of species must be assured” (Baraka 15-16). Watts emphasizes the essentially pathetic character of these “infantile and overblown condemnation[s] of whites” in that the totality of Baraka’s pronouncements suggest more the perverse desire of having victimization acknowledged, and thus “undermines the credibility of the juxtaposition of praise that [Baraka] lavishes on blacks” (Watts 232).

Watts’ argument is attractive because it helps us to accept that the poems in *Black Art* are good, while enabling us to condemn Baraka’s advocacy of genocide and murder--an advocacy we obviously shouldn’t support. But that attractiveness blinds us to an underlying dynamic in what Watts characterizes as a juxtaposition between violence against whites and praise for blacks, or something like the equating of murdering whites to getting objects you want in “Black People!” against the affirming, metaphysically complete vision of a black utopia to come in “Black People: This Is Our Destiny.” The unfulfilled quality of Baraka’s vision in “Black People: This Is Our Destiny”

suggests Scarry's characterization of visionary imagination above. What makes the poem not just a fatuous imagining of something that doesn't exist is the poignancy of the desire that it should exist. In fact, the poem hinges on a line that specifically invokes war: "the war in our hearts [is] but the purity of the holy world / that we long for" (9-10). War here is not the violent, genocidal death of whites, or at least it is not overtly and exclusively that. Instead, its direction is not toward injuring, what Scarry points out is the real aim of war, but to an ideological justification of war, a pure world. And for that reason we can see the same desire that animates "Attention Attention" and "Black People!" in its relation to Baraka's positive, hopeful vision. As in war, pain and injuring--even the figure of genocide--gives Baraka the means with which to tie the imagined construct of his just world to come, to materiality--in fact to something that is the closest experience of pure materiality, not the sensation of objects, but sensation itself: pain.

Finally, we might address one last incoherence relating to the poem "Black People!" not an ambiguity related to its content, but one of intent. Werner Sollors characterizes the poem as "perhaps the most extreme example of Baraka's 'pragmatic' and functional poetry" before quoting it in full (199). Sollors then gives a brief account of Baraka's appearance in court on July 14, 1967, quoting Judge Leon Kapp, passing judgment on an allegation that Baraka had "illegal possession of firearms." Kapp states that "Proof of a person's intentions may be inferred from all that he did or said" and then reads "Black People!" (201). Baraka's response is also cited: "I'm being sentenced for the poem. Is that what you're saying?" On one hand, Judge Kapp's reading of the poem, as the actual expression of what Baraka thinks people should do seems to be the more courageous reading, one that suggests a total commitment of artistic work to

political act. That Sollors characterizes the poem as “pragmatic” and “functional” almost provides a winking insinuation that this poem which is barely a poem, really is an exhortation. Baraka’s ultimate acquittal on the grounds of the poem’s cultural status as poem comes to then seem like a cop out.

Baraka wrote in “Black Art,” his “most widely quoted statement of the new Black Arts sensibility” according to Watts, that “poems are bullshit” (Watts 175). And to see Baraka as ultimately disavowing one of his “Poems that shoot / guns” (Baraka 20-21)--such as “Black People!”--suggests that Baraka’s poems of black revolution really might be “nothing more than mere thuggery superimposed on hurt black feelings, impotence, and defeat,” which is the description Watts gives to “Black Art” (Watts 177). But then what Baraka’s response to Kapp and Watts’ characterization of “Black Art” really have at stake is the widely acknowledged “Mao at Yen’an” aesthetic--that “literature and art are subordinate to politics” (Mao).

Sollors mentions in passing that Baraka’s appearance before Judge Kapp occurs during the Newark “riots” but he doesn’t emphasize what Komozi Woodard does, that the Newark Uprising resulted from increasingly violent encounters between police and the black community. In fact, Baraka himself was beaten:

We were told to come out of the camper bus. When I opened the door and stepped down, one detective...preached to me, screaming that we were the “black bastards” who’d been shooting at him. I said that we hadn’t been shooting at anyone....whereupon he hit me in the face and threw me against the side of the camper. The detective then began to jab me as hard as he could with his pistol in my stomach, asking, “Where are

the guns?" I told him that there were no guns. Suddenly it seemed that five or six officers surrounded me and began to beat me. I was hit perhaps five times on top of my head by nightsticks, and when I fell, some of the officers went about methodically trying to break my hands, elbows and shoulders. One officer tried to kick me in the groin and there were many punches thrown. As they beat me they kept calling me "animal" and asking me, "Where are the guns?" (qtd in Woodard 81)

Baraka repeatedly notes that the beating occurs simultaneously with questions, using the gerund form so that as "he began to jab" Baraka, he also was "asking, 'Where are the guns?'" What occurs isn't just a violence that is purely physical. The verbal act, the question, actually "consists of two parts," the question itself and the answer (Scarry 35). According to Scarry, the question appears as the motive for the beating, "providing [the police] with a justification" and thus absolving him of responsibility; while the answer, which the one being beaten is supposed to give, is meant to discredit the victim, "making him rather than the torturer, his voice rather than his pain, the cause of his loss of self and world" (35). That last phrase, "loss of self and world," is Scarry's description of the effect of pain, but it's strikingly present in Baraka's account of being beaten too. "They were beating me to death....I was being murdered and I knew it" (Baraka qtd in Woodard 81). That Baraka specifically "knew it" interestingly suggests his awareness of a state that should be negative, the loss of life; and thus a kind of doubleness: "what the process of torture does is to split the human being into two, to make emphatic the [...] distinction between a self and a body" (Scarry 48).

Scarry notes that through one's "ability to project words and sounds out into [the] environment, a human being inhabits, humanizes, and makes his own a space much larger than that occupied by his body alone" (49). Scarry's language suggests that she intends this basic aspect of speech to be a general impulse. Then she observes "This space, always contracted under repressive regimes, is in torture almost wholly eliminated" (49). Scarry doesn't argue it, but her suggestion is that in being what repression attempts to limit, the capacity to imaginatively extend one's subjectivity outward is a basic freedom that in some way threatens the exercise of power. After all, this faculty makes the environment itself available for at least imaginative transformation and even these imagined alterations, might well be a precursor to "a total reinvention of the world" (Scarry 171, emphasis removed).

Baraka's attempt to categorize "Black People!" as a specifically aesthetic work and not as political incitement to violence can therefore be read not as a repudiation to a radically political art. Instead, the appropriation of the imagination, and thus art, to politics is part of the violence of abusive power, as Baraka himself would have experienced in the violent appropriation of his capacity for speech against the physical reality of his body's pain. Thus, if Mao's formulation, with its implied opposition between dedication to art and dedication to a cause, has come to seem the obvious way to situate an art that is meant to also be political, as Baraka's was at this point, what Baraka's poetry actually demonstrates is that politics strives to realize itself on the reality of the individual--both in the act of torture and in Baraka's own poetic combinations of violence and language. And as counterintuitive as it might seem, even Baraka's black arts poetry has an underlying lyric, almost Whitmanian concern: the self.

## **Pornography, Race, Politics**

That Baraka tries to give a poem the immediacy of action, as in lines like “Fuck poems / and they are useful, wd they shoot / come at you” (“Black Art” 5-7), suggests that his aim isn’t to advocate violence, or so I argue. Instead, what apparently violent lines attempt is making an imagined possibility of racial liberation as real as possible, by invoking the immediacy of bodily reality through what is least amenable to mediation in either language or thought--pain.

To some readers, my use of the quote in the previous paragraph might suggest a misreading. These lines seem violent when read with a hard stop after line 6: would poems “shoot” and then, as though revising that thought, would they “come at you.” But a less vexed and simpler reading would be to just read past the enjambment: would the poem “shoot come at you.” But while this reading makes textual sense, it raises another question. Why should a poem ejaculating make it useful, especially if what we want are “poems that kill” (19)?

I want to start answering this question in a seemingly unpromising way, by considering the work of David Hsin-Fu Wand. Wand, who wrote poetry under the name David Rafael Wang, isn’t an obvious choice to read in context with Baraka, in that while Wand might have written critical works meant to promote Asian American activist poetry,

Wang's verse isn't political in the way that Baraka's seems to be.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Josephine Nock-Hee Park, who opens her third chapter in *Apparitions of Asia* with what would now probably be the most prominent consideration of Wand, reads Wand as something of a failed Asian American poet--failed in that unlike "poets of the ethnic nationalist movement" Wand was unable to align "poetry with [...] politics in the conviction that an aesthetic revolution could mean a cultural one" (Park 95, 94). Thus Park argues that Wand's division into Wand the critic and Wang the poet shows that even as "the scholar aligned himself with the Asian American movement" his poet alter-ego "belonged to an American Orientalist tradition which clung to the vestiges of the American bard," with this vestigial bardic quality connoting Orientalism, the very thing that Asian American movement poets universally opposed (94).

Park's reading of Wand/Wang is more complicated than something like the privileging of aesthetics (understood as personal) against the privileging of politics (understood as social), but that somewhat simple opposition still operates in her contention that Wand doesn't connect the aesthetic to the political, and that this lack of connection is what defines Wang's work and makes it fail. But then as I tried to show in my reading of Baraka's most stridently political poems, the abstract, unembodied nature of politics means that any naturalized politics--like an agreed-upon blanket rejection of all Orientalism--results from the appropriation of physicality, as in Baraka's use of violence, through the imagination, which is the faculty for sensing what isn't present to

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<sup>6</sup> My indirection in characterizing Baraka's Black power verse is meant to suggest my argument, which is that the apparently simple politics of this verse masks Baraka's deeper engagement with a problem of lyric subjectivity, and thus a connection to the mainline Whitmanian poetic tradition that activist ethnic poetry is usually seen as opposing. But for simplicity I refer here to the sense in commentators like Sollors and Watts that Baraka's politics are the subject of these 1960s poems, while indicating my difference from that view with the somewhat weak qualifying word "seems."

the senses, and thus is vital for politics. But also, the imagination is the traditional domain of literary art, and thus the province of aesthetics.

I don't think Park is wrong in characterizing Wand as schizophrenically divided nor even wrong in seeing that division as what consigns his verse to a kind of minor status, not quite in the mainline of Modernism, not quite in the mode of the Movement, which is actually varied and not easily summarized. Indeed, it's because Wand is so divided between the "American bard" tradition, understood I think as the assumption that a more intense engagement with the self will express broad, or even universal truths, and the triumph of political verse, which sees consciousness itself as something that can be created through literature, as in the very common rhetoric of "consciousness raising" in the ethnic nationalist movement, that Wand's work reveals tensions inherent to both of these opposed traditions and thus proposes their similarity.

Wand's work as Wang, as Park points out, isn't obvious in its support for the ethnic nationalist project. But then "The Ash-Hauler" from Wang's 1975 collection *The Intercourse* is at least an imitation of Baraka's Black Arts poetry, if not a call for pan-ethnic minority power. As in Baraka's work, Wang uses a pop culture reference, thus suggesting a populist ethos. In a more overt imitation of Baraka, Baraka is part of the "Greco-Sino-samurai-African tradition" Wang sees himself writing in, Wang contrasts a masculine, minority male against whites who are portrayed as effete.<sup>7</sup>

Superman has turned black

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<sup>7</sup> Wang's comment on Baraka comes at the end of *The Intercourse* in an author biography that faces a full page photograph of Wang fingering an arm rest and wearing what looks to be a traditional Chinese jacket with a scarf, his face with a kind of knowing sneer. To be clear, Wang writes singles out Baraka's work "as a playwright" and by omission suggests that he doesn't respect Baraka's poetry. But then Baraka's plays also increasingly, and certainly by 1975, were more about "exorcising Baraka's literary past, by ridiculing absurdist drama as an expression of white degeneracy," according to Sollors (208). Thus even citing Baraka's plays, Wang here attempts to align himself, however dubiously, with Baraka's politics.

Let him flap his biceps  
 Swoop down upon the villains  
 See how fast they turn and run  
 dropping their used powder puffs (2-6)

That the villains are white is made clear in the next stanza: “the pasty-faces are scared stiff” (7). That Superman wasn’t always black, but becomes black undermines the contrast between the pasty-faces and Superman, so much so that this second stanza replaces Superman with “a two-fisted panther,” a kind of obvious reference to the Black Panther Party (8). And yet oddly the poem actually begins with the line “Race never enters the picture,” which suggests that nothing about the opposition between Superman and villains, pasty-faces and panthers is racial.

As much as “The Ash-Hauler” imitates Baraka, it also doesn’t quite culminate in the violence that Baraka’s poems advocate. The pasty-faces that are afraid of panthers are left afraid, there is no actual violence. Instead, the panther

doesn’t need to snarl  
 to get his teeth to light up  
 in the sparkle of his sunny nature.” (9-11)

For Wang the emphasis is more on specular viewing than action and for that reason, the poem stages tableaux rather than actively trying to “shoot come at you.” Thus, while we’re tempted to see in the first line some kind of invitation to read the poem as racial, it is actually more a picture. To state that race never enters the picture makes sense because in this poem, which only consists of pictures, race is not deeply significant, but

externalized, spectacular.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, that Superman becomes black suggests blackness as a general term for non-whiteness; Bill V. Mullen points out that for both Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. DuBois blackness “was a flexible metaphor able to include not only mulattoes but Asians, Africans and Jews” (Mullen xxxv). Thus as a metaphor, Superman’s blackness, he was created by two Jews after all, is another reason why race is only external, not fundamental.

“The Ash-Hauler” concludes the first section of *The Intercourse*, what Wang titled “The Thrusts.” The other two sections, which are numbered as “acts,” are “The Insertions” and “The Withdrawal.” At this superficial level of titles, “thrusts,” which is both the first part of the book and is what sequentially precedes insertion, seems unlikely to mean the thrusting of sex. Instead, it might more plausibly be something like the subtle thrusting of erection, a kind of tightening of the hips in preparation of full arousal. If so, that “The Ash-Hauler” isn’t about depicting an act of black over white power, but rather the image of a black Superman frozen in muscular dominance over white villains who drop their make-up, means that the poem deflects its politics and its imitation of Baraka into sexuality--and not just sexuality, but a kind of perspicuous

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<sup>8</sup> The poem ends with a series of puns:

If you don’t get this, man, dig:  
Us spade cats will shovel white trash  
into the underground furnace of love. (12-14)

These last lines, somewhat like the ending couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet, break out of the poem to comment on it, but in that commentary, proposes that the poem’s point might be missed. Then, as though to assist the reader in missing the point, the three quick puns of “dig” “spade” and “shovel” occur to make the final surreal image playful. We might be tempted to read the poem as though it bore the overtones of Baraka’s most outrageous Black Arts poems, which advocate genocide and have “the extermination blues.” But then such a reading is something of a stretch in that if whites are reduced to white trash, blacks are also reduced to shovels, so there is no privileging of any particular identity. And more convincingly, rather than invoke the furnace in the context of the Shoah as Baraka does in “For Tom Postell, Dead Black Poet,” Wang uses the furnace as an image of love.

emphasis on the sexual that exists in an objectifying gaze, in the sense that physical exteriority is about to manifest sex.

In fact, it's this objectifying gaze that makes up the general subject of the poems in "Act I: The Thrusts." For example, the first poem "Kouros" is only three lines:

To capture your beauty:  
 Ring a gazelle tight with a rope  
 And watch him bound through the woods.

A kouros is a life-sized nude statue of a boy, and thus already the poem's title suggests its content: the "capturing" of beauty in something like sexual possession. The poem is recognizably Imagist in its brief, intense focus on a single, vivid picture, and thus might, in a politicized context, seem regressive: like the Orientalist reticence of some haiku derivative. Even so, this poem shows that it is through image that Wang begins a sequence of poems which in its culmination with "The Ash-Hauler" stages dominance and submission as a sexual spectacle across apparently opposed poetic styles.

If, as Park argues, Wang's poetics fall into Orientalism, the evident homosexual desire in "Kouros," which it's tempting to affirm against the chauvinism of early Asian Americanists, might actually be enabled by the very Orientalism that we're still likely to critique. After all, drawing our attention to kouros as an artifact of a lost, but once highly-cultured civilization evokes the Orient; and it's worth noting that Greece as a nation in Asia Minor could be geographically subsumed into the Orient. Greeks were even counted as Orientals under the 1907 Oriental Exclusion Act, as I've noted elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Not that I want to argue that Greece is the Orient in the terms Edward Said

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<sup>9</sup> See my "Why Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* Is So Inoffensive" from *Critique* 51:1 (2009) p. 10. I cite Stavros Frangos' historical work on Greeks in Michigan.

establishes in *Orientalism*. In fact, such a claim would have to be heavily qualified by the claims of Greece as the source of Western Civilization. But I do want to emphasize what David L. Eng points out about the conflation of primitivity in general with non-normative sexual excess. Eng argues that “Freud initially isolates the figure of the homosexual as an exemplary model of a stalled and pathological narcissism,” a narcissism which in turn applies to both children and primitive peoples (Eng 10). Eng specifically emphasizes Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* as positing a hypersexualized and primitive racial body. As Eng describes it, for Freud, the primitive is “unable to banish forbidden sexual impulses” to the unconscious, which thus results in what Freud sees as a redundant, over-insistent forbidding of incest, as though incest was constantly about to happen (8). *Totem and Taboo*, as Eng points out, is drawn entirely from secondary sources, which points to the epistemology of Orientalism that Said objected to: the substitution of discourse for knowledge. Thus, it’s tempting to sometimes read *Totem and Taboo* as an aberration, since Freud is otherwise scrupulously focused on primary observation, as in his case reports. But then it isn’t that the discursive, unscientific roots of *Totem and Taboo* disqualify it from producing further discourse, or that the work derived from *Totem and Taboo* would have some obvious deficiency compared to something drawn from a more scientific method. If anything, both Said’s comments on Orientalism and what Eng argues to be *Totem and Taboo*’s articulation of a theory that extends throughout much of Freud, of sexual excess as regressive, testify to discourse’s considerable power in the face of alternative, possibly more material accounts.

Thus Wang's black Superman as contrasted to his powder-puff dropping white foes also intimates the persistent black stud stereotype; a stereotype affirmed in Superman's transformation into an image of animal power while whites remain "pasty-faces."

Before moving on to the second act of the book, what by naming "The Insertions" in a book called *The Intercourse* Wang suggests is the volume's central section, it's important to note the specular quality of the first section, from which I've chosen "Kouros" and "The Ash-Hauler" to represent. For both these poems, male figures are presented as objects of sight with the poem's speaker in the position of viewer. It seems as though what is seen and sexualized should then simply be available for vision, but as "Kouros" shows, it is not enough simply that the person being seen is seen. The quality that incites the gaze, for example beauty in "Kouros," is not easily captured, which is the point of the poem.<sup>10</sup>

What Jacques Lacan calls "the given-to-be-seen" is a theorization of the gaze and Lacan's phrasing suggests the accidental, somewhat excessive quality of something like sexual attractiveness, in a manner that suggests beauty in "Kouros" (Lacan 74). Lacan proposes two examples to describe the gaze and the given-to-be-seen: first mimesis in insects which suggests a core insight of the "given-to-be-seen," that though we both see and are seen, the fact of being seen precedes our

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<sup>10</sup> "The Ash-Hauler" similarly depicts whatever fascinates the gaze as being elusive, most notably in the visual shifting from Superman to a panther. That substitution suggests that whatever made Superman initially an object of the gaze is what motivates the transformation in the second stanza.

seeing.<sup>11</sup> The second example is perhaps more suggestive of Wang's work, "the satisfaction of a woman who knows that she is being looked at, on condition that one does not show her that one knows that she knows" (75). Other than elaborating the complex conditions of who knows the other knows without knowing it, Lacan doesn't detail this example, but the woman's pleasure in being looked at suggests she's probably beautiful. Or rather, it is by asking whether she's beautiful that we understand why her being looked at must be disingenuously disavowed. Her beauty itself presupposes a gaze, and thus operates as what Lacan calls a "stain"--something like the mimetic markings of an insect which show that a visual feature already is the object of the gaze, before there is an explicit entity that gazes. And through the series of knowing and unknowing the gaze becomes a position someone can provisionally relate to, but not identify with or become.<sup>12</sup> For to become the gaze would be to be in the impossible position of completely seeing the given-to-be-seen, what would be a sensory plenitude that surpasses representation and difference. For that reason Lacan emphasizes that the gaze which the given-to-be-seen is directed toward is elided. And to return once more to "The Ash-Hauler," we could now see that Superman's flexing of his biceps is an invitation to be seen, which makes the dropped powder puffs not just a sign of fear, but of the kind of captivation by beauty "Kouros" describes.

Using the Lacanian given-to-be-seen to read the poems of "Act I: The Thrusts" as poems about the stain of sexual visibility will perhaps seem counterintuitive; sexual

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<sup>11</sup> Lacan's point here parallels his point of language preceding the subject. After all, we accede to the already invented system of signs of our language; we do not invent it on the fly for our individual use. Similarly, we are seen before we are aware of seeing, since as a biological model species of minimal psychology, even insects adapt to the world first as what is seen.

<sup>12</sup> The gaze, especially in Slavoj Žižek's explications of Lacan, is a superegoic entity. One that watches not from the perspective of subjects, but more in the sense of an intractable all-seeing presence.

objectification, after all, seems like it is the imposition of a phallogentric subjectivity, that wants to use fucking to degrade and possess. But in my reading, what confers sexuality to the images in the poems is the product of a gaze that no one ever embodies, a mark of visibility that makes an inhuman, all-seeing gaze fleetingly apprehensible. With “Kouros” and “The Ash-Hauler” it is perhaps impossible not to see in both Lacanian and anti-Lacanian theses some evidence, which suggests that at this point my argument would be inconclusive. But that ambiguity can be explained as an effect of where these poems stop, before insertion, which after all is the title of the next “act.”

Sex in “Act II: The Insertions” is on the whole bisexual, as though to justify the title’s plural ending. And this section also features the title poem “The Intercourse,” which begs more analysis if we are to understand what the book *The Intercourse* is about. The poem does somewhat relate to insertion, as its placement should indicate, depicting it, questioning it, but somehow the poem seems to be more about a shading between what we might read as homosexual and homosocial desire. It begins with a series of three or two line triads:<sup>13</sup>

You’ve been having  
sex with her  
four times a day

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<sup>13</sup> Obviously, it seems like bad mathematics to call a two line segment a triad, but in doing this I am making the claim that this beginning part of the poem is derived from William Carlos Williams’ use of three line sections he called triadic lines. Though there isn’t critical agreement on what constitutes Williams’ triadic line, it is meant to be a unit that relates intensity to typography with the intention of bearing something of a variable meter. That what I’m calling Wang’s triads tend to be syntactical statements that occur across what’s typographically marked as three lines suggests his imitation of Williams. Wang was a collaborator and correspondent with Williams late in life and Zhaoming Qian’s “William Carlos Williams, David Raphael Wang, and the Dynamic of East/West Collaboration” in *Modern Philology* 108.2 (Nov 2010): 304-21

But with me  
 once only  
 in life you have... (1-6)

What these lines most explicitly articulate is the quantity of sex: four times a day is a lot, in that it implies not only four times in one day but four times for multiple days and in addition to that there is the once more, or once “only” that occurs between “you” and “me.” And though this isn’t the kind of frequency that would mean sex is all that is happening it does suggest a kind of disinhibition toward sex, recalling Freud’s theorization of the hypersexual primitive, simultaneously the oversexed homosexual, who is unable to master his drives, and gives into them, and thus has more sex than he should. In Wang it’s the apparently bisexual “you” who is simultaneously hypersexual, although the excess of sex is heterosexual. But because these lines are really a complaint--you’ve been having too much sex with her and not enough with me--overactive sexuality is still something wrong, as it is with Freud. This judgment is subtly indicated by matching these two triads: four times a day is contrasted with the once only “in life you have...” Against what sounds almost workaday there is the singular once of once-in-a-lifetime, although as the complaining tone intimates, and the rest of the poem affirms, the single instance of sex connotes sex’s failure, not its value.

This failure is so abject that the speaker abandons even his complaint; then depicting the titular intercourse. Excerpting the poem in quotation becomes somewhat misleading from this point on because Wang begins to break down the triadic lines such that what the poem means emerges more in the lines’ flow than in formal units, and the ending third of the poem also has a visibly looser form. But for the sake of interpretation

I want to persist in a close, detailed manner by citing slightly more than the next three triads.<sup>14</sup>

I should be  
 jealous, but, no,  
 I can't/ You can fill  
 her up when  
 her body spreads  
 But with me nothing  
 changed even if you  
 came [...] (7-14)

What's misleading about this excerpted quote is the sense that why the speaker can't be jealous is the evident naturalness of heterosexual intercourse--that sense is markedly questioned later in the poem, as a conclusion of what this initial idea leads to. But then what this quote does include is the poem's only overt description of intercourse, notable because of the series of titles that put intercourse under emphasis. Intercourse will take on the definite article here because of its contrast with the failed homosexual attempt at intercourse earlier in the poem. What that somewhat awkward

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<sup>14</sup> In the quotation that follows I quote two two-line triads. If the triadic line is intended as a metrical structure, what Williams seems to have intended, then a two-line triad is no more unusual than any other metrical substitution. In this poem, we can see that the formal deviation coincides with content. The ending "no" of line 8, ("I should be / jealous, but, no") enacts the interruption which makes the nonexistent third line a kind of pause or discontinuity. Similarly the next two-line triad can be seen to have a pause in that the climactic moment of coming, again an experience of interruption, coincides with the elided third part of the triad. And what I don't block quote here is the third two-line triad that continues syntactically from "even if you / came" (13-14). This triad would be:

came / we could be in bed  
 again & again / but

Again the "but" indicates a cutting off from the content of the line, something in the manner of the "no" of line 8.

“the” in “The Intercourse” suggests is that there are a plurality of possible intercourses of which one gets emphasized.

The emphasized, heterosexual intercourse Wang depicts is similar to another depiction of heterosexual intercourse, Andrea Dworkin’s account in her almost identically titled book *Intercourse* (1987). Dworkin defines intercourse as “being entered” through grammatical parallelism: “There is never a real privacy of the body that can coexist *with intercourse: with being entered*” and it is her description of intercourse as entry that is so similar to Wang’s (154, my emphasis). Dworkin’s book isn’t so much a linear argument as a kind of meditation, and she riffs on the motif of penetration so that her ideas emerge by reading epigrammatic statements that take on axiomatic force. Thus, “She is opened up, split down the center. She is occupied—physically, internally, in her privacy.” And, “A woman has a body that is penetrated in intercourse: permeable, its corporeal solidness a lie.” Wang’s “You can fill / her up when / her body spreads” is also about a woman’s “occupation” by a man, to appropriate Dworkin; but in Wang what intercourse means isn’t primarily a matter of privacy, but of transformation. “But with me nothing / changed” suggests that what makes the speaker unable to begrudge his lover sex with “her” isn’t that her body can be occupied and his can’t--interestingly Dworkin too notes that “A man has an anus that can be entered, but his anus is not synonymous with entry” (155)--but that entry between man and man isn’t transformative (12-13). Thus what Wang imagines is an interpersonality to sex that Dworkin excludes. If the woman is penetrable and loses the privacy of her self in penetration, Wang suggests the penetrating man is also affected. Or more precisely, the act of

heterosexual intercourse is something the speaker can't dismiss because it is an act that changes both man and woman.

Saying that sex involves two people is perhaps too obvious to deserve comment, but this observation also suggests why if we are to read the given-to-be-seen as sexy, that sexiness isn't based on the viewer occupying the position of what Lacan called the gaze. Because what is at stake is sexiness, we need to attempt a definition of that term, all the while noting that defining sexiness is like defining what is natural or inherent to sex itself. Dworkin's definition of sex, or rather heterosexual sex, is appealing because she critiques the naturalness of sex as a construct as she defines it, arguing that the vagina is a sign "of being made for intercourse: for penetration, entry, occupation" and thus intercourse becomes by definition dehumanizing, a "violation of boundaries, taking over, occupation, destruction of privacy, all of which are construed to be normal and also fundamental to continuing human existence" (155-6). But then Dworkin's analysis begins from its own construal of naturalness, her axiom that humanness itself is based on having "a body that is inviolate" which inexorably means that "when it is violated, it is abused" (154). This supposition already presupposes that sex can only be abuse, because for Dworkin humanness actually means something like agency. For that reason a human experience as widespread and common as not being in control can't be affirmed as human, it has to be seen as antihuman.

Dworkin's version of the inviolate self thus presupposes the domination that she then decries, which isn't necessarily a problem, except that it is not sexy. It's clear enough that Dworkin begins from politics, from a discourse of agency. But then as Leo Bersani observes, politics is not simply reflected or expressed through sex; it's only

through an “extremely obscure process” that “sexual pleasure *generates* politics” (Bersani 208). In fact, Bersani’s view restates Foucault’s widely circulated thesis from the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, that to see a relationship between sex and politics as simple, simply opposed in what Foucault critiques, is an erroneous temptation.

Bersani makes his point about sex’s obscure relation to politics to theorize a problem that bears superficial resemblance to Dworkin’s, why gay men find erotic that which oppresses them--heteronormative masculinity. But rather than say that gay men are culturally constructed as feminine through penetration, which after all for Dworkin defines the iniquity of heterosexual sex, Bersani writes that the “logic of homosexual desire includes the potential for loving identification with the gay man’s enemies. And that is a fantasy-luxury that is at one inevitable and no longer permissible” (208). No longer permissible because writing in 1987 Bersani’s immediate occasion is both a governmental indifference to AIDS, and widespread homophobia in response to AIDS. But what is perhaps more interesting is Bersani’s ahistorical claim--that loving identification with gay men’s enemies is “inevitable.” But then this inevitability, which might seem essentialist, is actually strongly constructivist. It is because maleness doesn’t exist apolitically that to want a man means to desire “a socially determined and socially pervasive definition of what it means to be a man” (209). Thus masculinity is defined not at the level of an inviolate self, but at the level of the social and the cultural, which means that it is a level beyond the control of even the pressing political agenda of conscious social actors.

But Bersani goes even further. Not only do gay men inevitably love their enemies, but that love results from the general characteristic of sexual desire itself. If gay desire must accede to heterosexist versions of masculinity, then an oppressive mentality “is in part constitutive of male homosexual desire, which, *like all sexual desire*, combines and confuses impulses to appropriate and to identify with the object of desire” (Bersani 209, my emphasis). Thus Bersani suggests that one thing that makes the relation of sex and politics obscure is that sexual desire is itself mixed--not only an appropriation, Dworkin would call it “possession,” but an identification. Therefore sex is not just a narcissistic appropriation of a sex partner always reduced to the status of object, or if it is, it is so because of culture, and then because sexiness is cultural--which means both beyond the self and defining of the self--no one can be inviolate, as in being an uncaused cause, in sex.

It's true that beyond his comments about masculinity and gay eroticism, Bersani doesn't argue why what he characterizes as all sexual desire, a combination of appropriation and identification, is what is paradigmatic about sexiness, but my feeling is that Bersani's claim is both specific enough--it suggests not only why Dworkin's account of intercourse doesn't sound sexy, but also why as Bersani points out, parodies of gender aren't sexy either--and broad enough--in that a certain variation in relative amounts of appropriation and identification, or love and theft, is possible--to ultimately seem intuitively convincing. But more to my point, Bersani's account of sexual desire enables us to gloss both forms of intercourse in Wang's poem. Thus, the notion of transformation that is what justifies the rightness of the man and woman's intercourse in is better captured by what the poem suggests is a kind of ecstatic expansion of selves:

she spreads and he fills. While the failed sex between the speaker and “you” is a kind of mutual inviolateness of nothing changing. And in this contrast, finally, is why identification with the gaze is an erotic dead-end. Just as the speaker is reduced to a kind of voyeur of sex between his lover and her, from the point of view of the gaze, no participation in sex is possible.

Although I read “You can fill / her up when / her body spreads” as depicting a sense of the body not as bounded and inviolate as in Dworkin, but expanded and conjoined as in Bersani, these lines do assign different roles, filling versus spreading, that Dworkin would be inclined to read as “an act of possession in which, during which, because of which, a man inhabits a woman, physically covering her and overwhelming her and at the same time penetrating her” (Dworkin 79). But then to claim that the poem does more than what Dworkin describes, requires the whole poem:

You’ve been having  
 sex with her  
 four times a day  
 But with me  
 once only  
 in life you have...  
 I should be  
 jealous, but, no,  
 I can’t/ You can fill  
 her up when  
 her body spreads

But with me nothing  
changed even if you  
came / we could be in bed  
again & again/ but  
at best, it will be  
simulated sex: only cocks  
& pussies  
are strangely  
matched? I turned to you  
for your whole being, not just your arms,  
your buttocks,  
your legs/only  
when I watch the light  
spreading over your face  
when I stray into  
what we shared:  
pot, jazz, Greek gods, nymphets, &  
ideas/ do  
we come  
to a collaboration of wills, with  
cold sheet transmuted into  
scroll of words  
more urgent & intense

than the ruffled bed. (27)

As I suggest above, the poem turns out not to naturalize heterosexual sex because it sees “cocks / & pussies” as strangely matched. Implicitly, a cock and a cock would be a less strange a match. But leaving the question of genitals aside, in saying “I turned to you / for your whole being, not just” body parts, Wang suggests that sexual desire is like what Dworkin describes it as being--a desire to possess. But then what the speaker experiences is only the thwarting of this desire for possession, not its achievement. Penetration does not cover and overwhelm the whole being; it is only the province of particular ill-matched parts.

Not that sex is then egalitarian; for “The Intercourse” a sense of equality, “a collaboration,” is only possible in a third intercourse, not hetero- or homosexual penetration, but intercourse in the ordinary sense of communication. Wang tries to make communication seem not mundane but itself erotic, perhaps differently erotic. The “urgent & intense” words are substitutes for sex, note the transformation of bed sheet into sheet of paper, and instead of a collaboration of bodies, intercourse-as-communication is a collaboration of wills.

What Wang finally proposes is a poetics as intense as sex, that is supposed to result in a filling/spreading not restricted to genitals, but rather of experience and idea; but it seems like he only proposes it, he doesn't create it. After all, a collaboration of wills is diffuse in a way that sex is not, especially sex in this poem, which is explicit and pointedly not a private matter between the two who are having sex. So to make a statement that is almost too obvious to make sense, but ironically fulfills Wang's vision

of a sexual poetry, he most succeeds in writing a poem that has some of the intense characteristic of sex in the poem's depiction of sex, when it is most like pornography.

Although *The Intercourse* is persistently and overtly about sex, it's not easy to call it pornographic; but then pornography, as Frances Ferguson observes, is extremely difficult to define, most obviously in the example of obscenity trials. Such trials are based on an attempt to define pornography as a category based on content, but then no particular content is always pornographic, or so Ferguson argues (10). "What is pornographic about pornography, I maintain, is less what it presents than the relative actions and relative assessments it offers of the various parties to it. Pornography offers more a social evaluation than an evaluation of an object," writes Ferguson (9). Thus pornography isn't best understood as an object, but more as a structure. Like sex, porn proceeds from inequality, but unlike sex it has at heart an external character. Sex happens as an action and only exists as that act; but pornography is a durable object. But then why the object status of porn is significant is not because the object itself has meaning, but because as an object, it instantiates a relation to us that is impersonal, especially compared to the personal relationship that underlies sex. Thus porn creates the hierarchical experience of sex as something external, to which our own interiority, however vexed or however untroubled, isn't significant.

Ferguson's structural account of pornography depends on her reading of "utilitarian structures," for example, a school room as imagined by Jeremy Bentham. "Students in Bentham's classic Panoptic classrooms were supposed to change seats with every academic exercise and to take their places in the seats that indicated how well they had done in the previous trial. In this way, Panoptic disciplinary systems

aimed to display both fact and values” (18). In this example visibility, the relative ordering of seats, is what ensures that the fact of a performance corresponds to the value of that performance.

Obviously, porn does not assess us through exams, but what is notable in Ferguson’s example is the extent to which any number of inchoate internal factors, like something as nebulous a student’s situation, is totally irrelevant in producing that student’s place within a group of other students. Similarly, pornography is also indifferent to individual circumstance, and like the classroom organized by ability, its participants are put into an implicit order related to sex. In fact, making sex particularly visible, in the way that the class makes test performance visible, is what pornography accomplishes: “pornography responds to the sense that visibility needs emphasis to become perspicuous,” perspicuous in the sense that a student’s ability becomes perspicuous (21). And like the Panoptic classroom, “Its various procedures revolve around creating an ictus, or emphasis, that converts visibility into perspicuousness.” For that reason, “it has nothing to do with content per se. Instead, pornography represents the attempt to capture the ‘sexiness’ of anything that can be said to be interesting by giving it the relative weight that it has within a particular social grouping (21).

If Wang’s poems fall short of being pornographic, “The Intercourse” at least articulates the desire for a pornographic poem in Ferguson’s sense, a poem that has the intensity of sex, but acts on the will. What’s more, read with Ferguson the collaboration of wills Wang wants would displace the isolate self of failed intercourse, because pornography renders that type of interiority unnecessary. Park reads Wang/

Wang as irreconcilably split between an insincere public avowal of ethnic politics and an internal, almost perverse commitment to Orientalism. The appeal of something like the pornographic verse Wang imagines is that it wouldn't need to be a poetry of ideological pronouncements because it would not need to convince a conflicted subject split by desire to accede to abstract principles. Instead, it would leave that subject behind along with principles in an external order, experienced with the immediacy of sexuality. This desire suggests an answer to the question of why Baraka sought to supplement his poetry of violence with a poem that would "shoot come at you." I argued that the fact of pain as the sensation of sense itself, without object, makes something like an incorporeal political agenda take on the reality of experience. Orgasm, the moment of shooting come, similarly, might be thought of as a sensation of sense, not the feeling of a particular object of sensation. In that case, a poetry of violence and a poetry of sexuality are similar. They can both be used to make something immaterial, the political, the social, seem immediate; but immediate not through argumentation or persuasion, but experientially. This emphasis on immediacy makes the political poetry that follows in Baraka's vein, one that combines the aesthetic of Yenan and the Popular Front, a version of what that aesthetic is often read as being opposed to--the discourse of selfhood, here returning as immediacy, intensity.

### **The Universal Subject of Ethnic Poetry**

Toward the beginning of his 1966 essay "Poetry and Karma," Baraka makes a statement that a century earlier would have seemed Whitmanian, "American poetry

reflects American lives” (17). But his intent, unlike Whitman, is not to argue for a poetry of metaphysical inclusiveness, but for exclusions--possibly nothing short of a rejection of American poetry itself. “Merica is to die, soon” he remarks, which, following from the logic of poetry reflecting material conditions, means that the poetry of America is also about to die (18). He depicts American poetry, specifically modernism, as dead because what it reflects is only the vacuousness of American life itself.<sup>15</sup>

Chinese Poetry and Anglo Saxon Poetry were Avant Garde in 1915, The Destruction of Localism. The Missouri lad who wishes himself into a Saville Row funeral, or the Idaho boy who left his Barbarian people, ditto the Missourian, in search of CULTURE, knowing there was none where they had come from. And so replenished their streams. Or Williams who understood that mere concentration on the Local, presumed it to be General, and again generally descriptive of the world. (21)

What Baraka first notes is that canonical poetic modernism is not a poetry meant to materially reflect America; it is “The Destruction of Localism,” capitalized as though it were a title. But then in not reflecting America, what Eliot and Pound end up showing is the cultural poverty of American life because their poetry is the rejection of that life. Even Williams, who one might expect to be a more congenial modernist for Baraka’s point--that poetry reflects reality--must be refused; his problem is that he made the local a description of the general.

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<sup>15</sup> While Baraka pointedly mentions the antiquated dates of the height of modernism, “beginning of the century” (20) and “1915” (21) he observes that poetic modernism from these dates is nonetheless more modern than the work of the modernist’s “legitimate successors and improvers” (20). Thus Baraka suggests that the modernism of Pound, Eliot and Williams from the early twentieth century is the high water mark of American poetry, even to 1966, the date Baraka is writing.

In “Poetry and Karma” Baraka’s main point is that poetry is “thought trying to spiritualize itself” (22), and that black people “are the spiritual people” (24). Thus black poetry must be uniquely authentic, metaphysically so, and relevant, a living expression. And though, as Watts points out, the essay also has the “concealed” purpose of “specifically denigrat[ing] the creativity and creations of those white poets who were once his friends and mentors,” what I want to emphasize is how behind both of these agendas is the Whitmanian project in which authentic speech rooted in lived reality defines a true poetry (Watts 244).

In Baraka’s disavowal of the bohemian milieu of LeRoi Jones, his judgment on his former self is curiously difficult to read. Watts sees him as avowing LeRoi Jones, as though in the fifties and early sixties Jones carried the spiritually alive character of black verse into something like Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*.<sup>16</sup> But then Baraka himself makes more of a contradictory comment in discussing his place in that anthology, noting first that “we are poets from different sources, finally,” thus suggesting that a black poetry, intrinsically living and radically opposed to dead white poetry as it is, does not belong in a tradition that includes white poets. But then the rest of the paragraph takes umbrage at the fact that more black poets were not in *The New American Poetry*: “Only LeRoi Jones in New American Poetry, 1945-60. *The Negro!* Whose poetry then, only a reflection of what the rest of that E-X-C-L-U-S-I-V-E club was doing. You mean there was no other poetry, you mean there were no other spooks, &c.

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<sup>16</sup> In claiming that Watts sees Baraka as affirming Jones, I am interpreting how Watts situates Baraka’s quote on Jones’ presence in *The New American Poetry*. He reads Jones’ fit in with the other New American poets as though those poets are the “few white poets who are devoted to creativity” and who, in Baraka’s words “masquerade as captive niggers” (qtd in Watts 245). Thus Watts suggests Baraka reads Jones’ work as being part of “the superior spirituality of black poetry” described in this later essay, although this is not the immediate context for Baraka’s remarks in “Poetry and Karma” (Watts 245).

I pass" (25). This comment is indecipherably ambivalent. On one hand, Baraka suggests his work as LeRoi Jones represents black poetry, not only in Jones being "*The Negro!*" but the apparent outrage of other black poetry not being represented. But then he also suggests that Jones is only copying what is really more an "ofay suburban social [club]" than a true, living poetry (25).

Jones' statement on poetics in *The New American Poetry* repeats a version of what's incoherent in his later condemnation. And, as in "Poetry and Karma," he phrases his position through the figure of a group poetics defined not as conformity, but as authenticity.

"HOW YOU SOUND??" is what we recent fellows are up to. How we sound; our peculiar grasp on, say: a. Melican speech, b. Poetries of the world, c. Our selves (which is attitudes, logics, theories, jumbles of our lives, & all that), d. And the final .... The Totality Of Mind: Spiritual ...

God?? (or you name it) : Social (zeitgeist) : or Heideggerian *umwelt*. (424)

Jones' injunction "How you sound??" which is also the essay's title, interestingly proposes not just idiosyncrasy--a particular poet's "peculiar grasp" on any number of possible contexts--but idiosyncrasy raised to the status of what defines a group, that is, idiosyncrasy-as-norm. But then what Jones presents as an arbitrary list--note his colloquial "say"--is actually an enlarging series that begins unassumingly with probably the most expected element of how an American poet might sound, American speech made self-consciously weird in its very typography, to something quite far from idiosyncrasy, the infinite itself--thus suggesting Baraka's later privileging of black spirituality as definitive of black verse.

The trajectory of Jones' thought embraces a kind of universalism that is explicitly a "totality," what's more, it actually critiques a more limited, specific form of verse, one that Baraka also attacks--"academic verse."<sup>17</sup> Marjorie Perloff notes that Allen in his introduction tersely states that "the New American Poets 'reject all those qualities typical of academic verse;'" he doesn't delineate what exactly those rejected qualities are (qtd in Perloff 106). But Perloff offers a description of the academic verse Allen sees the New American Poets as rejecting: "In 1960, the Age Demanded that a poem be self-contained, coherent, and unified: that it present, indirectly to be sure, a paradox, oblique truth, or special insight, utilizing the devices of irony, concrete imagery, symbolism and structural economy" (107). What Perloff describes sounds initially similar to Jones' sound based poetry, as something "self-contained" academic verse seems individual in its concentration into a single aesthetic object. Thus, what Jones is promoting in "How You Sound??" is actually less the sense of individual contingency, which after all could be the province of a self-enclosed poem of oblique truth and paradox, but the universal.

This conclusion, that New Critical academic verse is less about universalism than Jones' avant garde poetry, is perhaps counterintuitive; admittedly, it initially struck me as such. But deciding on the putative universalism of the poetry endorsed by New Criticism has more to do with interpreting its ambition to objectivity than its aim at a transcendent universality. If such poetry is meant to be universal, it would be universal only through its status as an enclosed object, in other words, its universality would be immanent, not transcendent. That distinction means that the universality of a New

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<sup>17</sup> Baraka writes, "The girlish professors cannot admit of anything as art that would show that they are girlish professors" (25). Thus they are unable to recognize the art of "Duke, Monk, JellyRoll, Bird, Sun-Ra, or James Brown" or "where Shakespeare's 'rhythm' was stale and punkish."

Critical objective poem actually depends on the New Critical reading procedure; in itself all a poem has to be is self-contained. Or in other words, what is demanded of the poem is less the universality that will be discovered in it, but its specificity, its singularity, which is the basis for the subsequent discovery of its universality. For myself, this conclusion was difficult because an emphasis on particularity and the more restrained universality possible from that more situated frame seems to be culturally progressive, and New Criticism is commonly taken to be conservative.<sup>18</sup>

Jones' "For Hettie" announces in its title its non-universal address, to a single, intimate person; but it nonetheless presents a version of a universal perspective, through something immediate and idiosyncratic like the "jumbles of our lives." The poem is not self-enclosed; in fact, it mocks self-enclosure in its discontinuous logic.

My wife is left-handed.  
 Which implies a fierce de-  
 termination. A complete other  
 worldliness. IT'S WEIRD BABY  
 The way some folks  
 are always trying to be different.  
 A sin & a shame. (1-7)

Grammatically, beginning the clause in line 2 with "which" suggests that the clause will be nonrestrictive so that what Hettie's left-handedness means is not the necessary consequence of left-handedness, but rather additional information. And while such a

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<sup>18</sup> Finally, even if the reader isn't convinced of my claim that New Criticism is objective but not universal, what is important for my argument is less a definition of universalism, than a sense of the universal as constituted in relation. My claim then becomes that Jones is more fixed on this relation, which would mean a text's external connection, than the internal focus of the New Critical poem.

technical consideration might not determine a reading of the line, its pseudo-logical language “which implies” similarly suggests that what follows should be a necessary conclusion, as opposed to just another, possibly related or possibly unrelated detail. Combined with a declarative tone that arises from clauses being punctuated as sentences, all of these dubious assertions seem insisted upon. Thus, by the end of the first stanza, left-handedness becomes a mark of her willful difference, an effort at weirdness, that as effort, makes left-handedness less a natural indication of her pre-existing state of difference than part of the “sin” of “always trying to be different.” What isn’t stated is that as a secondary characteristic of effort, difference is not Hettie’s original condition; that original condition would have had to be sameness, the point of view of non-difference that the poet here speaks from.

That perspective, with its occulted universalism, is never the explicit content of the poem; in fact, it only emerges as an artifact of the poem’s intense description of Hettie. Thus, to say that Jones’ poetics is directed at the universal, at the “final ... The Totality Of Mind” means that that universal only emerges through the voice, or “sound,” which after all is as individual as the source of a poet’s sound, the poet him or herself. What Jones really articulates in “How You Sound??” is something like a poet’s exemplary status. In his own words the essay finally “means that I *must* be completely free to do just what I want, in the poem” (424). It is through that freedom, that unrestrained embrace of the self, that his poetry can break from being determined and can turn into something universal. And thus Baraka in 1966 has a difficult time attacking Jones; after all, Jones’ project in this otherwise all-white volume, is actually similar to what Baraka is arguing for: a poetry understood to unrestrained, to be spiritual. But

then the key difference is that while for Jones this universality emerges from the self, for Baraka, something more problematic ensures the materiality of the spiritual, his construction of black people as “the spiritual people, [...] [t]he living beings, the relatives of the most ancient men on earth” (24).

As I note above, this kind of appeal to a bygone black greatness implies a lack in present blackness, and makes whatever blackness is could be said to be real, as in experientially available, an odd experience of negativity. And thus, at the risk of repeating my earlier point, Baraka’s attempt at immediacy in his Black Arts poetry depends heavily on connecting what’s nonmaterial and even unmaterializable, his version of blackness, to some kind of material support, through something like the invocation of pain. And then through pain, Baraka actually returns to Jones, since pain ultimately is an experience of the self as self, without object or mediation, and thus the self in the mode of intensity.

But then is this negativity something to merely pass through, and if so, why not proceed as Baraka does when he is LeRoi Jones and just privilege the personal? If the project of Black Arts is to be different from Jones’ avant gardism, which it obviously is, then the figure of what Mullen calls “the ancient greatness of the race,” also a widespread figure of early Afrocentrism, must be more than just an absence to later fulfill (Mullen xxxiii). But how exactly?

What Mullen calls “Afro-Orientalism” suggests at the very least that an Orientalist context bears some relevance to a black context. Mullen takes pains to define his analytic as “a counterdiscourse that at times shares with [Orientalism] certain features but primarily constitutes an independent critical trajectory,” and as an independent

discourse opposes racism rather than perpetuates it (xv). Mullen emphasizes global capitalism's similar strategy of racialization as a reason why Orientalism could be understood as broadly racist, not just anti-Asian. But then he also recognizes his difficulty, which is that by positing that a version of Orientalism might be emancipatory even under specific, historical conditions his study puts forth, he not only goes against a giant like Edward Said, he risks conflating blacks and Asians, and even at the minimal level of explanation, what any critical work undertakes, he further risks a creeping Orientalism, a sense that what he describes he also defines.

In his verse Wang, as Park notes, is heavily Orientalist, though such a claim wouldn't be borne out in what I've quoted above; indeed, as Wand quoting Hugh Witemeyer on Wang notes, "only two" poems in *The Intercourse* "have 'Chinese subjects or tone'" (qtd in Wand 132). That Wand selects this quote suggests his readiness to distance Wang from Orientalism, perhaps perceiving what Park describes, that Asian American poetry was stridently opposed to Orientalism and gaining in institutional strength. Witemeyer's comment is a little dubious in that the extent to which tone is Chinese is an issue that's far less obvious than that of content, and in fact much of *The Intercourse* consists of "epigrams" as Wand again uses Witemeyer to say (qtd in Wand 133). These short poems, such as "Kouros," might also be described as derivations of haiku, filtered through Pound, which then would have some degree of a Chinese tone, understood to be an Orientalist version of China. But what more obviously confirms Park is something Wand wouldn't be able to re-describe, Wang's "The Grandfather Cycle." In a later essay, Witemeyer, seeming to be very much not the Wang booster that Wand portrays, quotes a comment by Wang in which he calls "The

Grandfather Cycle” his “major work in progress” (qtd in Witemeyer 202). This comment is almost unnecessary given the scale of this project: Wang intended it to be “a long family epic” of “101 Cantos” (“Grandfather” 31).<sup>19</sup>

According to Witemeyer, quoted in Wand, “The Grandfather Cycle” is about “both the culture and the ‘epic fornications’” of F. K. Wang a “classic Chinese scholar,” who “the speaker, his grandson, envies” and “thinks of [...] with nostalgia.”<sup>20</sup> From this summary, we can already make out this poem’s Orientalist structure. Its subject is the bygone China of Mandarins, of which F. K. Wang was one, with an explicitly nostalgic bent. Furthermore, the poem isn’t just a family history, but also a representation of “the culture,” all of which can be seen in “Canto X--Fermata II. The Escutcheon.” A case might be made for this particular canto’s Afro-Orientalist importance in that it wasn’t only published in *The Human Voice* in 1966, but also in *GUMBO*, edited by Yusef Komunyakaa, in 1977. The poem begins by presenting the culture as follows:

To be tied to a pillar  
 Stripped to the buttocks  
 The body cut up by ingenious torture  
 Such fates were allotted  
 To heroes and patriots

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<sup>19</sup> That this is Wang’s major work is also attested to by the length of time Wang was working on it. While fifteen cantos of this poem were printed together in *The Human Voice* in 1966, according to Witemeyer, “Wand had begun to write [it] in 1956” (198). Additionally, Wand intended it to be Poundian, and received encouragement from William Carlos Williams to keep writing it (198).

<sup>20</sup> This set of citations is somewhat complex given Wand’s use of Witemeyer to describe his own work as Wang. Witemeyer quotes Wang with the phrases “epic fornications” and “classic Chinese scholar.” But then all of what I quote of Witemeyer comes from a block quote that Wand selects as his discussion of Wang on page 134. In this 1978 essay Wand is straightforward that Wang is himself. According to Park, in an earlier 1973 essay, Wand maintained the appearance that Wang was not Wand, perhaps so that the credibility of praising himself wouldn’t be questioned (Park 93).

Chinese history

Resounds

With violence (1-7).

Wang's general characterization of Chinese history, as violent, serves as a kind of summary to the five lines above it; but more to the point, such a generalization reiterates the stereotype of Oriental despotism, "cut up by ingenious torture" might even refer to *lingchi*, death by a thousand cuts, which further suggests the vast distance of what passes for Chinese governance from Enlightenment principles of politics and sovereignty, which is ultimately to say, it is Orientalist.

The rest of the stanza affirms a second Orientalist trope, the inscrutable Oriental. If Chinese history shows heroes and patriots repeatedly tortured, their heroic status is shown in their sheer endurance of pain.

No threats nor bribes

Could discourage the martyrs

The mind soared unfettered

While pain froze the organs (8-11)

Wang presents these heroes' orientation toward pain as perverse: they are unable to be "discouraged" from undergoing torture. But then pain, despite the earlier description, here doesn't read as pain, but as a kind of transcendence, that might well be pleasure. Pain might affect the organs, but those are frozen, while the mind is "unfettered."

Eric Hayot analyzes an anecdote remarkably similar to what Wang presents, that of a silent, Chinese victim of torture, only Hayot's example is a purportedly true account of Edmund Scott's attempt to convince the East India Company "of his surehanded

direction of its financial fortunes” in the wake of theft from an English warehouse in the early seventeenth century (Hayot 42). Scott tortures a Chinese goldsmith in Java who “does not simply fail to cry out, or even to cry; he attempts to bite off his own tongue” (45). Regarding torture, Scarry writes that the “translation of pain into power is ultimately the transformation of body into voice” (qtd in Hayot 45). That the goldsmith doesn’t translate pain from body into voice seems to suggest that Scarry might be wrong. But then insofar as the Chinese goldsmith’s silence suggests “an inhuman strength, and the absence of his voice ‘justifies’ the escalating inhumanity of Scott’s” torture, Scarry is actually affirmed (45). It is because in remaining silent the goldsmith requires a greater display of power that he finally seems inhuman, inhumanly powerful. And thus his torture does seem to render him somehow transcendent.

Hayot’s point in discussing this example is not merely to read a historical instance of Britain’s encounter with a transnational Chinese merchant, but rather to read how Stephen Greenblatt, in *Learning to Curse*, situates this anecdote as evidence, as something that has what Hayot describes as having “the example effect.” This effect is inherent to the example’s exemplarity, that some unimportant instance, chosen at random, will have been made to illustrate not its randomness, but some overarching idea. What’s more, the example’s “value lies precisely in its having ‘nothing’ to do with the [...] material it illustrates” (27). Hayot’s argument is that the example does pertain to what it illustrates, because, in a somewhat aporetic manner, an example is by definition exemplary. More important for Hayot is what he sees as a general construct, a kind of structural motif, in which a random example illustrating some universal turns out to ask whether China fits that universal, as is suggested by the title of his book, *The*

*Hypothetical Mandarin*.<sup>21</sup> This use of China as a far-out, almost absurd example, suggests a “more general sense of the role China has tended to play in Western history and thought. There, “China” has most consistently characterized as a limit or potential limit, a horizon neither of otherness nor of similarity; but rather the very distinction between otherness and similarity” (8).

What this means for Wang’s tenth canto is that the Chineseness of those who silently endure torture is important, because it reveals that such a reaction to pain does constitute the limit of what we can conceive as human. But crucially this limit does not suggest that the inhuman is abject. On the contrary, it seems oddly powerful. Moreover, if Hayot’s theory of the example is correct, it seems powerful precisely because it emerges from an example of China.

Hayot accounts for this perhaps surprising conclusion by noting something that he says is an “impossible thing to say in literary studies,” that China “*more than any other place*, [...] has served as the ‘other’ for the modern West’s stories about itself” (Pomeranz qtd in Hayot 9). Hayot supports this bold, almost chauvinistic claim, by appealing to what might at this moment seem like it’s literary studies’ discourse of truth, history.

China’s unique mythology in Western history is the product of two major historical facts: first, that modern Europe encounters China as the first contemporaneous *civilizational* other it knows, and not as a “tribe” or nation whose comparative lack of culture, technology, or economic

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<sup>21</sup> The hypothetical mandarin of Hayot’s title refers to whether moral judgment depends on proximity. The question is what someone would do “if he could make a fortune by killing an old mandarin in China by simply exerting his will, without stirring from Paris?” (Balzac qtd in Hayot 4).

development mitigated the ideological threat it posed to progressivist, Eurocentric models of world history. [...] Second, for much of the period that modern Europe has known China--especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries--the latter had significant economic and technological advantages over Europe in the manufacture of certain especially desirable goods, most notably tea, silk, and porcelain, whose exchange dominated, financially and figurally, the maritime economies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (9).

That Wang praises his grandfather’s “epic fornications” isn’t surprising, given *The Intercourse*, but we might now see that what the Orient represents to Wang is not abjection. In fact, the specificity of his reference, to the privilege of a Mandarin China only two generations removed, suggests that the Orient is not just some vague essence suggestively alluded to. Instead, it’s an essence that Wang attempts to make real through sex and violence as relations because of it lacks reality in another mode of experience, the temporal present. But not being present doesn’t mean irrelevance, in that the universal must be tested against a distant example, and only in that relation can something like a virtual universality be knowable.

Baraka’s appeal to bygone black originators is also an attempt to read the universal as always determined through a contingent position. Hayot describes this kind of relational universality as “ecliptic:” the universal “as it is imagined from a particular perspective, one whose locality is named and defined by the universal it declares” (11). Thus defining a past and future in terms of an absent power, is an attempt to make that power define the contingent position from which those nonpresent

temporalities can be imagined. In the next chapter, I turn from this consideration of physicality to temporality, and suggest how temporality grounds an increasingly inclusive account of the real, as the enduring democratic project of Whitmanian populism.

## Chapter 4

### Postmodern American Ethnicity: Linh Dinh with Walt Whitman

In a short story by Linh Dinh with a first person narrator also named Linh Dinh, Dinh writes this about ethnicity: “I am American insofar as I read the box scores every morning, eat French fries on a regular basis, know that Buster Keaton is a genius. I am Vietnamese insofar as I have black hair, yellow skin, and a Napoleon complex” (“A Strange Letter” 30). Dinh’s parallel use of “insofar” suggests that both identities are only partial. And while his lists of national characteristics don’t sound Whitmanesque, they share the metonymic quality of Whitman’s more expansive lists of oppositions, and later in this chapter I will argue for a deeper understanding of Dinh and Whitman’s connection. At this point, the difference between Whitman and Dinh is that with Dinh the whole that these parts relate to isn’t spiritual, just unsaid, in a kind of colloquial inarticulateness captured by the word “insofar.” It’s that barely addressed and partly unacknowledged totality that Dinh’s identity gestures toward in the story, but that isn’t a problem since as Dinh’s lists imply, no one unproblematically experiences his or her social identity.

But this postmodern account of racial identity, as shifting, unserious, and cultural does imply difficulties about race and ethnicity, particularly whether ethnic identity really is on the same level as both racial phenotypes and eating fries. On one hand, drawing from the influential work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant, the answer would be yes. Omi and Winant argue that from the 1960s onward, race comes to be defined not

biologically but culturally; hence Omi and Winant suggest that race should be understood as “racial formation.” And so it is precisely because neutral cultural activities can be made to mean something about a person’s ethnic identity that race is such an important social category. But then on the other hand, it seems objectionable to equate race with trivial details. Arguably, race as a form of difference is increasingly not understood with any sense of causation or depth, and thus without real meaning, especially under multiculturalism, as Rey Chow points out in *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2002). More troublingly, Chow argues that ethnicity is not equally applied to all racial groups, despite the multiculturalist avowal that everyone has an ethnicity. In actuality ethnicity “is nonetheless resorted to time and again as a boundary marker” with “pejorative connotations of a limit and limitation of the group marked ‘ethnic’” (Chow 28).

What this chapter undertakes, then, is an account of race under postmodernism, addressing the deep ambiguity of the extent to which race operates as culture and therefore is fluid, and alternatively, reveals the boundaries of society and is thus limited. My argument is that race should be understood under a strong culturalism, and that superficially race does appear to be opaque, meaningless differences spread out in a postmodern web. But the intervention I seek to make is to restore a sense of meaning into race as culture, by accepting the logic of culture, drawn from cultural studies. Culture may be ephemeral and shifting, but it is significant in its immediacy; in fact, ephemerality is one indication that culture is real, situated in the shifting present tense of experience itself. And I propose that it is through the immediacy of experience that

on the one hand the boundedness racial categories enforce can be resisted and on the other, that the reality of racial experience can be affirmed.

Summaries of Whitman typically feel impoverished but nonetheless I interpret Whitman, particularly Whitman in 1855, to be a poet attempting to create a vision of American culture that depends on a temporality of presence and simultaneity. Whitman definitely sees his work as a break with the past, and for that reason as new, innovative; that break with the past, with a lingering feudal, hierarchical culture, makes *Leaves of Grass* American. And yet at the same time its meaning emerges in the context of the past, at the very least as what his unmeasured long lines contrast against. So his poetry, which incidentally is mostly in the present tense, enacts a kind of account of the present: the fullness of immediate experience which alone unifies experiences that are otherwise intractably multiple. Limiting my reading of Whitman to this perspective, Whitman becomes a paradigm of American culture defined as presentness. Dinh's work, which doesn't mimic Whitman's style, draws from this particular innovation specific to Whitman.

Whitman conflates nation with poetry under the assumption that poetry determines a larger cultural identity, and while Dinh has to acknowledge poetry's marginal status in American culture, both poets nevertheless appeal to a similar sense of immediacy in order to make claims on what nationality means. If ethnicity is a cultural identity, and race mediates a relationship between different ethnicities, nation in the way Whitman conceives it, has the potential to offer a form of identity that is more encompassing than either ethnicity or race. Whitman's idea of national identity seeks its affirmation not in limitations, but in a kind of meta-level displacement -- as though rather

than have to affirm a particular identity at the expense of others, Americans might see the full multiplicity of all forms of identity as what expresses their true nature. As Whitman put it in his 1855 preface, America wouldn't be "merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations" (LG 5).

### Nationality as Personal Experience

Whitman avoided printing his own name on the title page of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* to put in its place his picture.<sup>1</sup> But in the long poem that comprises the book, Whitman actually names himself twice. The more famous instance is the line: "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos" (LG 50).<sup>2</sup> What is jarring about this line is that it takes Whitman's transcendental conceit, that an individual is a "kosmos," but ties this idea not to a generic term like man, and not even to a pronoun like "I," but to a first and last name; in fact a name withheld from its proper place on the title page. In "A Strange Letter" (2002), Linh Dinh begins similarly, by invoking the

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<sup>1</sup> Betsy Erkilla begins her book *Whitman: The Political Poet* (1989) with this observation that Whitman left his name off of the title page, putting instead a portrait. Erkilla writes that Whitman's omission of his name from the title page is meant to challenge the conventions of literary authorship "in order to make personal contact with his audience" (Erkilla 4). Brian Folker also interprets Whitman's image, technically an engraving from a daguerrotype, as expressive of the larger themes in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. The mechanically reproduced art suggests that something intimate could be made widely available, as in the significance of grass as "Whitman's central metaphor for a life force that is both humble in its commonality and overwhelming in its ubiquity" (Folker 3).

<sup>2</sup> I use the Library of America edition of *Leaves of Grass* which includes both the 1855 and 1891-92 editions, but does not include line numbers, and for that reason I cite page numbers instead of line numbers. The Library of America edition seems to me to be the most accessible for reading the 1855 edition, because being able to easily refer to the most widely read form of Whitman's poetry (1891-92) helps to situate the 1855 versions. The variorum, edited by Gay Wilson Allen and Sculley Bradley, includes line numbers, but since Whitman's changes across all his editions are tracked in those volumes in footnotes, it's difficult to reconstruct a particular edition's version. In addition, the entire 1855 volume, even across formal breaks and sections titled "Leaves of Grass," tends to be read as a single poem, at least insofar as no table of contents accompanied the original volume. The length of the entire text then would be difficult to refer to by line number.

immediately identifying markers of name and nation: “My name is Linh Dinh and I am American.” Dinh’s story is published as “fiction” in the journal *Manoa* (2002), but the assertion of the speaker’s name, which is the author’s name, makes the work seem autobiographical. In fact, the next sentence gives the name of Dinh’s actual wife, making the work seem even more autobiographical.

But then even though both works take pains to announce that the ultimate subjects are actually the self, each work enacts a complicated dialectic between public and private. In Whitman this tension results in a vision of nationality as a form of personal experience. And as I note above, the racial context of nationality in the form of rights and privileges is something that Dinh explicitly takes up, and so ultimately a sense of the nation as an element of personality, as a part of the self, makes selfhood oddly indefinite, or undefinable. But even as articulating just what defines the interiority of a person turns impossible, personal experience nonetheless establishes an immediacy that establishes a kind of reality for things as immaterial as selfhood, and the forms of cultural identity that fold into that concept.

If we think of culture in expanded terms, not merely as the forms of expression of a society, but something closer to social life itself, then the experience of analytically separate categories like nation and race can be put together in the kind of flux with which they are unevenly experienced under postmodernism. Only in a less pure understanding of culture’s multiplicity can we start to explain why these forms of identification which aren’t ever totalizing, nonetheless have such real effects. Bruce Robbins characterizes culture’s emotional power as a sense of “lived particularity” which makes the human dimension of cultural forms socially important (Robbins 18). The

notion of “lived particularity” has to do with a subjective, emotional effect of culture; but if we think about Whitman and Dinh’s examples, part of the effect is also a sense of eschewing culture altogether for something more intimate. These attempts at a culture more intimate than culture create a kind of suspended disbelief that bridges a real contradiction: the feeling of the author’s private revelation which comes alive in the close contact of the moment of reading is actually a textual artifact available to any reader at any potential time.

Presentness has a similarly contradictory character: it’s both the fullness of experienced reality and ephemeral, so that to think of the present as present is to suspend its constant slide into the past. The 1855 preface begins with a specifically national defense of the contemporary. Whitman asserts a difference between America and “other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions” combined under the term “the past” (*LG* 5). So although the first words of the preface remark that “America does not repel the past,” this distinction between the US and other differently-organized social units is actually definitive, on the basis of time.<sup>3</sup> Whitman is not idiosyncratic in this temporal understanding of what defines America. In fact, Sacvan Bercovitch argues that the idea, or perhaps ideology, of America as a corrective of pastness derives from a Puritan version of historiography which manages to combine the sacred and the secular in an image of transcendence. Bercovitch points out that the Puritan immigrants of the 1630s thought of themselves in a transatlantic context. Quoting John Winthrop’s remark “the eyes of all people are upon us,” Bercovitch argues that “Winthrop was

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<sup>3</sup> In this opening paragraph, as Whitman goes from assertion to allegory, the image he uses is that the past is a corpse “slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house” in contrast “to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who approaches.”

admitting” that his vision of New England was dependent “on the Old World. It was not enough to set up ‘a Specimen’ of New Jerusalem; *their* eyes had to be on it” (Bercovitch 74). However, the eyes of the old world were decidedly not upon New England, and to simplify Bercovitch considerably, what happens is that Puritans compensate for their insignificance by rejecting and disavowing Europe. The Old World becomes “benighted [...] awaiting its redemption by the mighty works of Christ in America” (76). Here the Puritans break from all other colonists in *not* claiming the land as Europeans. But more significantly, their self-justified New England became both “‘wilderness purity’ and an Army of Christ advancing into a continental New Canaan,” so that the “larger, American vision which the Puritans bequeathed” was of “a chosen nation in progress--a New Israel whose constituency was as numerous, potentially, as the entire people of God, and potentially as vast as America” (35). Bercovitch suggests that a sense of chosenness, of already being sacred, combines with an affirmation of process which makes a temporality of presence, note Bercovitch’s rhetorical tic of adding “new” to Biblical sacred places, come to be definitive of American ideology.

While Whitman seems most concerned with novelty in terms of national government, his distinction based on time has a literary connotation as well. As Jonathan Arac points out, the initial sense of literature as specifically creative in America is also tied to a sense of refusing the past in favor of newness.<sup>4</sup> Arac’s literary history shows that in “the late eighteenth century, ‘literature’ meant all culturally valued writing” and indeed the dominant American literature before 1850 was a form of nonfiction that we wouldn’t now characterize as literary, the national narrative (Arac 608). Arac

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<sup>4</sup> Arac points to Edgar Allen Poe’s reviews as attempts to define literature in terms of imagination and novelty, see p. 694.

describes this writing as stories “of the nation’s colonial beginnings” that “looked forward to its future as a model for the world.” In this light, Whitman’s preface refers to this context of popular literature in its nationalism, even as it draws upon a more recent sense of literature as imaginative innovation.

Whitman’s nationalism is self-evident in remarks that distinguish America from all other nations at all other times, as in what I cite above, and in a claim like “The United States are essentially themselves the greatest poem” which is a remark that Dinh will find significant (*LG 5*). The sentence that precedes this particular assertion makes an important qualification to what would otherwise seem nationalistic: “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature.” In this comment, Whitman adapts the Puritan sense of America’s global significance to the realm of culture. To be American is not a matter of time and space, instead Americanness is defined by poetical nature, more specifically, a poetical nature like what Whitman’s own poetry attempts in its metonymic expansiveness.

But what Whitman means by poetic greatness is by no means the neoclassicism celebrated by someone like Alexander Pope in “An Essay on Criticism” (1711). Pope would write:

Those rules of old discover’d, not devis’d  
 Are nature still, but Nature Methodiz’d  
 Nature, like Monarchy, is but restrain’d  
 By the same Laws which first herself ordain’d. (88-91)

For Whitman, poetry is guided by nature, but not in restraint. Instead, poetry “is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day

and night” (*LG* 5). Implicitly Whitman follows in the mold of the Puritan rhetoric Bercovitch identified. Poetry’s sacred aspect, nature, is something that is apparently opposed by the construct of meter, though in Pope this apparent contrast is resolved at the higher level of nature’s instantiation of rules. Similarly, Protestantism initially divides the sacred from the profane, the “holiness of the ‘holy land’ depends on other lands *not* being holy” (Bercovitch 78). The New England Puritans made “the actual, terrestrial new continent before them” a sacred place of realized prophecy (77-78). Similarly, Whitman takes the methodology of poetry and makes it not a deferred naturalness, but naturalness itself.

Alexis de Tocqueville put the possibility of a specifically American poetry in slightly different terms. Acknowledging that “the language, the dress, and the daily actions of men in democracies are repugnant to conceptions of the ideal,” he thought if he himself undertook an American poem, he might nonetheless take as his object something “of the infinite greatness and littleness, of intense gloom and amazing brightness, capable at once of exciting pity, admiration, terror and contempt. I have only to look at myself” (qtd in Orr 650). Fifteen years before Whitman, de Tocqueville seems to have forecast his method. So even as Whitman asserts a lofty position for the true poet, taking the basis of poetry in nature and sacralizing a departure from versification, the content of his poems are organized by something no more sublime than proximity to his own senses. “What is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest is Me” (*LG* 38). De Tocqueville’s comment clarifies how an autobiographical verse which takes the self as its subject is implicitly democratic.

If Whitman can be thought of as combining a national narrative with a then-new notion of literariness, his comment on basing his work on what is commonest suggests that his emphasis is on the literary, the poetic as he polemically defines it, over and above a concern for praising a national political state. And his stirring rhetoric implies that to insist on calling the US a nation-state would be to betray its essence, which after all, is fully poetical.

To read Whitman's nationalism in this idiosyncratic way, in which his enthusiasm for America is interchangeable with an enthusiasm for poetry, goes against the more common view of Whitman's assertions for America. As Arac reviews it, in the 1940s Whitman and Mark Twain are credited with transforming literature into a specifically American idiom, as if recording an American essence, by critics specifically concerned with institutionalizing American studies (1996: 44). Arac's overall argument is closer to the literary Americanness that I see in Whitman's preface. His point is not that Whitman uses the popular language of America to transform literary discourse, nor that Whitman's work is paradigmatically American. Instead, he proposes that Whitman's stylistic innovation should be regarded as a "creole" practice, tightly connected to Whitman's newspaper journalism. After all, it is in the newspaper, and not out of spontaneous national folk language, that methods which are recognizable in Whitman, like the "arbitrariness of ... inclusion and juxtaposition" are found (Benedict Anderson qtd in Arac 51). Thus the immediacy of Whitman's poetry, that he draws from what is "commonest and cheapest and nearest," comes in part from his closeness to the newspaper medium (LG 38).

Arac draws in Benedict Anderson's theory of print capitalism's role in nationalism to help support his argument that what Whitman's poetic innovation is actually more transnational than is commonly assumed. For Anderson, the advent of nationalism is pointedly not a natural progression in scope from individual to family through dynasty and religion into government, but rather a shift in the type of community that can be imagined. Anderson argues that the shift from a prenationalist consciousness to one naturalized to the nation requires a change in historicization. In fact, history as a past time radically different from the present is not the imagined reality that precedes nationalism in the middle ages; according to Anderson medieval temporality imagines time as a "simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present."<sup>5</sup> If it seems as though experiencing time in this prehistoric way would feel immediate, it should be noted that this sense of time as a single temporality depends on a strong sense of Divine Providence to which all moments refer. Because time fits into a religious schema, its past and future are experienced as the present.

So then paradoxically, only when time is no longer an extended present but rather a unit of measurement, as it becomes in modernity, is something like immediacy possible. Time measured "by clock and calendar" makes an event specifically marked (24). And while it might seem that time is mediated through the arbitrariness of measurement, in actuality such measurement enables the standardization by which experience can be tied to a "firm and stable reality" (25). Anderson emphasizes that the modern sense of time as a countable unit also creates an experience of simultaneity,

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<sup>5</sup> Anderson *Imagined Communities* 24. Anderson gives an example of this medieval conception of time, representations of scenes from the Bible in the stained glass of churches and paintings of early masters. Such paintings depict scenes of the Christian nativity in "modern dress" so that "Christ is born bear[ing] the features of Burgundian peasants" (Anderson 22).

not of all times collapsing into a the present, but of the present's richness, that at any moment an indeterminate amount of people are sharing the same moment. For Anderson's argument, this experience of time is crucial for imagining the nation as a form of personal identity, but readers of Whitman will recognize this spontaneity of multiple experience in a rich present. According to Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* is meant to compel "every reader to transpose himself or herself into the central position, and become the living fountain" (qtd in Mattheissen 650).

Whitman's comment on a reader's experience is actually an account of standardization, that what Whitman records isn't just the sensory world, but sense. So Whitman's subject might be the self, as opposed to the self's experience, but if so, *Leaves of Grass* depends on the general character of selfhood. Anderson remarks in a later essay that newspapers not only initiated a sense of standardized time, but also enabled an anonymous seriality, meaning something similar to Whitman's idea of a reader transposing him or herself into the poem. Rephrasing an analysis from *Imagined Communities*, Anderson cites the example of a 1913 Javanese anticolonial essay, published in a newspaper, which points out "the incongruity of Dutch colonials celebrating the Netherlands' independence from Napoleonic subjugation while forcing the natives they themselves held in subjugation to contribute to the cost of festivities" (Anderson 1998 119). Anderson now points out that the rhetoric of this comment depends on an interchangeability between Javanese and Dutch subjectivities, a sort of "central position" from which the ironies of colonialism can be denounced.

In this same essay, Anderson writes that in *Imagined Communities* he overemphasized "the significance of the calendrical simultaneity of apparently random

occurrences” in newspapers (120). In fact, temporal simultaneity is only one way to understand a larger shift toward understanding the self serially, as aggregable into general categories, which enables nationalistic identification, among other things. But even so, Anderson does write that collective subjectivities are not all serial, devoting a large block quote from a story that depicts a character’s awareness of the divide between serial and non-serial versions of social belonging.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the richness with which we experience culture, and a cultural phenomenon like nationalism, depends on more than just a serial, substitutable sense of identity.

### **Globalization, Taste, and Non-Serial Identity**

Dinh’s vague discomfort with ethnicity, with which I began this chapter, has with it a governmental dimension, but his overall ethos of ironic distance characterizes both ethnicity and nationality. Just as with ethnicity Dinh’s eponymous narrator doesn’t bother to seriously list the determining traits of ethnic belonging, he also leaves nationality only partially addressed. At the beginning of the story, quoted in part above, Dinh qualifies his assertion of being American with the parenthetical remark, “At least that’s what my passport says.” The “at least” implies that passport is at best a minimal kind of identity. But then because he mentions a passport, Dinh’s remark can’t help but to also suggest the privileges of American citizenship in an transnational context of travel. The privileges of citizenship is one cause of a strengthening of serial identity

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<sup>6</sup> See “Nationalism, Identity, and the World-in-Motion” pp. 127-28. The protagonist of a story by Pramoedya Ananta Toer joins a revolutionary movement, but this contrasts with her localized, familial contexts. Anderson translates a passage that depicts both the serial and non-serial social worlds the protagonist inhabits.

according to Anderson, since government resources increasingly depend on responding to constituencies. Consequently, rights and entitlements come to naturalize those very constituencies, which can be as large as the imagined community of the nation itself. Despite all this, both the privileges the passport confers through national identity and Dinh's inability to say exactly what other than his passport would determine his nationality, indicate that the bottom line of his story's opening is his ambivalence toward these forms of serialized selfhood. By the end, the story finally shows an alternative to serialized forms of identity through culture and the significance of personal taste.

That "A Strange Letter" begins with these uncertain avowals of identity suggests a more personal form of selfhood that contrasts with the instrumental forms of ethnic categorization and nationality, but then Dinh's ambivalence also has to do with ethnicity and nation itself. After all, to write "My name is Linh Dinh and I am an American" already suggests a discrepancy, that linguistically "Linh Dinh" is not at all an English name. If this first line is to be read not as a paradox, we must read it in the context of a multicultural America. Remarking on "hyphenated Americans" Chow observes that the ethnic portion of identity always occupies the first term which makes Americanness a kind of non-ethnic universal. The implication is then that "ethnic particulars, while continuing to exist, no longer really matter (because they have been reduced to the merely picturesque)" (Chow 30). But then of course, such a state isn't an actuality that can be used to define Americanness, but an anticipated future, which then temporalizes ethnicity itself as atavistic. So then part of Dinh's ambivalence should be understood as the unevenness of multicultural identity: both its multiple cultures and multiple times.

The eponymous letter in “A Strange Letter,” which both is and is not strange, suggests ambiguities at play in nationality, since the letter is a request that plays upon the possibility that American identity is universal. Reproduced in the text of the story, a Vietnamese cousin of Dinh’s wife asks her to find a Vietnamese American for her to marry, but with embarrassing effusiveness and indirectness. This request itself, notably, is not strange. In fact, as Robbins observes, a sort of genre exists of upwardly-mobile female migration to the west. Robbins cites work by Jamaica Kincaid and Bharati Mukherjee and argues that they share a genealogy with no less a canonical work than *Jane Eyre*, all featuring a narrative of a better life in the metropolitan center. Robbins writes that as a genre, these works “flatter the metropolis as inevitable destination and saving source of freedom and happiness” (Robbins 102). In this regard, Dinh’s wife’s cousin’s fictionalized letter is totally normal, and even expected.

Robbins takes up Gayatri Spivak’s reading of *Jane Eyre* as an allegory of both colonization, in that Jane has to replace “Bertha/Antionette as the rightful ‘Mrs. Rochester’” by “economically exploiting and symbolically destroying figures who represent Europe’s colonial possessions” (Robbins 101-102), and as an allegory for critical practice itself which now tends to read Jane’s empowerment as broadly feminist, “at the expense of postcolonial subjects” (102). Robbins calls this observation a “double allegory,” but the point seems to be simply that the freedom of the metropole implies the exploitation of someone else who is out of the picture. More difficultly, Spivak’s double allegory spans centuries. It is “an allegory of the role of empire in the canonical literature of the nineteenth century” with “an allegory of the twentieth-century “bourgeois feminist” critic” as Robbins points out (101). Spivak herself is clear that insofar as

feminist readers don't recognize the displaced other behind Jane's rise, their blindness "attests to the continuing success of the imperialist project displaced and dispersed into more modern forms" (Spivak 243). Thus, there is an implicit third allegory behind Spivak's two, an allegory that conflates colonialism with postcolonialism, at the cost of sufficiently addressing the context of globalization.

Thinking of the genre of *Jane Eyre*-like stories, what stands out about "A Strange Letter" is that it doesn't portray America as a land of wealth and happiness; in fact, Dinh's experience of America is decidedly impoverished. The story ends making a kind of punchline out of the cousin's desire to immigrate into the American dream, but not without a certain pathos. Because the letter is embarrassing, it actually succeeds in feeling intimate, and thus ultimately, it achieves a kind of sympathy. Acknowledging that she and Diem, Dinh's new wife, aren't all that close, Tran Tu Ngoc, the letter's signatory, nonetheless tries to create that closeness through the text of her letter, almost in the manner of Whitman's claim that "this is no book / Who touches this touches a man" ("So Long" LG 611). Dinh notes that the writer was "a distant cousin, someone [the wife] had not seen or talked to for more than a decade" but this unpromising circumstance is portrayed by Tran differently:

You haven't been back to Can Tho in a long time. Perhaps you don't even remember me. I still have very fond memories of your visit in 1989. I was so happy to see you because I am the only girl in my family. Even back then you were very fashionably dressed. Do you remember? The two of us went all over Can Tho. We ate roasted corn; you took me to school, helped me with my homework. We rented Hong Kong videos and stayed

up until two in the morning. Then we fried up some duck eggs with scallions. Do you remember? (Dinh 30)

The issue of remembering is made pathetic, first by the remark that Tran could have been forgotten, and then by the specific details punctuated twice by the beseeching question, “Do you remember?” That Tran remembers announces the importance of these memories even as she states that it’s possible Diem has forgotten. If so, the memories become doubly intimate in that only Tran now has them, and that these personally significant moments are now being shared. Moreover, the letter itself bears these possibly forgotten memories back to someone who experienced them, making the letter not just a text, but part of both people’s subjectivity. Notably even without an acknowledged connection, the letter’s shared sense of identity comes about in an organic version of simultaneous experience. Whether remembered or not, Diem and Tran were in the same place at the same time.

The actual fond memories are narrated either in the plural first person or in second person address and related with adjectival specificity and situated in a physical passage through a city. And while Tran doesn’t get to the long lists of metaphysical seeing that Whitman favors, the underlying experience of being close to what Whitman could call a “Camerado” in a city no less, carries at least a Whitmanian sympathy. John Timberman Newcomb notes that Whitman is associated with putting “transcendental idealism into a framework of urban modernity” especially in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1856) (Newcomb 294). In terms of the type of connection that Tran tries to create with Diem, a poem like Whitman’s “Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd” (1865) from the “Children of Adam” cluster suggests how the city enables a sudden intimacy

that doesn't depend on maintaining contact and is deep though temporary. In fact, transience characterizes the urban encounter. "Now we have met, we have look'd, we are safe" writes Whitman, "Return in peace to the ocean my love, / I too am part of that ocean my love, we are not so much separated" (*LG* 6-8, p. 263). We might further note that Whitman uses a metaphor of the ocean for a crowd, adapting nature as a figure for the city. Interestingly, if both Tran and the now pseudo-American Diem share the intimate space of these memories then Tran would also have a kind of Americanness, if only as potential.

The letter then affirms what Dinh's hedged considerations of ethnicity suggest, the porousness of identity. Even the (post)colonial Vietnamese subject, Tran Tu Ngoc, has both a metropolitan existence, detailed in her memories of hanging out with Diem, and at least possible access to transnational immigration into the United States. In fact, the possibility of migrating to the US is all the more real because of her life in the city; after all, this is what her connection to Diem is based on. Spivak's analysis of *Jane Eyre* perhaps shows its date in that urbanized space is not part of the colonial world she sees as persisting into the then contemporary moment which forms the basis of connection for her doubly allegorical reading.

In fact, a trend that wouldn't have been evident in the early 1980s is that globalization transforms both temporality and spatiality across a network of international cities. In a rough summary of her work, Saskia Sassen suggests that the 1970s marked the limit of the Keynesian city, based on industry, to a globalized city based on increasingly abstract financialization. Sassen observes that an outcome of globalization has been intensified inequality within cities. She writes, "while inequality has long been

a feature of cities, major structural trends in today's phase generate novel types of social and spatial inequality which, at the limit, alter the very meaning of urbanity and civic life" (Sassen 3).

Writing in 1996, Frederic Jameson offers a description of finance capitalism that helps to explain the shift from a Keynesian city to the global city Sassen analyzes. Capital, understood as money invested in agriculture and manufacturing, begins tied to locality; after all investing capital in this form depends on creating profit through concrete transactions based on real commodities. Sassen points out that the Keynesian city is tied to the "material" economy, that even now one aspect of a city's inequality is the persistence of these earlier economic sectors. But even industries like mining, manufacturing and transportation buy more financial and insurance services, thus further driving financialization (Sassen 4). Jameson points out that at some point industrialization begins to reach limits in profitability; industrial expansion can only support a finite amount of investment, and markets become saturated (Jameson 141-142). At this point the greatest profit comes not from production but from financial exchanges, and once profit is invested in speculation and not in production, money itself becomes free-floating and abstract.

To make this point, Jameson veers into a strange comparison. He contrasts "cotton money, or wheat money, textile money, railway money, and the like," money invested in concrete industries, with a figure of money's abstraction: "Now, like the butterfly stirring within the chrysalis, [capital] separates itself off from that concrete breeding ground and prepares to take flight" (142). Jameson doesn't expand on this image or give a clear statement of what exactly capital now becomes. Instead, his point

seems to be that capital in this abstract mode no longer exists in terms of things, but as potential; for that reason it would be misleading to try to attribute to capital some definitive quality. So if we now observe “the intensification of communication technology to the point at which capital transfers today abolishes space and time and can be virtually instantaneously effectuated from one national zone to another,” such an observation confirms the shift in capital toward greater abstraction (143).

From there Jameson asserts that “the problem of abstraction - of which this one of finance capital is a part - must also be grasped in its cultural expressions” (143). By this he seems to mean that capital and culture are connected through a mediated relationship to abstraction so that examining abstraction results in insights into both money and culture.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Jameson sees abstraction as characterizing capitalism itself. He suggests that the break capitalism introduces is the difference between commerce, when money is simply what enables goods to be exchanged, to what he calls, drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, the “deterritorialization” of commerce in which money goes from a medium of exchange to something without content, not wheat-money but the butterfly in the chrysalis. The concept of deterritorialization enables Jameson to claim that abstraction “implies a new ontological and free-floating state” which at this deeper level emanates out as culture and capital (153). In this more muscular form of abstraction, deterritorialization, Jameson describes money as “that

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<sup>7</sup> Arguably Jameson frames the relationship of culture, capital and abstraction in this way merely as an initial conceit to launch into a more complex, historicist consideration of how his account of the shifts from realism to modernism to postmodernism track with the development of capitalism, but it seems to me that if so, Jameson’s deeper analysis preserves at least a theoretical separation between money and culture. For that reason I stick with Jameson’s initial, clearer formulation of this relationship in my own interpretation.

element which by definition has no content or territory and indeed no use-value as such” (153).

But is money really without content and use-value at the level of its very definition? On one hand, Dinh’s story seems to suggest that it is. In her letter, Tran claims to be “very poor” although Dinh’s wife tells him that she is actually well off (31). If this is the case, Tran’s American dream isn’t for something like a better life, which she is already living, but for profit in all of its deterritorialized abstraction. But reading Tran’s motivation in this deterritorialized mode begs the question of why mediate her desire for money through America at all, why not simply want to marry rich? It’s hard to tell the truth from the bullshit in her letter, which is at times cynical and at times naive.<sup>8</sup> After making the apparently cynical statement that her family is very poor, while also claiming “I’m not trying to suck up to you now that you have a rich husband,” Tran goes on to tell about when she thought she might marry a Vietnamese American (31).

In this paragraph, what seems to be Tran’s pursuit of money is presented as wanting to live in America. As though to evoke as much pity as possible, she begins by contrasting Diem’s “luck” with her own: “If only I were as lucky as you, how happy I’d be. I have dreamt of coming to America since I was ten, maybe earlier, but this lifelong dream has brought me nothing but disappointment” (31). This figure of luck masks any

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<sup>8</sup> I use the term “bullshit” with an eye toward its descriptive qualities. Harry G. Frankfurt in *On Bullshit* (2005) notes that the “loose usage” of bullshit is a phenomenon which is “vast and amorphous” (#). Because of its commonality, “bullshit” has less of a sting than outright lying, and implies not so much immoral deceptiveness, but an insincerity that after all isn’t so serious. He likens bullshit to “humbug” though obviously “humbug” can’t be used interchangeably with bullshit without acknowledging the unhip character of its association with Scrooge in “A Christmas Carol.” Humbug, like bullshit, characterizes an untruth that is short of lying, suggesting as Frankfurt remarks, that there is a “continuum” of untruth, of which lying is a severe form and bullshit a more innocuous (#). These two aspects of bullshit are relevant to my use of it in that Tran’s letter’s untruths don’t seem as harsh as lies partly because they seem part of a vast, amorphous context of exaggeration.

overt concern with money, and makes it plausible that America is actually something that is important to Tran beyond just wealth. And this sense that she genuinely believes America to connote luck is affirmed in the childlike avowal of her “lifelong dream.” We’re told in the exposition that Tran is twenty-three so admitting that she’s wanted to go to America since age ten makes the detail of her claim untrue, while suggesting the excess of sentiment attached to her dream of going to America.

It’s notable too that Tran’s avowal of being poor, and Diem’s counteravowal that she is well-off isn’t as clear cut as it might have initially seemed. After the letter ends, Dinh asks his wife whether Tran is really poor. “I asked my wife about Tran Tu Ngoc and was told that her family deals in electronics. They have a four-story house, and she has vacationed in six different countries.” If she is not actually poor, and this is the definite meaning of these details, then this information suggests that Diem and Tran really aren’t so distant, that ten years of not speaking doesn’t mean that the latest news isn’t still conveyed and made known. Therefore, ironically, if Tran is lying, Diem is too. Tran is not some unknown, distant relation whose wedding wishes can only be cynical. And Diem’s exaggerated distance from Tran, under a psychoanalytic reading, would suggest their actual closeness, that Diem too harbored some kind of American dream. In a way, then, the letter is honest. It expresses an understanding of Diem and Tran’s similarity while acknowledging the many disavowals necessary to come to that understanding.

These kinds of somewhat transparent lies are the kind of thing that makes the overall tone of the letter one that is between cynicism and earnestness and makes it less plausible to read Tran as only interested in money; she is clearly interested in some

kind of idea about America itself. This kind of cathexis to a specific nation doesn't seem explicable under the robust theory of abstract capital put forth by Jameson, unless we have recourse to claiming the unevenness of all postmodern phenomenon, including financialization. In fact, Tran's interest in America does seem to partake in a more classically Marxist notion of consumption. In *Grundrisse* Marx notes that eating is a form of consumption, and that this example exposes the basic quality of all consumption. If consuming food "produces" the body, this productive aspect of consumption "is also true of every kind of consumption which in one way or another produces human beings in some particular aspect."<sup>9</sup> In other words, consumption occurs because the consumer appropriates the commodity into his or her identity. And Tran wants to see herself as in some way American.

Pierre Bourdieu points out that in the act of consumption both economic and cultural appropriation occurs. And if Jameson is correct that economic consumption is motivated by the status of money as what enables exchange while also existing abstractly as profit, Bourdieu similarly proposes that cultural consumption is driven by "profit in distinction" through differences in "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 228). Cultural capital, Bourdieu suggests, is not absolute but rather relational. It arises because any cultural production objectifies its conditions of production, and therefore embodies the social relationships under which cultural objects come to be.<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu notes that the difference in distinction between different cultural objects is intensified when what he

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<sup>9</sup> From the chapter "Production, Consumption, Distribution, Exchange (Circulation)" under the section "Consumption and Production." I am using the digitized text at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm#2>.

<sup>10</sup> Marx would put Bourdieu's point that cultural production objectifies social relations under the category of production's own moment of consumption. As he notes in *Grundrisse* the basic figure of production would be the worker using up his ability to produce in production itself.

calls “the field of cultural production” obtains more autonomy relative to economics. In other words, so long as cultural goods seem to express not merely a vulgar monetary price, but a universal, aestheticized value, the role of distinction in motivating consumption becomes more important. And the figure of an autonomous aesthetic value, like the figure of money, is a suitably deterritorialized abstraction to motivate the pursuit of cultural profit seemingly for its own sake.

Dinh ends his story reflecting on his twenty four years of impoverishment in the US, meant to contrast with Tran’s life of third world privilege. He gives three separate incidents at unspecified times.

Once I went to a supermarket and paid for a packet of Ramen Pride with 28 pennies.

Another time I paid for a can of Spam with 159 pennies.

I waited until there was no one around before I went to the cash register, but as I counted out my pennies for the grinning cashier--as I formed for her 16 mounds of nearly worthless currency, minted merely to decorate the bottoms of shopping-mall fountains--a long line grew behind me.

Once, in the cheapest bar in Philadelphia, I tried to pay for a mug of Rolling Rock with 60 pennies and was told to get the fuck out.

“You have to take this! It’s real money.”

“Get the fuck out of here!” (31-32)

Each of these instances is presented as a singular event. But prefaced as they are with “once,” “another time” and “once” again, it’s clear that the episode expands from the

initial scene in the supermarket to the bar with an indefinite sense of time, making it seem like Dinh is poor outside of any teleology of exchanging rags for riches, which oddly makes poverty occupy the same nontemporal status of the adjective American that follows any hyphenated American expression of multicultural identity. And at this point Dinh's Whitmanian assertion of the author's presence within the text comes to embody a particular cultural position, poverty. While Bourdieu focuses on the autonomy of elite culture, it's interesting to note that Dinh's self-positioning at the economic margins asserts its own distance from the merely economic, as Whitman's characterization of himself as "one of the roughs" does as well. The various insincerities of Tran's letter makes Dinh's admissions come across as bracingly true, in its implicit rejection of even wanting to be rich. And when he ends with stating the obvious content of the letter, Dinh suggests the absurdity of Tran's striving. "This is the implied P.S. to the strange letter: Your husband must have a Vietnamese American friend who might be interested in a country girl like me" (32).

Pennies, as an increment of money so small as to almost no longer be money, come to indirectly represent that other form of governmentally-guaranteed identity, citizenship. Dinh remarked in the opening paragraph how his American identity is backed up by his passport, and given the qualifications that this American identity then takes, the fact that pennies too are only nominally money suggests the limitation of this kind of official definition of things and people, of the kind of serialized identity ascendent with nationalism, which is that it all has only a minimal character. That the nation also exists in the cultural imaginary, in a differential field with other nations that creates cultural capital along with economic capital, seems to suggest a way that identity can be

more meaningful, but the fact that culture also operates under the logic of consumption would be cause for pessimism, not optimism.

### **The United States As Essentially the Greatest Poem**

In his blog Dinh twice quotes Whitman's assertion "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem," and his use of this quote on both occasions is not merely to make fun of it. In a post from August 16, 2010 Dinh transitions from a paragraph made almost entirely of Whitman's quote to a paragraph beginning "Boy, was our bard wrong!" But here he focuses not on the question of America's status as the greatest poem, but on what overflows from Whitman after that assertion: that we "need never be bankrupt while corn grows from the ground" (qtd in Dinh). Dinh remarks:

Though we grow practically nothing but corn now, we are bankrupt, and of all the arts, none is more despised and neglected than poetry, but don't worry, this article is not really about that dessicated [sic] corpse, but the climate that has made poetry obsolete, the conditions that are the cause and symptoms of our national nervous breakdown.

Dinh's engagement with Whitman is explicitly tangential; he goes out of his way to assure us that his subject isn't poetry, which he assumes that we hate.<sup>11</sup> But then even if the topic is not poetry, Dinh nonetheless proposes a relationship between the nation, poetry, and culture. If poetry is a marginal, rejected form of culture, that very condition

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<sup>11</sup> It's interesting to note that if we presume poetic utterance to be marginal and despised as Dinh suggests, blog writing would then have a higher status than poetry. After all, blog prose is not obsolete as poetry is, and it's what Dinh's reader has chosen to read instead of other cultural texts, including poetry.

suggests a problem in culture, which is actually its hostility to poetry. To Dinh poetry is a form of attention that opposes the subtle propaganda characterized by “the beamed appearance of normalcy, the goofy jokes, dancing contests and fried chicken ads, etc, that’s masking pervasive rot and despair.” Despite the claim that his topic isn’t poetry, it actually is. Moreover, Dinh’s sense that poetry expresses an orientation toward culture is actually close to Whitman’s meaning in his quote, though this connection isn’t at first obvious. It’s through a question of the cultural status of the nation that Dinh and Whitman come to a similar sense of what the United States means. This meaning is actually one of becoming over being. Whitman writes: “A great poem is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning. Has any one fancied he could sit at last under some due authority and rest satisfied with explanations and realize and be content and full? To no such terminus does the greatest poet bring” (*LG* 24). If Whitman means that the United States is the greatest poem it is not as some already realized fact, but as a potentiality that Whitman thinks will inevitably be realized. Dinh might seem to suggest that fatuity of such a hope, especially in the trash culture of, say, dancing contests and fried chicken ads, but his poetry attempts, through a kind of blog ethos, to affirm the kind of Americanness Whitman invoked. Thus, despite his ethnic hybridity and transnational fluidity and the hybrid and fluid nature of his blog and poetry writing, Dinh’s work is actually about proposing a plausible model of national identity in the face of what seems like the postmodern dispersal, aided by the Internet, of just that type of metanarrative. Also, Dinh’s handling of Whitman’s themes suggest a re-reading of Whitman’s own canonical poetry and its negotiation with a dispersed identity.

Not that Dinh's poetry would then remind a reader of rhapsodic lines by Whitman. In his comment in *Best American Poetry 2004*, Dinh admits "I've always been a reader of trash literature. The worse the writing, the more I love it. I get off on flawed thinking expressed in bad English" (*Best* 252). This comment is particularly directed to his poem "13" which appropriates "the authoritative voice" of horoscopes, and whose authority is derived from its probably wrongness. Dinh comments, "Since fortune-tellers already know the future, the present and the past are nothing to them." That horoscopes don't actually know the future, and yet ignore past and present, consign them to speaking with authority about what can't be known. And while an analysis of "13" may well express Dinh's fascination with trash literature, his slightly later poem sequence "Fortunes" (2007), as its title suggests, returns to this idea of a known future, but with an additional element. Before each poem Dinh lists a fortune number and a date, with the last "fortune" as "fortune n° 1" corresponding to the earliest date (*Jam Alerts* 104-118). Also, appended to the bottom of each "fortune" is the line: "Filed under: destiny Comments: 0." That each poem ends with announcing zero comments suggests a falling short of the vaunted interactivity of the Internet, and suggests that despite the possibility of leaving comments, sometimes blogs are like more traditional texts, simply one way communications.

Thus the poem sequence "Fortunes" is meant to invoke a blog and also the curiously intimate anonymity that Julia Rak characterizes as the "blog ideology" (Rak 173). Rak argues that the blog is not just a remediation of the diary, blogs have the key difference in existing in a "grey space between public and private selves." "Blogging depends on [a] constant evocation of the life and interests of the blogger" and thus

might seem private, but that apparent privacy actually suggests “both the blogger’s belief that s/he is more anonymous online than offline as it builds community between bloggers who trust each other as they share experiences and opinions together.”

Blogging then, uses privacy as a means for a public engagement.

The first “fortune” in “Fortunes,” which is also the last fortune if “Fortunes” is read as a blog in which the latest entries are first, suggests a reading of Dinh’s surrealism even as it seems intimate in the manner Rak describes. After the heading with its fortune number (841), and date (February 12, 2007), the poem reads:

Read about “transparent white” in the afternoon, dream of Bianca Blanco  
at night, slide into third base, headfirst, of course, entangling my goatee.  
How fortunate I don’t babble during sleep, dependable wife still snoring  
beside me. Abrupt knife fantasy discounted as spilled subconscious.

(104)

In the classical sense of surrealism being a superseding of realism because it records the greater reality of the subconscious, the poem is mostly about a dream. But that dream also presupposes a suppressed reality, something true even if concealed, at least from the “dependable wife.” The wife establishes the intimacy of this poem, the apparent license that anonymity gives a blogger to reveal more of him or herself than in the offline world, in that the dream itself is what someone as personally intimate as the wife should not know about, despite its apparent nonsense. That the dream does present nonsense is acknowledged by the dismissal of the “abrupt knife fantasy” because it is just “spilled” subconscious.

But then its significance, and what must be concealed from the wife, is what the latent content of the dream suggests. The concept of “transparent white” turns into a female name that means whiteness, counterpoised to a fantasy marked by its masculinity--baseball, facial hair. In fact, in the associative logic of dreams, it’s possible to see these fantasies as being addressed to whiteness and America: a white woman, whose inviolability establishes her as the protector of racial whiteness under miscegenation, and baseball, the so-called great American pastime.<sup>12</sup> Two more fortunes make a concern with nation and race at least a theme in the larger poem.

Fortune 192 is about a transnational, probably Asian, poet:

With one foot in North Korea, one in South, I write a poem. With my heart  
in Mexico, liver in the USA, I write a poem. With the tip of my nose in  
Great Yarmouth, Ajaccio, Dien Bien Phu, I nudge and smear borders.  
(108)

The first two instances of border-crossing turn into the writing of a poem, and the third instance makes a general statement that substitutes poems for an action, the act of “smearing” borders. The next poem suggests that border-crossing itself suggests nationality, a specifically American nationality:

To be scribbled on a postcard: in the USA, even the houses are homeless,  
pointing elsewhere, yearning to get out. This warehouse, with its fake

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<sup>12</sup> According to Ann Laura Stoler as discourses became increasingly focused on social health, especially in the wake of imperial discourse, “child-rearing” became a matter of imperial and racial duty, and white women became “the bearers of a more racist imperial order and the custodians of their desire-driven, immoral men” (35). See *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, (Durham: Duke UP, 1995).

beams, to England; that “hacienda,” with its jive adobe, to Mexico. Many swear by another galaxy. (108)

Thus connected, Dinh suggests that transnationalism itself is a common feature, paradoxically of a form of nationalism, American nationalism.

The epigrammatic form of “Fortunes” means that these addresses to border-crossing and national identity remain in this suggestive sequence of brief poems, and therefore don’t invite a larger theorization of the larger implications and significance of this paradoxical construct of a nation defined as transnational. But then for Dinh, the problem of nationality and the tendency for American nationality to construct itself as an exception to nationality, (as in the idea of exporting American democracy into the very different geopolitical contexts of Iraq and Afghanistan), is a larger concern that spans much of his work. A more complex articulation of transnational American nationalism, and thus a suggestion on how Dinh rearticulates Whitman, occurs in his poem “Made in USA.”

“Made in USA” is from Dinh’s 2005 volume of poems *American Tatts*. The poem is the third in a sequence of four poems that deal with painting. Dinh himself was an art student, recalling in a blog post from September 28, 2009, a “1984 Leon Golub lecture” in which “some dork, not me, asked, ‘What advice would you give a young painter?’ Without hesitation, he said, ‘Quit! It’s not worth it!’” This post begins with Whitman’s “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” quote as an epigraph; and after Golub’s discouraging advice, Dinh points out, “Every young writer or artist starts out believing that he or she’s a chosen one. What choice does one have?” The general condition for art to exist is youthful messianism, without which Golub’s advice, a

real truth, would make all art impossible. And though Dinh uses Whitman's quote again to point out the irrelevance of poetry in contemporary culture, he also recognizes that this irrelevance is enabling.<sup>13</sup> In pointing out the artist's lack of a choice, Dinh goes on to remark: "One must think this way," messianically, "to keep going until it's too late to change or death or until one has enough of failure, rejection or poverty to agonize over a caesura." Agonizing over a caesura, or developing the kind of attentive habit of mind necessary for art, is the difficult task students are advised to quit from, implicitly because it is so contrary to what society values. But then once embarked upon, this artistic temperament turns into a kind of helpless slide to doom. Through this line of thinking, Dinh interestingly conflates painting with poetry, as the connection to Whitman's quote suggests, and this conflation makes "Made In USA" also a comment on poetry.

The title suggests at its most obvious level American commodity, and the poem is largely about a student painter, Aziz, who in the last line has "Made in USA" tattooed on his forehead, thus getting an American tatt. The first stanza describes Aziz physically, then through nationality: "Born in Iran, he was raised in Germany and England" (2). Aziz is then "oriental" and transnational, and how he ended up in a Philadelphia art school isn't stated. But then it isn't really a question since the point of this part of Aziz's description is to suggest the insufficiency of nation to describe a person. As with Dinh in "A Strange Letter," it would be hard to say exactly whether Aziz is Iranian, German, English or even American. The stanza ends with drawing Dinh, or at least the speaker,

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<sup>13</sup> Actually, this use of Whitman's quote predates by nearly a year the other, similar use of Whitman's quote I open this section with. So to suggest that this use of the quote is after what I mention first is misleading, strictly speaking, but I invert the temporal sequence for ease of reading.

into the poem as a like-minded art student. Considering themselves both “badass” painters in the vein of early twentieth century German expressionists Max Beckman and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, the speaker states “Like children, we thought we were destined to rule. / We painted all night, thinking we’ll be famous by morning” (6-7).

A childish sense of being destined to rule is another way to phrase what Dinh characterized as the student artist’s outlook, being young and feeling chosen, and this outlook is developed in the next stanza of the poem:

What a sweet, angry calling it is--

Wanting to smear your way through life!

Painting as a metaphysical passport to universal acceptance.

Painting as a lift from the mundane and the 9 to 5.

Painting as power and trance and annihilation. (8-12)

This stanza bears the slightly patronizing sense of the childishness of seeing painting in these sublime terms, which makes even the gradually intensifying, phrased-in-parallel definitions of what painting is seem a little disingenuous. Even so, the sublime difference that painting offers can’t help but seem appealing. At first painting is the transcendent form of community, “universal acceptance.” From there painting enables a repudiation of the mundane implied in the universality of being universally accepted. And finally we break from even opposition to a sublime inhumanness that doesn’t have anything to do with anything prosaic like wanting “to smear your way through life.” But then the intensifying rhetorical parallelism comes off half as a joke since it’s clear that what this stanza is about is a childish, aggrandized vision, not anything like a rhapsodic paean to painting’s power.

This mature perspective suggests the attitude from which this poem is written, one that undercuts the conceit of art in favor of something more mundane, and is therefore a reading of the Whitman assertion Dinh returns to in his blog. Characterizing art as being above “the mundane and the 9 to 5” suggests its inherent remove from ordinary life; so making fun of this idea, as Dinh subtly does, suggests that art is actually ordinary; and in a literal sense, the United States becomes a poem, because any art is as mundane as any experience. And actually this evolution of art from something all-transforming to something ordinary reflects prognostications about new media. Lisa Nakamura writes that “much of the research written in the nineties centered on hypertext theory, or on discursive ‘virtual communities,’” areas that imply a privileged subcultural status, as in now less-often used term “digerati” (Nakamura 1). But then the Internet didn’t evolve into some kind of unending new frontier that is forever unfixed and unstable. What actually happened is “the massification of the Internet as a media and communicative form,” in other words, the Internet has become ordinary (2). So then insofar as Dinh is hostile toward a transcendent vision of art, and possibly transcendence itself (recall his love of trash writing), we can see in Dinh a privileging of the everyday that reflects his use of ordinary communicative new media, such as the blog. But also, if transcendence seems to be a form of abuse, of a childish art, Dinh still maintains an ambivalence toward it. In the next stanza the speaker specifies that “in our cases, nothing really happened of course, / As all we had was crazy energy and a love for beer” (13-14). The “sweet, angry calling” of painting reduces down to an obviously mundane consumable, beer, and this reduction is experienced communally in the plural pronoun. At first it seems that the poet is speaking for both himself and Aziz,

but the next line distinguishes Aziz from the “we” who have only youth and alcohol: in contrast to everyone else, “Only Aziz was certifiably crazy” (15).

Aziz’s insanity is described as misrecognized as just drug abuse, which would just be an intensified form of a youthful love of partying. Instead, with a heightened sense of rhetorical suspense, his insanity is introduced to us as “something else entirely”:

Each time he went mad, Aziz would go on about

How he wasn’t really Iranian.

How his nose was fake, how even his skin was fake,

How he was a blonde German child kidnapped by Iranian parents. (21-24)

Before noting the two more obvious candidates for commentary, that Aziz’s insanity reminds us of Dinh’s problematic nationalism in “A Strange Letter” and that the question of art seems to be dropped altogether, I want to point out that Dinh uses “real,” and its adverbial form “really,” three times in the two stanzas we’ve been analyzing, and nowhere else in the entire poem. At first we have nothing “really” happening with painting, in which reality exposes painting to be nothing transcendent, so that what’s real is a kind of objectivity. This objective sense of reality is taken up again in line 16, “lose it for real,” which again contrasts a dramatic pose of an art student with actual insanity. But here Dinh introduces a certain irony in that what the real designates is not sanity and rationality but an actual state that is the total opposite, and for that reason needs to be emphasized as real. By the time Aziz asserts that he isn’t “really” Iranian, the notion of the real isn’t just a simple objectivity that contrasts with subjective mental states; it is rhetorical too, a mark of insistence that may not have to do with a notion of reality.

Most words are typically understood to refer to things or concepts, but “really” is a word that doesn’t have this referential character. Rather than have a denotative function, it has more of an expressive use. And if language is generally both denotative and expressive, it nonetheless is important to distinguish between these two modes. Thinking of language as a system of references means that language must be superficial, readily apparent in its reference, in order to be understood. But in contrast, expression is not superficial; it represents the depth of the intention behind language. The difference is one between identifying something and calling a thing something. Deleuze states that the kind of difference between expression and denotation is ultimately a “depth-surface distinction,” which helps to clarify that the role of expression, of something like the colloquial use of “really,” is not serial like ordinary language signification (*Logic of Sense* 215). Instead it suggests the opposite of partial, substitutable signifiers, which to Deleuze is not the signified, as in classical Saussurian signification, but a more enigmatic presence that he calls the Body without Organs.

In Aziz’s mad claims, the word “really” actually condenses the claims to nationality and art, otherwise at stake in the poem. First, “really” enables Aziz to differentiate his appearance of being Iranian from some higher, but unspecified, truth. And at the same time the claim itself isn’t irreconcilably insane. To not really be Iranian doesn’t preclude having been born in Iran, which the poem begins by asserting. After all, it’s not the fact of birth itself that confers nationality, instead an imaginary feeling like nationalism is probably more decisive. But from there Aziz then thinks his nose and skin are fake, so that it seems that what really determines nationality is physical, since the nose, and especially the skin, both seem basic to physical appearance.

Appearance is also what is most obvious about any person, more so when contrasted with something internal like a subjective sense of nationalism. And yet that his nose and skin could be fake, which they really could given plastic surgery, makes physical appearance ultimately unreliable as well. Thus, Aziz's two assertions give two competing versions of nationality, cultural and biological, which have to be invoked serially to supplement each other.

At the same time, if a sane reading can be made for each of these claims they also contain violent refusals.<sup>14</sup> Looking physically like an Iranian as he does, asserting that he isn't entails refusing his nose and skin. Aziz implicitly identifies himself as a noseless, skinless non-Iranian, through what Deleuze and Guattari would characterize as a schizo body: an "active internal struggle against the organs" (Deleuze and Guattari 150). Deleuze initially developed the concept of the Body without Organs through a reading of Melanie Klein, in which the schizoid position, a phase of infancy, is characterized by a differentiation between bad, partial objects, food and excrement, and its opposite. "What the schizoid position opposes to bad partial objects [...] is not a good object, even if it were partial. What is opposed is rather an organism without parts, a body without organs, with neither mouth nor anus, having given up all introjection or projection, and being complete at this price" (Deleuze 216). So then what

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<sup>14</sup> The reader might have noticed that there is actually a third claim made by Aziz about his nationality, quoted above. But since this line largely condenses the other two claims, I have omitted a reading of it in the main text. As with the other claims it is possible to read a sane version and an insane version of the line, and both should be seen in context with the second line of the poem: "Born in Iran, he was raised in Germany and England." When Aziz asserts in line 24 that he's "a blonde German child kidnapped by Iranian parents" this can be read as logical in that Aziz might well identify with being German, having been raised there, while by the same logic his parents would be Iranian, since they would have been raised in Iran. But then what this line emphasizes perhaps more than the preceding two claims is the violent character of Aziz's renunciation of being Iranian: he sees the family as a crime. Nonetheless this sense of violent rejection of nationality is present in the other two claims.

Aziz is opposing to false nationalities isn't another nationality, each of which would be partial, split between culture and physiology. Instead what he seeks is the intensity of the "really:" a wholeness behind nationality, with neither culture nor noses or skin.

Because Aziz identifies himself not as an oriental Iranian but as a teutonic German it's possible to think that at stake in this disidentification is race more than nationality. But Dinh works against such an interpretation in the penultimate stanza of the poem: "When Aziz was around blacks, he would say, 'I'm black, just like you.' / But when he was round whites, he'd say 'I'm white just like you.'" (25-26). Aziz isn't interested in the economy of social privilege in these statements, of the particular status of whiteness in a hierarchy of race, but rather the fluidity of ethnicity.

Before turning to the poem's ending, it's interesting that Dinh so pointedly details Aziz's hospital: "Pennsylvania Hospital--the oldest in the country, / Founded by Ben Franklin in 1751" (17-18). On one hand these details contribute realist verisimilitude to Dinh's narrative, reminding the reader that this poem is supposedly a memoir. But because of Aziz's psychosis of nationality, invoking the hospital's status as the original American hospital and its founding father suggests a connection between Aziz's madness and the national myth of origin, a myth which is also about an Americanness we don't live in the partialness of experience, but rather the deep Americanness beyond: what could be called an Americanness without organs.

It's almost unnoticeable that when Dinh describes the hospital as the "oldest in the country" it is actually older than the country. But then this type of prolepsis is rooted deeply in the mythology of the nation, perhaps most apparently in George Bancroft's popular and influential ten volume *History of the United States* (1834-1874), which as

Arac points out, comes to July 4, 1776 at the eighth volume, so that the vast majority of this history anticipates the United States. Arac points out that the effect of Bancroft's anticipatory history is that "the already existing, quasi-eternal, land itself" is associated with the United States, in such a way that the US is both "already present" and manifests "itself in time" (Arac, *Narrative* 625-626).

Turning to Bancroft's treatment of Benjamin Franklin in the third volume, it's notable that the pages devoted to Franklin's life actually tell a parable of a love of freedom coupled with industriousness. Bancroft begins with Franklin's father, who opposed in his Boston newspaper the persecution of witches and quakers. Arac notes that Bancroft in general moves by "a principle of supersession" (626). In the first volume the puritans established the institutions of "Democratic liberty and independent Christian worship" (Bancroft qtd in Arac 626). By the third, Bancroft was willing to see the puritans as now regressive; challenged by the reformation, "freedom of mind" in Bancroft's words, he now sees "the Salem witchcraft trials as arising out of a politically retrograde attempt by ministers to reclaim their eroding power."<sup>15</sup> Thus, James Franklin is a proleptic figure for the freedom of mind that Benjamin would more fully embody. Even when Benjamin Franklin is a "runaway apprentice" he is immediately described as the "greatest of the sons of New England of that generation" (Bancroft 376).

Franklin's founding of public institutions shows how biographical detail becomes allegorical in depicting the eternal Americanness of the pre-United States period. The margins of *History of the United States* notes dates, sometimes down to the month; and Franklin's life in Philadelphia begins in October 1723, but the next date is 1749.

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<sup>15</sup> Bancroft's words are quoted in Arac, 627. Arac's description of Bancroft's views on the Salem witch trials is also from 627.

Bancroft begins this condensed span in a surprisingly small scale, detailing the “sobriety, frugality, and industry” of the young Franklin. Beginning with Franklin “Toiling early and late” Bancroft goes on to specify that his “ingenuity was such, he could form letters, make types and wood cuts, and engrave vignettes in copper” (376). From these mundane accomplishments Bancroft then builds what otherwise would seem like Franklin’s unbelievable success, as though it merely followed through an inexorable logic:

He planned a newspaper; and, when he became its proprietor and editor, he fearlessly defended absolute freedom of thought and speech, and the inalienable power of the people. Desirous of advancing education, he proposed improvements in the schools of Philadelphia; he invented the system of subscription libraries, and laid the foundation of one that was long the most considerable library in America; he suggested the establishment of an academy, which has ripened into a university; he saw the benefit of concert in the pursuit of science, and gathered a philosophical society for its advancement. (376-377)

By this stage of Franklin’s description his mere thought seems to result in a successful institution of some improvement or advance, with historical time left indistinct. The effect of this narrative isn’t a sense of Franklin’s life; it is not a biography, but a displacement of biography to an account of the nation’s more abstract development. And it’s for this reason that Franklin now connotes a founding father, more than a biographical person.

So then despite the specificity of Dinh's reference, the particular hospital, its claim to fame, its founding father, Dinh actually invokes a highly abstract sense of the nation: temporally indeterminate, populated by figures, motivated by freedom. Recall that Dinh had written that every "young writer or artist starts out believing that he or she's a chosen one" ("Empire in Funkville"). And this attitude becomes the childish sense of thinking one was "destined to rule" in "Made In USA" (6). But far from just dismissing it, Dinh starts to tie the longings of a nascent artist into the sense of the nation itself, through a subtle reference to the founding mythology of a country that considers itself a chosen one. Aziz's madness, his radical acceptance of the inconsistency of race and nationality, is an intensification of this mythology. Disappointment, either not becoming famous or not really upholding the ideals of democracy, is not enough to make Aziz quit, as Leon Golub supposedly advised Dinh's art school class. Instead the "metaphysical passport to universal acceptance" either as painting, poetry or the land of the free, recedes from actual experience, emptying itself of all partially-failed real content, becoming instead the Body without Organs over which all these aspirations pass.

### **To Think of Time**

If Dinh's repeated returns to Whitman's pronouncement that the United States are essentially the greatest poem suggest that this idea is problematic, it's notable that Whitman himself ends the preface by putting it in conjectural phrasing: "The soul of the largest and wealthiest and proudest nation *may well* go half-way to meet that of its

poets” (*LG* 26, emphasis added). Whitman can sometimes be read as merely asserting himself as the greatest poet, indeed his self-reviews tend to make this claim, but the work itself contains moments of doubt that make the ending of the preface, its status of awaiting something, actually true to the experience of the book. In fact, I read incompleteness as the key to how Whitman creates a sense of unity from the vastness of referents he uses so that ultimately the transcendence his work achieves is based on division and fragmentation more than bland unification. It’s this form of transcendence that enables a transformation of culture into nation, of United States into poem, and thus suggests how shifting, variable identifications might still have meaning.

One way to sum up the first *Leaves of Grass* is to appropriate Ivan Marki’s synopsis from *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*. Marki summarizes the book as basically a narrative. The poet “must find the voice, the language [...] that will communicate his vision to those who are blind to its truth even as they embody and live it. If [...] the speaker passes his trial, he will have become ‘the greatest poet’” (Marki). That Whitman saw his purpose as articulating the not-yet-expressed truths of the people makes him similar to Bancroft; Arac notes that Bancroft too “conceived his task to resemble that of a primitive bard. He wanted to articulate what his people already knew and believed [...] but to give it a shape and scope that would include [...] more than could be directly known by any single person or local tradition” (Arac 623). The greatest poet is great because of his transcendence, but the process of this transcendence isn’t to be merely assumed, if Marki is right that Whitman isn’t merely asserting himself as bard, but trying for it. So finally there is an open-ended quality of the 1855 *Leaves*. It occurs in time.

The poem that becomes “Song of Myself” has a rough sequence. In the encyclopedia, James E. Miller Jr. writes about “Song of Myself” and breaks it into two phases, an awakening that starts with the famous soul-athwart-the-body chest penetration, and then a developing transcendence which is finally “ineffable” and mystical (Miller). The awakening sections tend to be more concrete, and to proceed as lists more than avowals; they are Whitman’s “word of the modern . . . . a word en masse” (*LG* 49). In fact, what I earlier cited as evidence of Whitman’s concern for the immediate, “What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me,” occurs in the context of this first phase in what would come to be the end of the 14th section of “Song of Myself.” In the 1855 version, this statement is in the midst of widely varying descriptions, from the “negro [who] holds firmly the reins of his four horses” (37) to the “wild gander [that] leads his flock through the cold night” (38). This paratactic divergence makes Whitman’s statement, “I see in them and myself the same old law,” express an increasing transcendence that comes about in the disparateness of what he mentions. What’s discontinuous flows together in the sweep of the poem.

That a list poem with no obvious unifying principle comes to seem capacious and unified is not altogether unusual. According to Barbara Herrnstein Smith, when verse proceeds by parataxis, “that is, [when] the coherence of the poem will not be dependent on the sequential arrangement of its major thematic units” then the tendency of the poem is toward indefinite extension (Smith 99). Smith notes that lists tend to be generated by something outside of the items listed, perhaps something conceptual (100). Indeed, in Whitman the lists of specific images are generated by a more abstract conceit. Combined with a sense of infinite expansion, the lists curiously seem to

concretely invoke something abstract. Whitman summarizes this effect as he draws down from a catalog of different people he is comrades with, first through commentary and then through another list.

I resist anything better than my own diversity,  
And breathe the air and leave plenty after me,  
And am not stuck up, and am in my place.

The moth and the fisheggs are in their place,  
The suns I see and the suns I cannot see are in their place,  
The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place. (LG 43)

“I resist anything better than my own diversity” suggests that the list of people, and Whitman explicitly includes people “Of every hue and trade and rank” (43), are all ultimately self-descriptions. But then identifying with diversity doesn’t mean Whitman surpasses a specific self; instead Whitman maintains a sense of specificity through his assertion of place. Place forms the organizing principle to this last list--last in what he would later break out as section 16--and it comes to mean not necessarily a spatial coordinate, but rather a sense of ordered belonging.<sup>16</sup> Place should be understood as being-in-place.

Miller marks a transition from “roaming the continent, celebrating scenes of ordinary life” to an erotic account of touch and then to an abstract comment on “human commonality,” which is evident in Whitman’s turn to place, especially since place

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<sup>16</sup> What I quote is by far not the last list that Whitman employs in “Song of Myself.” It is however, the last list in what would become section 16 of “Song of Myself” which wraps a long series of lists before section 17 which breaks from the pattern of listing with abstract commentary.

enables Whitman to connect the palpable with the impalpable. Because this transition still takes place interspersed with the vivid details of Whitman's lists, it can be hard to notice Whitman's turn away from perceptible, objective things toward thoughts. The meditation on place, which begins as an assertion of specificity, becomes a kind of minimal and universal form of existence. Whitman tries to articulate the reality of this essentially conceptual understanding as something common to all people:

These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not  
 original with me,  
 If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing,  
 If they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing,  
 If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,  
 If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing. (LG 43)

The demonstrative pronoun "these" seems to refer to both the immediate observed moments Whitman records and to something like the reflection on place, which both can be encompassed as thought. In these lines thought takes on great importance in Whitman's poem as the ultimate tally, or as the generative principle behind the observed world which Whitman records at length. But then thought is also problematic in that it can't be made to appear with the same reality as things. Whitman doesn't diverge into theoretical argumentation, after all, the great poet "is no arguer" (LG 9), but he does seem uncomfortable with thought's immateriality. This discomfort is reflected in Whitman's tone, which turns suddenly insistent and doubtful. Supposing the poem actually is original, that it is more Whitman and less the reader, makes Whitman willing to pronounce his work "nothing or next to nothing." This intensified rhetoric isn't

necessary in the paratactic lists, which after all are also assertions, except that they assert material scenes as opposed to thoughts.

By the next stanza Whitman returns to serene observation: “This is the green grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is, / This is the common air that bathes the globe.” Beginning with another demonstrative pronoun, Whitman again refers to the poem as a whole, except in this line, it might initially read as a simple description of grass. Only with the parallel phrase of the next line is it clear that “this” indicates a more general, immaterial grammatical subject. It’s notable how affirmative these lines sound and how they contrast against the repeated “nothing” in the previous stanza.

It might be tempting to see in the contrast of these two stanzas a passage through negativity that emerges reassuringly into the central image of the book, grass. But then the poem itself puts these two moments together more as juxtapositions than a narrative; nothing answers the series of if statements in the stanza of doubtfulness.

It’s not until the so-called “cuttings” that Whitman gives a more developed treatment of the possible negativity raised by the question of whether his poem is nothing. In what would come to be “To Think of Time” and interestingly, a year later in the 1856 edition, would end that volume as “Burial Poem,” Whitman again addresses the possibility of nothingness. This poem begins explicitly on the subject of thought: “To think of time . . . to think through the retrospection, / To think of today . . . and the ages continued henceforward” (*LG* 100). These opening clauses leave open exactly what the outcome of thought is, and instead seem to focus on the moment of thought itself. But then the phrase “to think through the retrospection” gives thought the

character of penetrating through time, in particular through the past tense, even as the next line puts thought in relation to the other two tenses. If previously thought spanned both the real and the immaterial, here thought spans time itself.

But in thought's temporal unboundedness, it is clear that Whitman isn't talking about a particular person's thought; especially since any person's experience is in time, and not beyond it. It's in this context that Whitman returns to the question of nothingness.

Have you guessed you yourself would not continue? Have you dreaded  
those earth-beetles?

Have you feared the future would be nothing to you?"

Is today nothing? Is the beginningless past nothing?

If the future is nothing they are just as surely nothing. (*LG 100*)

These stanzas return to the problem of thought's immateriality that "Song of Myself" leaves off on. But in this instance, Whitman begins at a personal level, on individual life's limits. It's notable that he bypasses the word "thought" here for "guessed" suggesting a less lofty version of thinking than the penetrating thought of the poem's opening. And at this folksy, informal level, Whitman introduces the problem of immateriality in the guise of the future after death, as a dread of "earth-beetles," only to dismiss it in a short appeal to immediacy: "Is today nothing?" This question seems more rhetorical than genuinely asked. Because the question of whether the future will be nothing is not an abstract problem but the problem of a real person's mortality, this appeal to today is similarly placed in the context of a person's experience. Experience

itself connects to the future and past and guarantees both of their reality, that both aren't nothing.

This apparent resolution doesn't proceed unproblematically, in fact, things get stranger considering the mutual reality of the experienced present and the unexperienced past. "To think that the sun rose in the east . . . that men and women were flexible and real and alive . . . that every thing was real and alive." If here Whitman is thinking through retrospection, then what thought accomplishes is a reproduction of something past, put into terms of being present. It seems as though this reproduction should show how immediate experience, the fullness of today, animates the past. But then the strangeness that the poet marvels at with the infinitive phrase "To think" suggests that this presentification of the past is not the simple presence of the actual moment. The next two lines amplify this difference: "To think that you and I did not see feel think nor bear our part, / To think that we are now here and bear our part." These lines then suggest a presence that the speaker and reader are absent for.

If Whitman relied on the assumed presence of the present to establish the reality of all times, at this point the very presence of "today" becomes less certain. Through the presence of the past, presence is detached from any person's particular senses, and thus isn't something that can be assumed. Jacques Derrida, as a critic of presence, diagnoses this relationship as a dangerous form of supplementation in *Of Grammatology*.<sup>17</sup> Derrida remarks that when "nature, as self-proximity, comes to be

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida uses the phrase "dangerous supplement" in reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's guilt over masturbation (Derrida 150). Supplementation in Rousseau, according to Derrida, occurs in Rousseau's infinitesimal displacement of virginity, with its sense of innocence, to *pucelage*, being technically a virgin. Pucelage is a virginity supplemented by masturbation in which pleasure corresponds to a loss of vital energy and risks death and castration (151-2).

forbidden or interrupted” then supplementation in the form of “representation and the imagination” becomes necessary (Derrida 144). Representation simultaneously allows the natural to be invoked, but only through a mediated form which “claims to be presence and the sign of the thing itself.” By that logic, representation comes to seem whole while nature then seems less than whole, after all it requires a supplement. The supplement “is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence.” But then this fullest measure is no longer immediate, the initial lack, the interruption of self-proximity, is still there.

Whitman next points out that at every minute both birth and death is constantly occurring, but death by far is his greater concern. A series of parallel “When” clauses suspends a long sentence that comprises the next section of the poem. “When the dull nights are over, and the dull days also” along with the physician’s “silent and terrible look for an answer” and mourning, “Then the corpse-limbs stretch on the bed, and the living look upon them, / They are palpable as the living are palpable” (LG 100-101). The pronoun “they” refers to the corpse-limbs, but for a moment in reading the clause, this pronoun demands a suspended expectation. After all, more immediately “they” refers to “them” so that the actual referent recedes backward in time as we move forward in reading. Overall there is a slight ambiguity to Whitman’s point that the dead limbs are as palpable as the living, which hides the subtle reversal in perspective Whitman undertakes here. It’s no longer that the living are naturally palpable, but rather the dead with their bare palpability, a palpability without the supplemental feature of life, seems to be the baseline standard of this measure of reality. Therefore finally, the supplement, non-presence as death, becomes a substitute for presence itself.

Death as a form of presence actually enables Whitman to go on in this poem much as he did otherwise, but with a few decisive differences. Details of observed moments are still conveyed in lists, except now preceded by “To think” which subtly shifts the frame so that what is being observed is situated in the sense of being observed across time; in other words, proximity to the poet is no longer a governing conceit. A description of a livery driver takes the form almost of an obituary, with a newspaper-like sense of reported detail. A stanza narrating the man’s personality describes him in life, and later driving itself is described, but now Whitman ends by remarking “To think that these are so much and so nigh to other drivers . . . and he takes no interest in them” (102). This kind of situating comment implies that the poet’s own perspective is more in the non-temporal moment of thought as opposed to the transient moment of living.

But as Whitman goes on thinking of experiences that aren’t tied to specific people who experience them with the kind of mystical inclusiveness characteristic of these types of lists, he suddenly defends personal experience and specificity.

You are not thrown to the winds . . . you gather certainly and safely around  
yourself,

Yourself! Yourself! Yourself forever and ever!

It is not to diffuse you that you were born of your mother and father--it is to  
identify you,

It is not that you should be undecided, but that you should be decided;

Something long preparing and formless is arrived and formed in you,

You are thenceforth secure, whatever comes or goes. (*LG* 103-104)

Much of the speculative “To think” passages affirm the objective reality of different experiences, some of which aren’t necessarily universal, like “the beautiful maternal cares” (103). Establishing an individual as real follows the paratactic logic of addition, though that doesn’t explain the vehemence of this assertion. It’s also notable that Whitman attributes an intentionality to time, or at least temporal processes, asserting that “it” intends not to diffuse you but to identify you. The force of this quasi-religious mysticism, which comes across more as intense conviction than revelation, does the work of establishing “you” as eternal, which means that it is at bottom an assertion.

Part of Whitman’s intense insistence on a present “you” in preference to a future without “you” undoubtedly arises from the polemic implicit in his emphatic embrace of a broad, encompassing present tense as what defines reality. Cody Marris sees in Whitman’s entire antebellum poetry a “fixation on the present” (49). And this fixation is “a kind of ontological challenge to the temporal strictures of industrial capitalism” (Marris 50). Marris sees Whitman’s temporality as opposed to standardization, which is a detail my analysis opposes. I agree with Benedict Anderson’s notion that standardized time is necessary to presuppose a single moment shared across diverse circumstances. But nonetheless, Marris’ point, that what Whitman opposes is a sense of time as a measurement of industry, “a soulless index of profit and productivity” to use Marris’ words, is accurate. After all, Whitman’s temporality, whether resistant of standardization or reliant upon it, is ultimately about the inclusiveness of the moment. It is in this sense that Whitman’s notion of time is contrary to his historical period, that of capital’s industrialization, as Marris points out. Thus asserting the importance of a present-tense “you” implicitly defends the diminished sanctity of the individual against the transference

of that individual for his or her labor, so that time is more an experience of living than a commodity sold as labor. And thus, time for Whitman can be a medium for understanding the self in the manner that non-commodified new media eventually will under Namakura's analysis.

And so it's in implicit opposition to hierarchy that Whitman then affirms, but really affirms to qualify, "the known leaders and inventors and the rich owners" (LG 104). This verse paragraph opens by asserting that the "great masters and kosmos are well as they go" but on rich owners Whitman inserts a subtle tentativeness; it's not that the rich owners are well, but rather they "may be well." This more conditional affirmation leads to Whitman's point that what his poem treats is not simply the distinguished. "The known leaders and inventors and the rich owners and pious and distinguished may be well, / But there is more account than that . . . there is strict account of all." The displacement of vertical hierarchy, greatness, to a horizontal inclusiveness as account, leads into Whitman's accounts of varieties of the subaltern, put again in the emphatic "not nothing" phrasing.

Whitman starts with a kind of topic sentence: "The interminable hordes of the ignorant and wicked are not nothing" (LG 105). And at least coming off of the notion of accounts, it's clear that not being nothing has the meaning of being included in the strict account, and not the earlier, theoretic question of immateriality. The list of the interminable hordes, interestingly, does not immediately take the form of vignettes specified with objective detail, but rather cultural, geographic groupings. "The barbarians of Africa and Asia are not nothing, / The common people of Europe are not nothing . . . the American aborigines are not nothing." When Whitman does come to

descriptive specificity, the details seem selected to emphasize abjection. “A zambo or a foreheadless Crowfoot or a Comanche is not nothing, / The infected in the immigrant hospital is not nothing. . . . the murderer or mean person is not nothing.” Taken with his earlier use of “not nothing” to suggest the minimal presence of what isn’t sensorily present, these people of the horde come to seem minimally human. But then leaving off on “the mocker of religion” who “is not nothing as he goes” Whitman then identifies with “the rest” as opposed to the great masters. At this point it is the minimal likeness that the rhetorical construction “not nothing” enables which is what Whitman ultimately speaks for as the great poet envisioned in the preface. “Not nothing” lets Whitman avow commonality without having to actually be foreheadless, a murderer or infected, but if so, the democratic communality Whitman projects in his verse is characterized by a multiplicity that preserves a blankness, a proximity to nothingness, analogous to, and perhaps prototypical of, a Body without Organs.

But finally, Whitman maintains ambivalence toward nothingness. The “To Think of Time” cutting ends with a refusal of death. “I swear I think there is nothing but immortality!” (LG 106). In refusing death, Whitman also refuses time, turning to a wish for a permanent state of temporal immediacy, without either a deferral into the future or a vanishing into the past. Ironically, this last strongly averred intuition on death, that it doesn’t exist, isn’t derived from a sense of inclusiveness, but from the kind of conviction seen earlier in the deistic insertion of the entity that intends and then guarantees “your” reader’s existence. This optimism comes at the cost of multiplicity, in the implication of an ultimate hierarchy. Whitman’s final recourse to a great master, I want to suggest, shows his inability to think through his inclusiveness to its point of incoherence, what

we'd call its deconstruction. This inability marks him as decisively not postmodern. Without his at times hieratic sense of multiplicity, the strand of his work that suggests that radical inclusiveness is a tonic to prejudice comes forward, unlikely as it might at first seem, into Dinh's poetry which can affirm the ignorant hordes without implicitly renouncing them. Moreover, to make a prognostication, a kind of fortune, on the cultural transformation made possibly by new media, one might hope that an inclusiveness that isn't a buried insistence on singularity, and thus on exclusionary practices based on social category, becomes more and more plausible.

## Conclusion

### **Race, Aesthetics and the Body without Organs**

In critical race theory, perhaps no concept is more discredited than universalism; not that so many books have been devoted to debunking universalism, but that an implicit debunking runs through the cultural criticism of race: what is supposedly neutral and inclusive is really oppressive and exclusive, and it is by pointing this out that criticism in this vein goes beyond the issue of just race, and begins to suggest the dynamics of wider oppression. This implicit debunking is no less present in this dissertation. Certainly, I critique a history that risks dissolving into an overall narrative, that of gradual resistance to race culminating in our enlightened, multicultural moment of the present, to argue for much odder, much more complex and sometimes more confrontational responses to racism, which in the end is meant to show that the problem of racism is not and has never been a simple matter that could easily be managed. Against an idea that racism is under control or effectively being opposed, I suggest that it has only been shifting, and thus its logic still needs to be, and perhaps will always need to be, diagnosed and resisted.

So then it is odd that I proceed in this project through comparativism, which in seeking to compare across contexts, in my case across race, attempts to establish if not a universal, then a meaningful critique that traverses, and in traversing also exceeds, mere context. Moreover, in mounting a comparative argument I don't just have to go beyond race, comparativism also demands I argue for what it is that enables a critique

across race, what grounds for comparison establish that which will exceed the particular and will at least gesture toward the universal.

My answer is not much more promising than the universal itself; most consistently, what I observe as challenging a hard conception of identity and connecting poets of different races is the aesthetic. By aesthetic, I mean a form of cognition focused not on analytic thinking but on response or feeling, which is admittedly a vague definition. But then it is through vagueness, or a kind of suggestive indeterminacy, that aesthetic experience challenges, or rather challenges and supplements, social identity--that term that I have argued underlies categories like race.

Versions of that claim, that conceiving of poetry as art has been a politically-enabling perspective for minority poets, appear in each of the four chapters above, but here, by way of conclusion, I want to turn to an account of aesthetics in the field at large, by way of Timothy Yu's comments on why *Dictee*, by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, has become a canonical text in Asian American literary studies. Yu constructs a historical account of Asian American studies' self-criticism. By the 1990s, Yu writes, critics "acknowledged the political necessity of insisting on a coherent Asian American cultural identity in the 1970s" but argued that this paradigm, Yu calls it "cultural nationalism," was also finally exclusionary (Yu 113-4). This recognition, that something more inclusive than asserting identity was needed, resulted in a critical embrace of "a new 'cultural pluralism,' which celebrates difference," and among other shifts in focus, initiated a transnational turn. It's this transnational turn that leads Elaine Kim to use *Dictee*, which Yu notes "presents itself at the precise point of rupture between the old and new paradigms," as an Asian American text in her foreword to the 1992 collection

*Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (114). But then *Dictee* is not just a transnational text, it is also one of formal difficulty, or at least non-linearity and non-narrativity. So even if *Dictee* were initially meant to just broaden Asian American literary studies out of the borders of merely national literature, the text inevitably also introduces an aesthetic problem, lack of resolution, ambiguity, into Asian American literary criticism.

Not to say that the aesthetic is secondary to the transnational--indeed, Viet Thanh Nguyen's remarks on *Dictee* emphasize that its aesthetics, which he reads as a "refusal of the literary market," are part of why this text is embraced by Asian American critics (Nguyen 153). *Dictee* is not just a postcolonial text, it also embodies the "rigorous standards of politics and aesthetics" which "form the basis of an ideal counter canon." Because *Dictee* is difficult, we can see it as a text that doesn't just have a different, transnational subject matter, but that is itself different, uncompromisingly so. So that through this extreme form of difference, to Nguyen it "seems singularly willful and inflexible in its refusal to accommodate its audience," *Dictee*'s difficulty makes the text, as a canonical work that has an implicit social value, embody difference.<sup>1</sup> Thus, part of what Asian American studies sought when cultural nationalism fell into crisis was something hostile to understanding but still valuable, almost personal in its singularity--that is, Asian American studies turned toward the aesthetic.

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<sup>1</sup> The question of what we mean by "canonical" in characterizing works as canonical to me suggests that we see these specially-marked works as bearing an excess value, in this case "difference." I explore the issue of canonicity more in "A Canon of Alterity: John Yau's Corpse and Mirror." in *Positioning the New: Chinese American Literature and the Changing Image of the American Literary Canon*. Eds. Tanfer Emin Tunc and Elisabetta Marino. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010. pp. 143-155.

## ***Dictee* and the Whitmanian**

What if *Dictee* is actually not difficult? Nguyen summarizes *Dictee* in this way: “To the extent that *Dictee* can be said to be ‘about’ anything, it is about the personal and historical experiences that have shaped Koreans and Korean Americans since the period of Japanese colonization” (153). That Nguyen begins with a significant hedge suggests that to him summarizing *Dictee* is not easy, but more interestingly, this hedge implies that *Dictee* is not really about anything, and can only be made to seem to have some paraphrasable content to an “extent.” But if *Dictee* doesn’t really have obvious content, what if we read the form of *Dictee* as significant. In that case, what we would observe is a nonsequential arrangement of thematically connected items, that articulates something about the intersection of the personal and historical, as Nguyen observes, though it does without an obvious narrative. That description of *Dictee*, I would argue, sounds like Whitman’s 1855 *Leaves of Grass* as I discuss it in chapter 4. There, I claim that the *Leaves*’ paratactic structure, in which sequential arrangement isn’t necessary to give the poem coherence, results in the poem’s ability to make something abstract, a multiplicity of experience that isn’t bounded, concretely invoked in the person of the greatest poet—who the persona, “Whitman,” claims to become. *Dictee* would actually repeat this general form of *Leaves*: not only does it abandon a sequential organization, Cha also foregrounds the development of poetic utterance into a capacious discourse in the figure of the “disease.” If *Dictee* can be read as being broadly Whitmanian, its status as a text of extreme difference, of being

uncompromisingly difficult, has to be rethought as fitting into an existing tradition, that of the lyric.<sup>2</sup>

Such a claim might have sounded hopelessly conservative, say in the early 1990s when Shelley Sunn Wong's essay in *Writing Self, Writing Nation* (1994) had to cast Wong's observation that *Dictee* critiques epic poetry with lyric poetry with a heavy qualification that *Dictee* contradicts "any effort to enshrine a mode of literary production traditionally premised on a single, unified, autonomous consciousness or identity--that of the lyric 'I'" (Wong 117). But it's safe to say that no one now seriously thinks of the lyric in those terms.<sup>3</sup> Yet if Tim Yu is right in saying that "almost all critics focus on the book's first half, particularly the opening and the 'Clio/History' and 'Calliope/Epic Poetry' sections," which are the more narrative sections filled with biography and history, then something about the lyric in *Dictee* remains curiously unexplored, except most notably by Wong and Yu, whose reading builds upon Wong's. Yu argues that "what *Dictee* provides is not a means of choosing between experimental and Asian American methods of reading and writing," what we might otherwise think of as lyric writing versus

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Tim Yu's analysis ultimately suggests that part of the reason why *Dictee* is read by Asian American critics in terms of history and autobiography and not in terms of its experimentation with language is that

<sup>3</sup> Rei Terada, writing a short paper in the "Theories and Methodologies" section of *PMLA* summarizes some papers given at the 2006 MLA convention and notes: "Pointing out the associations between lyric and other phenomena would be interesting in itself only if we normally believed that lyric was closed, and the papers show the present maturity of lyric studies by taking these connections for granted. In the earlier generation, it would indeed have been surprising to find papers undertaking these topics" (196). In other words, present criticism focused on the lyric takes it for granted that the lyric "I" in Wong's sense is not what defines that genre.

historical writing (Yu 122).<sup>4</sup> Rather “*Dictée* shows us a way of keeping these two paradigms in productive tension.” Yu may claim that his reading of *Dictée* is a *both/and* approach, but by the end of his chapter he notes that it is *Dictée*’s critique of language that “is crucial to finding a new kind of agency, one that can return again to the world of the present; only in language do we find” the basis of beginning again, what in *Dictée* is “a new kind of ‘home’” (Yu 136).

To say *Dictée* is a lyric, then, is to see its project as one of ultimately surpassing a solely historical determination, but not necessarily transcending it. So the kind of critique that a work like *Dictée* enables is a double refusal, against history and against transcendent individuality. And while these rejections seem as though they result in a disabling negativity, I contend that negativity is actually the grounds for a stronger critique, stronger because instead of disavowing an incoherence between determination and freedom, that incoherence itself authorizes critique. Admittedly, to think of critique in this way seems so abstract that what I propose might not intuitively seem critical, but then *Dictée*, if not the other works I claim as lyrics in this vein in the course of the dissertation, provides examples for what I mean.

A number of indeterminacies cluster around the section “Elitere/Lyric Poetry;” the most obvious is the substituted muse in the title, which according to Yunte Huang

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<sup>4</sup> Some critics of *Dictée* cite the title as *Dictée*, with an accent mark on the first “e.” However, my edition of *Dictée*, the 2001 University of California Press edition, does not include the accent mark on the title or copyright pages. I presume that the accent mark is an attempt to render the title correctly as a French word. But then there is a rich tradition of understanding *Dictée* as critiquing the idea of translation, following from Lisa Lowe’s “Unfaithful to the Original,” an essay from *Writing Self, Writing Nation* that also, in Yu’s words forms “the centerpiece of Lowe’s seminal 1996 book *Immigrant Acts*” (117). Nguyen also omits the accent mark.

shouldn't be "Elitere" but "Euterpe" (131).<sup>5</sup> Why Cha seems to have invented a name for only this muse isn't clear, but Huang takes it as a deliberate mistake meant to emphasize the difficulty of separating fiction from documentation (Huang 132). On the other hand, Wong speculates that Cha plays upon the words "elite" and "literare" in the name "as an oppositional gesture" (Wong 115). Combining these two interpretations, Cha's invented title means that the literary is defined by an ambiguity between truth and falsehood. That this point is made only with uncertainty through the text's own undecidability inscribes this interpretation into the act of reading this section's enigmatic title.

The title therefore plays out in miniature one almost trivial example of a lack, in this case a lack of explanation, enabling a kind of meaning that leaves itself open to its own refusal. And if this doesn't tell us why Cha used "Elitere" instead of "Euterpe," it does suggest her overall reading of what the lyric means. First Cha attempts to frustrate sequence as the titles of the three poems that comprise this section show. What we get first is "Aller/Retour," go and return, and then "Aller" and then "Retour." Thus we begin with the synthesis and then go to each of the dialectic terms, suggesting that against a narrative expectation that the end bears the meaning of what comes before, Cha places that meaning at its most uncertain point, the beginning. Additionally, by objecting to narrative, this section argues against not only the "Calliope/Epic" section

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<sup>5</sup> A second "indeterminacy" would be the image immediately following the title. As Anne Anlin Cheng describes it, it is "an unidentified, grainy black-and-white photograph of a mass protest" that "Cha's private notes tell us [...] documents the 1919 Korean Independence Movement demonstration" (Cheng 143). Cheng emphasizes the meaning of this image appearing without any documentation, essentially that Cha critiques the "facile mask of identification and sympathy" that a photograph enables (144). But without critical apparatus, the image would have to be initially read as simply incoherent, registering a mystery.

that Wong writes on, but also the “Clio/History” section.<sup>6</sup> “Clio/History” is notable for its emphasis on bare duration as fact, for example while invoking Korean revolutionary martyr Yu Guan Soon, Cha here notes birth, death along with the so-obvious-as-to-be-almost-parodic “She is born of one mother and one father” (25). On history, Cha finally concludes on its simultaneous lostness and its self-transcendence in the form of metanarrative:

The memory is the entire. The longing in the face of the lost. Maintains  
the missing. Fixed between the wax and wane indefinite not a sign of  
progress. All else age, in time. Except. Some are without. (38)

These terms, memory, waxing and waning, and time recur in “Elitere/Lyric,” but where earlier a melancholic lostness pervades historical thinking, under the lyric the unknowableness of history becomes the kind of lack that’s not simply empty, but productive.

“Aller” begins by invoking memory not in the sense of a fullness that is incomplete, but as something to actively forget:

Discard. Every memory. Of.  
Even before they could.  
Surge themselves. Forgotten so, easily,  
not even as associations, (128)

Omitting what the memory is of in the first line enacts the kind of total erasure that the next lines go on to specify. But then even as this act of erasure proceeds, it isn’t in the end simply an absence. A key transformation occurs further down the page:

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<sup>6</sup> For Wong’s discussion on Cha’s strategy of opposing lyric to epic, see pp. 115-118 in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*.

Now formless, no more a mould.

Make numb some vision some word some part

resembling part something else

pretend

not to see pretend not having seen the part.

What keeps the memory from actually ceasing to exist is something external to the memory itself, the sense faculty of sight which leads, via language, to part to part resemblance; from that minimal trace of memory, the bare possibility of resemblance, emerges its very opposite--total memory:

Start the next line.

Might have been. Wanted to see it

Might have been. Wanted to have seen it

to have it happen to have it happen before. All of it.

Unexpected and then there

all over. Each part. Every part. One at a time

one by one and missing none. Nothing.

Forgetting nothing

Leaving out nothing. (129)

Why simple resemblance leads inexorably to total presence has to do with what seems like a discontinuity in a poetics that is already very discontinuous, the line "Start the next

line.”<sup>7</sup> Here Cha points up the paratactic structure of the poem in which its mere continuation, even without a discernible sequential structure, makes the poem seem coherent. That coherence arises from the minimal part to part logic that exceeds total erasure in that if something however incomplete is simply there, a hypothetical connection is desired. Hypothetical as in “Might have been;” and desired in “Wanted to see” or “have seen it.” Therefore, what makes this kind of memory complete isn’t its content--it is not that a form of memory exists that is omniscient. Instead, just as the lack of memory is undermined from outside memory itself, the fullness of memory arises from that same outside. One is tempted to see this external determinant as the reader, perhaps the reader’s response as inscribed by the poem, based on Cha’s use of vision to introduce paratactic connection. But here vision doesn’t correspond to some kind of penetrating insight, as in seeing through an incomplete erasure, but to its opposite: vision merely records an exteriority, a residue that persists on even what’s formless.

History, as Anne Anlin Cheng’s analysis of *Dictee* points out, can’t be experienced since even to witness an event only emphasizes the event’s asymmetry to our own faculties. “No one can be at the center of an ‘event;’ its eventness is its historicity and therefore at some level it is unavailable to personal experience or possession” (Cheng 150). In its obscurity, history becomes melancholic, especially considering how “Clio/History” broaches the possibility of recuperating the anticolonial, female revolutionary Yu Guan Soon as a mythic foundation for an oppositional identity.

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<sup>7</sup> This line echoes the much-commented upon translation exercise that opens *Dictee*--the most well known such comment is Lisa Lowe’s that occurs on pp. 38-42 in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*. Just as when that earlier section shows a translation from French to English that too literally includes what seem to be verbal cues of punctuation, here what might be an inner cue to the poet or the reader is explicitly rendered.

And thus, *Dictée* introduces a problematic critique of identity, inasmuch as identity is naturalized through a perception of genealogical continuity, which I might add, is also the underlying logic of race. But to recognize the incommensurability of historical event to personal experience in Cheng's account results in a kind of failed subjectivity that speaks to *Dictée's* difficulty:

We are allowed neither the complacency of spectatorship nor the consolation that bearing witness effects change. In reading *Dictée*, our instinct is to re-compose all the time, to "correct," to fact-check, to narrativize, to contextualize, to trace origins in this empire of signs. Our compositional desires are constantly evoked, exposed, and thwarted.

(150)

Cheng here supposes that narrative and a completeness of context are what readers instinctually are drawn toward, but in the lyric, or so *Dictée* comes to suggest, the condition of not being able to apprehend history can be read not as failure, but as an obscurity, immediate in its sensibility, that makes narrative seem artificial and imposed.

Paratactic reading thus becomes the key to reconciling the problem of individual to history, which is also the problem of individual to race and individual to identity that forms the main critique of this dissertation. Anne-Lise Francois describes paratactic reading as occurring in successive uses of "and" in a verse from Genesis: "And Enoch walked with God; and he was not" (qtd in Francois 244). Francois remarks that "the parataxis 'and .../and ...' all but elides the difference, as well as the relation, between the two actions, so that in place of a sudden abruption and breach of presence, Enoch's 'not being' seems continuous with his walking with God, parallel to it" (245). So then to

broaden Francois's comments, what parataxis might do for *Dictée* is to replace the implicit singularity of narrative, in which whatever happens next makes what happens before vanish, with simultaneity.

In chapter 4, reading Dinh and Whitman, I argue that what their paratactic inclusiveness results in is a kind of Americanness without organs, and the connection of Whitman in 1855 to Dinh in the early 2000s is meant to suggest the applicability of this interpretation to work that derives from Whitman, the Whitmanian lyric. Here I would broaden that conclusion to suggest that what the lyric's presentation of the fleeting or obscure suggests, especially as it comprises several moments, is again a kind of "Body without Organs." What the Body without Organs is not according to Deleuze and Guattari is "the sense of fragments in relation to a lost unity" that is, a vision of historical wholeness, "nor is there a return to the undifferentiated in relation to a differentiable totality. There is a distribution of intensive principles of organs," in the context of the lyric these would be apprehensible moments, "within a collectivity or multiplicity" (Deleuze and Guattari 164-5). It's that horizon of wholeness that results from the bare parallelism of more than one thing existing that is what I understand to be the Body without Organs, and what I therefore propose as a way to transform identity away from a definition to avow for political purposes, toward the mysterious and indistinct basis for relating that is inescapable. That relating also forms the basis for a project of comparativism, in which no context ultimately is totalizing enough to close off the wholeness that the Body without Organs impossibly, and asymptotically, indicates.

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