

Writing Agency:

The Material Imaginations of
Charles Olson, Langston Hughes and Frank O'Hara

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I, Timothy Woodham, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis explores how Olson, Hughes and O'Hara imagine dynamic forms of materiality as notional structuring agents for their respective poetries. It argues that this aesthetic becomes urgent in the context of what Timothy Melley has called 'postwar agency panic': a historical moment of rupture that problematised the conceptual and institutional frameworks underwriting the apparently agentic qualities of the American national subject. Chapter 1 narrates specific moments within the politically fraught topos of post-1945 US culture where agency becomes a problematic concept, and briefly introduces how the stated poets respond to a perceived absence of agency by adopting aesthetics underpinned by the imagined agencies of material processes. Gaston Bachelard's formulation of 'material imaginations' is offered as an appropriate conceptual homology for these postwar aesthetics. Chapter 2 shows how Olson borrows concepts from geology, areal geography and metaphysics to argue for *elemental* modes of writing and reading that offer roadmaps for the construction of a situated yet internationalist political subject. Chapter 3 rehearses late-career Hughes' aesthetic inheritances from his various political affiliations of the 1910s-1940s, and explores the ways in which his postwar work uses form to test out the feasibility of locating agency within *geographically* demarcated spaces defined by repressive socio-political relations. Chapter 4 recapitulates recent arguments surrounding how O'Hara's poetry seeks to establish alternative structures of kinship in a mainstream cultural landscape defined by normativity and enclosure, but stresses that the concept of *intermediality* is vital to this endeavour, revealing how O'Hara evokes the material consistencies of different media to enact a dialectic of flight and rest in a dynamic urban landscape. The conclusion places what I term a 'crisis of the material imagination' in the context of the Whitmanian prophetic tradition, and considers how these conclusions pertain to contemporary debates surrounding non-human agency.

Impact Statement

This thesis considers three authors who are rarely brought into direct comparison; its ethos is thus underpinned by the desire to forge connections across academic borders and to encourage a spirit of reciprocity between intellectual frameworks.

The literary topography of experimental American poetry in the post-war period has been traditionally demarcated geographically through core hubs and distinct avant-garde traditions. By situating a writer like Langston Hughes (a popular African American poet most commonly periodised around his 1920s output, despite living and writing into the mid-1960s) alongside two younger, self-consciously avant-garde white poets writing in predominantly white artistic milieux, I aim to upset received norms of academic periodisation and set down methodological pathways that might lead to more inclusive comparative approaches.

This thesis also stresses a profound commitment to interdisciplinarity. A great deal of my work on the ‘jazz poet’ Langston Hughes has been informed by contemporary musicology on bebop and other strands of post-war jazz; the thesis’ final section on Frank O’Hara is methodologically situated within the vocabulary of contemporary media and communications theory; and the polymath figure of Charles Olson has necessitated that this research take detours through the fields of geography and twentieth-century American metaphysics. By initiating conversations around and between disciplines, this thesis anticipates and promotes collaborative intellectual projects.

This thesis has the potential to promote impact beyond the academic realm. My work on Langston Hughes’ experimental, musical-poetic hybrid performances and post-war intermedial performance cultures suggests itself to theatres and musical venues and is of value to performers and directors. Given the relative obscurity of pieces like *Ask Your Mama* within both the reception history of Hughes and the British cultural context more broadly, my work on this piece in particular will be of interest to those seeking to broaden the field of contemporary performance culture. In a time where calls to decolonise our institutions are beginning to be recognised at an institutional level, research that celebrates historically maligned literatures by non-white authors will enrich and embolden museums, libraries and other cultural centres eager to expand their collections to a more diverse set of publics.

The impact of this research has already made itself visible in the way that it has elevated my teaching. During UCL’s Widening Access and Participation Summer School—

an annual event that seeks to expand access to Higher Education by targeting underrepresented groups and non-private schools—I was given a brief that involved curating a day around the interconnections of jazz music and American poetry. The student feedback after the summer school stressed the novelty of this approach, in contrast to the disciplinary rigidity of their experience in Further Education, with one respondent saying that it “challenged my one dimensional and linear perspective of this historical period”. On a pedagogical and academic level, I believe that this thesis has the potential to continue challenging one dimensional and linear perspectives on history, enriching both the academic field and the public’s broader conceptions surrounding cultural production in the American post-war period.

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Note on Abbreviations and Citations

Abbreviations

This thesis periodically references itself parenthetically by Chapter-Section-Subsection. 3.b.i thus refers to the first subsection (i.) of section two (b.) of Chapter 3. The core texts pertaining to the three named authors are referred to by the following shorthand:

Charles Olson

COCP	<i>The Collected Poems of Charles Olson, excluding the Maximus poems.</i>
COCPr	<i>Charles Olson: Collected Prose.</i>
SVH	<i>The Special View of History.</i>
TMP	<i>The Maximus Poems.</i>

Langston Hughes

LHCP	<i>The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes.</i>
LHCW1	<i>The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v.1: The Poems: 1921-1940.</i>
LHCW4	<i>The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v.4: The Novels</i>
LHCW5	<i>The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v.5: The Plays to 1942</i>
LHCW7	<i>The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v.7: Simple Takes a Wife.</i>
LHCW9	<i>The Collected Works of Langston Hughes v.9: Essays on Art, Race, Politics and World Affairs.</i>
Rampersad I	Rampersad, Arnold. <i>The Life of Langston Hughes (Vol 1: 1902-1941): I, Too, Sing America.</i>
Rampersad II	Rampersad, Arnold. <i>The Life of Langston Hughes (Vol 2: 1941-1967): I Dream a World.</i>

Frank O'Hara

FOCP	<i>The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara</i>
PR	<i>Poems Retrieved</i>
SSaW	<i>Standing Still and Walking in New York</i>

Etymologies

My own source for etymologies is the Oxford English Dictionary, aside from particular cases during close analysis of Charles Olson's poetry, where Skeats suggests itself as the more dutifully Olsonian choice.

Appendix and Figures

For full-page images or sequential images spread over multiple pages, I have included an Appendix at the end of the thesis, cited in the main text as 'Appendix' followed by a chapter reference and page number. For smaller, more manageable images, I have included them in the text as Figures, cited via MLA guidelines in a caption beneath.

Writing Agency:

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-1-

The Poetics of Agency

-1.a.-

Agency Panics and Precarious Post-War Subjects

i. ‘thy multitudinous encompassed Sweep’

It is as though the Bomb has become one of those categories of Being, like Space and Time, that, according to Kant, are built into the very structure of our minds, giving shape and meaning to all our perceptions.

(Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* xx)

Reflecting upon the atomic age three years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Boyer envisions a material process (in this case, the splitting of the atom) so totalizing and disruptive that it has within its power the capacity to ontologically intervene in the *a priori* foundations of the human subject itself. The event of nuclear fission, in other words, has both ontic and ontological consequences: it not only kills subjects, but adapts the very notion of what a subject *is* in the first place. How can this be so? How can a material object and its latent potentialities reach so deeply into the most protected parts of our being, twisting us inside out and hanging us up to dry not as human subjects per se but rather as ‘bomb-beings’; subjects transformed by the threat of nuclear holocaust? This thesis is not a survey of such bomb-beings, although all three of the poets discussed here lived and wrote under the shadow of the Bomb. Rather, this thesis is concerned with the kind of ontological transaction the Bomb allows Boyer to perform conceptually: that is, the act of designating the human subject as a structurally precarious and bendable object, open to dynamic material processes existing in the real world which might actively reconstruct the regulative mainframe of subjectivity as such. At the heart of Boyer’s hypothetical is an invitation to imagine forms of subjectivity distinct from the ones we might intuitively recognise—and such an invitation carries with it emancipatory as well as terrifying potentialities. I bring the post-war poetry of Charles Olson, Langston Hughes and Frank O’Hara together on the basis of their works’

shared ontological hospitableness towards ambiguous material forces. It is my contention that they poetically enact similar kinds of ontological transactions to that of Boyer, using poetic form to invoke an array of material processes that might give different ‘shapes’ and ‘meanings’ to their entangled and embodied perceptions. This is a study, in other words, of the implications of an aesthetic which co-opts material process into its formal requirements in the name of announcing new infrastructures of being.

It is worthwhile to linger on the Bomb for a moment, however, as this particular example might pre-empt some of the conceptual tensions that this thesis will find itself considering further down the line. If there ever was a poetic enactment of Boyer’s ontological intimacy with the Bomb, one would likely find it in Gregory Corso’s 1958 work *BOMB*. A concrete poem cut into the outline of a mushroom cloud, the initial City Lights edition comprised a single long sheet folded into eight panels that the reader gradually unpacks: beginning with the head of the cloud, we move with each line further down towards the initial zone of impact, rewinding the blast back to its terrifying source. Contrary to what one might reasonably expect from a work titled after one of the greatest moral atrocities of the twentieth century, the poem is a parodic ode to nuclear holocaust, a perversely Whitmanian affirmation of extinction: ‘O Bomb in which all lovely things / moral and physical anxiously participate’ (n.p.). The blast authorises a host of iconoclastic rhetorical flights ranging from the Nietzschean death of God (‘O Bomb thy BOOM His tomb’); the castration of phallic signifiers of nationalistic modernity (‘Eiffel shaped like a C’); and horrific animations of dead matter: ‘From thy appellational womb / spew birth gusts of worms’. In the blast’s aftermath, Corso paints an upturned, surrealistic global geography of comically mis-matched signifiers:

The jaguar’s flying foot
soon to sink in arctic snow
Penguins plunged against the Sphinx
The top of the Empire state
arrowed in a broccoli field in Sicily

Eiffel shaped like a C in Magnolia Gardens
St. Sophia peeling over Sudan
O athletic Death Sportive Bomb
their grand ruin ceased

Lying behind this ludic iconoclasm is clearly a serious point. Corso positions the Bomb as radically democratic in its destructive potentiality. After all, if an atomic bomb were to fall, it would not differentiate between the people and the objects it lands upon, nor could it distinguish the complex intersections of political, cultural and religious significance implied by those metonyms for 'civilisation': 'Sphinx', 'Empire state', 'Eiffel' and 'St. Sophia'. Neil A. Chassman thus speaks of the threat of the atomic bomb as a 'leveller of meaning': to confront the scale of potential annihilation is already to imagine a world radically uncircumscribed by the values and codes through which it is currently organised (17-18). Echoing Boyer, we might say that Corso's ode is an attempt to incorporate the Bomb's totalising perspective—'thy multitudinous encompassed Sweep'—into the very structure of the poet's imaginative faculties, absorbing its radical negation of all meaning as a destructive precondition for an authentically creative attempt to reassemble human values anew; an outlook that Norman Mailer would influentially place at the forefront of his definition of 'American existentialism' the very same year (94-95).

Needless to say that when Corso read this poem to an audience largely consisting of British Nuclear Disarmament campaigners at Oxford University during the spring of 1958, such an interpretation would have fallen on deaf ears. The performance was a disaster, with Corso getting about halfway through his ecstatic exaltations before he and his co-performer Allen Ginsberg were heckled offstage, 'tight-lipped and silent, with hurt eyes, like children who have been chastised for the first time' (Moraes 67).¹ Humourless though such an

¹ It should be said that Moraes' first-hand account of this notorious event has been contended by Stephen Hugh-Jones, then-leader of the 'New College Poetry Society', who denies some of the more dramatic elaborations—most particularly that the offended audience threw their shoes at

audience might have been, and wary of turning a similarly deaf ear to the obvious rhetorical ironies and double-voiced qualities of the poem, I do find myself wanting to extrapolate from their outrage a more targeted critique of the above interpretation of *BOMB*. Central to Corso's appropriation of the atom bomb as an imaginative co-participant is a kind of triumphalism regarding the agency of the poet-subject. Ginsberg believed that the very fact that Corso could domesticate the Bomb into a kind of harmless punchline proved that the Bomb in itself had no agency, and that it is was up to human subjects to deal with it and to decide what to do next: 'it just reduces the bomb to insignificance because the poem is greater than the bomb' (cit. Horovitz 67). But to declare such a victory by merit of a few poetic devices arguably doesn't do sufficient justice to the serious destabilisations of the very concept of human agency that the lived fear of the Bomb unleashed. Conceived as a brutally algorithmic form of intelligence, Mutually Assured Destruction introduced a dizzying upheaval of scale between very quotidian human actions on one side (i.e., the ubiquitous image of a world leader's finger poised over a button) and game theory's exponentially escalating reactive consequences on the other. Once the first bomb drops, nuclear holocaust follows its own script: to all intents and purposes, the Bomb *did* seem to exercise an agency of its own; a ruthless distortion of human rationalism projected into the realm of the cosmic with consequences on a scale literally unimaginable by the grounded common sense of embedded human actors. From this angle, *BOMB* might be considered as a kind of extreme limit case for the Whitmanian 'word En-Masse': the presumption that the atomic bomb can be included and thus be somewhat *reconciled by* the imaginative frame of the poet-subject—that 'simple separate person', open and affirmative of the world in all its variant plurality (*Leaves of Grass* 1)—might be to drastically underestimate the negating agency of the object

Corso. For our purposes here, it is more than sufficient to note that the poem went down like a ton of bricks (cf. Hugh-Jones, n.p.).

one wishes to include. Or, posed through a different, blunter register more proper to the complaints of the Nuclear Disarmament protesters in 1958: who the hell does Corso think he is—or what does he think he can become—by presuming to *incorporate* the Bomb as a kind of subordinated, imaginative device?

All of this is to say that at the heart of the botched poetry reading in 1958 was a contestation over the *agency of the poet's imaginative materials*: that there may be things so totalising that to include them as underwriters of a poetic process is to risk nullifying the poet's status as an agentive being herself, one in control of her own act of *poesis*. Of course, the atomic bomb might be an extreme example, but what I hope this recounting of Corso's explosive rhetorical performance makes clear are the stakes lying behind what one, so to speak, 'invites in' to one's poetics. Like Corso, the three poets taken up by this thesis were deeply invested in shoring up the agency of the poetic subject—and, like Corso, they attempted to do so by inviting into the poem fortifying or otherwise potentiating notional material processes. However (and in a move perhaps more reminiscent of the CND protesters booing in Corso's audience), this thesis will also explore how these very same figures used poetry to worry about such aesthetic incorporations; about the obscured glimpses of unreconcilable agency that threaten to overturn the poet's status as an active agent at the helm of their own creation. But before we arrive at such fraught tensions between poets and their materials, we shall first have to account for why the historical and geographical conjuncture of the United States after the Second World War is such an apt analytical terrain for what this thesis will go on to call a crisis of the material imagination.

ii. The precarious subject

It has been said that a major anxiety within intellectual and literary culture after 1945 is the pervasive awareness of a marked 'disconnect between progress and progression' (Westphal

12-13). In Bertrand Westphal's account, the coupling of Enlightenment humanist values with the technological power and acceleration of the Industrial Revolution during the nineteenth century engendered a widespread understanding of time as unstoppable, linear and, most importantly, 'progressive' (Ibid). If this normative thrust upwards acted as a kind of adhesive agent, binding together the simultaneously developing intellectual theories of scientific positivism, the techno-social developments of industrial capitalism and the political emergence of democratic states; then the subsequent horrors of two World Wars, the stark inequalities precipitated by global economic depressions and the rapid predominance of numerous new totalitarianisms across the world radically unstuck the coherence of that unidirectional movement referred to as human progress. Presciently evoked by the opening words of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), what the traumatic events of the early twentieth century made untenable for many was that the central directionality of the Enlightenment—in Immanuel Kant's famous formulation, 'man's emancipation from his self-incurred immaturity' (17)—did not have as its legitimating underwriter the ineluctable trajectory of a progressive, universal history: 'Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity' (*Dialectic* 1). In the North American context, the phrase 'triumphant calamity' has especial purchase: morally validated after a global military victory, emerging onto the world stage as a triumphant political, economic and cultural hegemon, the post-war American national subject was nonetheless one forged under the shadow of a decimated Europe, the atrocities of the concentration camps, its own complicity in the arbitrary levelling of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the wake of a wholly new, paranoiac 'cold' warfare. Moreover, the triumphalism of America's victory over Fascism rang progressively more hollow as the racist brutality of the Jim Crow South emerged out of the war undeterred. As Engelhardt writes, the 'victory culture' of the United States was, in the decades

immediately following the war, quickly revealed to be precarious: 'Shadowed by the bomb, victory became conceivable only under the most limited of conditions, and an enemy too diffuse to be comfortably located beyond national borders had to be confronted in an un-American spirit of doubt.' (4)

The first poet that we take up in this thesis, Charles Olson, provides a useful way into this precarious topography of post-war American 'doubt'. A poet commonly remembered as a rhetorically assertive affirmer of human agency, many of his initial texts of the early 1950s reveal a fraught double-sidedness to the intellectual grandiosity of the mythopoetic persona of 'Maximus' that he would come to develop over the next two decades. In the same year as Olson was drafting with Frances Bolderoff and Robert Creeley the urgently optimistic manifesto 'Projective Verse' (1950), he would also write a poem whose diagnosis of the contemporary moment would not be reconciled by such a loud call for ineluctable, progressive motion:

This it is simple, what the difference is—
that a man, men, are now their own wood
and thus their own hell and paradise
that they are, in hell or in happiness, merely
something to be wrought, to be shaped, to be carved, for use, for
others

does not in the least lessen his, this unhappy man's
obscurities, his
confrontations

He shall step, he
will shape, he
is already also
moving off

into the soil, on to his own bones
(*'In Cold Hell, In Thicket'* *CSCP* 158-59)

There is a sense here of a war-torn subject failing to come into its own; the 'he' that emerges is wavering and precarious. Universals elude the first stanza: 'a man', one of 'men', but

crucially one not representative of ‘Man’; a being that simultaneously *owns* his ‘hell and paradise’, but is nonetheless caught within a hell ‘or’ a happiness that exceeds him. The poem enunciates such wavering ‘obscurities’ and ‘confrontations’ through a syntax of hesitation and revision, with words like ‘he’ and ‘his’ yawning off into the page’s abyssal white space with no certainty that they will find any continuity. As many have noted, the relegations of people to the dimensions of objects—a manoeuvre that in ‘Projective Verse’ appears as an exhilaratingly kinetic, potentiating transference—here reads more like an echo of the horrific biopolitical logic of Auschwitz (Middleton and Woods 63; Herd, ‘From Him...’ 382); a vision of ultimate ontological subjection performed by the obscured and ambiguous agency of ‘others’. This passage, and indeed the ponderous movement of the jeremiad as a whole, oscillates between momentary assertions of autonomy and direction, before returning into a state of material passivity and drift. At stake is whether agency triumphantly springs forth from the subject, or whether one is ‘merely’ a channel of some ‘other’, mysterious agency, something that can only be registered by the subject as a kind of ontological calamity.

‘In Cold Hell, In Thicket’ can in this sense be seen as an exemplary articulation of post-war anxieties surrounding social control; anxieties that would intensify drastically as Cold War paranoia and mass culture developed in tandem during the 1950s and 1960s. Timothy Melley coins the term ‘agency panic’ to describe a widespread cultural reaction that emerged notably in response to the mainstreaming of J. Edgar Hoover’s paranoid theories of ideological brainwashing alongside a surge of literature enumerating the ‘mind-control’ capacities of various arms of the mass media such as advertising and radio broadcast (1-13). And whereas the most stylistically sophisticated cultural articulations of such conspiratorial paranoia are often recalled through the frame of the literary avant-gardes (the fictions of Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs and Kathy Acker are perhaps the most frequently cited touchstones), the predominance of ego psychology as a clinical psychiatric practice for the

American middle classes and the explosion of ‘self-help’ books in the popular nonfiction shelves all contributed to a sense of the individual as a fundamentally precarious entity, vulnerable to the coercive forces of nebulously distributed webs of political and social power acting against the self in un- or para-conscious forms.² And while Melley argues that the principle response to agency panic manifested primarily in literary and popular culture as ‘extremely self-defensive postures’ of redoubled individualism (11), recent scholarship has also attributed the preponderance of artistic collectives and countercultural communalisms among post-war literary movements to be a similar outgrowth of this destabilisation of the individual as a self-enclosed agent. If the subject now found itself reduced to a partial node expressing the obscure functions of broader institutional and discursive structures, then a natural political response would be the collective construction of counter-communities that might allow for ethically superior forms of structural agency, whether those were to be found in the autonomist framework of educational institutions such as Black Mountain College (Dewey 10-13), or the more casual alliances of friendship and writerly solidarity in groups such as the ‘New York School’ or the ‘San Francisco Renaissance’ (cf. Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies* 29-40; Davidson *San Francisco* 23-31).³ Beyond its initial appearance as a purely reactive paranoia, then, post-war ‘agency panic’ has come to be seen as a generative challenge to radically refigure the nature of the individual subject in response to its rapidly shifting entanglements within other, significantly more abstract social and technological agencies.

² The literature surrounding the reception of Freudian psychoanalysis after 1945 is too vast to be comprehensively cited here. For a wide-ranging recent historical account, see Herzog (2017); for a literary reception history of Freud’s account of the ego in the post-war period, see Jenness (2019). See Effing for a useful overview of the development of ‘self-help’ as a particular outgrowth of American individualism (2009).

³ I am here referring more broadly to a host of critical works (methodologically influenced by the sociological concepts of Pierre Bourdieu) that seek to redefine the post-war ‘New American Poetry’ through the plastic geographical social fields through which they have famously been categorised. I make use at various intervals throughout this thesis of such path-breaking studies as Rifkin’s *Career Moves* (2000), Dewey’s *Beyond Maximus* (2000) and Davidson’s *Gays Like Us* (2004).

If the paranoid register of ideological social control and the technological capacities of electronic mass communication gave a historically unique tenor to anxieties surrounding individual agency in the post-war period, this is not to say that such ‘agency panics’ were a particularly new phenomenon. Arguably, they can be seen as thoroughly bound up within a much broader national conversation about the variegated modalities of agency contained within America’s evolving political structure of federalism. During the decade leading up to America’s entry into the military arena, the New Deal had already radically recalibrated the ability of federal authority to exercise its directed, yet highly bureaucratic, forms of agency in hitherto unprecedented areas of American life. Roosevelt’s ‘alphabet agencies’ made lasting and necessary changes to the country’s socio-economic and political topography, but not without simultaneous anxieties about the extent and reach of executive power. As Ira Katznelson has shown, a predominating ‘fear’ guiding the legislative stops and starts of the New Deal throughout the 1930s was the paradoxical notion that, in order to protect America’s national and international identity as ‘the’ liberal democracy in the face of economic ruin, the very structure of its governance may end up adopting centralised systems of command more homologous to those of the new dictatorships springing up on the other side of the Atlantic (12-18; 96-129). It is difficult to imagine post-war accounts of latent totalitarian tendencies within nominally liberal democracies without this lasting suspicion of the New Deal as a political vessel for ‘interest-group liberalism’ (Lowi 85) or a kind of corporatist state whereby powerful, democratically unaccountable interests exercised their agency under the aegis of a consolidated executive.⁴ Thus, the very governmental agencies

⁴ I have in mind here the kind of revisionist critiques of the New Deal made by critics of the New Left in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Some examples might include Lowi’s *The End of Liberalism* (1969), Parenti’s *Democracy for the Few* (1974), and Eckhart and Ries’ ‘The American Presidency’ (1975). Olson would himself draw explicit comparisons between the totalitarian Soviet Union and the executive remit of the United States, viewing them as both using coercive governmental power to direct populations through what he refers to as ‘Conspiracy’ (*Letters for Origin* 102).

that initially claimed to restore autonomy to a newly invigorated liberal subject after the Depression—ensuring dignity in labour, the freedom to consume, and so on—appeared as precisely the same mechanisms through which people came to see themselves as vulnerable to incipient techniques of social control exercised from above. With this in mind, New Deal optimism and Cold War agency panic can be seen as two polarities on an affective continuum negotiating the massive structural changes of mid-century America’s political and socio-economic life.

Indeed, Charles Olson could provide a miniature case study for such a continuity, as one tracks his movement from an eccentric functionary of the Roosevelt administration’s Office of War Information (O.W.I.) into one of the leading figures of Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry*, writing on the absolute fringes of official political activity. It is perhaps a critical commonplace to conflate Olson’s rejection of a career in politics with a rejection of politics altogether; a retreat from the world of public life into a private world of metaphysical contemplation (Clark 94; Christensen 16). More nuanced, recent arguments like those offered by Siraganian (159) and Hickman (66-8) suggest that Olson’s ‘retreat’ towards poetry and the autonomist educational institution Black Mountain College was more a continuation of politics by other means; a refiguring of ideological commitments grounded in the Popular Front New Dealism of the late 1930s that had been betrayed by the calcifying bureaucratic structures of command in the years following the war. Hickman writes of Olson’s commitment to a ‘patrician but egalitarian’ form of ‘uplift’ as he was tasked with selling the war effort to the country’s geographically dispersed ethnic groups, alongside a cadre of broadly leftist writers and artists employed by the department (68).⁵ Key here was the attempt

⁵ ‘Part war propaganda machine, part liberal New Deal PR firm, part news clearinghouse, the organization projected the story of America that the administration (or at least the agency) most wanted told. It did not always create the stories but adapted and retransmitted them as the war required, a coordinated multimedia effort between press, radio, and film.’ (Siraganian 146). For

to ground a consolidated national identity through a renewed emphasis on ethnic pluralism and the recognition of local histories: Olson's principle contribution to the Department's output was a bilingual pamphlet entitled *Spanish Speaking Americans*, a direct address aimed at geographically distinct Spanish-speaking communities, drawing lines between domestic, local contexts and the broader ideological aims of America's involvement in the war. Throughout the pamphlet, an attempted reorientation of American-ness is implied through combined rhetorical and visual strategies, the most suggestive of which being the juxtaposition of English text against photos of Latinx figures, and Spanish text alongside images of white people (cf. Appendix 1.a., 323-25) If the pamphlet's version of the war idealised a notion of decisive 'action' powered by the heterogeneous grassroots of American civic life, it is not difficult to read the bottom-up, organic movement of 'Projective Verse'—and the telling use of the word 'citizen' —through a similarly propagandistic lens:

Now (3) the *process* of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished. And I think it can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at all points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER! (COCP*r* 240)

In Siraganian's words, 'Projective Verse' thus 'reiterates the same issues Olson grapples with at the O.W.I.: the new media challenge of reaching diverse groups with the unified messages of a single, charismatic progressive voice' (148). Seen through this trajectory, the manifesto can be read as a radical expansion of an optimistic political project that the Truman

more detailed accounts of the O.W.I., its motives and its institutional history, see Laurie and Horten.

administration and the structural realities of an imperialistically-minded U.S. government could never really have lived up to.⁶

In his resignation letter, Olson cited the newly bureaucratised and censorious managerial attitude to the department as forces that ‘hamstrung’ its ability to speak both to and for the American population (cit. Clark 84). As Belgrad recounts, Olson’s exit came after a slew of other resignations and dismissals of leftist artists and intellectuals, with the body of the department in 1944 consisting predominantly of advertising agents (Belgrad 21-26), or ‘merchandise men’, as Olson would later come to recall them (*MP* 58). The aesthetic and political change of direction that such a shift in staff apparently precipitated was the tempering of the agency’s desire to make the case of American identification to the unique interests and histories of specific groups, in favour of an aggressively-foisted vision of American conformity based on the ability to purchase new and high-tech consumer items (Belgrad Ibid). Olson would immortalise his antipathy to the aesthetics of advertising in the very first book of *The Maximus Poems*, pre-empting later, influential tracts against the industry’s coercive approach to desire such as Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957):

where shall you find [that which will last], how, where, where shall you listen
when all is become billboards, when, all, even silence, is spray-gunned?
(*MP* 6)

Here, billboards serve as the embodiment of all that Olson’s resignation letter from the O.W.I. sought to denounce: decontextualized, ready-made icons of coercive identification imposed upon the earth from the top down, inextricably linked to the indiscriminate and total acts of killing in World War II.

⁶ See Herd “‘From him only...’” (375-95) for a more detailed linkage of Olson’s postmodern poetics as a way of thinking through internationalist geo-political relations as a response to the ‘silence on the subject of complicity’ in post-war American foreign policy.

In a poem most commonly read as an official statement of sorts, Olson turns away from the more recognisable official channels of political activity towards more metaphysically grandiose objects of ‘attention’:

Full circle: an end to romans, hippocrats and christians.
There! is a tide in the affairs of men to discern
[...]
Our attention is simpler
The salts and minerals of the earth return
The night has a love for throwing its shadows around a man
a bridge, a horse, a gun, a grave
(“The K”, *COCP* 14)

What this oft-quoted passage makes clear is that, for Olson, human agency is always underwritten by something. By announcing ‘an end to romans, hippocrats and christians’, he has not escaped the circle of political complicity and its various trade-offs between human capacity and abstract, structural agencies. To the contrary, he has come ‘Full circle’. Ending only to begin again, Olson thus throws in his lot with a different kind of agency, albeit one much more obscure and cosmological. In the famous opening words of another essay, ‘Human Universe’, Olson declares that ‘There are laws’ (*COCP* 155), but such laws are evidently not to be found in those traditional stalwarts of nineteenth century nation-building: Empire (‘romans’), traditional political parties (‘hippocrats’), national religions (‘christians’). In David Herd’s account, Olson is thinking here alongside many of his contemporaries in political theory who argued against the nation state as a successful guarantor of human freedom and agency, and who probed the possibility of grounding agency anew in universal structures that exceeded or transcended the delimitations of national borders (“In the Dawn...” 155-70). There is something, however, of Hannah Arendt’s scepticism towards such a project in the final words of ‘The K’. As Arendt forcefully argued, what the refugee crisis following World War II made clear was that it was possible to live in a place called nowhere: outside of legally articulated definitions of communal belonging, collective agency might not have any articulable—let alone enforceable—possibility at all (290-302). Likewise,

Olson's turn towards the broader, elemental cosmologies of water and earth as a kind of substitute for those more familiar politics threatens to cloud over into illegible, or un-'discern'able, darkness: the final line's paratactical sequence of signifiers minimises and obfuscates the nebulously defined agency of an indeterminate figure ('a man'), cloaking him in a familiar sequence of roles that appear as given, and a deathly predetermination that cannot, ultimately, be avoided.

Thus, Olson can be seen as a figure nervously responding to the precarity of a subject who no longer finds himself represented in the normative imaginary of the nation state. As we shall see, his attempt to imagine a 'polis' beyond such boundaries leads him down an epistemologically anarchic route: a mishmash of methodological inheritances across disciplinary borders as diverse as geology, history, syncretic mythological cosmology, biology and many more besides. It is this movement from a sense of divested political agency into a recuperative, hybrid disciplinary method that Chapter 2 of this thesis takes as its object of enquiry. In seeking to announce a universal history grounded in the possibility of meaningful human agency, Olson comes to see in almost every conceptual and material artefact under his consideration a kind of ontological blueprint for a renewed, reinvigorated human agent. In *The Maximus Poems*, the material dynamisms of the earth oblige one to speak variously of the human through neologisms such as 'tectonic-being', 'tidal-being', 'processual-becoming'; they necessitate a translation of the consistencies of the material into a polymorphous proliferation of embodied, notional subjects. In response to the restrictive and calcifying iterations of post-war American national subjecthood, then, Olson asks of the planetary outside what materials it might offer to better imagine potentiated modalities of thinking, doing and becoming anew.

iii. The ‘castigated particularity’ of the universal subject

If Charles Olson’s experience of the late 1940s was one of a political insider self-consciously pivoting towards a more marginal position less compromised by the complicities of Cold War *realpolitik*, the political and aesthetic direction of the poet Langston Hughes during the same period might be plotted along an inverse trajectory. Forced into a defensive position by high-profile denunciations of his 1930s pro-Communist agitprop verse, surveyed on and off by the F.B.I. throughout the 1940s, and drastically in need of financial security after a series of personal and professional crises, Hughes spent much of the war and the years following it embarking upon a ‘massive campaign of consolidation’ (Rampersad II 17). During the previous two decades, Hughes had often responded to personal, professional and political encumbrances with a steadfast belief in the agency of flight: whether it be his youthful voyages to Africa and Europe as a sailor during the mid-1920s or his 1932 tour of the U.S.S.R. during the Depression, agency for Hughes in this period could always be claimed by positing an outside and striving towards it, moving away from the repressive architectures of Jim Crow in favour of more potentiated locales. Now, however, with the Second World War rapidly re-drawing political lines in the sand, Hughes sought to position himself more firmly on solid ground. Unlike contemporaries such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright and James Baldwin, Hughes responded to the consolidating political climate of the immediate post-war years not through emigration or radical dissent but a commitment to political and professional advocacy via a broader engagement with both progressive and liberal African American organisations, and within the available mechanisms of mainstream U.S. culture. In the words of Arnold Rampersad, by 1948 ‘the need to root himself in a family and deep within a community of black people had become his greatest priority’ (Rampersad II 57).

As a black man attempting to maintain his status as a professional writer within the structurally racist parameters of the American culture industry, Hughes would repeatedly

come up against the stark contradictions of his position. During the war, for example, a stream of employment came through via his participation in wartime propaganda agencies; we find him working at various intervals for the Writer's War Committee and contributing towards morale-boosting radio broadcasts on behalf of the Department of State in 1942. Frequently tokenised within only nominally inclusive departments, Hughes' work was subject to censure from the very beginning, and, in some cases, prejudicially left unremunerated (39, 45-46). Often at the root of such censorship was Hughes' vocalisation of the rhetorical strategies of the short-lived 'Double V' campaign (46; 81-82): that is, the linkage of official, pro-democracy wartime messaging to more radical domestic campaigns against the internal fascism of Jim Crow.⁷ In the words of a *Chicago Defender* article penned by Hughes on the morning of the nation's 'victory':

Plenty of people are dead and cannot shoot any more, and the atom bomb has terrified the heart of man. Death has beaten death, force has beaten force. Those of us triumphant[...] have now the urgent duty of winning the war in our own lands and our own hearts[...] This war will be won only when EVERYBODY can celebrate being alive on a basis of equality with everyone else alive (cit. Rampersad II 103-4)

If the 1940s for Hughes thus marked a liberal turn of sorts, this is not to say that such a position would be held uncomplicatedly. As early as 1941, Hughes had already started to privately categorise his own writings into the groupings 'Social', 'Non-social' and 'White', adopting a strategy of realism in the face of variable audiences and the necessities of carefully modulating his mode of address (Ibid 18). For every strategic embrace of liberal possibility in essays such as 'My America' (*LHCW* 9 232-39) and poems such as 'Freedom's Plow' (*LHCP* 263), there can also be found highly pessimistic reminders that such calls were perhaps inevitably destined to fall on deaf ears. A decade after Harry Truman's fateful 1948

⁷ See Thompson's 1942 letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier* 'Should I Sacrifice to Live "Half American"' for the initial coinage of the term 'Double V'. For a good contemporary source of the period exemplifying the campaign's rhetorical strategies, see Logan's (ed.) *What the Negro Wants*. For two recent historical accounts, cf. Wynn and James Jr.

election promise to ensure civil liberties and racial equality, and following Hughes' hearing at the hands of Joseph McCarthy in 1953, Hughes would speak to the 1959 'First Conference of Negro Writers' (an event which, fittingly enough, was secretly financed by the F.B.I. in order to make visible subversive black radicals [Washington 32]) with barely concealed venom: 'Of course, to be highly successful in a white world—commercially successful—in writing or anything else, you really should be white. But until you get white—write' (*LH Essays* 383). This sense of Beckettian futility is an apt example of another side to Hughes' writing during the post-war years, whether one is talking about the satirical perspective of 'Jesse B. Semple', a wry fictional character who would frequent Hughes' weekly column in the *Chicago Defender*; or the biting lampoons of *Ask Your Mama* (1960), a late masterpiece that, as we shall see in Chapter 3.c., faces the monolithic persistence of American white supremacy with rhetorically explosive contempt.

Another way of understanding Hughes' aesthetic and political development during the late 1940s and 1950s is to consider his pre-war significance as a popular poet of the folk voice in relation to a new generation of post-war African American authors who favoured neo-modernist aesthetics of fractured subjectivity and psychological dissonance to present more self-consciously complex pictures of raced subjecthood in an uncertain political topography. Reacting in part to the apparently reductive categorisations of the progressive protest novels prevalent throughout the 1940s and the exoticisation of black subjects during the 'Harlem Renaissance' of the 1920s, novelists such as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin presented psychologically complex characters navigating the margins of proscriptive political, sexual and spiritual roles; while Gwendolyn Brooks' first two poetry collections, *A Street in Bronzeville* and *Annie Allen*, balanced stridently progressive political themes with the

nuances of rich, semantically ambiguous verse forms.⁸ At a time when the N.A.A.C.P. and the nascent civil rights movement were making significant inroads into official federal policy and achieving concrete legal successes like 1954's *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, the possibility of a formal end to Jim Crow segregation was—perhaps for the first time since Reconstruction—appearing as a distinct possibility. However, what such psychologically uncompromising works during the 1950s made clear was the broad chasm between legislatively declared rights and freedoms on the one hand, and the more insistent, material continuities of slavery as they would continue to be felt and lived by racialised subjects on the other. By probing the indelibility of such legacies on the level of interior consciousness and the most granular manifestations of everyday experience and language, such authors were arguably attempting to demystify that particularly American chimera of the self-possessed, free individual. What these aesthetics foregrounded, to borrow the words of Sadiya Hartman, was that the political ideal of an unencumbered, free subject—written into existence by law, propaganda or other such discursive strategies—is always paradoxically felt in its material instantiation as ‘the burdened individuality of freedom’, whereby

The individual, denuded in the harsh light of scrutiny, reveals a subject tethered by various orders of constraint and obscured by the figure of the self-possessed, for lurking behind the disembodied and self-possessed individual is the fleshy substance of the embodied and the encumbered—that is, the castigated particularity of the universal. In this light, the transubstantiation of the captive into volitional subject, chattel into proprietor, and the circumscribed body of blackness into the disembodied and abstract universal seems improbable, if not impossible. (*Scenes of Subjection* 123)

⁸ See Baldwin's ‘Everybody's Protest Novel’ for one of the most well-known iterations of this sensibility, alongside Gwendolyn Brooks' Pulitzer Prize acceptance speech, stressing that ‘the Negro poet's most urgent duty, at present, is to polish his technique, his way of presenting his truths and beauties, that these may be more insinuating, and, therefore, more overwhelming’ (cit. Brooks, *Conversations* 38). By far the most comprehensive and nuanced definition of the two ‘strains’ of post-war, black ‘neo-modernisms’ can be found in Smethurst's *New Red Negro*, which focuses on how both conservative and politically agitational strands emerged in dialogue with the prominence of the Communist Left in African America political life during the 1930s and 1940s.

The epistemologically uncertain writings of the 1950s alluded to above could be conceived as a registering of the ‘fleshy substance of the embodied and the encumbered’ as a problematising counterforce against straightforward announcements of achieved agency. In place of affirming liberal, revolutionary, nationalistic, or straightforwardly integrationist subject positions that would grant freedom if only they were actualised, characters such as Ralph Ellison’s ‘invisible man’ phrased subjectivity through a vocabulary of the negative, probing the very feasibility of a freedom that could presume to transcend the subject’s ontological status as a burdened, materially encumbered body, always-already entangled within the material and structural dimensions of multiple domains of social abjection.

Situating Hughes in this literary context is difficult. By the time his major poetic work of the post-war, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, was published in 1951, he was already starting to take up the position of an elder statesman representative of a previous age; a poet whose prior significance was highly respected, yet one whose aesthetics could not satisfactorily keep up with the current vogue for complexity and critical self-reflexivity. Seeing himself in part as responsible for nurturing the new generation, the post-war Langston Hughes has been described as a paradigmatic figure of ‘black political correctness’, displaying a ‘reluctance to reveal the cracks in the black world’ in a way that might jeopardise the struggle for political and civil rights (Als n.p.). During the heyday of the 1920s, Hughes had been castigated by the middle classes for celebrating the sensuous and the salacious in popular black culture; in 1941 he now found himself publishing an essay entitled ‘The Need for Heroes’, arguing for the representation of positive archetypes celebrating heroism and success found in adversity (LHCW9 184-85). And whereas his poetic output in the 1940s was indeed prolific, and the three major collections of that decade home to some of his finest verse, there was nonetheless a sense of an older poet cashing in on styles that had been cultivated much too

long ago.⁹ James Baldwin would sum up this critical doxa with characteristic eloquence and rhetorical precision:

Every time I read Langston Hughes I am amazed all over again by his genuine gifts—and depressed that he has done so little with them [...] Hughes, in his sermons, blues and prayers, has working for him the power and the beat of Negro speech and Negro music. Negro speech is vivid largely because it is private. It is a kind of emotional shorthand—or sleight of hand—by means of which Negroes express not only their relationship to each other but their judgment of the white world [...] Hughes knows the bitter truth behind these hieroglyphics: what they are designed to protect, what they are designed to convey. But he has not forced them into the realm of art, where their meaning would become clear and overwhelming. ('Sermons and Blues' 6)

Here, Baldwin argues that Hughes is unable to shift gears beyond the enthusiastic affirmation of black forms and styles, and that his voices are too comfortable in their 'emotional shorthand': they do not encompass or make thinkable the more complex, human dimensions of black experience outside of the presentational immediacy of 'sermons, blues and prayers'. To be sure, Baldwin's critique is very much that of a novelist: faulting Hughes not for a lack of feeling, technique or sincerity, he rather demands a sort of narrative-like field of contextualisation that can position the poet's 'hieroglyphics' within a more robust interpretive 'realm' of artistic self-reflexivity.

Subsequent to Baldwin's attack, critical attitudes towards much of Hughes' post-war work have changed. Still rather thin on the ground in comparison to the sheer quantity of ink spilled regarding his 1920s output—and, indeed, more recently, his 1930s writings—the amount of critical work relating to key texts such as *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and *Ask Your Mama* is growing. In particular, a great deal of recent work stresses precisely the kind of complex, neo-modernist aesthetic that many contemporary critical responses failed to

⁹ See Dace (Ed.; 227-344) for an archive of influential reviews of the period. See also Rampersad 'Introduction' to *LHCW* 2 for a useful gloss of Hughes' changing approaches across during the writing and publication of the 1940s texts (1-10). Oft-cited and eloquent criticisms in this vein by Saunders Redding (Dace 330-31; 387), Ralph Ellison (259-61) and Babette Deutsch (395-96) are also of particular note.

seriously engage with, and which has been framed by official biography as an artistic development out of sync with Hughes' poetic sensibilities (Rampersad *II* 192-93). In the case of *Montage*, subsequent critical attention has focused largely on Hughes' engagement with bebop musical idioms and avant-garde cinematography as touchstones for the poem's formal experimentation (Brinkman; Brown; Hokanson), an aesthetic cut from the same cloth as Ellison's jazz modernism (Borshuk 1-20) and critically responding to the high modernism of T.S. Eliot (Summers-Bremner). The poem's re-assertion of Harlem as a dynamic space of nascent black power has also been framed as a vital intertext for the more politically radical avant-gardes of the decade following *Montage*'s publication (de Jongh 138; Smethurst, *New Red Negro* 144), and one that offers a vital continuity between the formally experimental neo-modernist aesthetics of the 1950s and the more explicitly political agitprop of the 1930s—a continuity that has frequently been written out of the popular characterisation of the 1950s as a uniformly reactionary era (Washington 27). Similarly, *Ask Your Mama* has in recent years gone from being remembered as a curious footnote or afterthought in Hughes' career to an underrated masterpiece—its intermedial weaving of musical, dramatic, and poetic performance techniques along with its radical spatial presentation on the page have led to critical works seeking to unpack the way the poem actively problematises and destabilises frames of racial representation and the telling of black history (Miller; Schultz; Jones, 'Langston Hughes and...'), in contrast to earlier accounts of the poem which stressed rather its evocative representativity of 'the Dozens' as an exemplary African American rhetorical form (cf. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* 100-101). Chapter 3 of this thesis seeks to add to and work within this constant critical reappraisal of 'late' Langston Hughes, arguing that, *contra* Baldwin, the poet did indeed worry about and problematise the representation of his lyrical 'hieroglyphics', using formal devices of juxtaposition, spatial framing and intermedial cross-pollination to place questions of agency and political identity in a conceptually rich and self-reflexive aesthetic domain.

This thesis argues that, in many ways like Charles Olson, Hughes responded to the worrying problematics of political representation in the post-war period by adopting a poetics that sought to channel the underlying material preconditions that guide, frustrate or enable human agency. Like Olson, Hughes might be said to declare that ‘there is a tide in the affairs of men to discern’ through poetry, although he often does so in a markedly different register and with a categorically different set of normative presumptions. Compare the final lines of ‘The K’ above, for example, with one of Hughes’ most frequently anthologised poems, ‘Harlem [2]’, published originally as part of *Montage* in 1951:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?
(LHCP 426)

For Hughes, the tide in the affairs of those holding the dream of real emancipation is no less urgent to discern than it is for Olson and his grandiose pronouncements upon the affairs of ‘men’. But whereas the latter sees in the domain of the material a sort of expansionist, redemptive agency that can escape the calcifying particularities of State power in a leap of faith thrust outwards towards the universal; here, the figure of the material cannot be co-opted quite so easily into a vocabulary of universalist liberation. In ‘Harlem [2]’, the domain of the material belongs whole-heartedly to the broader agencies that seek to contain, frustrate and indeed nullify the conditions for black life. Nonetheless, the questioning persists, with the final line’s veiled warning of riot implying that, despite such encumbrance, there exists

within the geographies of abjection sources of power and agency that might tip the moment to a point of crisis. In Chapter 3, I will suggest that Hughes uses poetic form to think through the lived paradox of this situation: how *surviving* within the precarious, particular castigations of the material might transform into a politics able to overcome or transfigure it.

iv. Subjects in the Margins

Emerging through the very different biographical contexts of Charles Olson and Langston Hughes, then, is a heavily compromised and qualified picture of the idealised post-war American subject. The 1950s—or so a prevailing common sense within the popular imagination goes—was a time when a ‘culture of conformity’ flourished: the American subject, buoyed high by expanding material comforts and relative political stability, saw itself reflected back as a situated entity, optimistically induced into a nuclear form of societal cohesion—a homeliness only to be undone by the much more radical and explosive 1960s, bracketed in part by the race riots of ’63 and ’64 and the national embarrassment of the Vietnam War.¹⁰ But what the perspectives of Hughes and Olson reveal is that this coercive ideal of conformity and societal normativity could not be imposed without an attendant psychic and affective push-back. In other words, the experiential texture of the material world itself would often prove a sufficient contradiction to the fragile promises of the U.S.A.’s highly mediated national fantasy. As we have seen, for Hughes this would be most strikingly apparent in the lived reality of infrastructurally underfunded inner-city black ghettos whose unequal position in the American social hierarchy would become drastically underscored by the beginnings of suburbanisation and white flight throughout the decade. As the economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote in his landmark text *The Affluent Society*: although the overall effect of Eisenhower’s ‘Liberal Consensus’ was to reduce overall income

¹⁰ Cf. Reisman for the most well-known articulation of this sociological perspective on the post-war at the time.

inequality and heighten general levels of material comfort on the back of a boom in productive capability and consumer purchasing power, what it crucially lacked was an ideologically committed, redistributive form of agency that could realign the infrastructural foundation of society on the basis of such wealth. Already in 1958, Galbraith was noting the waning of liberal interest in ‘redistribution’:

Increasing aggregate output leaves a self-perpetuating margin of poverty at the very base of the income pyramid. This goes largely unnoticed, because it is the fate of a voiceless minority. And liberals have long been accustomed to expect the poor to speak in the resounding tones of a vast majority. (87)

Bewitched by the Ouroboros cycle of production and consumption as a regulative norm, the economic base of the American post-war also gave birth to the cultural privileging of those organisations of human life that were deemed most ‘productive’ and thus most able to efficiently consume: that is, the heteronormative, suburbanised nuclear family whose glistening white faces looked down from the ‘billboards’ that Olson had decried in the opening Letter of *The Maximus Poems*. For those either living within or sympathetic to the apparently *unproductive* ‘margins’, the affluence of the 1950s appeared less as a gradualist rise in individual freedoms and material comforts than as a structural reconsolidation of inequalities stratified most visibly across racial, sexual and political divides. It is unsurprising that both Olson and Hughes, with their shared interests in small hubs like Gloucester and Harlem respectively, both privileged the locality of the margin as a conceptual locus from which oppositional iterations of political agency and collective organisation would emerge, in purposeful contradistinction to the kinds of corporate civic archetypes immortalised in texts like William Whyte’s 1956 *The Organization Man*.¹¹

¹¹ ‘the corporation[...] is going to be *the* citadel of belongingness. The union of Frank Tannenbaum, the community of Lloyd Warner, the corporation of Elton Mayo—each is in conflict as to which group is going to furnish the vital belongingness, and these three by no means exhaust the roster of groups proposed. [...] Society has broken down; the family, the church, the community, the schools, business—each has failed to give the individual the belongingness he needs and thus it is now the task of ——— group to do the job.’ (Whyte 45)

If the smiling white faces plastered across the nation's billboards provided the aspirational ideal for American social belonging, the McCarthy State Senate Hearings can be seen as a metonym for the disciplinary mechanisms which lent such an ideal its political authority. As the principal domestic arm of Truman's 1947 'Containment' policy, what came to be known as the Red Scare encompassed a vast array of committees, hearings, propaganda campaigns and political legislation all in the name of rooting out the Communist threat that had ostensibly embedded itself within the most interior vestiges of government, the military and the culture industry. Chiefly remembered as a post-war phenomenon emerging explicitly in response to the Cold War fear of Communism, the actual institutional and infrastructural architectures of the Red Scare stretched back many decades earlier to J. Edgar Hoover's organisational reconsolidation of the F.B.I. following the First World War. Already, the American state was well accustomed to using the federal scope of its powers to sound out, label and punish a broadly defined array of 'domestic radicals' ranging from bootleggers to political leftists to sexual 'deviants' to liberal civil rights activists. Within the context of this broader trajectory, the Red Scare itself can be seen as a radical intensification of governmental strategies that were already set in play; the floating signifier 'Communist' helpfully expansive enough to include any kind of societal rejectamenta that fell under the proscriptions of the state. Hence, the 'Red Scare' was simultaneously a 'Lavender Scare', a purge which led to the dismissal of around six hundred federal civil servants on the basis of their sexual orientation or their association with 'known homosexuals' (Johnson 3); furthermore, it provided a useful excuse to crack down on progressive black voices whose association with the Communist Party had long expired or indeed was non-existent (Washington 22-23). Buoyed along in part by fraudulent information, the McCarthy trials were an exemplar in the capacity of the state to position otherness in highly delineated terms: to be made visible by the legal and administrative techniques of the Red Scare was to be fixed

into the role of a reductively defined enemy of the state whose most minimal associations to the most nebulously defined political signifiers were reified into a concrete identity unreconcilable with ‘American’ values. In the early 1950s, Olson was questioned by the F.B.I. regarding suspect wartime affinities (Perry Anderson 12), and Hughes’ own high-profile encounter with McCarthy would be the most visible iteration of a political silencing that, as we have seen, had been well in play since the early 1940s.

The principle legal mechanism that made the Red Scare possible with such vicious effectivity can be located in a leftover piece of wartime legislation called the Smith Act—a document which considered the very ‘*intent* to cause the overthrow or destruction’ (my italics) of the U.S. government sufficient grounds for punishments such as blacklisting or monetary fines (*Alien Registration Act* n.p.).¹² In Kutzinski’s words,

Collapsing the distance between *mens rea* and *actus reus*, intent and action, the Smith Act[...] made it possible to charge and convict someone simply on the basis of his or her political beliefs and projected intentions without having to muster actual evidence—that is, that something had actually been caused by such beliefs and intentions. (201)

Conceived as a sort of hermeneutics of subjectivity, what the Smith Act and the reams of committee interrogations throughout the 1950s thus projected was a vision of the enemy within whose *intentionality*—however spuriously proven—was the essential characteristic of their being; the accusations of the Red Scare actively neglected questions of psychological complexity, material contingency, semantic ambiguity and the physical capacity to transmit ideas into actual practice. The name of the game, one could say, was an exercise in hermeneutic reduction, or the attempt to anchor a diffuse, contingent and often contradictory matrix of thoughts, desires and means into a singular, essential iteration of

¹² Officially named the Alien Registration Act, the act was held as constitutional despite multiple legal challenges until 1957, when the Supreme Court would reinterpret the act. See Kutzinski 201-3 and 301-2, n. 60 & 61, for a useful discussion of this history and a comprehensive citation of precedents and legal precursors to the Act.

psychic intent. Thanks to documents released in 2004, one can look at Hughes' responses to Roy Cohn's interpretive reductions as an anticipation of how artists and political figures sought to resist such strategies. Kutzinski's reproduction is especially useful here as her italics show just how much rhetorical work has to be done in manipulating the questions towards their work of hermeneutic anchorage:

MR. HUGHES: Sir, I don't think you can get a yes or no answer to any literary question,
I give you...

MR. COHN: I am trying, Mr. Hughes, because I think you have gone pretty far *in some of these things*, and I think you know pretty well what you did. When you wrote *something* called "Ballads of Lenin," did you believe *that* when you wrote it?

MR. HUGHES: Believe *what*, sir?

MR. COHN: Comrade Lenin of Russia speaks from the marble:

On guard with the workers forever—

The world is our room!

MR. HUGHES: *That* is a poem. One cannot state one believed every word of a poem.

MR. COHN: I do not know what one can say. I am asking you specifically do you believe in *the message carried and conveyed in this poem?*

MR. HUGHES: It would demand a great deal of discussion. You cannot say yes or no.
(cit. Kutzinski 204-5)

Here, Hughes attempts a two-pronged approach to evading Cohn's rhetorical weaponization of general and imprecise language: he points out the qualitative gap between psychological states and linguistic forms of representation; and then the semantic ambiguity *interior* to the play of poetic language itself. However, what is arguably most crucial is Hughes' incredulous repetition of Cohn's vague vocabulary: signifyin(g) upon the questioner, the only strategies available for Hughes in this instance are to re-introduce all that the reductive hermeneutics of McCarthyism attempted to force out, seizing upon the necessarily fuzzy language of the questioner to destabilise the authority of his judgement.¹³

¹³ *Qua* Henry Louis Gates: 'signifyin(g)' is to undermine a term's intended or presumed meaning (its 'signification') by destabilising the relation between what is denoted and what may be connoted, thereby introducing a textual dissonance that resists fixed or essentialist metaphysics (*The Signifying Monkey* 46-51).

Of course, none of these strategies actually worked for Hughes insofar as the hearing was concerned. Threatened with the very real possibility of perjury, the close of the transcripts of Hughes' private hearing reveals an embattled capitulation to McCarthy's real intention for Hughes to serve, in his *public* hearing, as an exemplary detractor from his Communist alliances of the 1930s—a compromise which spared Hughes the need to give names or actively betray former allies (cf. Chinitz, 'Langston Hughes...'). The hearings thus mark a clear turning point in which any positive, public affirmation of leftist political allegiance would become, for Hughes, a strict impossibility (Rampersad II 330-31). Like Ralph Ellison's invisible man going underground after his movement through a panoply of impossible political ontologies (cf. *Invisible Man* 559-71), 'the magma of political indignation in Hughes remained, below the placid surface, red-hot' (Rampersad II 219-20). If there was to be anything approaching the politically contestatory in Hughes' post-war work, it would have to adopt a similarly evasive and fugitive aesthetic form, one resistant to the kinds of agitprop, declaratory political rhetoric upon which the likes of Roy Cohn found it so easy to seize. As we shall see in our two in-depth studies of Hughes' post-war work, it is in the *liminal* spaces of evasion and transitivity that Hughes invests political significance: rather than locating politics within the psychologically anchored intentionality of fixed subject positions, Hughes stresses the contingent, intersubjective spaces of dissonance and representational ambiguity as the sites of political possibility in poetry.

In this, Hughes was certainly not alone. We have already referred to contemporaries such as Brooks and Ellison who stringently resisted straightforward or easily reducible archetypes of political-ontological unity, instead investing the political into moments of slippage, evasion and flight. But another productive comparison—at least insofar as the two other authors explored in this thesis are concerned—would be the subversive and self-consciously disruptive aesthetics of the 'New American Poetry' (N.A.P.), a term coined by

Donald Allen in his influential 1960 anthology detailing the work of ‘third generation’ American modernist poets since 1945. From the beginning, this cluster of radicals and experimentalists were positioned as ‘a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse’ (Allen xi). Specifically, they represented a rejection of the institutional hegemony of New Critical approaches towards poetry, a critical dogma (explicated most famously in Wimsatt and Beardsley’s 1954 *The Verbal Icon*) which prized above all else the autonomous structural unity of a poem, or a critical thought ‘devoted[...] to a practical criticism and the cult of poetic craftsmanship, activities their proponents claimed were free of theoretical “bias”’ (Breslin 24). Concurrently, the poets institutionally privileged by this vogue for formalism such as (the early) Robert Lowell and Richard Wilbur would make convenient enemies for those who viewed elevated diction, formal cohesion and hermetic conceits as an endorsement of artistic and political conservatism (Ibid 47; Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple* 23-5). To be sure, this long-standing and arguably self-serving positioning of the N.A.P. as a straightforwardly ‘anti-establishment’ movement should of course be questioned, and a great deal of subsequent critical work has strived to demystify this very framing, as well as questioning Allen’s organisation of such an entangled cluster of artistic figures into geographically coherent hubs or centres—categorisations that were not, in reality, quite so clearly delineated.¹⁴ Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the total output of the poets included in this essential anthology does represent a strategically directed challenge to what we have referred to above as McCarthyite hermeneutics. Indeterminacy, vocal polyvalence, context-dependent writing practices, the destabilisation of the lyric ‘I’ as a controlling or regulating ego, an embrace of immanent experiences over transcendental symbolic structures—these

¹⁴ The most compelling critical rejection of this New Critical vs. N.A.P. opposition in particular can be found in Blasing’s *Politics and Form*..., which persuasively deconstructs the naturalisation of oppositional/conservative political signifiers through the rhetorical embrace of open/closed verse forms. As far as this thesis is concerned, see 1.b.ii and 3.b.ii for a discussion of the advantages of investing aesthetic forms with political meanings in a way that aims to *problematise political meanings*, rather than *politically naturalise aesthetic forms*.

are just some aspects of the N.A.P.'s vocabulary which repeatedly navigated the eternal binaries of openness over closure, improvisation over premeditation, the psychologically decentred over the recognisably personal or tonally magisterial. Unlike the New Critics, then, who arguably responded in their own way to McCarthyite interpretive reductions by *evacuating* the text of any sort of troubling exteriority (Wimsatt and Beardsley 3-20),¹⁵ the N.A.P. might be conceived of as an attempt to overload and flood the poem with a multiplicity of intentions, experiences and material exteriorities that resist interpretively reductive strategies of formal consolidation. In the words of Denise Levertov, this was 'not a breaking down but a breaking open' (*The Poet in the World* 240), an attempt to keep the poem entangled within the vital flux of instantiated experience, an edict of transitivity replete with rhetorical overtones of evading the reifying gaze of power.

The work of the final poet taken up by this thesis, Frank O'Hara, might serve as an apt exemplar for many of the aesthetics we have outlined above. Replete throughout Allen's compendious *Collected Poems* are highly quotable affirmations of flight and a kind of freedom predicated on the rejection of fixed and stable states. Whether it be the 'fleece of pure intention' and 'the wings of an extraordinary liberty' sailing off the final stanzas of Mike Goldberg's birthday ode (298); the political sureness of the claim 'we fight for what we love, not are' in 'Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets' (305); the motion of 'reels of celluloid', rolling 'as the great earth rolls on!' in a poem dedicated 'To the Film Industry in Crisis' (233)—these examples are a testament to the rhetorical purchase of a freedom found in movement throughout O'Hara's works. Fittingly, too, his work is difficult to formally pin down through the explication of a singular, unifying trajectory throughout his tragically short career. Most famously remembered for what he would later call his 'I Do This, I Do That'

¹⁵ Cf. Kutzinksi for her linkage of the New Critical propagation of the 'intentional fallacy' within the context of the Smith Act (206).

poems, the ubiquitous image of the ‘lunch break poet’ bouncing around Midtown in the early afternoon, open to the rhythms of urban contingency in affable and casual tones is a stark contrast to the surrealistically inflected, a-representational imagescapes littering the bizarre and complex stanzas of earlier poems such as ‘Second Avenue’ and ‘Oranges’. Bracketing these complex changes in direction are the formally closed, rhetorically tighter poems of his earliest verse (many of which are housed in the first half of *Poems Retrieved*), and his late-career, cryptic phantasmagorias of detrital culture found in the posthumously published pamphlet *The End of The West*. It is beyond the scope of these introductory words to give a total account of such drastic shifts in aesthetic direction beyond the perhaps truistic observation that they represent a commitment to ‘breaking the poem open’ through a multiplicity of poetic barometers: a destabilisation of the text on the level of both word and image, the lyrical subject and more multi-voiced textual pluralities, form and rhetoric. However, and unlike Charles Olson, these shifts and breakings-open are not always legitimated by an explicit metaphysical baseline, or a highly systemic theoretico-poetic tract. Openly mocking such attempts in quasi-manifesto pieces such as ‘Personism’ and ‘Statement for the Paterson Society’, O’Hara extends into the realm of poetics the refusal to reify the poem’s potential through normative aesthetic proscriptions (cf. 4.a.ii.).

As many have previously noted, such aesthetics of ambiguity, flight and interpretive openness are also bound up with O’Hara’s position as a gay man navigating the conservative and heteronormative environment proscribed in part by the McCarthyite persecutions described above (Blasing 56; Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies* 45). Like Hughes, whose sexuality was also the subject of constant speculation, strategies of veiling and allusion were oftentimes a necessity for queer articulations of sexuality in a pre-Stonewall era where visibility was an

active risk for institutionally maligned collectives.¹⁶ Indeed, O'Hara's contemporary John Ashbery attributes a year-long writer's block to this very environment defined by 'anti-homosexual campaigns': 'I was afraid that we'd all be sent to concentration camps if McCarthy had his own way' (cit. Gooch 190).¹⁷ With this in mind, critics such as Bruce Boone have influentially argued for certain of O'Hara's works to be placed within the rhetorical context of 'gay language', or linguistic codes through which groups denied a public voice can communicate, as it were, subterraneously (63-66; cf. also 4.b.iii.). Given that the discourses of McCarthyism pre-eminently figured the undesirable enemy within as a form of infection—a rhetorical strategy that would reoccur with devastating brutality during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s (cf. Wald 157-212)—it does not take much critical labour to unpack the tone of this well-known 'Song' from *Lunch Poems* as an example:

Is it dirty
does it look dirty
that's what you think of in the city

does it just seem dirty
that's what you think of in the city
you don't refuse to breathe do you[...]
(FOCP 327)

Here, O'Hara seizes upon the paranoid imaginary of the state, inverting its normative predications. In a world where the agentive American national subject was apparently under threat by the synonymous agencies of Communism and sexual deviance, O'Hara revalues these incursions upon the healthy body politic as a necessary and even salutary act. To be sure, the poem is not without its aggressive rhetoric—the speaker almost echoes the tone of Roy Cohn's questioning cited above in that its questions are not really interested in answers, and the refrain 'that's what you think of in the city' seems more like a command than an

¹⁶ See Schwartz for a particularly astute and path-breaking analyses of Hughes' lyric poetry as strategies of veiled homoeroticism (68-87).

¹⁷ See also D'Emilio's landmark study *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* for a fuller account of this nation-wide reinforcement of virulent anti-homosexual campaigns between 1940 and 1970.

observation. Nonetheless, in this playful reframing of the language of the interrogator, dirt is an apt material metaphor, its status as matter-out-of-place lending it a quality that is conceptually homologous to those quotable paeans to transitivity cited above.

Nonetheless, the way ‘Song’ ultimately places itself *within* the binary negotiations of the sanitation-neurotic interrogator—irrespective of how ironically the binary is reversed—does bring to the fore a key weakness in the rhetorical and poetic embrace of transitivity and relationality over the apparently conservative drive towards identity and stability. The problem with normatively reifying these binary oppositions can be seen in the less politically coherent aspects of post-war hipster cultural appropriation. Two of the major contemporary cultural influences that Allen cites as particularly inspirational for the N.A.P.—‘modern jazz and abstract expressionism’—can be seen as two axes along which this problematic is articulated. The fetishization of black music as a rejuvenating and spontaneous counter-current of ‘hip’—frequently speckled over the pages of texts like Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*—often spoke to a reductive essentialism which effectively precluded capacities such as rational thought from the African American subjects it ostensibly championed. The most dated yet theoretically sustained articulation of this kind of essentialism is Norman Mailer’s essay on the ‘White Negro’, wherein he posits that Beat hipsters had ‘absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro’ (97)—the fetishized black body here offering itself up as a legitimating underwriter of whatever counter-cultural bohemianisms the predominantly white, middle class authors decided to proclaim. To be sure, these cross-cultural meetings and appropriations were and continue to be read as complex and multifaceted; defined in part by the very real architectures of segregation and American settler colonial mythologies proper to their time, these problematic ways of thinking through national and counter-national identity cannot be simply denounced via the standards of contemporary criticism, nor brushed aside as merely accoutrements of their age. O’Hara was not immune from this

kind of essentialising and binary thinking: black bodies are often positioned throughout his poetry as sexualised cyphers for visions of unleashed desire and libidinal freedom, such as the function of Billie Holiday's voice at the end of 'The Day Lady Died' (325), and the exoticized coding of blackness in 'In the Movies' (206) and 'Easter' (96). What Blasing describes as O'Hara's 'imperial self' (61), or a kind of colonising instinct to reductively frame peoples outside of the Western humanist tradition, is thus inseparable from his rhetoric of escape and flight, and a reminder that such rhetoric still bears the potential to impart problematic reifications of its own.¹⁸

For all of O'Hara's blindspots on reductively racialised codifications of desire, however, he did in other areas show a remarkable understanding for the way imaginaries of flight often produce their own strictures of closure. This can be explored through a facet of his imagination which centred upon the technologically expansive media ecology of the post-war United States. Marshall McLuhan would sum up this techno-*topos* with characteristic iconoclasm during the early 1960s: the 'era of electricity'—given shape and form by the explosion in public access to radio, television, cinema, amplified live music and other forms of visual and sonic culture—had extended the human subject's nervous system through a mesh of disorienting sense-perceptions, creating what he saw as a social condition of narcotized rootlessness, numbed through overstimulation (19-21). Via concepts such as 'hot' and 'cool' media, McLuhan's post-war America was a technologically determined, dynamically atmospheric landscape which asked people to envision themselves as materially

¹⁸ Ross's early, provocative essay on O'Hara's camp aesthetic in 'The Day Lady Died' can be seen as an inaugural critical resource of sorts for mention of the way in which race is incorporated into a queer economy of desire. See Friedlander for a more robust critical intervention into the way, for O'Hara (in contradistinction to the Pound/Olson tradition), 'race is less didactic than libidinal, less a matter of sociology than sex' (129). For a more politically optimistic accounts, see Nick Lawrence for an account of race and the Situationist-inflected creation of 'postcolonial space' in the work of O'Hara.

tempered by the technologies they used as extensions of themselves, decentring human-centric models of subjects over objects in favour of a spatially distributed entanglement whereby the objects of a complex technological environment actively produce and adapt subjectivity as such (Ibid 40-48). Media theorist John Peters has recently positioned McLuhan's insights as indicative of a much broader shift in awareness, beginning in the post-war and finding its culmination in the networked, distributed media ecology of the information age:

Media are civilizational ordering devices. Getting this insight requires us to see just how exceptional media were in the last century. During much of it, "media" such as radio, television, film, newspapers, and magazines were seen as providing information for voters, enticement for consumers, entertainment for workers, and ideology for dupes. Media were largely conceived, in other words, as distributors of messages and meanings designed on a human scale. They were generally taken as influential, to be sure, but not as infrastructural—as figure, but not as ground. In the past half century, as the dominant technologized form of communication has shifted from broadcasting and telephony to the Internet, things have reverted back to the historical norm of a more chaotic media world. (5)

Seen through this lens, the N.A.P.'s rhetoric of decentering the self and open-ended stances towards vibrant and vitalistic conceptions of the world can be seen as not only an antagonistic rebellion against normative cultural edicts, but also as a symptomatic registering of the somatic effects of a rapidly developing, disorienting technological substrata: the 'ground' rapidly threatening to subsume the 'figure'.

In many cases, the role of media new and old was explicitly woven into the tracts of poetics themselves—Jack Spicer declared that 'The poet is a counterpunching radio' ('Sporting Life' n.p.); while Olson's typewriter in 'Projective Verse' is famously positioned as an immediate extension able to precisely 'indicate the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables[...]' (*COCP* 245). Indeed, O'Hara's centring of the telephone in 'Personism' has been frequently seen as a vital way of reading his archly nonchalant poetic voice (*FOCP* 498-99), but the latter was arguably much more attuned than either Olson or

Spicer were to McLuhan's broader, hyper-connected media ecology, investing a curator's delicate eye for material culture into pretty much every mass cultural medium that came under his gaze. The final chapter of this thesis will develop this facet of the poet's work in more detail, but for now it suffices to say that O'Hara often dramatizes his poetic manoeuvres between stasis and flight, closure and openness, through addressing a vast assortment of different media: within each intermedial encounter, the affordances of the telephone, or the movie projector, or the television screen, or the radio, offer different models of being and becoming—and not all of which O'Hara views as intrinsically positive or liberatory. Indeed, and as we shall see, O'Hara frequently explores the liberatory promise of a given technological extension only to find himself coming to terms with its limits and proscriptions, prompting a potentially endless cycle of escape and capture. For O'Hara, different forms of media offer an ontological vocabulary for mapping the plasticity of the self in flight and rest. Once again, as we have seen with Hughes and Olson, it is through a language of the material—in this case, the medium—that vexed questions pertaining to human agency are explored.

Whether declared as a timely revolution in being, or accepted as a politic necessity, or acknowledged to be reflective of a much deeper objective reality, one could say that the post-war prompted for many in the United States a critical undermining of the figure of the individual subject as the principal locus of effective agency within society. In the wake of a disorienting and massifying media ecology and a globally hegemonic consolidation of the American state; in the wake of intrusive McCarthyite campaigns coupled with intensely normative projections of national belonging, the notion of the subject as a decentred, entangled one-among-many was at once a terrifying and liberatory prospect. At once a conceptual revolution that promised a way of escaping the reductive normativity of the state, such decentred distributions of agency in many ways also left the subject even more

vulnerable to coercive exteriorities outside of its immediate control. In this opening section, I have tried to introduce Charles Olson, Langston Hughes and Frank O'Hara as broadly united in that their aesthetics all emerge from this shared uncertainty regarding the way agency is located, claimed and acted upon. This thesis will thus go on to map how these poets each respond to their respective articulations of precarious subjecthood by seeking in poetry new consolidations of thinking and feeling; of counter-hegemonic communal and individual practices. To be sure, such authors spoke from drastically different literary contexts and political positions, yet the line I want to draw here is principally one of association rather than demarcation. As we have thus far only intimated briefly, dynamic materials enter into all three of these poet's imaginaries as ways of both consolidating and problematising vexed conceptions of collective and individual agency, and it is this act of imaginative underwriting that this thesis wants to unpack and explore. I will attempt, in other words, to navigate what is to be gained by thinking the human subject—its capacities, its connections, its environment—through forms underwritten by agentive matter, and the kinds of political possibilities such substitutions seem to augur.

–1.b.–

The Agencies of Matter: Material Imaginations

i. Writing Agency

Before we attend to the three poets in more detail, there remains to be answered important questions regarding terminology—specifically, two concepts alluded to in the title of this thesis, which have already announced themselves to varying degrees during our synopsis of the historical period: ‘agency’ and ‘material imaginations’. The first of these merits clarification due largely to its broadness and definitional polyvalence; the second due rather to its specificity and its particular definition in certain works of the French ‘phenomenologist of the imagination’, Gaston Bachelard. In a certain sense, the two terms used in conjunction throughout what follows should be conceived of as a conceptual shorthand linking together the artistic manoeuvres we have already begun to discuss: that is, the thinking-through of problematics surrounding social agency by attempting to incorporate the structural dynamisms of material processes into poetic forms. The aim, then, of this short section is to give some account of how this operation enacts itself; or to explicate the mechanics giving form to a shared aesthetic strategy.

First, it is useful to put pressure on the concept of ‘agency’ as a complex and paradoxical term. Straightforwardly defined as the ‘ability or capacity to act or exert power’ (from the Latin *agere*, ‘to set in motion’ or ‘to draw out’), the term gets trickier as soon as one starts to ask questions such as: who or what should be given the title of an actor?; to what extent does ‘capacity’ conceptually overlap with purposive intention?; and under what criteria can we distinguish between ‘action’ conceived in both active and passive moods: to act or to be acted upon? Such conceptual anxieties can be recapitulated by the commonplace

observation that the word ‘agent’ is in itself a contranym: one can be a free agent in the sense that one’s actions are undetermined, but one can also be an agent (in the sense of, say, a covert operative) of some larger body that determines and instructs one’s actions. Rather than purport to arrive at a stable definition of the term, I propose to use agency as a generative concept that is productive by virtue of its definitional polyvalence. To worry about agency is to immediately draw a map; to posit an environment filled with simultaneous yet variably distributed chains of causation and interrelation, and to posit which entities have the power to determine and regulate such chains and in what ways.

Up to a point, the same can be said about a related concept relied upon heavily in the previous section: the ‘subject’. Etienne Balibar perhaps poses the question best: ‘Why is it that the very *name* which allows modern philosophy to think and designate the *originary freedom* of the human being—the name subject—is precisely the name which *historically* meant suppression of freedom, or at least an intrinsic limitation of freedom, i.e., *subjection*?’ (8-9). From the root form ‘under’ (*sub*) ‘cast’ (*jacere*), then, the subject becomes the category that allows enlightened ‘Man’ to stand above and in detachment from the lowly domains of objects. Raymond Williams’ useful warning that if we are to avoid ‘glibness’ or ‘confusion’ in the preferential usage of one version of the ‘subject’ over the other—historical or philosophical—‘*Subjective* and *objective*[...] need to be thought through—in language rather than within any particular school—every time we wish to seriously use them’ (*Keywords* 263-64). This need for thinking-through goes much further than the need for simple linguistic clarity: bracketing either drastically idealist or materially deterministic viewpoints, it is not controversial to say that any account of human subjectivity will be arrived at through the interrelated iterations of objective, limiting restrictions on the one hand, and a delineated locus of originary, responsible action on the other. In the words of Terry Eagleton, ‘to be free of all determinations would not be freedom at all. How can one be free to score a goal

for Real Madrid if one's legs did not operate in a certain anatomically determined, reliably predictable way?' (13-14) Navigating *between* the subject and subjection, in other words, should be seen as a process of political thinking; a process of distinguishing from where meaningful action can be said to spring forth and the channels through which it is condemned to operate, and how these domains mutually fold back into themselves in a relation of interdependence.

Diagnosing their respective historical and political problematics as a confrontation between authentic liberty and a restrictive or enclosing environment, the aesthetic responses of the three poets under discussion in this thesis might be placed within a trajectory of thought which Alexander Houen has recently termed 'potentialism': a political aesthetic that developed most visibly in the wake of the countercultures and political activism of the 1960s, but which, as we have seen, was certainly in its developmental stages during the previous decade.¹⁹ For Houen, this discourse in the American post-war principally articulates itself not by straightforwardly claiming existing institutions or domains of political power, but rather by radically expanding the realm of the 'possible' and indeed the political:

If a person's potentials are not simply innate, are they reducible to the concrete manifestations of capacity that are in evidence through that person's interactions with an environment? Might the person not retain other *unrealized* capacities for thinking, feeling, and acting—capacities that can be extended and reoriented through being exposed to alternative worlds of possibility, for example? (9)

Rejecting both the innate agency of a withdrawn, transcendental subject and the reactionary determinism of strict environmental causation, political possibility is thus uncovered in 'unrealized' domains—in domains whose given function or purpose may not seem to be related to the domain of the political *per se*. It follows, then, that what is needed for such an

¹⁹ Houen routes the intellectual genealogy of this concept principally through the work of New Left studies in America in the wake of Herbert Marcuse, and is further conceptualised through the Foucauldian theoretical articulation of biopolitics. See the discussion of agency panics in 1.a.ii. for a comparable contextual account.

operation of environmental disclosure is a particular view or standpoint: a way of seeing the environment not as overdetermined by an explicitly given function, but rather as containing hidden, unrealized muscularities of potentially liberating actions; a way of reading space as a disclosure of possible agency.

The move, then, is one from the agency of the subject to the notional agency of the environment—or, more precisely, the agency of the environment *as realised by* the reconstitution of the subject's 'capacities for thinking, feeling, acting'. In the parlance of this thesis, to 'write agency' is to claim imaginative writing as a mode of such a realisation, whereby formally innovative poetic techniques substitute for more fundamental shifts in human capacity. Whether it be formulated through Olson's 'salts and minerals of the earth', or Langston Hughes' obscure, environmental agencies manipulating the 'raisin in the sun', or Frank O'Hara's tentative embrace of mediating technologies, what draws these projects together is their shared insistence that the kinds of things that might be considered to constitute the background context of political actions actually exert their own disruptive agency—an agency that must either be harnessed or otherwise confronted before any radically effective notion of human freedom can be articulated. Thus, we move from poets writing agency through grand, complex objects like the Atlantic Ocean, to geographical localities within industrialised cities, to media artefacts like saxophones and television screens. What links these intuitively discrete items together—rather than any intrinsically similar attributes or categorical commonalities—is their suggestiveness for posing questions such as: what do these objects allow me to think, feel or do? What unexpected or unrealised actions do they inspire for my own body or the collective body of which I am a part? They serve, in other words, as vectors of potential agency, and poetry is the choicest medium for anticipating how these potentials may be actualised.

In framing environmental and material phenomena as expressive of a kind of agency, I am nonetheless aware of potentially problematic metaphysical commitments that emerge from such a notion. Such problems can be extrapolated via fairly recent discussions within ‘new materialism’, and Jane Bennett’s well-known conceptualisation of ‘vibrant matter’ is a good example.²⁰ For Bennett, it is fundamental to reframe our anthropocentric view of the world by positioning matter itself as possessive of agency, taking seriously the way dynamic materialities such as food or electrical fields impose themselves upon human subjects and worry straightforward conceptions of the human as a self-enclosed, self-sufficient category. Borrowing heavily from Latour’s model of ‘distributed agency’ in his early articulations of ‘Actor Network Theory’, Bennett claims it is possible to conceptually de-stick *intentionality*, on the one hand, from *agency*, on the other—with the former positioned as merely one (particularly human) kind of causal origin for action alongside other, less human models of causality and directionality to be found ontologically further afield (*Vibrant Matter* 31-36). Radically horizontalizing these distributed models of causality—and thus not automatically privileging the intentional, directed thought of human actors—might, in Bennett’s formulation, lead to ethically superior attitudes that can face up to the environmental reality of a world that is, as it were, rejecting the historically catastrophic impact of human systems upon it. As its own kind of anti-anthropocentric potentialism, Bennett’s is a comparable attempt to write agency through a dynamic and imaginative engagement with the forcefulness of matter and the insistent modalities of becoming in the world.

²⁰ I deploy the term ‘new materialism’ here to refer to various intellectual currents during (broadly) the 2010s which position themselves against what they perceive to be excessively idealist epistemological commitments that stress a hard distinction between (and consequent irreconcilability of) ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’ categories. Anything approaching a complete bibliography is too vast to cite here, but other texts pertinent to this discussion in particular are Meillassoux’s *Beyond Finitude*, Harman’s *The Quadruple Object* and Haraway’s *Staying With the Trouble*.

The critiques of Bennett's 'vibrancy' of matter (that is, something *like* 'vitality' but, as with her formulation of 'agency', similarly 'distributed' and not so anthropocentric) are not so difficult to pre-empt. In attempting to de-centre the human from questions of the political, Bennett arguably forces the even greater imposition of anthropomorphism—that is: projecting, via a precariously analogical reasoning, onto the noumenal outside attributes and qualities that reductively foreclose the intrinsic otherness of matter within human grammars. There is, in other words, a kind of homely cosiness to Bennett's ontology, whereby the deep world of objects and matter comes to appear as a merely useful testing ground for human self-reflection and collective betterment. As a radical call for an experimental phenomenology, Bennett's work is inspiring and thought provoking; framed as an ontological commitment, however, to claim the agency of things is to rest on epistemologically unstable ground, and it is telling that the most convincing defences of 'vibrant matter' made by Bennett herself are to do with the theory's applicability to urgent contemporary problems like climate change, with the importance of directed, human actions and intentions clearly remaining centre-stage.

Additionally, one could argue that, in 'distributing', stretching or otherwise re-defining concepts so important for political thinking like agency and vitality, this might be read as an uneasy prelude for a much more disturbing admission: that is, if one were truly to decentre the human out from the ontological frame, concepts like agency would not only be unworkable but epistemologically impossible. In other words, if Bennett's strategy is to read subjectivity into the object-world as a hesitant sort of vitalism, one might be inclined to argue in the opposite direction and read the object-world as rather a *traumatic disruption* of subjective categories. Mark Fisher has positioned a train of thought he terms 'Radical Enlightenment' as precisely this countermove, locating its roots in Sigmund Freud's theorisation of Thanatos in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle':

By striking contrast with the new materialist idea of “vibrant matter”, which suggests that all matter is to some extent alive, the conjecture implied by Freud’s positing of Thanatos is that *nothing* is alive: life is a region of death. [...] What is called organic life is actually a kind of folding of the inorganic.

But the inorganic is not the passive, inert counterpart to an allegedly self-propelling life; on the contrary, it possesses its own agency. There is a death drive, which in its most radical formulation is not a drive towards death, but a drive *of* death. The inorganic is the impersonal pilot of everything, including that which seems to be personal and organic. Seen from the perspective of Thanatos, we ourselves become an exemplary case of the eerie: there is an agency at work in us (the unconscious, the death drive), but it is not where or what we expected it to be. (84-85)

Of course, Fisher here does not get away from necessary anthropomorphisms: the word ‘pilot’ is a clear concession, as is the framing of the death drive itself as possessive of ‘agency’. But where Fisher departs from Bennett can be seen in his insistence that a truly radical attempt to think human life through matter will not be experienced as an expansive widening of the horizon of human possibility, but rather as a catastrophic irreconcilability with human thoughts, feelings and actions. At its most radical level, accepting the agency of matter is perhaps to surrender the domain of the thinkable.

Fisher’s corpus (alongside many similar veins of contemporary thought that have elsewhere been titled ‘cosmic pessimism’ [cf. Thacker]) includes many of the expected names in a rostrum of the philosophy of nihilism: Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Freud all variously make their appearances as harbingers of an irreconcilable Outside, beyond the limits of self-reflexive representation. On an aesthetic level, however, we might feel ourselves to be quite far away from the innovations in 1950s experimental U.S. poetry. Recent discussions of this sort have centred around the ‘weird fictions’ of authors like H.P. Lovecraft and Thomas Ligotti, and the popular contemporary genres of post-apocalyptic media and Anthropocene disaster narratives. Yet I would argue that attending to the material imaginations of the three authors in this thesis breaks down the apparently zero-sum incompatibility between the helpful, potentiating agency of matter as offered by Bennett, and the irreconcilable, ‘eerie’ material impositions as offered by Fisher. One of the more

surprising conclusions of this research has been the extent to which initially optimistic embraces of notional, material agencies frequently find themselves coming to terms with the fragile nature of the poem's representational capacity. Throughout the chapters of this thesis, one traces a recurring pattern: frustrated by an absence of meaningful political or social agency, the poet frames his work as somehow reconstituted by the rejuvenating potentiality of material processes. However, in doing so the poetic subject must come to terms with the kinds of agency he *cannot* incorporate, or the kinds which threaten normative presumptions of what a poem should ideally 'do'. Whether it be seen in the overarching trajectory of Olson's *Maximus Poems*, where fortified, typewritten pages literally seem to decay into detrital scraps and handwritten notations; or in Langston Hughes' late-career pessimism regarding the ability of poetry to contribute towards a broader politics of liberation; or in Frank O'Hara's uneasy negotiations of mediated desire in 'Biotherm'—what begins as an excitement in the face of potentiating, 'vibrant' materialities continuously folds into a radical uncertainty about the limits of human possibility itself. I will argue that to trace these negotiations is to recognise that the ways in which we care about the world are inseparable from the ways in which we are swept up and carried away by it. 'Writing agency' in this sense is as an attempt to situate oneself on the porous boundary line between the active and the passive; where human agency irresistibly attempts to move beyond itself and glimpses the potentially terrifying significance of the ontological loss that such a movement might entail.

ii. Material Imaginations

Insofar as we have foregrounded writing agency as an act of ontological disclosure, the language of phenomenology has already presented itself as ready to hand. In other words, if we can read the poetry considered by this thesis as an un-concealer of potential agency, or poetic writing as a way of revealing hidden aspects of the world that the structures of day-to-day existence limit or foreclose, then vocabularies like those of, for example, Martin

Heidegger's *aletheia* (wherein the 'voice of thought must be poetic because poetry is the saying of truth, the saying of the unconcealedness of beings' [72]) or Victor Shklovsky's 'defamiliarization' (which anticipates Heidegger's thoughts about poetry's un-concealing agency via an embrace of the 'deautomatization' capacities of poetic language upon human perception [cf. 171-72]) might present themselves as useful counterpoints. These were, after all, the conceptual innovations of previous generations on the other side of the Atlantic that were only beginning to make themselves felt in the post-war Anglosphere in which Olson, Hughes and O'Hara were writing. It is no coincidence that early critical voices within the U.S. academy celebrating Charles Olson and Frank O'Hara in particular were readers of Heidegger and Shklovsky like William V. Spanos and Marjorie Perloff, critics who saw in this nexus of texts a common route of departure from New Critical orthodoxies surrounding the hermetic unity of the poem.²¹ As far as this thesis is concerned, however, I would rather bring into the conversation the slightly less well-known phenomenological writings of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, whose theorisation of 'material imaginations' chimes well with the kinds of shared aesthetic we have begun to elaborate, and may offer some common descriptive parameters for a set of writers who are working within quite distinct literary traditions and milieus. Of all three authors, Olson is the only one who can be said to have had any sort of direct engagement with Bachelard, and even this is minimal. According to Charles Boer, after being presented with a copy of Bachelard's landmark *The Poetics of Space* quite late in his life, Olson exclaimed 'that's my title!' (*Olson in Connecticut* 108)—but there is little evidence to suggest that he substantively engaged with it further. In many ways, the function of Bachelard for this thesis could be seen as an equally serendipitous, contemporary

²¹ By far the most illustrative example of this melding of traditions can be seen in William V. Spanos' 'Charles Olson and Negative Capability: A Phenomenological Interpretation'. See also Perloff's 1976 'Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention' (781-82) for an early and influential reading of O'Hara through Viktor Shklovsky.

intellectual project that mirrored in key ways how these poets expressed their own iterations of the ways in which poetry teases out or discloses the agency of matter.

Although *The Poetics of Space* is perhaps Bachelard's most well-known book, it can actually be situated within a much broader corpus of late phenomenological writings that contrasted stylistically with earlier texts that had made the philosopher's name in the field of scientific epistemology. Between 1938 and 1961, Bachelard composed numerous works of literary enquiry which centred on how poets each developed aesthetic signatures, or traceable imaginative affinities with different kinds of matter—specifically, those represented by the Classical elements: fire, water, earth and air. To do this, it was important for Bachelard to make a clear distinction between the objects of the imagination—or, *what* the human subject dreams about; and the dynamism of the imagination itself—i.e., *how* the human subject dreams. Indeed, in each of his major works of the 1940s (his books on water, air and earth), Bachelard's analyses repeatedly begin with this fundamental distinction. To take the opening passage from *Air and Dreams*:

We always think of the imagination as the faculty that *forms* images. On the contrary, it *deforms* what we perceive; it is, above all, the faculty that frees us from immediate images and *changes* them. If there is no change, or unexpected fusion of images, there is no imagination; there is no *imaginative act*. [...] The basic word in the lexicon of the imagination is not *image*, but *imaginary*. The value of an image is measured by the extent of its *imaginary aura*. Thanks to the *imaginary*, imagination is essentially *open* and *elusive*. It is the human psyche's experience of *openness* and *novelty*. (*Air and Dreams* 1)

Between 'image' and 'imaginary', poetry un-conceals the agency (the 'act') of imaginative faculties; the way the mind continuously engages with the phenomena it receives and imparts a sense of possibility that ensures the thinking being does not become locked in a habitual inertia. Crucially, Bachelard does not conceive of this deformational capacity as a kind of *a priori* judgement, or a faculty of the mind that works in detachment from an embodied and sensuous engagement with the world. In his book on water, one finds a recapitulation of the image/imaginary dialectic through a similar vocabulary which plots 'the imagining powers of

our mind around two very different axes', the 'formal imagination' and the 'material imagination':

Yet besides the images of form, so often evoked by psychologists of the imagination, there are[...] images of matter, images that stem *directly from matter*. The eye assigns them names, but only the hand truly knows them. A dynamic joy touches, moulds, and refines them. When forms[...] are put aside, these images of matter are dreamt substantially and intimately. They have weight; they constitute a heart. (*Water and Dreams* 1)

In counterposing the 'formal imagination' (i.e., that which *presents* 'immediate images') against the 'material imagination' (that which *deforms* them), Bachelard argues that there are certain materialities in the world that poets seem not to approach as mere objects; that these images of matter interact with the imagining mind in a more embodied and fundamental way, coinciding somehow with deeper realities of human experience. The implied hierarchy of sensation in this passage underscores the point: eyes need to maintain a distance to be able to observe; hands both affect and are affected by that which they touch. A study of the material imagination is to enquire into this open, reflexive engagement: a study of how the mind not only proposes imaginary objects but how it is itself manipulated and changed by the objects that it privileges.

In his 1947 book on the reveries of earth imagery, Bachelard would cite Carl Jung's formulation of psychological archetypes as a key reference point (*Earth and Reveries of Will* 3-4). In a certain sense, Bachelard's elements could be seen as comparable, psychological ur-structures: hidden ideal unities that manifest as a structuring psychological substrata demarcating the bounds of possibility for one's imaginings. In place of the trickster, the hero or the wise woman, then, are the essential consistencies of water, earth, air and fire. Arguably, however, what sets Bachelard's schemata apart from this kind of archetypal reasoning—and, more specifically, may point to a departure from certain of the more problematic

essentialisms of Jungian psychoanalysis—is precisely this reflexive vocabulary of touch and moulding. Echoing the passage quoted above, Bachelard goes on to write that

A material image dynamically experienced, passionately adopted, patiently explored, is an *opening* in every sense of the word, in its real sense and its figurative sense. It assures the psychological reality of the figurative, the imaginary. The material image transcends immediate existence and deepens superficial existence. This deepening reveals a double perspective: opening into the interior of the active subject and into the inner substance of the inert object encountered by perception. However, in working with matter, this double perspective is reversed. The inner depths of subject and object interchange; a salutary rhythm of introversion and extroversion comes to life in the worker's spirit. (*Earth...* 24)

If Jung's essentialism can be thought of as a one-way street—where ideal, archetypal structures always precede emplaced experience, Bachelard's essentialism—with its tactile, interactive and creative 'worker's spirit' underpinning it—posits ideal psychological structures as arising from lived, embodied encounters. In other words, the deeper structures of human imagination are not received as the inheritances of a closed, generational lineage mandated by a collective unconscious—rather, the deeper structures that inform one's imaginative dynamism are set into motion by our ongoing, tactile engagement with the objects around us. Subjecthood is thus an act or a way of 'working' through the given, a way of moving back and forth between the manifold particularity of empirical encounters into radically potentiated ideal unities. Bachelard would go on to imagine this work as an act of 'kneading' (71-75), a metaphor that Steven Connor has noted 'mimics [the] life-giving process of fermentation' (*The Book of Skin* 225). Being is in this sense a mode of being-made; the material imagination is the agency which forms, deforms and transforms the self; a self that is both continuous with itself, but also porous and open to its outside: with each kneading, it is reconstituted.

Poets, then, come to arrive at different kinds of affinity with the 'outside', different tendencies towards specific material textures, which in turn give way to different muscularities of 'imaginary' dynamism. In *Water and Dreams*, Bachelard calls this an 'oneiric

temperament', not dissimilar to the way pre-Socratic philosophy underwrote 'philosophical dispositions' through a privileged element (3-5). In keeping with his distinction between formal and material imaginations, this does not necessarily mean that specific poets write more about water, earth, air or fire as a simple preference in *subject matter*. One might better think of the process inversely: as an element coming to form the poet as a *mattered subject*. Arguing that 'A material element must provide its own substance, its particular rules and poetics', Bachelard emphasises the need to abstract through an almost mathematical extrapolation a sort of calculus of matter, or a formal poetics that such privileged elements perform (Ibid). Thus, the Nietzsche of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is principally *aerial* in nature, he 'is the prototype of the *vertical poet*, the *poet of the summits*, the *ascensional poet*' (*Air and Dreams* 127), with the rhetoric of ascension underpinning and poetically substantiating arguments that claim to surpass the boggy, terrestrial ground of inherited morality. In this sense, 'Nietzscheanism' can be phrased as 'a conquered vertigo. Nietzsche comes near the abyss to find dynamic images of ascent.' (147). This might be contrasted with, say, the way Bachelard frames Edgar Allen Poe's imagination of water: an element that, in its still, placid form, gives one a Narcissus-like ease in self-reflection, an idealisation of the world that 'corrects the real; it removes stains and wretchedness. Water gives the world thus created a Platonic solemnity. It also provides a *personal* character[...] in so pure a mirror, the world is my vision' (*Water and Dreams* 49). But this purifying idealisation quickly flows into something much more disturbing: in waters less placid and shallow, in deeper waters which tug via the more abyssal currents running underneath the colourful, light-absorbing surface, water becomes 'an invitation to die; it is an invitation to a special death that allows us to return to one of the elementary material refuges' (55). For Bachelard, Poe's most prominent poetic concern—as epitomised in the lines 'I could not love except where Death / Was mingling his with Beauty's breath' (cit. 65)—is thus underwritten by water's precarious continuity between surface and

depth; a revelation that intoxicated, idealised images of beauty are borne upon the currents of a deathly passing-over (64-66).

We could continue extrapolating certain of Bachelard's reconstructions of elemental poetics, teasing out the way specific material images engender their own sustained grammars of imaginative tendency. In contrast to the ascensional thrust of air, or the placid self-reflexivity of water, for example, the earthly is imagined by Bachelard to be connected to imaginaries of practical, human action, and the way in which matter resists or facilitates embodied interventions in the world (*Earth...* 13-26); while fire conjures in the earliest of Bachelard's enquiries imaginaries of consuming desire, whether that be the Promethean desire for knowledge or an Empedoclean self-immolation (*Psychoanalysis of Fire* 7-20). Furthermore, Bachelard would often view these elements in conjunction: the material imagination of mud as a combination of water and earth, for example (*Earth...* 80-102; *Water and Dreams* 93-114); or the image of the tree as encompassing an earthly imaginary at its root and an imagination of the aerial at its crown (*Air and Dreams* 203-5). To be sure, these are only a handful of the kinds of extrapolations Bachelard was apt to make; his work on the material imagination is littered with italicised, conceptual neologisms, or moments where tactile depictions of material consistency irresistibly metamorphose into abstract idealisations of potential imaginative temperament.

For all that Bachelard achieved in terms of conceptual plenitude, the same cannot really be said in the way of a holistic unity underpinning the total output of the philosopher's works on aesthetics. For whatever theoretical value Bachelard's work into the material imagination yields, his insights have a tendency to remain partial and glimpsed, tantalising theoretical shards bursting from seemingly arbitrary engagements with different kinds of material texture. In many ways consistent with his earlier writings on the numbing effects of

‘epistemological obstacles’ in the domain of the sciences,²² we might say that, for Bachelard’s aesthetics, one’s objects of enquiry and one’s abstracted, ideal architectures must similarly interfold in the ‘salutary rhythm of introversion and extroversion’. In other words, Bachelard himself performs an intellectual flexibility between object and concept, or an unwillingness to calcify his enquiries within a singular architecture of interpretive reduction. In the words of his ground-breaking book on scientific epistemology, ‘An objective discovery is at once a subjective rectification. If the object teaches me, then it modifies me. I ask that the chief benefit the object brings should be an intellectual modification’ (*The Formation...* 246).

Consequently, if this thesis can be considered Bachelardian, then it is so not because it seeks to systematise conceptual schemata like ‘aerial plunging’ or the ‘Atlas complex’ (*Earth...* 256), or even the more well-known, developed notion of ‘housed being’ as explicated in *The Poetics of Space*. Rather, this thesis takes from Bachelard the same willingness to move back and forth between ‘objective discovery’ and ‘subjective rectification’; an ethos of ongoing ‘modification’ that extrapolates from the structure of materiality notional imaginative architectures which can be applied through various theoretical vocabularies. Material imaginations, in other words, are for Bachelard a revelation of spatial agency; a disclosure of the way in which engaged human actors are entangled within complex, heterogeneous fields of possible action. It is for this reason that I have chosen to privilege Bachelard’s notion of ‘material imaginations’ as a guiding piece of terminology in this thesis.

²² Bachelard would be careful to distinguish between his aesthetic phenomenology and his work on scientific epistemology, and it is beyond the scope of these introductory words to attempt a properly systematic consolidation of these two branches of his life’s work. Despite vast tonal differences, however, Bachelard’s exploration of the phenomenology of the imagination was largely consistent with the intellectual challenges that he perceived to be imperative for scientific insight. If Bachelard’s most famous contribution to the philosophy of science is his coinage of the term ‘epistemological obstacles’ (‘a factor of inertia of the mind’ that hampers the open sensibility necessary for scientific enquiry [*Formation...* 25]), it is not so difficult to extrapolate the ‘scientific’ value of a dynamising poetics of matter as that which might surmount such intellectual quagmires.

The point is not to arrive at a particular conception of space but rather to fasten upon *a poetic attitude towards space*; an attitude which claims poetry as a privileged mode by which the pluripotential agency of matter in space reveals itself. Much like Gaston Bachelard, I will posit here that Charles Olson, Langston Hughes and Frank O'Hara develop characteristic affinities with different iterations of dynamic and potentiated materiality, allowing such materials into their works not simply as privileged subject matters but rather as agents which *matter the subject*, re-potentiating the affective and experiential contours of the subject's ability to act effectively within the world. Throughout the following studies, then, two key, Bachelardian questions direct our movements through these authors' texts: 1.) what kinds of materiality does each author privilege as particularly agentic or potentiated; and 2.) how do these authors enact such material consistencies as a dynamising poetics of subjectivity?

iii. Chapter Outlines: Elemental, Geographical and Medial Matters

This thesis' second chapter jumps off from perhaps one of the most assertive declarations of material imagination in the post-war United States—that is, Charles Olson's manifesto 'Projective Verse'. In an exhortation for a more immanent mode of poetics, Olson argues that the projective poem will be 'taken up' by the 'kinetics' of the material world, establishing a vital connection between the impetus of dynamic objects on the one hand, and the relative tensions of line, syllable, image, sound and sense, on the other (*COCPr* 243). By posing the kinetics of matter as a propulsive force that wrenches language both from habitual usage and alienating, 'closed' forms, matter enters into the poem as a re-potentiating agent, one which promises radical reorientations of historical, political and social thinking. After paying some attention to the problematically naturalising implications of these onto-poetic commitments, the first section of this chapter argues against conceiving of Olsonian kinetics as an essentialist naturalisation of rhetorical positions that are, *contra* the poet's magisterial grandiloquence, much more contestable. Instead, we go on to isolate how, beyond

‘Projective Verse’, vocabularies of the material interfold with Olson’s notions of ‘actionable’ thought: how different consistencies of matter imply for Olson different modes of thinking that might be useful for specific purposes; how liquid thinking can be distinguished from solid thinking, and how these two polarities not only define something important about the way one navigates thought, but also inaugurates the implied problem-space of *The Maximus Poems* themselves. Thus, the opening section of Chapter 2 argues that the central kinds of materiality that Olson privileges are *elemental* in nature: *The Maximus Poems* are defined by the need to reconcile water with earth, and this fundamental attempt to, in Olson’s words, ‘square the circle’, lends an idiosyncratic yet evocative weight to questions central for those who would seek to announce new forms of individual or collective agency. Specifically, an imagination of water and earth allows Olson to move back and forth between two often incompatible registers: the first being that which aspires to undermine the dominative tendency to ground or fasten down the subject; while simultaneously resisting the fetishization of aqueous transitivity, which in itself risks foreclosing one’s ability to extract meaningful actions from unlimited—and thus un-actualised—potentials.

Olson takes the first entry in this thesis because these questions—expressed in *The Maximus Poems* through a staggeringly vast, cosmological scope—will come to define the generative tensions of both Hughes’ and O’Hara’s material imaginations, even as we move away from a vocabulary of primordial, elemental substance towards more everyday assemblages of dynamic matter. If the first section of Chapter 2 traces how Olson poses the *problem* of agency as a movement back and forth between aqueous potentiality and solid actuality, the next two sections are concerned with Olson’s attempt to explore this problem through a formally experimental poetics. Borrowing a distinction often made by Olson when referring to the over-arching structure of *The Maximus Poems* (cf. 2.c.iii.), I read the first ‘Book’ of the poem as a text obsessed with water, constantly drawing its readers out to sea in a way

that resists a definitive ‘settlement’ on the American landmass. Via a discussion of Olson’s borrowings from the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and a close reading of poems such as ‘On First Looking Out through Juan de La Cosa’s Eyes’, I show how the saline waters of the Atlantic Ocean allow Olson to imagine a historiographical method that considers past events in the conditional mood. In other words, by imagining what America *could otherwise have been*, Olson poses a challenge to the notion of a national subject as a stable whole, offering non-linear routes through history and geography to radically broaden the horizons of a propositional, internationalist subject.

As Bachelard observes, however, water holds a precarious duality of surface and depth. If Book I of *The Maximus Poems* finds Olson mesmerised by the tidal drift of the ocean and its lateralising paths across the Atlantic’s smooth surface, the final section of the chapter sees how the poet dramatizes the progression of the long poem as an attempt to thread such journeys back home. In other words, I read Book II’s move away from the harbour and shore towards the ruined inland settlement of Dogtown as an attempt to establish subjective coherence amid a world drowned by process. The earthly imagination of this Book—its increasing fascination with source materials garnered from the geological record, its obsessive return to the same, cyclical walks across the inland moraine—relishes the resistant solidity of the ground under the poet’s feet. The final section of this chapter thus considers how the poet imagines the forms he encounters in the earth as structuring agents for poetic *consolidation*: a way of ‘pivoting’ one’s outward journeying back to a position that holds, and in so doing providing the dynamic impetus to go back out towards the horizon of creative re-emergence. The combined focus of the latter two sections of Chapter 2 is, in a certain sense, exegetical in nature: these sections attempt to trace the elements as active agents within the poem, distinguishing what kinds of imaginative functions they perform and what roles they play in Olson’s attempt to establish at the heart of his work a model for dynamic human

agency. Nonetheless, I also strive towards a more critical approach to Olson's material imagination: for all that *The Maximus Poems* conjure in terms of imaginative flight and poetic possibility, the final throes of Book II bring to the foreground the unbearable *silence* of matter, or its status as an impersonal and thus fundamentally indifferent agency which cannot necessarily reconcile itself with those particularly human desires for meaning and understanding. Thus, we conclude our section on Olson by noting a dialectical quality to the material imagination: if 'Projective Verse' initially posited the kinetics of matter as a fundamentally helpful dynamization, working in tandem with the printed page in a way that strengthens the capacities of the poetic subject, *The Maximus Poems* end in scraps and handwritten fragments. In other words, the question becomes not what exteriorities the poem can be said to contain or interpolate, but how the poem is itself interpolated within a vastness that is ultimately indifferent to it.

It is perhaps idiosyncratic to have Langston Hughes follow Charles Olson, and even more so to draw a line of continuity between their respective aesthetic temperaments. Differences between the two poets abound, with Hughes coming to literary prominence at least thirty years earlier than Olson, and through a literary tradition that the latter seldom engaged with. In contrast to the autonomist seclusion of Black Mountain College or an isolated fishing village in Massachusetts, the post-war Langston Hughes positioned himself as a quintessentially popular poet writing in the middle of an urban neighbourhood in a global metropolis. Where Olson's lasting legacy is that of a towering pedagogue subsumed by a single, modernist epic comprising over 600 pages, Hughes—although by no means any less prolific—was principally a lyric poet, and a whole host of other titles as well: song writer, playwright, memoirist, novelist and children's author, to name a few. Nonetheless, this thesis brings them together on the basis of a striking aesthetic echo that, in the case of Hughes, comes to the fore in the late poetic masterpieces of his career: specifically, the two long

poems *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and *Ask Your Mama*. In these two works, Hughes attempts to dynamize the ‘blank’ space of the poetic page. These scare quotes are important because, for Hughes, the page is anything but neutral; in many ways like Olson’s announcement in ‘Projective Verse’, the interstitial gaps within these two poems come with their own dynamic ‘kinetics’. In *Montage*, the interstitial space of the page is endowed both with the sonic energy of bebop but also the interjecting dynamics of urban space; it is a poem ‘on contemporary Harlem’ (LHCP 387), and Harlem is just as much located as a force interrupting the text as it is a referent for the poem’s cacophony of Harlemite lyric speakers. Similarly, *Ask Your Mama* codes its liminal space as dynamic and agentive, but this time it mediates the disorienting dis-locations of speakers across continents, rather than street corners. In both cases, the poem is announced as a porous entity: not a closed, self-sufficient totality but a ‘tensile mass’, ‘saturated with its outside’ (Connor 225), open to agencies that are exterior to its own. To the extent that these exteriorities are invoked by Hughes as material in nature—not simply as privileged images in the text’s imaginative landscape but rather as an active propulsion that deforms and dynamizes the text as it appears on the page—conducting a reading into the poetic agency of liminal space is to describe the contours of the poet’s material imagination.

Nonetheless, there is only so much a comparison between Hughes’ late, formally experimental poetry and Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ can achieve. In making the comparison, I am wary of doing a disservice to the organic literary and historical context of Hughes himself and artificially imposing a framework that obfuscates more than it makes clear. It is for this reason that I have structured each chapter as a more or less self-enclosed study that attempts to ground each poet in their respective critical and historical contexts so as to bolster the lines of aesthetic affiliation as homologues that recur through different traditions, rather than just a seemingly arbitrary selection of poems. To that end, the first section of

Chapter 3 concerns itself with the gestation of Hughes' developing aesthetics of liminal space, tracing out the poet's trajectory as an emerging light of the 'New Negro' Renaissance in the mid-1920s through to the politically radical agitprop verse of the 1930s. From the very beginning of Hughes' career, the articulation of a collective subject rooted in the folk forms of African American music and culture was a predominating concern: jazz and the Blues, it shall be argued, were for Hughes not to be thought of solely as valuable cultural possessions but rather as structural anticipations of political possibility. The agency of musical innovation as an underwriter or counterpart to the poetry is, in this sense, homologous to the way Bachelard framed the agency of matter in his split between the formal and material imaginations: it is the part of the poem's unconscious that authorises a creative deformation of the subjects it presents and, with them, the transfiguration of racial representation and the kinds of political possibility that the signifier of blackness holds. This willingness to allow ideas and forms borrowed from performance culture to disrupt and reinvigorate the written word would also inspire Hughes to incorporate, especially in his 1930s poetic output, ideas taken from constructivist agitprop theatre, using the space around the text as an invitation for participatory dramaturgy, encouraging the reader to take a more active role in the poem as a yet-to-be-enacted performance site. Thus, in Chapter 2.a. I argue that Hughes' post-war aesthetic of agentive, liminal space can be seen as an amalgam of these two core influences: through them, Hughes comes to view the text on the page as situated within a conditioning or enabling musico-material, performative environment, and would go on to explore the rich textual ironies and interpretive contradictions of this aesthetic in his post-war work.

As we have seen in the previous section of this introductory chapter, Hughes' post-war work comes at a time of intense personal and political vulnerability, with the possibility of directed, radical politics seemingly quashed under a rigorously policed culture of conformity. In Chapter 2.b., I claim that *Montage of a Dream Deferred* poses the question of

how one stitches together dynamic and oppositional collective cultures in spite of such overwhelming vulnerabilities. If Olson in 'Projective Verse' paints a more or less harmonious complicity between page-space and the primordial substance of the poet's environment, Hughes positions the tensile geography surrounding *Montage's* plurivocal agora of Harlemites as 'interjecting' rather than 'projective'; 'conflicting' rather than kinetic. In other words, Hughes sets up an apparently antagonistic relation between word and space and, via the improvisatory idioms of post-war jazz, presents the poem as an attempt to establish continuity out from fragmentation, solidarity from material disparity, a future of arrival from an eternal present of deferral. In our final section on Hughes, we go on in Chapter 2.c. to explore how this aesthetic moves from the geographically local concerns of the neighbourhood to more global webs of transnational solidarity. 1960's *Ask Your Mama* finds Hughes confronted with a different horizon of political possibility: with African nations decolonising on the other side of the Atlantic and the Civil Rights Movement gaining momentum alongside a nascent, rebelling youth culture closer to home, *Ask Your Mama* renews an overtly populist radicality the likes of which Hughes had not embraced since the 1930s. Once again, however, such a sense of collective solidarity is not easily won: the poem is presented as a complex, spatially distributed web of fragments and multi-medial aesthetic forms, allowing for readings that once again present page-space as a provocative distancer, challenging straightforward articulations of collective belonging.

At this point, we have considered two variations upon a possible 'material unconscious' subtending the formally disruptive and dynamic movements of a poem. Through an *elemental* vocabulary, we have broken down matter to its most constitutive textures and imaginative potentials: for Olson, elements are the building blocks upon which the poet constructs a reciprocal back-and-forth between being and becoming; to understand the agency of earth and water is to understand the extents and limits of a utopian, future

subject. In Hughes' *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, however, we have hit upon another variation: that is, the material processes of a named, *geographical* locality. In Harlem, Hughes names the site of an empowered collective body, but one which is perennially struggling against the materially repressive architectures of ghettoization. The question is not so much to what extent the subject can be re-imagined, as it were, from the ground up, but how a local, material environment imposes itself as a thing to be traversed and, in a very real sense, *survived*, lest the sense of the collective dissipate and atomise. With *Ask Your Mama*, however, we will be introduced to the third and final variation upon the material imagination that this thesis will consider: that is, the literal, material bodies without which there could be no formal poetic utterance in the first place—the *medium*. In Hughes' final long poem, the poet defamiliarizes the codex as a material artefact: the text is presented on pink pages in alternating colours; there are 'liner notes' contained at the back of the book imitating the form of an LP; and the text itself is arranged in two columns—the officially 'poetic' text on the left, and the italicised, functional 'score' giving instructions for musical accompaniment on the right. This ambiguity over medium (score? poem? recording?) draws attention to the text as a material artefact, forcing the reader to confront its materiality as a component of interpretation. Fittingly, this chimes with a major thematic concern of the poem as well: *Ask Your Mama* is replete with depictions of black artists and political figures undermined and delimited by the media they are contained within; the poem charts how such reifications are the mechanism by which political possibility is contained and appropriated by capital. Chapter 2.c. thus argues that Hughes, in one of the most eclectic and evocative textual assemblages of the American post-war, posits *intermediality* (or, a formal aesthetic that seeks, as it were, to cross-contaminate the operative logics of one medium with those of another) as an aesthetic encouraging hermeneutic strategies that resist such definitive reifications. To the extent that this strategy evokes and seeks to channel the *material* compositions of different medial forms, it is in its own right a material imagination.

We pick up Frank O'Hara where *Ask Your Mama* leaves off, with another poet fascinated by the way different media imply different modalities of thinking and feeling. In Chapter 4.a., we observe a frequent recurrence in O'Hara's poetry towards a genre of the lyric that could be understood as a poem of the *medial address*—or, poems which posit and consider the existential trade-offs between itself and other mediating technologies. By considering poems which pronounce upon the relative affordances of cinema, radio and television as different 'architectures of being', I argue that O'Hara seeks to bend the poem into the shape of other media, seizing upon their technological capacities to make sense of different kinds of lived experience. To do this, I refer to a little-known lecture by O'Hara, entitled 'Design, etc.'. A light-hearted attempt to describe poetic form in motion, the lecture begins a discussion about how form is experienced as a temporal event, as the poem navigates between the Scylla of individual idiosyncrasy and the Charybdis of formal adherence. Different media, it shall be argued, intuit different modalities of poetic 'design'; different ways of navigating the poem's formal requirements and thus implying different ways of being in the world.

In our second and final section on O'Hara, we consider his late long poem dedicated to Bill Berkson, *Biotherm*, as a culmination of many of the concerns brought forth in his poems of medial address. The poem itself is an at times uncomfortable one, with various mediating forms intruding upon the lyric subject—at times providing precipitous new ways of feeling for the addressee of the poem, and at others calcifying the implied relationship in a claustrophobic set of constraints. Chapter 4.b. centres upon the core metaphor underpinning the poem's movements back and forth between different mediating structures: that is, the brand of sun-care lotion that O'Hara cites in the poem's title. Skin, it shall be argued, is in many ways the perfect metaphor for the kinds of negotiations of embodied,

mediated infrastructures that O'Hara's poems conjure: the boundary-line that opens one out towards the world and its intersubjective lines of mutual feeling while also being that which closes up the body and gives it its status as a being in the world, apart from those which surround it. By offering the poem up as a sort of dermatological salve, O'Hara works upon such transactions between open and closed, with a material imagination that is as much remedial as it is intermedial; one which channels the agencies of different material consistencies not to open the subject out to a cosmotoc totality but as a way of salving the daily frustrations and lived negotiations of agency as a daily practice.

The direction of this thesis, then, could be described as a kind of zooming-in through the multiply scaled registers of the material imagination: we move from the cosmic, universalist aspirations of Olson towards the more instantiated, yet nonetheless global, demands for liberation in Hughes, to the potentiated realm of the interpersonal in O'Hara. Through all of these demarcations of scale, imaginaries of the material intervene to provide new and disruptive notions of agency, or different ways of drawing the subject forth into the world. Nonetheless, I am aware of potential accusations of arbitrariness in my perhaps too-cosy categorisations of Olson-elemental, Hughes-geographic and O'Hara-intermedial. As we have seen, Hughes' linkage of bebop and urban space as structuring criteria for poetry in *Montage* and the ironies of *Ask Your Mama* as a codex already muddy such individualised demarcations between the geographical and the medial. Olson, too, would famously 'come back to the geography of it' in a particularly quotable Letter (*TMP* 184), and the underlying tension between the typewritten page and the handwritten scrawl in *The Maximus Poems* demands a vocabulary more akin to the medial than the elemental per se. O'Hara and Hughes, for that matter, were also not averse to elemental imaginaries themselves: cinema for O'Hara is frequently drawn into the same imaginative orbit as fire (4.a.iii.), while Hughes' depictions of space were frequently codified through the more cosmic registers of earth and

water (3.a.iii.). My intention here is not to offer these shorthands as the ultimate last words on these authors' material imaginations. They serve better as a guiding logic that *begins* an enquiry into the way these authors attempt to incorporate an agentive conception of the material into their poetry's formal requirements; a heuristic that invites comparison and refinement through the granular analyses of the texts that follow.

Relatedly, I am also keen to underscore that by grounding in the material what frequently appears to be questions of *poetic form* (that is, innovations in poetry along the lines of visual presentation, aural and linguistic arrangement, or any other strategy that prizes questions of undergirding presentational structure), I do not mean to naturalise these innovations as somehow emerging from a uniquely autochthonous relationship with the world, outside of the contingent domain of poetic language as a phenomenon to be judged on its own terms. In many ways following certain aspects of Forrest-Thomson's Wittgensteinian theorisation of 'poetic artifice', this thesis maintains that 'to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life':

The world is not something static, irredeemably given by a natural language. When language is re-imagined the world expands with it. The continuity which makes it possible to read the world into words provides that the world may be enlarged or enriched by the enlargement of one's awareness of language and/or awareness of others' enlargement of their awareness of language. (20-21)

In seeking to uncover forms of environmental agency via a formal poetics, poem and world become *reciprocally engaged with each other*: matter expands the horizon for poetic possibility without becoming coterminous with it, thus allowing the poem in turn to intuit forms of social, intellectual and affective agency back into the world. The realm of the material is useful for the three poets under consideration here not because it delimits the boundaries of a uniquely true or authentic language but because it keeps language open to the notional possibilities of the world—a comforting thought for a civic landscape frequently understood, as we have seen, through discourses of normativity and top-down control (1.a.iv.)

A guiding aim throughout the gestation of this thesis has been to treat the category of the material in the broadest and most wide-reaching way possible. Similarly, the selection of authors has been inspired by an attempt to draw lines between literary figures who are rarely considered in close proximity. As we go on to detail in Chapter 3.a., Langston Hughes is rarely brought into the orbit of the New American Poetry—predominantly due to his legacy as a poet of a previous generation but arguably also due to the intellectual ghettoization of African American letters as a tradition to be considered as fundamentally adjacent to the literary inheritances of Charles Olson and Frank O'Hara. Recent scholarship aiming to correct the longstanding critical neglect of Hughes' post-war work has made gestures towards critical interventions countermanding this tendency—most explicitly, Smethurst has argued that Hughes is 'an important if almost unconsidered progenitor of what came to be known as the New American Poetry, particularly the Beat and New York Poets, and to a lesser extent the Black Mountain Poets' (*New Red Negro* 163). While this thesis is not driven by an attempt to systematically substantiate this claim (such an account would have to include in some biographical detail the nodal intermediary of Amiri Baraka, for example), it is nonetheless motivated by the wish to expand the kind of connections that are readily apparent between Hughes' late-career output and that of a new generation of predominantly white poets. In this, I consciously work against the periodising heft of the 'Harlem Renaissance' as an important but problematic historical lens through which Hughes' career has been typically framed (3.a.ii.)

It could be argued that Frank O'Hara and Charles Olson, too, are often set against each other in what is by now a rather familiar literary critical binary. Exemplified best in Mutlu Blasing's book on postmodern rhetoric, the two are frequently pitched via the competing legacies of modernism on the post-war avant-garde, with Olson as the inheritor

of a formal, Poundian lineage which sees in experimental form a way of binding together the discrete fragments of modernity via a gambit of epic universality, and O'Hara as the innovator of a rhetorically destabilising mode of address which challenges such centralised and self-consciously pedagogical dramatizations of the poetic voice (Blasing 1-29; see also Shaw, *Poetics*... 65). Such metonymical shorthand of, one might say, neo- vs. post-modernism is a useful way of parsing the aesthetic and intellectual fault-lines of the post-war scene, and are given due attention as contextualising schemata for our representative chapters on Olson and O'Hara. However, by pitching the material imagination as an analytical category that foregrounds similarity in the two poets' respective aesthetics, I hope to draw lines that discomfort the tendency to treat the two figures as aesthetic polarities representing irreconcilable poetic traditions, finding instead moments of affinity and discord around a shared poetic preoccupation—that is, the ontological and socio-political significance of dynamic matter as a notional structuring agency for poetic form.

Finally, it should be made clear that—given our focus on granular, close analyses of poetry and the conceptual implications of formal experimentation—this thesis cannot presume to be an authoritative, fully representative account of agency in the poetry of the post-war period. Such an account would demand a much broader range of poets considered, not to mention a broader sample of *non-male* poets, as well as a greater emphasis on coteries and collectives, and the sociological intersections between authors, rather than such clearly demarcated, single-author framings. My aim here is not to view the poetry of Olson, Hughes and O'Hara as either symptomatic or uniquely illustrative of a particular historical paradigm; rather, I consider a historical moment through certain of its tensions and generative contradictions and adopt a granular analytical approach to explore and unpack the conceptual and theoretical implications of sustained creative responses to such tensions. In doing so, I hope the studies that follow are useful for accounts of the period that organise

themselves more systematically around broader sociological axes, especially those of race and gender. Ever since Marianne DeKoven's ground-breaking account of the role of water as an imaginative threat to the dominating tendencies of modernist masculinity, it has been clear that a material imagination is perforce a *gendered* one (35), and the three authors contained in this thesis similarly code their imaginaries of matter through variously gendered frameworks that speak more broadly to the specific status of masculinity as a form of agency in the post-war period. At various points in this thesis, I have tried to account for these gendered imaginaries of matter, but to claim anything approaching a final word on this subject would be insincere. Another path that this thesis has regrettably left untravelled is something that Toni Morrison calls an 'Africanist perspective'—or a thoroughly comparative account of the way racializing discourses colour these authors' invocations of dynamic matter. Again, such an account would require a degree of theoretical contextualisation and nuance that we cannot hope to reconstruct in this instance. If, for Hughes, questions of race and racial representation stood at the forefront of every facet of his career as a writer, the whiteness of both O'Hara and Olson has afforded them and critics in their wake the luxury of seeing race as a theme that is merely attendant—rather than intrinsic—to their imaginative landscapes. The critical task of reframing both O'Hara and Olson in terms of race remains an urgent one, and I am interested in pushing the conclusions of this thesis towards readings of these poets' material imaginations through more systematically reconstructed theoretical frameworks on these lines.

In the following chapters, we shall see how the textures of the material provide for these three authors a host of imaginative possibilities. Matter enters into poetry as a potentiating agent, expanding the capacity of what poetic language can say and do, and with it offering hope for the capacities of embodied, human actors. The purpose of this introduction has been to explicate the historically contingent reasons for the adoption of

such an aesthetic and to set the terms for the ways in which Olson, Hughes and O'Hara each attempt to incorporate variously defined notions of the material into their respective imaginative landscapes. What remains to be done is to follow these material engagements to their limits, and to probe for the pressure points that complicate such hospitable aesthetics. In what follows, I show how the material imagination ultimately brings itself to a state of crisis: when the bristling dynamisms of material process seem less the revivifying agents of poetic possibility than agencies irreconcilable with the poet's normative iterations of what the poem should be able to do. In other words, this thesis traces the realisation that to *write* agency may not be the same as the act of *claiming* it.

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Charles Olson's Elemental Agencies

Squaring the Circle: Charles Olson between Land and Sea

i. Navigating the projective archive

At the heart of Charles Olson's poetic project in *The Maximus Poems* and beyond lies a sonorous call to immanence: the poet announces that he no longer transcends his materials; he no longer appropriates at will from the world of objects below into the upper echelons of a privileged poetic subject position. In the words of 'Projective Verse', no longer shall the poem be subject to the 'lyrical interference of the individual as ego' (COCPr 247); the poet instead shall be an object among objects, and thus 'every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality' (243). The poet and the poem do not reflect upon the material world, but are themselves 'taken up' by its dynamisms; they stand as indices of a material process enacted, a process which can be brought to bear on the poem only by what Olson calls an act of 'humilitas' (247)—a surrendering of the poet's perceived sense of agency to the more ambiguous vectors of the world of objects. But what does this humbled poet, this object among objects, look like? If this notion of 'humilitas' is a living practice, what toolkit in particular does one make use of to ensure one's poetry is thus humbled, and on whose authority? What is the status of such a poetry, if it precludes any abstractable *about-ness* of the world; if it is indeed ontologically equivalent to, say, one billiard ball hitting another, or a spark launching a forest fire? These are not easy questions to answer, and it is at the moment of posing them that general statements regarding the central developments in Olson's poetry and poetics break down. Nor is it necessarily adequate to look for answers by meticulously

charting the lines of development and argumentation contained within the *Collected Prose* or *The Maximus Poems* or indeed the wider archives. Olson's methods for exploring the theoretical implications of what one might describe as his inaugural ontological manoeuvre were dutifully immanent themselves: each lecture, poem, reading, interview or essay can be read as a new foray into this participatory kinetics, a way of thinking-through that is always perforce a thinking-with whatever contingent processes and dynamisms are at hand. These dynamisms direct the discourse; submerged in such contingency, there are too many bifurcations and contradictions to posit any system even remotely describable as epistemologically consistent.

As an example, one might take the first question I asked in the preceding paragraph: what does this humbled poet look like? Beyond his most famous manifesto, Olson repeatedly offers a plethora of figurations stretching across and between divergent genres and epistemological formations. As David Herd notes, there is a certain discontinuity between the mobile poet-object described by 'Projective Verse' (1950) and the stable and limited subjective perspective of 1956's *The Special View of History*—one which, as he shows, resists synthesis ('The view...' 277-78). Four years after the *Special View* lectures, Olson would adopt the language of cognitive science to re-introduce the concept of the 'soul' into his poetics (an idealism he threw out in 'Projective Verse'), this time under the guise of 'proprioception': 'the data of depth sensibility/the "body" of us as object which spontaneously or of its own order produces experience of, "depth" ' (*COCPr* 181). Such a description of the bio-poetic body—a vessel whose coherence is produced by this pre-linguistic experience of 'depth' emerging from the 'abstract-primitive character of the real' (183)—is difficult to reconcile with yet another figuration of the poetic body evoked in the 'Bibliography on America' (1964): the poet this time sits at the intersection of four tendrils of metaphysical insight, each of which stemming from an interdisciplinary library-load of authoritative *texts* (305). Lastly,

how might one read any of these evocations of the poetic body through Olson's words at the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference that an open poem is, against its intent, more often than not just an expression of a 'private soul' anyway and at best the 'cry' of 'a cock at the birth of day' (*Muthologos* 167)? We could jump off from any of these texts and try to develop an argument beginning with the poet as an immanent object ('Projective Verse'), or a kind of historical or political subject (*The Special View of History*), or a pre-linguistic vector of sensory input ('Proprioception'), or a textual effect ('Bibliography...') or indeed a private individual (*Reading at Berkeley*)—but the work itself will not sustain such reductive individuations. Metaphysics blurs into politics blurring into biology blurring into biography, and on it goes. What is truly remarkable about Olson is that throughout his life he authorised all of these interdisciplinary optics yet left remarkably little in the way of which one was to take authoritative precedence. My point here is neither to critique Olson for a lack of intellectual or artistic rigour (Perloff, 'Charles Olson...' 286-306; DuPlessis 138), nor to pave the way for a rhetorical discarding of 'a critical orthodoxy [that] routinely manifest[s] as an exposition of what Olson tells us he thinks his poems do, followed by a demonstration thereof' (Kindellan 95). To the contrary, my point is rather that critical interactions with Olson should be aware of themselves as complicit in the kind of ontological manoeuvre that I have outlined above. It is dangerous to presume access to an over-arching 'Olsonian' discourse which sits above its contingent and divergent emergences within the poetry, prose and public performance. There is, in other words, little choice but to intervene in one or a handful of Olson's manoeuvres, to measure their kinetics and dynamic potentialities alongside whatever contingent materials the critic has to hand, and to embrace whatever 'USE' they might be put to (*COCP* 247). In the face of such an entangled corpus, we are all in some sense 'projective' critics.

I would submit that the appropriate task when unpacking Olson's work is not to attempt, as it were, to close down the work, or to be too committed to establishing an authoritative trajectory running down the middle of it. I would rather see the breadth and heterogeneity of the archive as a tensile space within which one can explore not just what certain ideas or concepts *mean* but rather what they might be able to *do*. Items of concern, difficult concepts and charged contradictions attach themselves to Olson's open poetics, thereby testing the porousness of their limits and the (in)stability of their contexts. Much of the most engaging recent criticism on Olson has taken precisely this approach, intervening in Olson's work with an almost collaborative interest in testing out the affordances of concepts which have taken on contemporaneous urgency. Aside from this being one of the central themes knitting together 2015's landmark collection *Contemporary Olson* (cf. Herd, 'Introduction' 1-21), it is also the ethos of a number of recent monographs which seek to chart their own paths through the archive starting from a moment of kinetic intensity in the work itself. Miriam Nichols (*Radical Affections*) homes in on Olson's triadic schema *topos-typos-tropos* to explore the possibilities for a radical affective continuum between subject and world, connecting Olson's Whiteheadian influences to a vitalist lineage that runs from Baruch Spinoza to Gilles Deleuze. Shahar Bram also picks up on Olson's re-formulation of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy but offers something much richer than a mere study of influence—his methodology is most self-consciously complicit with Olson's long poem, as he structures his analysis as an enactment of non-serial repetitions, 'recapitulating' Olson's encounters with Whitehead through his own sequential unfolding of organic emergence which he argues to be congruent with the guiding structural principle of *The Maximus Poems* themselves (47). Contrastingly, in Carla Billiteri's consideration of the *American Cratylus*, Olson's poetry and poetics are seen as indicative of a tendency towards a naturalist theory of language—a theory dismissed as epistemologically naïve going back as far as Plato, but one self-consciously appropriated by Olson not as a linguistic theory *per se* but as a utopian entry-

point into imagining a world beyond a ‘culture of quality, mechanization, industrialization, and capitalist expansion’ (121). In the words of Lytle Shaw, what unites these critical approaches is their shared responsiveness to Olson’s ‘invitation to rethink the process of contextualization itself from the ground up—from empirical sites to the interpretive languages that authorize their explication, from grassy to disciplinary fields’ (*Fieldworks* 261). By either implicitly or explicitly accepting the poet’s central gambit that the open poem is more like a grassy than a disciplinary field, encounters with Olson’s work allow these critics to rethink disciplinary borders and engage in works of conceptual engineering ‘from the ground up’. In the words of Kristen Case, ‘to inhabit [...] *The Maximus Poems* is to build one’s own mappemunde, to connect that particular history to America’s and to find oneself located there, part of the unfolding’ (119). Open verse becomes a charged and potentiated zone within which thought can be performed in radically creative ways.

There is a fundamental problem with this line of argument, however: Olson himself was never very humble in the first place. Shaw puts the central contention most succinctly in his reading of Olson as a ‘fieldworker [setting] off into foreign terrain in order to unearth compelling fragments of... himself’ (*Fieldworks* 66). It is perhaps apt that my own extremely partial game of hopscotch through Olson’s poetic career above has tended towards a similar narrative arc of lyrical personhood regained—a trajectory anticipated by numerous early accounts of Olson’s failure *in practice* to live up to theoretical and ontological commitments announced *in theory* (Ross, *The Failure...* 95-125; Von Halberg 115). Essentially, what this line of argument boils down to is the extent to which we wish to be complicit with the poet’s more ontologically radical manoeuvres; whether we wish, in Angus Fletcher’s words, to accept *Maximus* as truly an ‘environment-poem’ which ‘aspire[s] to surround the reader, such that to read [it] is to have an experience much like suddenly recognizing that one has an environment’ (9). If this aspiration is indeed revealed to be naïve, then all that remains is a

textual landscape obscured by the shadow of the poet rather than the more general and potentiated status of environmental spatiality as such. As numerous critiques of Olson have rightly pointed out, the constant need to re-emphasise Olson's towering verticality within the broader criticism betrays a crucial counterbalance to the horizontalising assertions of 'Projective Verse': *The Maximus Poems* are replete with structural affirmations of patriarchal and gendered hierarchies that should in no way be naturalised as organic forms spontaneously emanating from the fabric of material reality (Bernstein 326-28; DuPlessis 'Olson and his...' 138-9, 'Manifests' 44-53; Olsen, *Secure Portable Space* 74-108; Montgomery 163-77). Thus there remains an ethical imperative in deciding how we respond to, in Michael Davidson's words, a paradox 'inescapable in any poetics of presence: that the desire to participate directly in the moment depends upon an authorizing agency prior to and ultimately beyond that moment' (*Ghostlier...* 115). Arguably, unveiling and critiquing these actually-existing authorising agencies remains the only thing left to do once one has discarded the feasibility of Olson's appeal to genuine presence.

It is instructive that Susan Howe argues that '[t]he fractured syntax, the gaps, the silences are equal to the sounds in *Maximus*', thus moving towards the parts of the text which are a result of *interpersonal* collaboration (with figures like Bolderoff, Creeley, Prynne and Butterick having a vital role in the layout of the poetry's final typescript) in her attempt to recuperate a 'hidden feminine' from the masculinist dimensions of Olson's towering figure (180). Indeed, a number of excellent recent critical appraisals have also sought to move 'Olsonian' tendencies away from a discourse of single-author innovation and to situate them within a more cooperative social environment. Libbie Rifkin unearths the homosociality 'undercodified in academic institutions [and] kept hidden through heterosexual public representation' and places Olson within a male poetic community, a social field made legible

by the movements of institutional careerism and intellectual posturing (6-8).²³ To adopt the memorable formulation coined by Anne Day Dewey, attempts like these to go ‘beyond Maximus’ each endeavour to move concepts like ‘the projective’, ‘open field poetics’ and so on away from Olson’s grandiose metaphysical gestures and epistemological ambiguities and use them to re-contextualise the social field of post-1945 literary production (Dewey 1-16). By accounting for the ways in which the work is authorised by the social practices in which it is embedded, one avoids taking too seriously the uncomfortable figure of Olson as a privileged dispenser of gnomic insights regarding the need for ‘humilitas’.

At the core of Dewey’s work on Olson is an attempt to separate the poet’s more problematic gestures towards the naturalisation of the social from his more admirable attempts to articulate new forms of collective agency arising from the socius (the ‘polis’) as such. By emphasizing what is social, public and economic in Olson’s poetry at the expense of the metaphysical, Dewey reintroduces the concept of political agency into *The Maximus Poems* and reminds us that the central driving force behind Olson’s project is, as we have seen (1.a.ii.), his desire to envision new forms of public collectivity and political agency distinct from the US State’s bureaucratised institutions—a concern which remains open enough to be actively taken up by other Black Mountain poets as a collective and communal project (cf. Byers 1-19). While my argument certainly sees itself as a continuation of Dewey’s enquiries into the way a theory of agency is negotiated through poetry, I take issue here with her attempt to separate the ‘natural’ from the ‘social’, a problematic negotiation that is belied by her own final words on the subject:

Although Olson’s general effort to present these cultural structures as emerging from natural order provides some synthetic framework in the *Maximus Poems*, however

²³ See also Michael Davidson’s *Guys Like Us* (1-48) and Andrew Mossin’s *Male Subjectivity and Poetic Form in ‘New’ American Poetry* (25-64) for, respectively, how the imperative of male homosociality is voiced through the historically contingent discourses of the Cold War; and how this sociality can be read through *The Maximus Poems*’ symbolic development.

inconsistently observed, the absence of orientation and hierarchical order among those structures frees them for isolation as independent forces developing in time with a dynamic independent of a universal natural order. The pieces of Olson's epic that experiment with new, public structures—his emphasis on language as a *sediment* of collective thought, his investigation of comparative mythology and of the transformation of deities through time, and his effort to analyze the many *strands* of tradition that compose individual consciousness—identify some of the cultural artefacts that take on lives of their own and become structuring agents in the work of the other Black Mountain poets as they explore the social implications of field poetics. (43; my italics)

At the very moment in which Olson's useful or epistemologically valid insights detach themselves from his problematic naturalising figures, *one cannot help but appeal* not only to two metaphors taken from the 'natural' world, but two of such metaphors which have particular purchase within Olson's apparently disposable 'synthetic framework'—that is, a concept borrowed from geology ('sediment') and a pun on crafting materials and oceanic expanses ('strands'). Rather than seeing such natural and tactile metaphors as inessential and decorative, or problematically essentialist and proscriptive, the following case studies would rather preserve Olson's epistemological blurriness in the name of properly addressing its generative and conceptually rewarding potentialities. To borrow a vocabulary set down in Bruno Latour's early iterations of 'Actor Network Theory', what is interesting about Olson is that he broadens the 'social' into what one might call the 'collective'—that is, his project is one of 'assembling new entities not yet gathered together and which, for this reason, clearly appear as being not made of social stuff' (75). By allowing tidal patterns, tectonic plates, flora and fauna into his poetry's formal method, Olson works at the blurry border between the 'natural' and the 'social', allowing speculative articulations of social and political agency to be voiced through the enabling conditions of a propositional environment. To read Olson this way does not straightforwardly amount to legitimising an essentialist position—it is rather to

recognise Olson's prescience in attempting to allow what is frequently cordoned off as the merely-natural back into social, historical and political problematics.²⁴

In the following case studies, I will concern myself with two of these interlocking strands of the 'natural' and the 'social' in *The Maximus Poems*. In essence, the central problematic governing these explorations will be one of scale: how do the (relatively) local considerations of community, nation or *polis* abrade the vaster, more planetary material processes such as the shifting of geological plates or the lateralising currents of oceans? On the contrary, I want to ask how these huge material processes characteristically disrupt, extend or reshape Olson's historical and social formulations of political agency. But before we can arrive at such questions, in what remains of this chapter I shall try to explore in more detail what specific kinds of large-scale material processes Olson is interested in and to account for the aesthetic dimensions of how he *invites such processes in*, as it were, to the formal properties of poetic language. Here, I want to explore the extent of Olson's 'humilitas' at its most extreme: if indeed the causal agent behind the emergence of a poem has been dethroned in favour of these more ambiguous material 'elements' (*COCPr* 243), to what extent is it useful or even possible to read Olson's work as a speculative patterning of energetic matter; a work that does not so much voice a contained and individuated poetic subject but a material process that is both constitutive of yet 'beyond' Maximus himself? Brendan Gillott has recently made some strides in this direction, in his analysis of the role of the ocean in *The Maximus Poems* as 'a poetics rather than a thematics' (370). In his account, to entertain the ocean as an agent that is somehow involved in the structuration of the poem's form is to posit a 'more complex scheme of *analogy*' than the simple cataloguing of the ocean

²⁴ Cf. Amber Pearson's PhD thesis 'The Ecopoetics of Space...' for a comprehensive and theoretically rigorous attempt to include Olson within the broader language of eco-poetics and new materialist critical thought. More recently, cf. Skinner on 'Visual Poetics' (65-83.)

as a metaphorical theme within the poem's image-bank. In Gillott's words, to do so is to 'unanchor' us 'from the certainties offered by the masterful model of the poet as authority, and from the reassuring formal homeostasis of the poem as "well-wrought urn" or organic unity' (Ibid). Here, I am trying to expand upon Gillot's analysis through a comparative account of the variable textures of multiple kinds of material imagination in the text. There are, after all, many modalities through which 'the masterful model of the poet as authority' may be brought down to earth (or, indeed, to sea), and the formal openness of *The Maximus Poems* to multiple kinds of extra-human agencies allows us to explore the various trajectories of such ontological humility.

ii. Olson's elements: water, earth, fire

Insofar as Olson was a master in the avant-garde rhetoric of 'beginning again' (Byers 14), his multiple declarations of artistic genesis often carried with them an Old Testament grandiosity. The separation of earth from water recurs as a constant thematic in many of Olson's declarations of new artistic worlds. If, as we have already seen, 'The K's newly resolute speaker brackets his shift in ethos with images of water and earth (an equilibrious worlding that grants him the ability to speak for himself, *COCPr* 14), the rhetorically much more urgent voice of the opening to *Call Me Ishmael* recasts this allusion in a much more complex rhetorical arrangement:

The fulcrum of America is the Plains, half sea half land, a high sun as metal and obdurate as the iron horizon, and a man's job to square the circle.

Some men ride on such space, others have to fasten themselves like a tent stake to survive. As I see it Poe dug in and Melville mounted. They are the alternatives. (*COCPr* 17)

Here, earth and sea do not come together in such an easily-won equilibrium; the elements are 'obdurate', impossible problems for 'man' to overcome. What is more, in this instance Olson profanes the biblical gesture of *separating* water from earth: the 'Plains' and 'the Pacific'

(18) are bound up with each other and inextricable: like the geometrical problem of squaring the circle, the key is not to recognise that earth and water can share the same area, but rather to find out how to move from one to the other via a single poetic logic. Apparently, Poe can only attempt to ground America by appealing to its earthliness, while Melville embraces the continent's fluid momentum, ever-progressing beyond itself—and although in *Call Me Ishmael* Olson is clearly preoccupied with the latter's vision, the overriding import of the book's introduction is that Melville's approach is in the final instance inadequate: 'The thing got away from him' (Ibid 20). To fully take on the behemoth of the American landscape, one cannot be so fully swept away by America-as-water, or conversely calcify by aligning oneself too statically to the landscape's 'obdurate' earthliness—one must, in other words, square the circle by learning how to write both together; to 'dig in' and to 'mount' simultaneously.

The overtly gendered and (hetero)sexual language that Olson deploys in his announcement of 'a man's job' in *Call Me Ishmael* inaugurates a theme that will recur constantly in his later writings, and illustrates how, for Olson, squaring the circle carries libidinal as well as purely technical significance. Melville's investment in the ocean certainly appealed to Olson in part because of the latter's on-going preoccupation with the ancient Greek personification of the sea, 'Okeanos'; a potent, literally seminal deity who impregnates the earth-mother at the inaugural moment of creation. In one of the opening units in the second volume of *The Maximus Poems*, 'Maximus, from Dogtown I', Olson recounts the myth in prophetically suggestive terms: 'Vast earth rejoices // deep-swirling Okeanos steers all things through all things' (TMP 172). The 'fulcrum' of America, 'half sea half land' is, in this sense, merely a recapitulation of a much more primordial coupling at the very heart of creation, a repetition that passes through ancient myth, the literal texture of the American landscape and indeed the libidinal-poetic predilections of a host of great male authors eager to take on the world as their subject matter. And for all the phallic enthusiasm propelling

Olson's heterosexual championing of Melville-Okeanos (a virile sea-god able to 'mount' the American landmass), *Call Me Ishmael* nonetheless acknowledges that this enthusiasm left unchecked quickly passes from Eros into Thanatos, in Melville's case represented by the terminus to Ahab's hateful quest: 'To Melville it was not the will to be free but the will to overwhelm nature that lies at the bottom of us as individuals and a people. Ahab is no democrat.' (COCPr 17). Here, it is certainly clear that Olson considers Ahab to be an embodiment of Melville's deepest, most essential instincts—what 'lies at the bottom'—but his artistry seems to be much more attached to the character of Ishmael, a personified squaring of the circle in the sense that Ishmael retains the capacity to hold down and stage a democratic narrative of multiple cast members while also sharing in and identifying with Ahab's libidinal nosedive into the abyss: 'He cries forth the glory of the crew's humanity. Ishmael tells *their* story and *their* tragedy, as well as Ahab's, and thus creates the *Moby-Dick* universe in which the Ahab-world is, by the necessity of life, included' (Ibid 58). Melville's great achievement, it turns out, is not to stay true to his natural inclination to 'mount'—his need to be subsumed by *his* element, like Ahab—but rather to embrace this drive at the same time as containing it within its opposite: the more democratic vision as seen and embodied by Ishmael. Furthermore, that for Olson such negative capability²⁵ is not just a measure of good art but 'the necessity of life' has drastic implications for what he sees to be at stake in literary writing: squaring the circle carries with it an almost Promethean responsibility for the formation of an ethical human subject—a rewiring and opening out of one's structures of desire and libidinal investments towards different, potentially uncomfortable, dynamic patternings of matter already bound up simultaneously in the outside world. Acknowledging this somewhat tempers Charles Bernstein's well-known critique of Olson's overarching

²⁵ Describing Keats' famous concept as 'the inch of steel to wreck Hegel' (COCPr 120), negative capability would come to feature prominently in Olson's poetics and broader theorising: most significantly in 'Equal, That Is, To the Real Itself' (Ibid 120-25), but also as the vital corrective to 'actual, wilful, man' in the thesis statement to *The Special View of History* (16). Cf. Spanos 38-40.

‘phallogocentric’ poetics (326-28)—a critique that arguably only tells one half of the story of a sexual problematic in Olson’s poetry that is frequently (if at times inconsistently) complicated as dialectical.

As an intellectual writing in a tradition spanning from Empedocles and Hippocrates to Gaston Bachelard, then, Olson figures the elements as mediating terms that place the deepest and most interior vestiges of the human on the same continuum with that which is most exterior to it: rolling plains and expansive tides. This elemental interpenetration of interior and exterior—‘that forever the geography / [...] leans in’ (*TMP* 185)—is made more explicit in a remarkable yet unpublished short essay entitled ‘That point at which analogies are the facts of myth and science’, written six to eight years after the publication of *Call Me Ishmael*. To my knowledge, my citation of it here is the first direct engagement with the essay in critical work on Olson and is useful for my purposes in that it serves as an interesting pivot between Olson’s use of the elements in earlier writings like *Call Me Ishmael* and ‘The K’ and later cosmological pronouncements in poems such as ‘Maximus, from Dogtown I’. Like the former pieces, the essay begins by separating out what is earthly in man from what is watery. The reason for this initial separation, Olson claims, is that ‘the following discriminations can be put down as primaries, that is, as components which, by both myth and science, are comfortable as limits in which and by which and through which we do act’ (1). The imperative of action here is Olson’s broader theme, and serves principally as a rewording of *Call Me Ishmael*’s call to square the circle: how to act in such a way that one avoids surrendering oneself to the destructive power of obdurate elements? After announcing that ‘physically we are matter... but instantly we are also water’ (1-2) and describing the texture of this Janus-faced Being through the authority of the ‘mythic knowledges’ of water and earth, Olson hesitates before introducing a third term:

Without further proofs, one could take these two constituent facts of us—that we are both earth and water in source—as declaring two ‘inertias,’ or passivities, we are beholden to: that we do die, even as a vegetable rots; and that the state of life in us flows and ebbs as water is, daily, hourly, minute by minute, actually faster than time. (2)

Water and earth, in other words, are not enough to adequately account for ‘us’ in that they leave us indistinguishable from brute matter. What Olson needs is a third, joining element—and he finds it by appealing to fire:

that light & fire are how we act, how we are ‘moving,’ how we are capable of motion, that the eye and the heart are different from the body and the soul, that the eye shows forth what ‘feeling,’ what fire... [...] So fire is the source of life, and we speak right when we say, as of the life in us—and now I mean our own, how we take it up, do discharge it, do believe—that it is fire, that feeling does precede thought, that only those who ‘feel’ act right.

And thus rhythm is what we are and how we do control the universe: the rhythm, of burning, which is light, and how earth and water produce, life. (2-3)

Bearing in mind this text’s status as an unfinished draft, it is difficult to claim with any great precision what Olson is intending in the counterintuitive coupling of eye/heart set against body/soul, or indeed how such anatomical discrimination correlates with Olson’s other rhetorical dissection experiments in ‘Projective Verse’ (*COCP* 242) and ‘Proprioception’ (181-183). Nonetheless, it is clear from this piece that Olson is attributing to fire the power of a vitalising subjectification predicated on the moment of individuated ‘doing’—the magisterial constructions ‘do discharge’ and ‘do believe’ are in this sense certainly not just pretentious appeals to lordly diction. The word ‘do’ reconstitutes the rhetorical subject anew at the moment of each action performed; each action is independently ‘done’ and distinct from the subject’s continuous entanglement (read: death) within the broader, planetary agencies of water and earth. Moreover, like *Call Me Ishmael*’s squaring of the circle, it predicates this moment of individuation and agency at the moment of water and earth’s unification: fire brings water and earth together and in so doing ‘action is shown to arise from such depths & widths of source’ (Ibid 1). Importantly, however, Olson’s active human is not permanent or archetypal: the final allusion to ‘rhythm’ reconstitutes life itself as a

constant process of redrafting; a repeated set of syntheses of water and earth, each resulting in an agentive yet contingent subject constantly arising anew from the ‘facts’ or ‘sources’ of his elementally constituted environment. This move away from *Call Me Ishmael*’s lording of Melville’s masculine power and artistic genius into a vision of individual agency that emerges from environmental process is arguably a testament to Olson’s turn to the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead in the mid-1950s. His evocation of fire maps on to Whitehead’s conception of the creative and organic modality of reality’s on-going becoming; an elemental agent underwriting the proliferating processual syntheses inclusive of human life and human action (cf. Hoeynck, ‘Revising...’ 154).

‘Squaring the circle’ thus becomes a daily practice, localised within a more environmentally situated domain of human connection. In an essay written initially as a letter to Robert Duncan in 1953 (later published in the *Black Mountain Review* the following year), Olson reworks some of the language used in ‘That point in which...’ but this time strictly in terms of poetics. The article takes the form of a public account of a private dispute over the function of poetry, with Olson upbraiding Duncan for measuring himself too stringently against the apparently un-poetic standard of ‘wisdom’ (COCPr 260-64). While Olson acknowledges that poetic language might communicate something *like* ‘wisdom’ (elsewhere described as ‘truths’ or ‘universals’ [261]), he goes on to suggest that wisdom ‘as such’ is not the reason one would write poetry: ‘a poem is not wise, even if it is: that any wisdom which gets into any poem is solely a quality of the moment of time in which there might happen to be wisdoms’ (263). If poetry is an instantiation of a ‘moment in time’, potentially inclusive of wisdom and indeed many more things beyond it, it is when trying to describe this moment that Olson once again reaches for an *elemental* vocabulary of rhythm:

Rhythm is time (not measure, as the pedants of Alexandria made it). The root is ‘rhein’: to flow. And mastering the flow of the solid, time, we invoke others. Because

we take time and heat it, make it serve our selves, our form. Which any human being craves to do, to impress himself on it. (Ibid 263)

These passages carry notable resonances with the ontological difference that Gaston Bachelard had perceived between ‘formal’ and ‘material’ imaginations (cf. 1.b.ii): while the former (‘wisdom’) carries purely incidental images and ideas, the latter (rhythm) constitutes a set of deeper, dynamising images that lend power and capacity to the poet-subject as a determined agent. In this iteration, heat/fire is the catalyst for a poetry written on a purely immanent basis against which is opposed its—by now familiar—‘closed form’ antithesis; but what interests me most about this articulation and its prefiguration in ‘That point in which...’ is that the ability to ‘USE USE USE the process at all points’ (‘Projective Verse’, *COCPr* 240)—i.e. the poet’s fiery ‘mastery’—does not, rhetorically speaking, arrive *ex nihilo*; nor is the immanent Real shrouded in a mysterious aura that precludes theorization or abstractable description. To the contrary, the projective ‘rhythm’ is won by a kind of elemental equation, i.e.:

(flow + solid = time) heat = the poem, *or* rhythm

or, in the language of ‘That point in which...’:

(water + earth) fire = rhythm

In other words, the ‘rhythm’ that the projective poet indexically records on the page—‘the quality of the moment in time’—contains traces and echoes of the planetary ‘passivities that we are beholden to’, a kind of deep time existing within but inevitably passing beyond the individuated human vessel: a deep time composed of water and earth.

Might it be possible to read back through *The Maximus Poems* the rhythmical logic of such ‘deep time’? These attempts to elementally classify a specific, material texturing of the real offer a glimpse of a potential systematicity for unpacking a side to Olson’s poetics that often seems obfuscated by the figure of the poet as a privileged but unrecoverable subject

tethered to an always-already lost ‘present moment’.²⁶ To the contrary, here the ‘present moment’ has a strange but analytically accessible modality—a broader, more processually dialectical kinetics of temporal order stretching across each individuated moment the poet ‘does’ write. If *The Maximus Poems* can be seen as an attempt to write this ongoing, elementally synthetic ‘rhythm’, my question is how to read formally, via a critical inverse operation of sorts, the ways in which Olson’s poem accumulates, over time, a poetics of man’s ‘two inertias’; the way the poems attempt to channel both flow and solid simultaneously. Or: to what extent can we make sense of *The Maximus Poems* as Olson’s attempt to square his own circle; as an attempted synergy of water and earth?

iii. Elemental modalities of thought: Alfred North Whitehead and Carl Sauer

It is one thing to point to Olson’s elemental metaphysics and say that it was important for the poet’s conception of the world to split (and then re-join) planetary processes into water and earth, and another thing altogether to suggest that this somehow works itself into his poetry’s structure as a legible ‘rhythm’ or poetic mode. Nonetheless, the elision between metaphysics and poetic form is perhaps more understandable when we observe that, for each time in which we have seen Olson construct an elemental schema, a set of authors are not far behind, each with their own particular elemental affinities. As Gaston Bachelard knew and attempted to catalogue (cf. 1.b.ii.), what separates the elements as conceptual categories is above all a question of *modality*—it is how they act, how they pass through or offer resistance; it is how they put things into relations with other things; how they affect and change the nature of the world’s object: they speak best to the *quality of the act of imagining*. By aligning himself more with the ‘rhythm’ of poetic language over the ‘wisdom’ it ostensibly

²⁶ Andrew Weaver is particularly good at unpacking the contradictions of Olson’s attempt to ‘give’ the reader ‘a present’ in *The Maximus Poems* in his paper on ‘Olson’s sublime sense of time...’ (273-298).

offers, Olson similarly sees poetry as valuable for its ability to provide different modalities of change; different muscularities for placing the objects of thought into relation with one another.

Olson didn't reserve this modal capacity for strict definitions of 'poetic' speech alone. During his lectures entitled *The Special View of History*, given at Black Mountain College in 1957—perhaps his most comprehensive attempt to construct an overarching metaphysical schema from the ground up—there is a moment where Olson attempts to articulate this notion of rhythm in terms of an universal system of grammaticality:

a sentence is in fact a transfer of force, from object to object by verb; thus the actionable, or, the very act of the sentence, is the dynamic which matters. And for that dynamic to come into play one has to go back to the original noun-verb terms, and not remove 'thought' from the function of finite noun and infinitive. (*SVH* 44-5)

Olson's punning explication of 'the dynamic which matters'—that is, a sentence which is itself matter and energy, describable via the same measures one might determine the sea's current or an earthquake—is here crucial. To speak of a noun in terms of its velocity or to measure the amount of Newtons in a verb is of course nonsensical, but to think this way gets us much closer to what Olson means when he describes sentences as 'acts' rather than things, or uses the word 'actionable'—a term whose connotations of town hall meetings or corporate decision-making are not entirely irrelevant. The study of history is here not about seeing written documents as evidence of actions already completed, but rather about recuperating the energy and agency still tensile and potentiated within the written record in the name of directing it towards whatever pressing urgencies beset the present. During the lectures, Olson declares the chief urgency to be the formation of a new historical subject, or, in his terms, 'actual, wilful man':

I do not hypostasize the concept of history but employ it as a concept denoting intensity or value. (18)
[...]

history, like religion, myth, and poetry, share [*sic*] the common property that a thing done is not simply done but is re-done or pre-done. It is at once commemorative, magical, and prospective. (22)

To view the historical record as ‘hypostasized’ is to ‘estrangle man’ ‘from that which he is most familiar’—the demands of his own immediate reality; to see the text as closed off and inaccessible to the reader’s ‘magical’ present and ‘prospective’ future. It is no coincidence that Olson describes history’s relation to the past as ‘commemorative’, appealing to the lived and embodied experience of memory and its etymological echoing of ‘lot’, ‘share’, ‘deserve’ or ‘gain’. Or, to put it another way, elsewhere in the lecture Olson describes history as a wealth of raw energy to be wrenched out of its telic straight line and redrawn into a circumference of potentiality around the present moment: ‘a man’s time is at once a center and a circumference, and the drawn, the circumference, is history, the force and tensor, history.’ (Ibid 28)

What I am trying to get at is that textual knowledge of any written genre—be it myth or written testament to actual ‘fact’ (*SVH* 20)—is here caught up in the same spatial language Olson uses to describe geographical landmasses, his own breath and bodily capacity, and the elemental processes interpenetrating both of these exterior and interior spaces. To speak of Olson’s textual ‘sources’ in the cumulative sense as building blocks leading towards a finished textual product only tells part of the story—more useful when thinking about how figures like, for example, Alfred North Whitehead and Carl Sauer impacted Olson’s poetry and poetics would be questions such as: what kind of purchase or affordance do they offer at what particular moments? what kind of generative frictions between texts does Olson find useful? and what kind of experiential infrastructures or constrictions do such modes of thinking help Olson get into or out of? I have picked Whitehead and Sauer as illuminating exemplars not because they serve as decisive interpretative keys to Olson’s metaphysical-poetic schemata (although it is of course possible to make that argument), but rather because

they exemplify two contrasting modes by which knowledge is made ‘actionable’, or brought in as ‘force and tensor’ to navigate an open field.

In the words of the philosopher Timothy Morton, a theory that presupposes descriptive access to material reality will often prioritise one kind of material over the other. The ontology of Alfred North Whitehead, according to Morton’s critique, is a ‘flowing-liquids ontology’ in that ‘some things are more real than others: flowing liquids become templates for everything else’ (‘An Object-Oriented...’ 207-8). Whitehead’s ontological allegiance, as it were, is invested in flows and currents, processual chains of becoming and change rather than that which stays, holds or ‘digs in’. In the words of Jane Bennett, this kind of emphasis within an ontology is anthropomorphic because it is ‘biased toward the peculiar rhythms and scale of the human body’ (Bennett 229). Large-scale objects that are important to Olson such as the American continent—what Morton calls ‘hyperobjects’—only come to be defined as open-ended process because of the human body’s subjective entanglement within them, and its inability to arrive at a viewpoint that can see them as self-contained objects: ‘A process is simply an object seen from a standpoint that is 1 + n dimensions lower than that object’s dimensionality’ (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 72-3). Epistemologically limited perhaps, yet Morton (in a manner in which Olson would surely have approved) stresses not so much the wisdom but the *use* of process:

The theorists of this process relationism—Whitehead, Deleuze—conceive time as the liquid in which the image melts and flows. This flowing aesthetic in contemporary thought manifests precisely to the extent that it has enabled us to track hyperobjects. [...] Process philosophy helps us to visualize how high-dimensional entities execute. Thus, a slightly upgraded way of seeing hyperobjects would be the plot or graph. (Ibid)

‘Flowing-liquids ontology’ in this sense allows us to *enter into* larger totalities of a scale unthinkable as bounded wholes; and, in keeping with the permeability of such an elemental

metaphor, larger totalities are reciprocally brought *into us* in the sense that they direct our actions such that we come to experience the outside from within.

To meld together Morton's and Olson's geometrical languages: process forms a tensile circumference around human sensory experience, and the routes we take up inside its area form the 'graph' or 'plot' of how that broader entity 'executes' both itself and us. Process thus presents a material totality via a logic of dynamic inter-participation, rather than isolation or withdrawal, or, in the words of one of Olson's most well-known homages to Whitehead:

In English the poetics became meubles - furniture -
thereafter (after 1630
& Descartes was the value
until Whitehead, who cleared out the gunk
by getting the universe in (as against man alone
& that concept of history (not Herodotus's
which was a verb, to find out for yourself:
'istorin, which makes any one's acts a finding out for him or her
self, in other words restores the traum: that we act somewhere:

[...]

[...]the dream being
self-action with Whitehead's important corollary: that no event
is not penetrated, in intersection or collision with, an eternal
event

The poetics of such a situation
are yet to be found out.

(‘A Later Note on Letter #15’ *TMP* 249)

Often, this passage is read as Olson announcing process philosophy as a sort of ur-poetics for *The Maximus Poems* in general (Shahr 25-35): each poem is a moment of ‘self-action’ graphing onto the totality of the universe, a radical interpenetration of subjective experience and exterior cosmic process. Here, though, I am more interested in thinking about the way Whitehead is dramatized or staged within this narrative of intellectual epiphany: what actions his figure performs. His two mentions in the extract are spread over two tenses—the past tense and the future subjunctive: it is difficult to tell whether Whitehead's insights have already happened or are conversely yet to be fulfilled. Then there is the strange word

‘corollary’—most intuitively suggesting something that follows on naturally from ‘self-action’, etymologically linked to the act of gift-giving, i.e. it is that which is *given*. The ‘act’ of history—‘finding out for yourself’—thus *necessarily* takes the form of a revivifying participation in the universal, or a ‘cleaning out the gunk’ and ‘getting the universe in’. And yet the given is not given—it is still ‘a dream’, with Whitehead having to be conjured into presence to give it. Consequently, the passage suggests that ‘self-action’ comes first, and ‘getting the universe in’ *should* come second; the job is, of course, a matter for ‘poetics’, and Whitehead is present as a sort of counterbalancing *techné* which fixes the problem of ‘self-action’ as acted out by ‘man alone’, in this passage presumably synonymous with the default first-person conjugation of the Cartesian *cogito*. In other words, Whitehead *comes after* the individuated and particular to retroactively reveal its ecological entanglement within the collective and universal—less a corollary than a corrective, reminding Olson that each action he makes is worlded and placed.

‘Gunk’—a sort of middle point between liquid and solid, opaque and recalcitrant matter that restricts flow—here seems to be synonymous with a world contextualised by ‘man alone’: it is a materiality that cannot be participated with, best defined by its withdrawal from interactivity with an outside. Gunk is, in other words, an inward-facing subjectivity—a solipsistic slop into which a de-potentialised reality sinks. As we shall see in the next two chapters, gunkiness reappears in many other guises in *The Maximus Poems*, but I am less interested in such literal representations than I am with moments in the long poem which threaten to turn into such solipsistic gunkiness—and the modes by which Olson channels Whitehead to ‘[get] the universe in’ *in response*. Consider another well-known ventriloquising of Whitehead, ‘Maximus, to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]’, a poem which begins with a nostalgic and lyrical recollection from Olson’s childhood only to abruptly morph into a gnomic and authoritative lecture on process, replete with Whiteheadian jargon. The

individuated memory gives way to a vision of the poetic speaker without gunk—fluid, dynamic and constantly transitive—but this transitivity is hardly ‘imposed’ by the memory itself. Whitehead’s voice has to resound via Olson to bring the universe in and to take Olson’s memory away from the nostalgia of it having already happened to make it ‘commemorative’, ‘magical’ and ‘prospective’. Thus, Whitehead always seems to enter *as a response* to individuation; not a natural baseline from which the poet speaks, but an actionable technique that acts in response to a given problematic. In the next chapter, I will argue for such a retroactive ‘actioning’ of Whitehead’s ‘flowing-liquids ontology’ to a historical moment where the stakes seem much higher—specifically when the poet attempts to enter into the subjective viewpoint of the Italian and Portuguese ‘founders’ of America, and the way in which the ‘poetics of such a situation’ attempts to re-see the American continent in a way that undercuts what Olson considers to be the solipsistic and domineering instincts of colonization.

The reason I have put so much weight on what one might call Whitehead’s *ordinal* status in Olson’s lauding of process philosophy is that it might allow us to distinguish key differences between other of Olson’s sources which one might be tempted to elide with Whitehead’s predominating influence. The Berkeley geographer Carl Sauer, for example, held a similarly prominent place in Olson’s constantly developing pantheon of ‘queer parents’ (cf. ‘The Present is Prologue’, *COCPr* 206). The intellectual texture of the subdiscipline of geography that he founded—namely, areal morphology—with its attentiveness to geological, biological and demographic processes; its ability to construct a total picture of the landscape which speaks with and through the single pieces of evidence upon which Sauer wishes to speculate—does indeed seem a compatible bedfellow for Olson’s enthusiasms regarding Whitehead, perhaps even the geographical ‘corollary’ to Whitehead’s metaphysics (cf.

Ford).²⁷ But to focus so much on these formal affinities is to neglect potential differences or moments of bifurcation which concern not necessarily what Olson learns from these sources, but how he makes them useful. Shaw perhaps leans into this pitfall by accrediting Sauer's influence on Olson to his 'geographic determinism'—that is, his determining of 'an immediate relation[...] between [historical] settlements and their would-be physical conditions of possibility: wind patters, river flows, oceanic tides, mountain shapes' (*Fieldworks* 58-9). In this sense, Sauer performs the same function as Whitehead in that he 'brings the universe in' to human experience by connecting the causative function of that experience to broader ecological dynamics impossible to see directly from within.

Indeed, in perhaps the most important of Sauer's works, for Olson at least, 'Environment and Culture during the Last Deglaciation', Sauer moves from deep geology in the Late Pleistocene into the inferred climates of the period, through said climate's effect on sea level rises and vegetative changes, before zooming-in on environmental changes and then finally the archaeological record of human activity. However, when Sauer offers his 'hypothesis of the progressive fishing people', he is at pains to observe how this 'hearth of human learning' cannot be explained away by an evocation of purely environmental data, nor by an idealist meditation on the evolution of some purely abstract form of 'progress':

Neither the invitation of a favorable nor the lash of a harsh environment in itself brings cultural advance. Time by itself works no social evolution of large proportion[...] The milestones of human learning have been set here and there at opportune times by a few exceptional groups in exceptional locations for discovery and transmission of ideas. (77)

²⁷ This is a purely speculative assertion on my part—as May argues, Sauer was resistant to conceptualising his geographical practice through any rigorous philosophical or theoretical systematization, his methodology underpinned more often than not by a 'common sense empiricism' (275-6) which naturally retains a purely cosmetic similarity to Whitehead's place in the lineage of radical empiricism alongside William James and John Dewey (cf. Auxier & Herstein).

Might it be appropriate to define the semantic functions of phrases like ‘here and there’ or ‘exceptional’ as gunky? After all, there is perhaps no word more anti-Whitehead than ‘exceptional,’ if we maintain a stringent fidelity to the doctrine of any actual entity or existing thing always emerging in contact with everything else (cf. *Process and Reality* 244, 342-43). Nonetheless, it is vital to stress how important this ‘exceptional’ quality of human creativity was to Sauer’s work. Famously, Sauer was a vocal *critic* of ‘environmental determinism’ within the field of geography. His analyses frequently asserted that ‘the curve of cultural innovation’ (Ibid) could not be mapped directly onto the graph of environmental conditions.²⁸ His practice, as defined in his landmark essay ‘The Morphology of Landscape’, was ‘distinctively anthropocentric, in the sense of value or the use of earth to man’ (325); concerned with the residual impact of human action *on* the environment rather than the environment’s ‘penetration’, ‘collision’ or ‘intersection with’ the human body:

The direct influence of environmental stimuli is purely somatic. What happens to man through the influence of his physical surroundings is beyond the competence of the geographer; at most he may keep informed as to physiologic research in that field. What man does in an area because of tabu or totemism or because of his own will involves the use of environment rather than the active agency of the environment.’ (Ibid 349).

For Olson, I would argue that the order in which we narrate these meetings between act and environs is crucial for an understanding of how he reads into these texts different muscularities of embodiment. To put it another way, if Whitehead draws man out from his centre into the tensile and potentiated area of the totality as defined by the circumference, Sauer *begins* at the circle’s edge, delineates chains of process and environmental causation and then locates at the centre a meaningful, important or ‘exceptional’ human action. If, for Olson, Whitehead’s ‘action’ was to draw man out; Sauer, by contrast, places man in.

²⁸ Indeed, this has led many geographers in the field to accuse Sauer of adopting a ‘superorganic’ notion of culture—an over-valuation of inadequately defined human creativity. See Duncan and Salot.

During Olson's time at the helm of Black Mountain College, the projective rector bombarded Berkeley professor Carl Sauer with complementary letters asking him to lead his new course named 'the Sciences of Man', claiming that his geographical work would provide the 'pivot for how we shall succeed to make [the creative output of the College] fresh, a sign of the intellectual & creative reality of the present' (Callahan 157). Stressing how Sauer's work correlated with his own attempt to find for man a 'CENTER' (Ibid 145), Olson envisioned their collaboration as the first step in making 'an Institute devoted to he [*sic*] geographical sciences and the bio-sciences as the proper gates to any adequate attack upon man' (149)—a position which Sauer subsequently declined, citing prior engagements (152). Again, it is the directionality of statements like these that I find interesting—how the phrases 'CENTER', 'pivot' and 'attack' (perhaps its doublet echo 'attach') stress the *solidity* of Sauer's conception of man—not a processual event always-already caught up in the universal state of becoming, but something isolatable, 'exceptional' and precisely demarcated. In the treatise 'The Gate and the Center', written contemporaneously to the letters cited above, Olson channels Sauer referentially but also with a clear view to method:

[...] what is the story of man, the FACTS, where did he come from, when did he invent a city, what did a plateau have to do with it, or a river valley? What foods were necessary[...]. Were they people on the edge of the retreating ice, marauders, or were they (as Sauer so beautifully argues) fisher-folk? and man's first food clue, that tubers which poisoned fish did not poison humans? [...](*COCPr* 168)

Like with Whitehead, Olson is here concerned with the 'universe' surrounding man, but the force of his questioning is centripetal rather than centrifugal. He is looking for what is detachable; the key 'FACT' that will organise the lateral chains of process around a centre.

In a more literalistic sense, it is clear that Sauer's research concerning pivotal events in the development of human culture—and his finding of them in small, singular communities well-nourished by their local, isolated environment—clearly resonated with a poet who, after overseeing the closure of Black Mountain College in 1957, would return to

Gloucester to continue his own poetic enquiries about the re-founding of a historically pivotal *polis*. Equally, Olson's insistence that Sauer should come to the college in some titled and agentively impactful role, again speaks to the modality of being that his methodological approach implied for Olson. The College was, during their correspondence, on the last legs of its existence—Olson took charge of an institution mired in debt, haemorrhaging students and facing serious backlash from its financial backers (Harris 160, Duberman 401-13). 'Process' wasn't the issue—according to Duberman, Olson's time at the college marked an exuberant embrace of 'anarchic' experimentation and intellectual cross-fertilisation the likes of which had not been seen under previous rectors John Rice and Josef Albers (373-76). Rather, it was a central sense of output that was found lacking; a *raison d'être* that went beyond the perpetually suspended sense of on-going experimentation. Arguably, what Olson saw in Sauer's work, both in the geographer and the man, was an ability to ground, or to find the hard centre around which 'all those antecedent predecessions' could gravitate. Sauer, in other words, *dug in* at the very moment in which Black Mountain College was set to drift, directionless, away.

Prefigured by his early appeal to two forms of masculine agency in the introductory sections of *Call Me Ishmael*, the perseverance of Olson's call to square the circle is now apparent. For the bipolarity of water and earth speak more broadly to a central personal and intellectual tension within Olson's work concerning the meaning of agency itself. To see digging in and mounting as two instincts that Olson was inclined to adopt simultaneously is to chart conflicting alliances between two theories of agency: between that which emerges from a centre, a fixed and distinguishable locus whether that be titled the subject, or the human, or the proprioceptive 'depth-sensor'; and that which is always-already emerging outside of itself, continuously escaping individuation in its on-going becoming-outward. Miriam Nichols frames this tension in Olson's work as a productive one—the various

‘scapes’ of Olson’s ‘human universe’ intersecting in a matrix, with the individual—‘Maximus’—taking up ‘a dialectical relationship’ in his repeated encounters with his outside (*Radical Affections* 55):

If the poet faithfully records an event as the elements present themselves to him or her, the resulting record will articulate a figure doing something on the ground, and this articulation will be shareable. [...] What is essential in the presentation of an event is not the actor, but the actor as he or she brings forward the ground. (Ibid 60)

In the next sections, I offer water and earth as modalities for reading this double articulation of actor and ground. To be sure, I do not want to polarize water and earth as static categories to be pinned onto a binary (i.e., water=circumference; earth=centre)—rather I offer them as media for navigating a binary; modalities that guide the recurring back-and-forths between one and many, inner and outer, figure and ground, centre and periphery. To do so is of course to read the long poem *at length*—to chart such movements as they recur and reappear over textual spaces that imply extended periods of time. My aim is thus to recontextualise the ‘kinetics’ of *The Maximus Poems* not as a communicator of authentic, immediate insight, but a living practice that explores the way in which reader and writer are drawn back and forth from centre to circumference, and the vicissitudes that lie at the point of deriving action from wisdom.

Dis-locating tides in Book I of *The Maximus Poems*

i. ‘and the mind go forth to the end of the world’

The correspondences of J.H. Prynne and Charles Olson are a suitable place to begin for an analysis of the role of water in *The Maximus Poems*—if not immediately for the subject matter of their letters but for the oceanic distances their words had to cross. In Bachelard’s terms, the vision of Narcissus’ reflection in water sparked both recognition and perplexity—an image of the self still consistent in its form but one which ripples at its edges, speckled by light and constantly threatening to flow away: ‘To disappear into deep water or to disappear toward a far horizon, to become a part of depth or infinity, such is the density of man that finds his own image in the density of water’ (*Water and Dreams* 12). Arguably, the young Prynne’s intellectually piercing and enthusiastic letters to his much-admired poetic forebear reflected back to Olson an image of himself that was both his own and yet much more beyond. To say that Prynne was dedicated to Olson’s poetic and intellectual project is an understatement—his early, introductory letters in 1961 took the form of extrapolations and projections of Olson’s ideas, with Prynne deploying his keen eye for etymology, geology and archival exploration to a host of tensile words, concepts and historical figures within Olson’s then rather thin canon, stretching, bending and in many instances completely transforming Olson’s own ideas back to him (cf. Dobran 16-22 for a representative transmogrification; also *Muthologos* 377). In Clark’s account, ‘Prynne proved a loyal and assiduous research assistant’ (299)—although, as Dobran remarks, the breadth and intensity of Prynne’s riffs set against Olson’s admiring but at times bewildered and restrained replies rather unsettles the implied context of a wise sage overseeing his loyal inferior (5-6). On September 24th 1962, Olson wrote to Prynne asking him for help in uncovering the biographies of two historical

Gloucester personages: ‘the London merchant MATHEW *[sic]* CRADDOCK’ and the founder of a fishery ‘MAURICE THOMPSON’ (Ibid 35), believing them to be important keys for Olson’s ‘desire’ to ‘totally fill in all that might be caught up out of the possible story of what was GL in those years’ (37). Prynne’s researches pertaining to these two figures in particular ‘yielded few positive results’ (40), however, over the course of three lengthy replies, Prynne did prove himself a serious adherent to the task of ‘totally fill[ing] in’ the rest of the picture, citing over thirty archival sources in his vast researches around early settling patterns from the 1620s through until the dawn of the eighteenth century (38-48). One might imagine pages and pages of equally assiduous poetry emerging solely from Prynne’s findings, with Olson following the trails left by ships tangled across history towards new revelations, origins and poetic contingencies. Such poems remain purely hypothetical. Four years later, in conversation with Robert Duncan, Olson would describe the results of Prynne’s efforts as ‘a trap’:

Prynne man went and found all the goddamned records of all the boats that crossed the Atlantic Ocean after Columbus that might have bearing on entering Gloucester Harbor. So that I wrote “And now let all...” just to get out of the trap that [his] having done that put me into. I still carry the stuff around in my bag, I didn’t open it. ‘Cause, I mean, I got to do that research now on the other end, the natural end of the stuff that you use for your own purpose. So I just sort of....: “Now let all the ships come in, let the fucking harbor be flooded with *all* the ships!” (*Muthologos* 193)

The poem that finally emerged from Prynne’s researches was only four lines long, with reference made to but one sailor’s inventory of three ‘catches’ (read: ‘ketches’, i.e. small fishing boats):

And now let all the ships come in
 pity and love the Return the Flower
 the Gift and the Alligator catches
 - and the mind go forth to the end of the world
 (TMP 290)

Biographical accounts of Olson during this period may well explain away the poet's coolness towards Prynne's extra-curricular exertions: perhaps, as has been argued, Olson lacked the scholarly skill of patient and meticulous co-operation (DuPlessis, 'Olson and his...' 141); or, contrastingly, he was all too much the academic in his attempt to keep his research area under his own authorial control (cf. Rifkin 23-26). Clark would rather position Olson as a tragic lost cause, or a victim of his own 'sedentary life'; his lack of intellectual fervour a by-product of his latter-day alcoholism and health complications (cf. 296-300). But these accounts foreclose an obvious methodological objection to Prynne's tendency towards systematic exhaustion. It is not unreasonable to argue that Olson's *elemental* sensibilities might have been offended by Prynne's meticulous attempts to contain and exhaustively account for the movements of ships across water. Indeed, Olson's initial letter may well have implied as much, through a revealingly aqueous metaphor: 'I *hate* organized scholarship, believing (at least where my problem sits—like the bad tap in the sink!—that tonight once organization gets it (plumbers!), hopeless: the stuff doesn't come through etc' (Dobran 35). The reference is to Olson's 'Song 3' of *The Songs of Maximus*, a poem in which the speaker condones his broken plumbing and 'the leaking in the faucet' as 'the blessing / that difficulties are once more'—reinforcing the importance of difficulty, fracture and leakage as that which allows the poet to 'go // sing' (TMP 18-19). Prynne's research was on the one hand comprehensive and far-reaching, but on the other completely closed off from imaginative engagement or *use*—with so much coordinated organisation, Prynne leaves no apertures into or out of which the watery dynamism of the imagination might flow. It is no surprise that Olson reimagines the lines 'And now let all the ships come in' as a flood ironically *destroying* Prynne's hard-won system of historical reconstruction, implying that one does not collect historical data for the sake of preserving and organising past events—rather, one does so in the name of creative destruction, allowing historical events to smash into one another and to submit history itself to a sort of leakage. Only then can 'the mind go forth to the end of the world'.

Such an (apparently) dysfunctional dynamic between Olson the sage and Prynne the disciple speaks to the central tension undergirding Olson's material imaginary of water. Words travelling overseas—be they those of Renaissance voyagers sailing away from post-Columbus Europe or two researcher-poets swapping notes—are enthralled to tidal currents that separate intention from its object, explorer from destination, communicator from recipient. At stake are the variable trade-offs the sea offers between agency and passivity: for while the dynamism of water conjures exciting reveries of movement, such an aqueous ontology threatens to subsume the very foundation of what makes a single act meaningful in the first place: much like Prynne's researches rotting in Olson's bag, how can one *do anything* amid the chaos of all the ships coming in? In what follows, I will trace the way Olson stages his imaginary of water via a poetic process of intervening in a historical moment. In his attempt to make history 'actionable', what kinds of agentive affordance does the watery setting of a historical moment offer Maximus, and how does this tension between agency and passivity extend or frustrate such a notion of 'actionable' or agentive language in the first place?

ii. Tidal violence

In the very first Letter of *The Maximus Poems*, the sea is figured as a chaotic and dangerous element. Yet while the text is rife with allusions to boats and nautical traffic—the sea itself remains rather absent on the level of overt imagery. It is instead evoked formally, negatively inferred by the twists and warps of Olson's tortured syntax:

in! in! the bow-sprit, bird, the beak
in, the bend is, in, goes in, the form
that which you make, what holds, which is
the law of object, strut after strut, what you are, what you must be, what
the force can throw up, can, right now hereinafter erect,
the mast, the mast, the tender
mast!

(TMP 8)

Here, the speaker takes on the voice of a captain barking orders to his crew during an unexpected storm, breathlessly reacting to the immediate effects of angry waters battering his vessel. If the first unit can be read as an inaugural statement of poetics; if the poem itself is thus a consistent form ('the law of object') which subsists among tempestuous waters—then this sets up a productive conflict between, on the one hand, the speaker's inner coherence ('what holds'), and, on the other, the disruptive and deformational forces of his immediate surroundings. As Maximus continually attempts to secure and pin down his meaning through repetition, a host of ambiguities follows. In the passage just quoted, sources of creative agency are blurred: 'the form / that which you make' becomes 'what / the force can throw up'; a propositional statement ('what you are') metamorphoses into a normative one ('what you should be'); and the tautological reassertions of the now ('right now hereinafter') are a futile attempt to keep hold of the present moment even as it slips out of Maximus' hands. Yet while the barrage of water blurs and disfigures the lines' propositional content, the poem is pushed along with an invigorating dynamism: the mast is raised, and the poet catches the wind currents 'for // forwarding' (6). This never-ending game of push and pull between internal coherence and external distortion is replayed throughout *The Maximus Poems*—the very next unit seems to shift allegiance from the former to the latter, as Maximus mocks his opening unit's declarative tone:

. tell you? ha! who
can tell another how
to manage the swimming?
(TMP 9)

The speaker's trenchant commands to retain 'the law of object' are revealed to be a sort of misguided Canutism: the 'swimming' cannot be managed so easily; the deformational anarchy of the water holds full sway.

If, as these examples suggest, the sea can be invoked as a disruptive presence, Olson also give us plenty of examples of figures who can successfully ‘manage the swimming’. He writes enviously of the gifted fishermen whose ‘sharp’ eyes can pierce the depths of open waters to find evidence of fish rippling under the surface (*TMP* 30-1). Later on, he will equate this incisive, purposeful sight with the very foundations needed for a successful *polis*: ‘so few / have the polis / in their eye’ (32). This authentic mode of being—the ability to be *in one’s element*, so to speak—is a continuous source of anxiety for the poet: he writes that ‘The sea was not, finally, my trade’ (56), and that he lacks the capacity to pull off the graceful nautical manoeuvres of the sailors with whom he came of age (cf. Gillot 371). His dejection is further compounded in the unit ‘*Maximus, to himself*’, whose private and confessional tone contrasts against the didactic, public voice of the earlier units. Facing out towards the sea, Maximus muses that ‘the sharpness (the *achioté*) / I note in others, / makes more sense / than my own distances’ (Ibid). Whereas the fishermen can remain sharp, purposeful and productive at sea, the water for Maximus only distances him from the possibility of straightforward, agentive action:

It is undone business
 I speak of, this morning,
 with the sea
 stretching out
 from my feet
 (57)

The dual connotation of the word ‘undone’ here is crucial. In its temporal dimension, it signifies the act not-yet-completed—another biting contrast with Maximus’ revered fishermen, who, ‘daily’, ‘do the world’s business’ (56); and, in its spatial dimension, it connotes some notion of looseness or unravelling.

No matter how much Olson valorises the sharp-eyed fishermen who hold the ability to retain their internal coherence as they interact fully with their element, the sea more often appears to Maximus as precisely that which worries his identity and constitutive wholeness. And while this, at times, clearly provides a source of anxiety, it is more often the case that Maximus is incessantly drawn to the inherent potentials of this kind of deformational agent. After all, if ‘business’ remains ‘undone’, then it consequently retains its potential to be done in a multitude of different ways. By placing a limit upon the completion of an act, the act remains open to alternative modes of actualization. The passage from ‘*Maximus, to himself*’ quoted above echoes a moment in Olson’s *Special View of History*—this time, however, we are not confronted by a dejected poet looking out towards the sea, but a declaratory metaphysician making claims about reality as a whole:

Reality is unfinished business or there would be no extent, and the time that man knows, comes to know when he stares, is what history enables him to confirm, that the extent is a limit. History is the confidence of limit as man is caught in the assumption and power of change. (26)

To parse this passage, we would do well to bear in mind Robert Creeley’s remarks that, for Olson, ‘limits’ are not a ‘frustration of possibility rather than the literal possibility they in fact must provoke’ (71). If reality were in fact ‘finished’, then it would consist of a linear sequence of reified, static objects, impervious to the ‘power of change’. The *extent* of one’s potential actions (read via the root form as ‘stretching-out’) is what man ‘comes to know when he stares’: instead of a sharp and pointed gaze, fixedly honing in on its target, man’s stare lateralizes his own attention to encompass a broader spectrum of potential actualities. By placing confidence in his own limitations, Maximus is thus allowed a privileged vantage point from which he can view the true extent of potentialities that reality entails.

This conception of history as a ‘power of change’ that is lateral rather than linear, one that incorporates potentiality alongside actuality, comes straight from the pages of

Whitehead's *Process and Reality*. Central here is the process philosopher's doctrine regarding causation and potentiality, that 'The concrescence of each individual actual entity is internally determined and is externally free' (46). The word 'concrescence' here is key and Olson is evoking it when he speaks of 'finished business': what Whitehead calls an 'actual entity' (what we might otherwise refer to as, for example, an object) is less a substance than an event, and the concrescence of said event is the moment in which a transitive process is prehended as an individuation; its antecedent causes 'satisfied' in the 'individual actual entity' under consideration. Crucially, this deterministic account of causation is only half the story: reality, for Whitehead, is both actual and virtual, with the realm of potentiality having just as much importance or ontological primacy as the concrete objects we perceive as actually existing. Hence the necessity of what Whitehead terms 'eternal objects'—'Pure Potentials' (22) which in other philosophical systems might refer to 'qualities' or 'relations': colour, numbers, tactile sensations, conceptual abstractions, etc. Purely virtual categories, 'eternal objects determine *how* the world of actual entities enters into the constitution of each one of its members'—you cannot point to 'blue', only describe how blue organises and brings together various actualisations of blue-ness. But the radicality of Whitehead's manoeuvre is his refusal to ontologically subordinate this modal notion of potentiality to the definitive occurrence of actuality. In fact, it could be argued he does exactly the opposite:

An eternal object in abstraction from any one particular actual entity is a potentiality for ingression into actual entities. [...] The definite ingression into a particular actual entity is not to be conceived as the sheer evocation of that eternal object from 'not-being' into 'being'; it is the evocation of determination out of indetermination. Potentiality becomes reality; and yet retains its message of alternatives which the actual entity has avoided:—whatever component is red, might have been green; and whatever component is loved, might have been coldly esteemed. The term 'universal' is unfortunate in its application to eternal objects; for it seems to deny[...] that the actual entities also fall within the scope of the principle of relativity. (149)

The stakes of this argument are incredibly high: what could have been is no less real than what has been—in fact, the movement from potentiality into actuality no longer takes place on a one-way street. Contained within any given concrescence of an actual entity are the

abstractable eternal objects serving as escape routes for ‘ingression’ into other potential actual entities. To reiterate Whitehead’s formula: ‘The concrescence of each individual actual entity is internally determined and is externally free’—Olson’s task is thus to seize a historical moment’s external freedom rather than its internal determination, to work upon the eternal objects that partake of a historical moment and recuperate the vital power that outlives such a temporary and particular actualisation.

Within the material imaginary of *The Maximus Poems*, then, the pelagic transitivity of the sea is as an eternal object capable of making indeterminate the ‘finished business’ of historical concrescence. As we have seen, this is intimated via the violent twists and warps of projective syntax and the formal evocation of the sea as that which intervenes, breaks apart and suspends previously bounded wholes. It is worth noting that this imperative for destruction is common in Olson’s metaphorical repertoire for the poetic process. As Christopher Beach catalogues:

Olson wants to replace the ‘searchlight’ Pound uses in discovering his cultural paideuma with a ‘crowbar,’ a ‘hammer,’ or even a ‘cyclotron,’ a more powerfully decentering conceptual tool with which he hopes to ‘bust apart’ the ossified perceptions of Western culture. (87)

However, just as the collision of particles within a cyclotron might well result in the creation of new, secondary particles, the currents of the open sea do not just point towards breakage and ‘bust[ing] apart’. In contrast to the deeply phallic and penetrative language of Olson’s characterisation of the sea, the more feminised notion of the sea as the incubator of earthly life is just as relevant to the poet’s material imagination. Such a notion lies at the root of perhaps the biggest question Olson poses in his historical enquiries into the colonisation of the Americas. As he writes in the inaugural statement of ‘Letter 10’:

on John White / on cod, ling, and poor-john

on founding: was it puritanism
or was it fish?

And how, now, to found, with the sacred & the profane—both of them—
wore out

The beak's
there. And the pectoral.
The fins,
for forwarding.

But to do it anew, now that even fishing...
(*TMP* 49)

For Olson, the stakes of this question were clear: can modern day America be conceived of as a by-product of the desire for nourishment and abundance—i.e., fish; or must it be a blank canvas onto which pre-existing European forms are pressed—as in Puritanism? For Olson, the ocean provides an alternate means of creative and dynamic space ‘for forwarding’, to ‘found anew’ an America that has gone astray; in this case it is a matter of what the sea can offer in the way of organic models for propulsive embodiment. However, even the presumed value judgement in Olson’s opening question is itself open to question; it is not simply a matter of fish *over* religion: the wornness of ‘the sacred & the profane’ could be a Nietzschean slight against the inadequacy of ethical categories under Puritanism yet also refer equally as well to the sacred/profane dichotomy Olson has just set up himself in the previous stanza (cod/Puritanism). In other words, the research question with which Olson begins his stanza is a red herring: arriving at a clear and singular answer to the ‘founding’ question is less important than the way the question itself situates the questioner in a field of potentiality for variegated ingressions into disparate actual entities: after all, Olson doesn’t find what he seems to want to find—fish—rather, he puts together a strange, cross-species assemblage of parts: beak, fins and pectorals. It is also not entirely irrelevant to Olson’s material imagination that the general direction of the section moves from a specific, *actual* founding (i.e. that of John White) to a more general, potentiated notion of founding (‘But to do it anew’): the verb ‘to found’ itself has a strange double etymology that places potentiality and actuality along axes of liquid and solid. In its metallurgical context, ‘to found’—i.e. to cast metal—carries

watery significations of mixing, mingling, melting and pouring out, via the Latin *fundere* ‘to pour’—and thus refers chiefly to the state of metal as potential, the smelted viscosity of alloyed materials before they find a coherent shape. Contrastingly, in its more familiar and commonly used context, ‘to found’—i.e. to establish—connects to earthly words like ‘foundation’, ‘base’ and ‘groundwork’, via the Latin *fundus*, or ‘bottom’ (cf. Skeats 218). Thus, at the very level of the word, ‘to found’ is at once to select and establish a solid ground for historical study as it is to liquefy and melt down such ossified foundations, allowing for the given historical moment to recuperate a sense of potential, or the possibility for it to be formed into other kinds of potential shapes.²⁹

One of the little-appreciated yet vital texts underpinning Olson’s ‘founding’ question—and the slightly obscure reference to ‘cod’ in particular—is actually Carl Sauer’s first contribution to the field of geography, a monograph entitled *Northern Mists*, its title a reference to an influential 1911 publication by Fridtjof Nansen, *In Northern Mists*, a critical review of the transatlantic explorations of the northern hemisphere from early times until the beginning of the sixteenth century. Partly an updating of Nansen’s initial research, the key difference between Sauer’s version of early landings on the American continent and Nansen’s is the narrative structure of the book itself: Sauer begins with Columbus’ voyage and then progressively, chapter by chapter, goes back in time via the Basques, the Bretons, the English and the Norse. Before this approach of history-in-reverse is taken, however, Sauer the geographer identifies the real protagonist of the enquiry in his eloquent introduction. Describing the Atlantic as a ‘great aquarium’, ‘kept stirred, mixed, and aerated

²⁹ See Fredman’s influential use of Charles Olson as a metonym for a broader definition of the American poetic tradition: that is, by lacking a ‘grounded tradition,’ American poetry grounds itself by taking groundlessness itself its defining characteristic: ‘in Olson, we find a combination of the tough-minded and the mysterious, a reliance upon facts as the legitimate vehicle for glimpses of the bottomless’ (*Grounding...* 30).

by current, wind and tide, with temperatures, salinities, and insolation favourable to organic reproduction' (6), it is clear that he means this both in terms of literal chemical composition *and* imaginative purchase for explorers seeking to better the lot of their own development.

The Medieval Atlantic, he writes,

was not the 'tenebrous sea' of antiquity but an invitation to open horizons where one might find new fishing or sea hunting, distant commerce, land to live in, adventure and combat, or peace and solitude. The incentives varied with the people who went out at different times in widening reconnaissance of the western ocean. (2)

Like Olson, Sauer is here not concerned so much with what 'has been done' as with what man '*does*' (cf. Olson, *Special View* 26)—not the satisfied concrescence of finished business, but the multiple and contrasting desires that historical action implies—America subsequently re-emerges throughout the book via this 'widening reconnaissance': its geography, symbolism and political meaning is constantly redrafted by way of the perspectives of various explorers. Olson's call to found anew could well be framed as a request to enter Sauer's book as a new chapter, or at least a post-script, broadening Maximus' horizon to encompass this incubatory 'great aquarium'; to reinvent America beyond the repressive inheritances of European politics and culture. Ultimately, Sauer's book is relatively uninterested in Christopher Columbus: the stories it dwells upon are of people who journeyed to America and either didn't stay or never really arrived: just like Maximus standing 'undone' and slighted on the shoreline, their stories are in a similar sense *limited* and therefore *potentiated*—their visions of America in some sense salvageable by merit of their openness and transitivity.

Founding a new America is thus for Olson a sea-bound salvage operation—the poet may 'hunt among stones' (*COCF* 93), but these stones are caught within dynamic crosscurrents and lateralising tides, poetically harnessable as vectors for creative re-emergence. That there is something valuable to be found in these currents in the first place is always taken for granted—America's history as a highly capitalised, Puritanical

‘pejorocracy’ (TMP 7) may well have actualised in a certain way, but it needn’t have been so: an in-built counterfactual is always waiting beneath the surface. Here, however, I am less interested in weighing up how successful Olson was in founding such a new world, nor do I want to assess the quality or criteria for selection of each recuperable figure. Rather, I am interested in the more fundamental question of how the ocean as a conceptual category differs vastly from, say, a fishing hook, a net or indeed a ‘cyclotron’. As we have seen, there are certain similarities regarding what the sea can offer Olson’s imagination, but the crucial difference is that the sea cannot be reduced to the status of a tool; it is not *operated* by the poet himself. Rather, the sea enters Olson’s poetry as a process from the outside, and while this decentring aesthetic offers the poet a privileged mode of access into history as ‘unfinished business’, this access threatens to subsume the agentive status of a historical subject who can speak, feel and act. In other words, it is one thing to point towards what an idealised vision of the ocean might mean for Olson’s creative energy—in the next subsection, however, I want to unpack how the ocean undermines and frustrates Olson’s capacity to meaningfully ‘USE USE USE the process at all points’ (COCPr 249). How can such a tactic ever be ‘useful’ if the poet himself is absorbed and subsumed by the alien, deformational agencies of the tide?

iii. The phenomenology of a ‘First Looking’

The task of poeticising this conception of the sea as a dynamic super-agent of potentiation is most adequately addressed in the central poem of Book I of *The Maximus Poems*: ‘*On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa’s Eyes*’. To focus on this poem in this respect is to speak of it as a particularly symptomatic example of *The Maximus Poems*’ pelagic outward-ness, an exemplary problematic in that it allows us to navigate the broader stakes of Olson’s material imagination of water, not least because it is a poem whose figurative setting is placed most explicitly and most consistently at sea. The title’s reference to the John Keats sonnet ‘On

first looking into Chapman's Homer' is apt: both poems' central theme is the expansive and immediate effect of a 'first looking', both on the part of the reader who approaches a new source and on the part of that source itself, as both Homer and La Cosa can be viewed as points of origin; the first ones to have mapped or given evidential form to their respective *topoi*. Like in Keats' poem, where the Ancient Greece of the *Odyssey* 'swims into [the watcher's] ken' (Keats 72), Olson situates this first looking within the metaphorical waterscape of the ocean. The speaker tells us that 'before La Cosa, nobody / could have / a mappemunde' (TMP 81), and thus locates this visionary experience within the eyes of Christopher Columbus' 'Chief Chart Maker' on their infamous 1493 voyage to the West Indies. The map itself—the first complete world map to include the Americas—is valuable for Olson not because of its cartographical accuracy but because it communicates the phenomenological intensity of the Americas as a landmass (Appendix 2.b., 326) While the eastern section of the map is dominated by La Cosa's windrose network—the straight lines emerging from numerous compass-points around the map, a navigational aid plotting lines via a network of known locations and trading points—America's westerly lines are vascular and crooked, implying a sense of the land not yet conquered by Renaissance rationalism—and indeed one that has its own life-force, presented in stark contrast to the familiar (somewhat less colourful) Europe-centred terrains. Indeed, a fifteenth-century viewer could find great value in the eastern sections of the map: he could follow the Silk Road by tracing the routes of the camels across Asia towards Europe; he could take in the extent of the Islamic Empire stretching across Africa's northern coast; he could decipher the various European escutcheons dotting the map's northern edge. However, for a later viewer 'first looking' at the chart in the mid-1950s, such usefulness shows definite signs of erasure: in some places around the Mediterranean, the very borders between land and sea are almost indiscernible; many of the signs and symbols have faded; and the panoply of straight lines blooming out of the compasses overcrowd the cosmos they are supposed to make accessible.

Contrast this with the western side and we can see that even the parts of the map which have decayed seem to lend the Americas new life: the rips and tears in the very parchment appear like streams of lava running from the fissures of the land. Indeed, borrowing words from Carl Sauer, Olson describes the ‘New Land’ through such a vital and dynamic register:

swimming, Norte, out of the mists

(out of Pytheus’ sludge

out of mermaids & Monsters

(out of Judas-land

(*TMP* 82)

Here, the rightward push of the text encroaches across the page in a way that is similar to the eastward motion of La Cosa’s ‘New Land’. Blurred and inarticulate, phenomena associated with masking or covering spawns its own presences, as the ‘Northern Mists’ spread over the point where mythological imagination and reason collide. From a contemporary perspective, the almost comically gigantic Gulf of Mexico is like a monster itself, threatening to subsume familiar locales and known starting points. One might, finally, compare the east and the west of the map to Prynne’s and Olson’s relationships to historical research: Olson is drawn to La Cosa’s first looking precisely because it is partial and unsystematic; the America he records is caught in a moment of potentiality; it embodies an expansive otherness unplotted and seemingly unplotable.

Robert Von Hallberg argues that Olson’s quoting of the Keats title is more of a rebuttal than a continuation or an affirmation. He writes that ‘while Keats dived into factually inaccurate books for inspiration (his poem famously confuses Cortez with Balboa as the first European to ‘[stare] over the Pacific’ [Keats 72]), Olson sees maps as the superior medium, as they allow him to ‘[turn] away from history, seeking a fresh start by mapping the terrain’ (Von Hallberg 131). It is not irrelevant that Olson’s original title for the poem was ‘On first

Looking out through Balboa's eyes' (Dodd archives 1:25)—perhaps a proposed correction to Keats' error, a nod towards the achievability of recuperated, immediate historical perception, formally attended by the move away from Keats' artificial closed sonnet form to Olson's open projective verse. But I am suspicious of this reading, as, when we look to the rest of Olson's poem, this sense of 'freshness' is very difficult to pin down. Just like Keats, Olson's attempt to fasten upon an inaugural moment of novelty and discovery is refracted through translations, approximations, and second-, third- and fourth-lookings. The opening of section one—what seems to be a log entry from the captain of La Cosa's ship—is in fact taken from Nathaniel Bowditch's journal of 1803: another, much later, innovator of ocean navigation. Thus, it would seem that the 'first Looking' Olson gives us is not through Juan de la Cosa's eyes at all, but rather through the author's more historically immediate predecessors. The poem acknowledges the gap by linguistic means: 'As men, my town, my two towns / talk, talked of Gades, talk of Cash's' (81). 'Gades' is the Latin name for Cadiz, familiar to La Cosa; 'Cash's' is a colloquial name for Cashes Ledge, familiar to nineteenth century and contemporary fishermen in Cape Ann (Butterick 117). Already within this aural melding of 'Cash's' and 'Gades', we see a clear irony within the nature of a 'first looking'. Our view can never be unitary—it rather brings to the surface a host of perspectives simultaneously, threaded through the patchwork quilt of history and legend. Olson's other sources include Homer's *Odyssey*, but also Victor Bérard's *Did Homer Live?*; La Cosa might have been the first to draw a complete 'mappemunde', but a key part of Olson's source-material comes from the accounts of St. Brendan the Navigator (c.484 – c.577). Indeed, La Cosa is, for the most part, absent from the poem— it concludes upon a host of failed expeditions, including John Lloyd's failed attempt to reach the legendary island of 'Brayslle' located off the coast of Ireland (thirteen years prior to Columbus setting sail); and the famous wreck of the *Titanic* in 1912 (Butterick 123). Rather than taking us back to the expansive moment of America emerging before La Cosa's eyes, Olson's push westward struggles to

reach its destination, and, when he does, the actual substance of what has been found is by no means straightforward. His evocation of Pytheus quoted above is telling: the famous Ancient Greek geographer and explorer, whose original texts have been lost, is evoked by figures as diverse as Herodotus, Pliny and Timaeus—all of whom give contradictory accounts of Pytheus' measurements and reports. Thus, the reference to 'Pytheus' sludge' is twofold. First, it is a reference to the reported accounts of his findings in the British Isles, a region

in which there was no longer any distinction of land or sea or air, but a mixture of the three like a sea lung, in which he says that land and sea and everything floats, and this binds all together, and can be traversed neither on foot nor by boat (Stefansson 21; cit. Butterick 94)

Second, however, I would argue that the piling together of sources about the hazy and indistinct visions of the Atlantic also enacts this kind of sludge-like viscosity. To be sure, it is easy (aided by Butterick's *Guide*) to unravel Olson's references; to place into neat boxes the various 'first lookings' of what lies beyond the Atlantic horizon, as I have done. But the very title of the poem forces us as readers to conceptually enact our own first-readings: detached from context, we are left with the transient sightings of sunken boats and failed expeditions. And, ironically enough, what we finally get from a 'first looking' is multiple, diverse and fractured, and yet at the same time totally homogenous: bound together by their mutual impossibility, each first looking recedes from Olson's grasp into the vast implacability of the sea.

This sense of implacable vastness is recapitulated in one of the final images of the poem, in the form of a brief allusion to an annual Gloucester community ritual: the throwing of flowers into the ocean to commemorate fisherman lost at sea. Thus, Olson returns to the figure of one standing on the shore, looking out towards the horizon:

these bouquets (there are few, Gloucester, who can afford florist's prices)
float out

you can watch them go out into,
the Atlantic
(TMP 84)

The ritual makes a return in the penultimate Letter of *The Maximus Poems*' first book, 'Maximus, to Gloucester, Sunday, July 19', a mention which recapitulates the specifically *visual* sensibility of 'On first Looking out[...]', in the sense that the flower petals themselves are described as eyes:

the flowers
turn
the character of the sea The sea jumps
the fate of the flower The drowned men are undrowned
in the eddies

of the eyes
of the flowers
opening
the sea's eyes

(TMP 157)

Here, the ritual is evoked explicitly as a form of resurrection: the petals on the water are likened to the eyes of the lost sailors rising up to the surface. Just as in 'On first Looking out[...]', however, the flowers invoke a specific way of seeing which implies some essential identification with the sea itself: 'the flowers / from the shore // awakened / the sea' (159). The sea is not just the arena into which drowned sailors meet their final resting place—the sea has rather integrated itself into these very sailors' 'eyes', and it is impossible to separate such historical perspectives from the broader, elemental passivity into which they have been absorbed. That seeing through 'the sea's eyes' has value; that the tempestuous and dislocating pull of the tides furnishes Olson with a lateral mode of navigating history, forces the speaker to make a strange rhetorical manoeuvre at the end of the poem:

let you who paraded to the Cut today
to hold memorial services to all fishermen
who have been lost at sea this year
when for the first time not one life was lost

radar sonar radio telephone good engines
bed-check seaplanes goodness over and under us

no difference,
when men come back

(*TMP* 159)

He addresses the people of Gloucester almost as a reproach *not* to be thankful of the fact that, for the first time in the history of the settlement, a year has gone by without a Gloucester fisherman being killed at sea. The efficient innovations of modern technology make ‘no difference’: the dead men return to announce that, no matter how much one tries to ‘manage the swimming,’ the sea still holds the power to disrupt our sharp-eyed vision—although, in this case, it becomes increasingly difficult to decide whether this is for better or worse.

Further, there is something deeply unsettling about the alternative way in which the line ‘no difference’ can be read: that ‘when men come back’ there can be no difference, no way of valuing one perspective over or beside another; no way of distinguishing between this view and that one. Perpetual first-ness can just as well be reframed as a suspension of memory or a process of historical erasure, whereby any given event is subsumed into a kind of floating catatonia: rather than a set of tensile particulars latching onto each other to form new, charged assemblages, *The Maximus Poems* threatens to leave us with a thousand inarticulate petals floating out upon the voiceless Atlantic. Nonetheless, Olson would not cease returning to this oceanic imaginary throughout his intellectual and poetic career, nor would he give up on the watery way of recuperating such perspectives. A piece written very close to the end of Olson’s life entitled ‘Continuing Attempt to Pull the Taffy off the Roof of Mouth’ can be read as a re-opening of the kind of investigative technique that the poet had begun to explore in the early 1950s—albeit this time in a much more visual and diagrammatic spatial arrangement (cf. Appendix 2.b., 327) The bathetic impishness of the piece’s title, with its notational gerund verb reinforcing a sense of on-going deferral without release, undermines the lordliness implied in ‘On first Looking out[...]’; furthermore, it

recasts Olson's grand attempt at historical understanding as a sort of annoying chore—rather than a perspective to be gained, this piece is more interested in getting *rid* of something. The final lines of the text frame this 'Taffy' as 'metal, administrative, // time' (374)—that is, a time measured in dates and years, a history that goes one way in linear progression. The kind of topological, relative time that Olson demands in its place—the 'trampoline nets or mattings we already / appointed / stand in, and are differently supported / to / in. [...] water-paths and wave-motion' (Ibid)—have the power to bend this linearity; to bring disparate historical events together across time in a way that might finally release the potential contained within the historical past. But what to make of the line Olson draws through his own historical research? It can in one sense represent an urge to stitch together these netted 'mattings' of history spread out across time and space—to find a path *through* this lateralising ocean of non-linear time. But it is of course also a mark of erasure, implying that this very path by necessity voids these moments of their potency and significance. It is difficult not to read this strange, angular line as a deflated admission of defeat upon the viability of using an oceanic material imaginary to navigate history: in trying to find a way through 'all this cruel and iron-mongers time between', one is left with precisely this hanging and interminable 'between'; an account of history that is (both in geographical and colloquial terms) neither here nor there.

To return to Olson's single-quatrains response to Prynne's meticulous transatlantic researches, it is apt that the line 'and the mind go forth to the end of the world' also does not terminate in a full stop. If the awkward reference to the Gloucester commemoration ritual is anything to go by, the final sections of Book I of *The Maximus Poems* mark a fundamental anxiety surrounding Olson's endeavour to 'let all the ships come in' via destabilising oceanic currents. The problem is that the mind will never arrive at the end of the world: the world is a sphere and the ocean cannot really be said to 'end'. The liquid

ontology that I have attempted to explore makes meaningless marker-points like ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ as structuring architectures for subjective emplacement: through allowing water into the poem’s structure, Olson is held fast in an infinite process of becoming or betweenness, destined to pass over and on, beholden to the passivity of water. It is no wonder that one of the central introductory poems to Book II of *The Maximus Poems* begins with the injunction: ‘the Sea – turn yr Back on / the sea, go inland[...]’ (179). As I will argue in the next chapter, the second volume of Olson’s epic is remarkable not for its continuously deferred fields of potentiality (although there is certainly more of that), but rather because of the urgency with which it seeks to ground itself, to resist the quiet annihilation of a world drowned by process.

-2.c.-
'by the act of leverage':
Earthly pivots in Book II of *The Maximus Poems*

i. 'You bring it all back in'

In Prynne's extraordinary 1971 lecture on Book II of *The Maximus Poems*—part critical disquisition, part elegy for a kindred spirit who had died the previous year—the poet ends his ruminations by evoking the long poem's ur-rhythm as an oscillatory cosmic voyage between inner and outer, imagistically underwritten by a Homeric material imagination of dislocating tides and the permanence of an earthly, reliable homestead. What Olson had described as man's two elemental 'passivities' ten or so years earlier, united through a vitalising, Heraclitan fire, Prynne similarly formulates through the Empedoclean category of 'love', as that which underpins a harmonious balance between one's outward and aqueous passing over into alterity and one's inward and earthly need for subjective reconstitution and consistency. Prynne evokes this 'love' as an expansive and all-encompassing 'it', an 'it' that expresses itself across time through 'a thing like Stonehenge', the clockwork of Newtonian mechanics, and then, finally, Olson's long poem:

And the Olson poem also wants it. And if you read it, and if you hear it, then you also want it. Then you can also have the particular condition of transpiring through the noble arc, from the land to the shore, from the shore to the sea, from the sea to the ocean, from the ocean to the void, from the void to the horizontal curve, which is love. You have the condition. You turn it round. You bring it all back in. You come right down, and you are home. (Prynne 6)

Despite the laudatory rhetoric of Prynne's elegiac send-off, the specific mechanics and origins for this cosmic movement were in practice not quite so self-evident. In some of the earliest letters between the two poets, written during Olson's composition of Book II, the metaphysical call and response of departure and return takes the form of a problem to be

solved. In a brilliant, unprompted riff on agency and the role of the poet, navigated by way of Fenollosa, Pound, Heidegger and Olson himself, Prynne attempts to locate the ‘subject’ or ‘agent’ of a sentence within the poetics of kinetic or ‘projective’ language. Of course, Prynne is well aware that such an agent cannot be so easily conjured into language with the vulgar subject pronoun ‘I’—an imposition altogether bound up with Cartesian splits and transcendental subjectivity. Yet the question of agency is important for both Prynne and Olson because if the projective sentence cannot ‘move with purpose & effect along its own line, outward from the agent, the object, the lungs’ (Prynne, in Dobran 18), ‘Projective Verse’, like many radically materialist theories, threatens to fold into a purely mechanistic account of the human. Additionally, and despite the 1950 manifesto’s famous insistence on unending movement and velocity, Prynne recognises that without any fixed points of reference (i.e. somewhere to arrive at or depart from), unending movement is tantamount to complete inertia; total becoming appears as just another way of formulating non-being.

Prynne’s response to this was not so much to include agency within the framework of ‘Projective Verse’ but rather to claim that the *acquiring* of agency is the *raison d’être* of projective verse as such. Prynne describes the agent of a sentence as something that needs to be ‘won’ or ‘earned’—the moment a sentence becomes ‘kinetically feasible’ is when the velocity of a speeding poet-object is temporarily interrupted or affected by an object or set of objects at rest (Dobran 19). Prynne calls these latter objects ‘fundaments’—temporary points of stabilization that allow the poet to point to a *here* rather than a *there*; objects that recalcitrantly stay in one place but in so doing allow the poet to prepositionally orient himself in relation to it and the world around it.

Thus a reliable fundament (noun & pro-noun): roughly physical world and human body establishes innumerable pivots, and it is by the act of leverage upon these pivots that we feel their security and our motion. The sentence swings around its BECAUSE and ALTHOUGH and THAT (our native cinematics), and the inertial force which such a change of direction generates will confirm and corroborate the

fundament while still depending upon it. Clauses joined in apposition across commas accumulate similar pressures: passion speaks out in the turns and joins, which regulate and so define the concern by the rhythms thus generated. (Ibid 20)

Olson was greatly taken by this concept, underscoring in his reply the elemental dimensions of this account of movement and stasis: 'yr word fundament knocks me right out of my seat, like... & that whole sense of how the rock is what one does launch oneself from when one does dive into the sea' (23), describing Prynne's regulatory 'turns and joints' as 'the I finding its identity and thus coming to control its own pronoun and thus any part of speech' (Ibid). The fundament, in other words, is where the poet is coming from—a set of fixed locations in relation to which all the dislocating becomings of their journeys must be held. The experimental language that both Prynne and Olson deploy is here vital: the fundament is fixed not in the sense that it is transcendental or eternal (as, for example, a soul might be, or some other category of human individuation like consciousness)—rather, it is solid precisely because it is experienced as such through embedded, continual poetic practice. Here, the ontological architecture of an agentive subject is 'won' by the way in which the body cyclically arrives at and departs from that which remains recalcitrant amid the flux of dynamic, contingent experience. Or, in Prynne's words: 'Access to the fundament is earned by the mind's geologers, the passions which will forge out availably valid starting points and lend them to those few others prepared to profit' (19). The status of the fundament as both telos and origin—as that which is simultaneously sought out and departed from—is precisely the point: it is the central pole of attraction that remains obstinate even amid a processual reality that beckons the poetic body to constantly decentre itself outward, on, 'INSTANTER' (COCP_r 240).

In this final section, I propose tracing these moments of obstinacy and recalcitrance in a reading of Book II of *The Maximus Poems*. The second book suggests itself for many reasons: as referred to in the previous chapter and as we shall see in what follows, the poet's

inaugural injunctions to 'LEAP onto / the LAND (180) and 'turn yr back on the sea' (179)—
 buttressed by Olson's sustained focus on the terrain of Gloucester and Dogtown Commons,
 incorporating sources more specifically geographical and geological in nature—all give plenty
 of thematic reasons to search for the earthbound within its pages in particular. But, more
 specifically, and vis-à-vis Prynne's theorisation of arrivals and departures around a 'reliable
 fundament', volumes IV, V and VI of *The Maximus Poems* stand out because rhythms of
 recurrence and return start to make themselves more felt in the general development of the
 poem's accretion of referential material. Whereas Book I seems with each unit to push off
 anew in varying rhetorical, formal and thematic directions, in Book II we as readers start to
 consolidate along with Olson the key 'turns and joints' the figure of Maximus finds himself
 pivoting around. Furthermore, as other critics have argued (Case 114-15; Weaver 275-76),
 Book II marks a transition away from the sheer quantity of thesis-statement manifesto poems
 like the first ten letters of Book I towards the elusive and fragmentary note-like approach of
 the incomplete Book III. Rather than announce himself by declaring outright his intentions
 and agency, Maximus comes to understand that his identity must be 'found' and 'earned': or,
 that he must '[come] to control its own pronoun and thus any part of speech' by an
 exploratory 'act of leverage' upon the numerous 'pivots' the earth below him provides. To
 be sure, I do not intend to relegate Olson's material imagination of earth to one book of
Maximus in particular: patterns of rest and return exist in Book I just as well as Book II kicks
 off into new, expansive seas of referential deferral. My aim here is rather to show how water
 and earth as conceptual metaphors mutually reinforce the weaknesses of each taken in
 isolation. By (perhaps artificially) *isolating* the aqueous in Olson's poetry, one comes to know
 the stakes or pitfalls that lie behind the poet's explosive blowing apart of history: once one
 has rejected linear time and deterministically causative accounts of history, one needs some
 form of fundamental structure for the way in which reality is alternatively actualised out of

the ensuing, undifferentiated mess of pure potentiality. One needs, in other words, *somewhere* to thread one's chains of becoming back—or, in Prynne's words:

Do you not feel the need to knit up your space into orbits, loops of arrival & departing, regrets mast-like against the horizon? Perhaps I run wild; but we here require urgently to un-knit our space, already congested with departures too distant to do more than entangle, as when Beowulf himself 'led the way to the shore' (Dobran 31)

As we have seen, tables, charts and lists of dates do not for Olson provide a satisfying way of 'un-knitting' his chaotic space. However, taken as a knowing response to the solitary Maximus of early Book I—who stands by himself on the shore, stripped of his ability to effectively navigate the ocean—one could read this question as Prynne urging Olson to adopt a model for recuperating agency from the ever-departing tidal drifts of a world drowned by process. If it can be said that Prynne in this instance provides the model, I now want to consider how Olson might be seen to adopt and extend it; how the poet stitches back his own loops by way of leveraging himself against the steadfast persistence of his earthly fundaments.

ii. 'the kame I was raised / on': 'Letter, May 2, 1959'

Many of the themes and material in the opening sections of Book II of *The Maximus Poems* can be found in germinal form in the antepenultimate poem of Book I, 'Letter, May 2, 1959'. It is here that Olson first places the injunction upon Maximus to turn his back to the sea (154), establishing the predominance of large-scale geological shifts ('The ice / will drag boulders' [155]) as a key thematic concern, and is the most formative example of an important staging device that will reoccur with more and more frequency as the subsequent Books develop: that is, the emplaced poetic subject wandering around Gloucester, tethering his own highly specific researches regarding the founding of the settlement to his own day-to-day movements around town.

While the poem is perhaps most striking in terms of its modulations through various concrete verse forms, it is worthwhile to first unpack the underlying thematics of elemental conflict which subtend the poem's formal experimentation. Beginning ostensibly as an inquiry into the movements and motives of early New England colonists, Olson's thematic and imagistic materials quickly take a turn towards the metaphysical, as he quotes from a sermon delivered by the Rev. Daniel M. Wilson, a late nineteenth century Gloucester preacher:

[...]we must reckon
with the great sea the influences
of it the salt breath of it
have interfused the sadness of it have interfused
Zebulon
(*TMP* 151)

By recalling Jacob's blessing to his son Zebulon ('[...]he *shall be* for an haven of ships' *King James Bible*, Gen. 49:13), Wilson's original speech was to give 'a comforting assurance to the tenderhearted residents of [Gloucester] who may be troubled at the thought their support is at the expense of the suffering of the lower creatures [i.e., fish]' (cit. Butterick 210-11)—thereby consolidating the fishermen and their families as all part of God's plan. One could say, however, that Olson's sensibilities might not have been completely comforted by Rev. Wilson's words. The poet emphasises the 'sadness' of 'salt breath' through an imagistic register of rot and death—drifting with the sea is 'the rubbish // of creation' and 'sentimental / drifts dirty / lazy man' (*TMP* 154), recalling Olson's earlier Jeremiadic denunciations of 'pejorocracy' and a world where all has become decontextualized and uprooted. Underscoring the sense in which this languid a-directionality is a *threat*, Olson makes a bizarre subject rhyme:

the Peoples of the Sea Meneptha fell Kadesh they were there Ramses II
Greeks

from the sea Lebanese

To Gloucester these Englishmen what was Bruen doing

Here, the ‘salt breath’ of early New England settlers is likened to the twelfth century B.C. invaders of Egypt, peoples of obscure origins who proved to be worthy adversaries during the Nineteenth Dynasty’s ascent into its peak period of geopolitical dominance. Sea-infused peoples are thus conjured into being as subtending, violent and protean, weaving a trail of blood through Olson’s references to key wars and battles (Butterick 212-13). Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out how the first line of the above traces the presence of this migrating population via a specifically *Egyptian* perspective—the epithet ‘Peoples of the Sea’ was a name given to a population whom the Egyptian authorities couldn’t easily place, and such an evocative nomination would also have been strategically useful in the sense that it dehumanised an invading force as nationless barbarians. Olson, on the other hand, following his source Victor Bérard (Butterick 212), believed them to be early Achaeans—or, less accurately, ‘Greeks’. Pivoting around a line-break, we can take these enjambed lines as formally metonymic of the broader pivot Olson is trying to anticipate: to reconcile the syntactically unstable, ‘drifty’ traces of history which promise fluidity at the expense of autonomy, with a contained and agentive bearing on a solid fundament: ‘the I finding its identity and thus coming to control its own pronoun and thus any part of speech’. Likewise, if Juan de la Cosa’s map prompted tangled departures into an ever-widening spectrum of historical contingency, what epitomises ‘*Letter, May 2, 1959*’ is rather its almost neurotic persistence in returning to the same grounded source, constantly seeking in the land the solidity needed to provide an adequate point of departure.

What, then, is Olson looking for in particular? What does he expect to find in the soil, and to what extent can his efforts be defended against accusations of parochialism or the crypto-nationalistic demarcation of borders? Here again it is worthwhile to bear in mind Prynne’s evocation of the cyclical unfolding of *The Maximus Poems*, and how land in his

account is not a final destination or essential Lebensraum but rather a momentary pivot in the rhythmical unfolding of arrival and departure. Similarly, Olson's evocation of the nation does not straightforwardly offer itself up as a floating signifier waiting to be *filled up* by cultural and social values—the material recalcitrance of the land resists and undermines such neat and unproblematic modes of symbolic interpellation. This sense of hermeneutic recalcitrance can be seen in this moment of 'Letter, May 2, 1959', where Olson conjures formally the kind of effect the 'granite / moraine shape' of Gloucester is supposed to perform:

Fisherman
 are killers Every
 fifty of 'em I pick off
 the Records seek
 the kame I was raised
 on and are startled,
 as I am, by each granite
 moraine shape Am in the mud
 off Five Pound Island
 is the grease-pit
 of State Pier

(TMP 155)

Much like Prynne's use of the word 'fundament', one cannot help but think of the word 'startle' as having a similarly kinetic effect. The fishermen do not settle on the American landscape so much as they are *unsettled*, or 'startled', by it. Unsurprisingly, Olson's use of the word 'startle' is etymologically the perfect choice for what he is trying to get across: from the PIE root **-ster*, or stiff, through Old German and Middle Dutch connotations of 'to move briskly or stiffly', 'to rush' or 'to tumble', to contemporary variants in English words like 'start'—i.e., to begin or to set off (cf. Skeats 592). In this sense, rigidity is bound up with connotations of new beginnings and kinetic departures: the recalcitrance of the land under one's foot is the precondition for one's ability to leap. Olson formally evokes this recalcitrant or 'startling' quality of the land in the pivotal blank space between the description of Gloucester's 'granite / moraine shape' and the grammatically awkward 'Am in the mud'. It is of note that in a stanza so clearly dominated by the first person pronoun, it is conspicuously

absent when it should be placed in apposition to a geological description of the land. That Olson is not the subject he once seemed to be while simultaneously still exerting agency and directionality (the verb 'to be' is still conjugated) grammatically and syntactically affords this moment of 'startling' a transformative capacity to re-subjectify the speaker anew. Further, the blank space obviates not only the first person pronoun but also a potential full stop, introducing an ontological blurriness between the indirect object of one sentence and the subject of the sentence which follows it. Perhaps such an ambiguity might even tempt us to re-read the construction 'I am, by each granite / moraine shape', and question the significance of the preposition 'by'—is it that Olson stands *next to* the stone, or that Olson 'is' *as a consequence* or *product of* the stone? To read the lines in this latter sense encourages us to read subject and space in both directions; to see Gloucester as not simply a locale to be sought out but one whose imprint rebounds upon the subjective foundations of the poet himself and his numerous becomings.

Land, then, is not an authentic resting place for a nation-bound subject, but rather that which inaugurates, or 'startles' a subject into a new process of becoming. As we have seen, earth and water become general metaphorical cyphers for this process, but the extent to which the geological term 'kame' has particular purchase within Olson's material imaginary is also of note. The irregular and prominent shape of a kame mound occurs as a result of a retreating glacier, which over time deposits sand and gravel in irregular, wave-like formations as the ice continues to melt: visually, they do indeed seem to capture this ambiguity between water and earth, appearing almost as cresting waves billowing over the surface of the land. Furthermore, kame also provides a geological analogue to Rev. Wilson's spiritual evocation of a people 'interfused' with the 'sadness of the sea'. If Olson characterises such oceanic 'sadness' with metaphors of, drift, dirt and refuse (*TMP* 154), it is not so difficult to see why the following passage from the New England geologist Nathaniel Shaler is so frequently

alluded to throughout Books II and III of *The Maximus Poems* (by my count: cf. *TMP* 186, 196, 318-20, 326, 332). In this case, I'm citing from a poem where Olson quotes the geologist's description of the kame deposits in full:

“These high-lying benches of stratified drift material,” he [Shaler] continues, “probably indicate points where small subglacial streams emerged during the process of the retreat of the ice, bringing forth a quantity of detrital matter and depositing it upon the surface of the shoved moraine at a time when the mass lay below the level of the sea.”

(“The Cow of Dogtown” *TMP* 319)

Here, the ‘benches of stratified drift / material’ provide a model for the fusion of aqueous and earthly modalities, fixing spatially an on-going temporal process. Note in particular the similarity between Shaler’s ‘bringing forth / a quantity of detrital matter’ and Olson’s formulation ‘the kame I was raised / on’: glacial deposits in this sense provide snapshots or indices of sea-infused drift; when Olson writes that he is infused with the ‘rubbish // of creation’, he does not imply a desire to be cleansed—rather, one gets the sense that he values the kind of precise and meticulous geological description above because it can up-hold and thereby give legible form to man at his most ‘drifty’ and ‘dirty’.

From these two examples, we can isolate two principle functions for the role of land in Olson’s material imagination. On the one hand, it acts as a spur for Olson to start or to be ‘startled’ anew, providing a solid foundation or fundament for the on-going emergence of ‘more than I am’ (*TMP* 184) to begin again; but at the same time geological metaphors offer a model for indexically recording or describing such ontological emergences within a fixed spatial field. Perhaps we could call these two earthly functions diachronic and synchronic pivots, respectively: earth breaks up a temporal flux so that temporal experiential categories such as ‘beginning’, ‘ending’, ‘arrival’ or ‘departure’ can make sense even amid the

muck of nonlinear historical exploration; at the same time, it renders such dislocating journeys through different modes of temporality and experience legible and therefore shareable by affixing them to spatial formations, much like the geological record registers large-scale temporal processes in its very materiality. Earth allows, in other words, the subject to push themselves forward towards a new emergence while at the same time retaining a record of what has already been actualised within a particular instance: it is the elemental metaphor that underpins *The Maximus Poems* as both practice and product.

iii. ‘Where it says excessively rough moraine’: Dogtown Commons

The elemental metaphysics of ‘*Letter, May 2, 1952*’ are useful to us in that they dramatize the ways in which geological and geographical forms are incorporated by Olson in order to both provoke and prefigure new recalibrations of sentience. However, to gain more insight into the way in which this process of subjective integration occurs via an on-going textual project, it is necessary to zoom out from the particulars of a single poem and to trace the contours of a geographical locale as it persists across *The Maximus Poems*’ on-going accretion of pages and referential deferral. In the ‘Bibliography of America for Ed Dorn’, Olson represents this local field of integration diagrammatically by drawing a box around his exemplar-poet, in this case his then student at Black Mountain, Ed Dorn (*COCPr* 305; Appendix 2.c., 328) I am not interested here in explicating the totality of this enigmatic diagram—rather, I want to highlight how the poet’s own local field (mapped along the four axes of Dorn’s immediate experience) acts as an organising matrix for an incoming rush of data pertaining to a much broader spatiotemporal universality. My contention is that the geographical and the geological, for Olson, both provide dynamic structures for this box: by repeatedly pacing out one’s local field and allowing it to in-form one’s very modality of thinking and perceiving, one becomes attuned to multiple ways in which the universal might be made sensible within the particular.

Olson allegorises a comparable vision of Dorn's subjective box in an early poem of Book II of *The Maximus Poems* via a retelling of an old Algonquin myth about a man carrying his house on his head. The poem ends with the man putting down his house 'near a good spring of / water' and settling down for the night, waking to find it stuffed with the choicest meats, only for the house itself to completely disappear as soon as he reaches out to take them: 'the rug itself melted / and it was white snow, and his arms turned into wings / and he flew up to the food and it was birch-boughs on / which it hung, and he was a partridge and it was spring' (*TMP* 201). Thus, the house disappears as soon as it is affixed to one place in particular and, by extension, the essence of man's species-being itself unravels in the process. Within the story's mythological register, 'home' cannot be pinpointed to one place, but is rather that which attends one's on-going journey: Olson carries his home as an extension of the way he carries himself; a house is here defined not by what or where it is but rather by the way in which it subtends or co-exists with the poet's own temporal unfolding. Similarly, when speaking of Olson's home—places such as Gloucester Harbour, Meeting House Hill or, as we will now see, Dogtown Commons—one would do well not to pinpoint or reify it as an objective location. Rather, one must trace the ways in which 'home' integrates the disorienting and discontinuous climes of the cosmos into a dynamic and continuous experience of thinking and feeling; in the words of Bachelard, 'the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being' (*The Poetics of Space* 6-7). In a more literal sense, however, Olson would indeed attempt to house himself with the geography of Dogtown Commons. During the writing of Book II, he 'covered his apartment walls with Dogtown maps marked with settlers' names' (East 167) and even went so far as to tantalisingly declare the two roads running through the area as plottable structuring units for the poetry itself: 'the poem [that is, Book II] actually is the Dogtown—the sort of statistical or metrical base of the poem is the two

roads of Dogtown' (*Muthologos* 220). The Commons were, in other words, the home that Olson carried on his head: a structuring agent of integration that would inform not only the words on the page but also the movements of the embodied poet writing them.

Without even looking at the 'from Dogtown' poems in particular, however, one can already intuit why the space proved to so enigmatic. A winding landscape of 'scrub pine, overgrown blueberry brambles [and] rocky granite outcroppings' (Clark 279), the terrain is scattered with boulders deposited during the period of deglaciation that Olson, as we have seen, had already located as a vital ur-event for *The Maximus Poems* as a whole. 'There is something inspiring in the huge barren hills and great boulders of Gloucester's Dogtown'—or so claimed Olson's source for much of Gloucester's local history, Roger Babson (1865-1967), in his 1935 memoir. 'At the same time,' he adds, 'there are pathos and tragedy in the old forsaken cellars of the original inhabitants' (247). As Olson's own researches had revealed to him, the land itself was worked upon in the seventeenth century by the 'third generation' of English settlers, who 'discovered that the salt marsh grasses of this country fattened cattle better than any salt grass that they knew in England' (Olson, *Muthologos* 216). After the Revolutionary War, however, the inland town was slowly abandoned, with what is now present-day Gloucester presenting itself as a much more favourable terrain for the reinvigorated fishing industry and inter-Atlantic trading routes unencumbered by enemy ships. Over the next hundred or so years, the settlement of Dogtown disintegrated, becoming a wasteland mainly used as a dumping ground for unwanted trash—that is, until Babson, during the turn of the twentieth century, spearheaded a renewal of historic interest in the site. His 1927 guide 'Dogtown—Gloucester's Deserted Village' melded history with archaeological recovery, with Babson believing he had found forty or so sites of original homes by the imprint of old cellars remaining as holes in the ground—the locations of which he marked physically by carving numbers into proximate stones throughout the Commons

themselves. The affinity between Babson's project and Olson's is clear—one might recall Olson's archaeological fieldwork, chronicled in the *Mayan Letters* to Robert Creeley between 1951 and 1953: 'working around stones in the sun, putting my hands into the dust and fragments and pieces of those Maya who used to live here down and along this road' (*Selected Writings* 71). In a similar sense, Babson allowed the history of Dogtown and its people to be autochthonously recuperated: hunting among stones, the poet paces through stories echoed in the very earthliness of the land; the ghostly imprints of a lost socius providing the tracing lines for imaginative revival.

Dogtown also reflected for Olson a similar kind of integration of scale presented in the 'Bibliography of America for Ed Dorn' in its very material facticity: the geological record encapsulated a deep time reaching back to the formation of the American continent itself; while the remnants of old housing structures contained the potentiality of the space as an imminent phenomenal locale that could be paced and inhabited by a living human body. As Olson would say in a 1966 interview, it was the site for 'the universe coming in and creating its wall' (*Muthologos* 221). In the poem 'MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN – II', Olson coins the term 'protogonic' to describe the Commons, a typically Olsonian construction in that it echoes the word 'protogenic' (of or pertaining to an earlier race) but with a topographical twist: *-gonic* is a medical suffix meaning 'work required to facilitate a specified reaction' (*Mosby's* 811) and is commonly applied to describe how environmental conditions impact upon particular organisms (i.e. *dysgonic* for unsuccessful bacterial cultures; *endergonic* as referred to how chemical reactions absorb energy from their surroundings, etc.) Olson's 'protogonic', then, refers to how older, 'deep' factors excite a reaction via the lived immediacy of a projective poet's environment; how ancient ur-structures reappear as structuring laws for

the imminent now. Indeed, every one of the ‘from Dogtown’ poems of Book II³⁰ can be viewed through the double-lens of the *proto-* and the *-gonic*—a sort of attempted balance between the deep-time archetypal structures extrapolated from global mythic, geological and historical records and the formal and rhetorical dimensions of the poem as a local, projective emergence.

As far as the *proto-* side of things is concerned, Olson’s scope can be disarming, as he thematically refracts his Dogtown poems through the creationist cosmologies of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, passages from Memphite theology as summarised by Henri Frankfort and a Hittite creation myth pertaining to the ‘Diorite Man’—all of which find formal homologies in Nathaniel Shaler’s geological record and Babson’s histories of the town. It should be said at this point that untangling these compendious webs of comparative mythology, science and local legend in a granular fashion is an exegetical ordeal, not least because to isolate these strands one must also re-enact the historiographical contexts of Olson’s source texts such as Jane Harrison and the deepening theoretical influence of Carl Jung during this period, resonances which are bravely sounded out in Butterick’s *Guide* but remain perennially in need of critical reconstruction.³¹ Nonetheless, it is once again an *elemental* vocabulary which underwrites this mytho-poetic manoeuvring through such a host of deities and cosmologies,

³⁰ For the sake of critical focus I have narrowed down five poems which arguably, as it were, wear Dogtown on the poet’s head. The first three inclusions are relatively straightforward: the three instalments of ‘MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN’, numbered I, II and IV. I have chosen to include ‘The Cow of Dogtown’ and the ‘Gravelly Hill’ poem not only because they share in these poems’ intertexts but also because they share in the contained, ‘protogonic’ structure which this chapter will go on to extrapolate. Appearing as they do as structurally and thematically recurrent poems, I have come to see these five examples as a contained sequence in and of itself, and their place within the broader Book a spine of sorts, offering momentary pivots of thematic reconstitution amid a formally variable textual landscape.

³¹ I am indebted to many, much more granular and detailed, analyses of Olson’s comparative mythology in such poems. See Stein for a Jungian reading of Olson’s Typhon; Grieve-Carlson for an illuminating elaboration of Hesiod’s influence on the poet; see also Jeff Davis for more on the relation between geology and voice in Olson’s later Maximus poems.

providing a meta-ontology of sorts that makes legible the thematic alignment of such diverse traditions. The central mythic figures of the five poems are those representing water and air on the one hand, and the subterranean depths of the earth on the other. Notable figures in the first instance, for example, include the Ancient Greek ‘deep-swirling Okeanos’, who ‘steers all things through all things’, aligned via Jane Harrison’s cosmological linkage of Okeanos to Ouranos, or ‘high heaven itself’ (Harrison 456-67)—which in turn creates a subject rhyme with the Memphite figure of Nut, or ‘the air, moving around, moving from one place / to another’ (*TMP* 320). What links these two deities is their symmetrical binding of the upper, heavenly domain with the aqueous world below: cosmologically speaking, both Okeanos and Nut aqueously integrate with the earth from above (whether by metaphor of insemination, as with the former, or breast-feeding, as with the latter) so as to provide it with vitality—water and air mixed with earth, in other words, instigate life: ‘Vast earth rejoices,[...] / the sleeper lights up from the dead, / the man awake lights up from the sleeping’ (*TMP* 172).

If ‘MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN – I’ feminises the Earth as a receptive, nurturing receptacle via the implied figure of Gaia, ‘MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN – IV’ instead focuses on the subterraneous through the active, rebellious figure of Typhon, descendent of Tartáros, who, according to Hesiod, is the third primordial deity under Chaos and Earth (Hesiod 6). The poem itself takes the form of a disjunctive narrative, retelling the story of Typhon’s rebellion against Zeus through an almost live-action presentation of Maximus’ responses to the original source text (cf. Hesiod 26-29). However, it quickly becomes clear that this retelling is not going to be easy to follow, as the speaker obsesses almost to the point of neurosis on the *ordinal* nature of Hesiod’s original family tree:

[...] Tartarós
was once ahead of
Heaven was prior to

(in coming into being) this ‘child’
of Earth: Tartaros
was next after Earth (as Earth
was next after hunger
itself – Typhon
was her child, by Tartarós, even if last
as Heaven was her child, first
(TMP 337)

Once one disentangles the jumbled prepositional pivots ‘ahead of’, ‘prior to’, ‘after’, ‘next’, ‘last’ and ‘first’, Olson’s chronology does broadly make sense—his emphasis throughout is that the ‘underdome’ of Tartaros-Typhon is a completely different lineage to that of the ‘overdome’, or the deities of the sky, Ouranous-Zeus. Tartarós is of course *related* to Ouranous, but crucially does not father and is not fathered by him, contrasting with the parricidal lineage of Ouranous-Kronos-Zeus that the first ‘from Dogtown’ poem foregrounds. In other words, when describing Typhon’s (i.e. Tartarós’ son by Earth) failed attempt to dethrone Zeus, the rebellion is significant precisely because it is a conflict of cousin against cousin, rather than son against father: Typhon is Zeus’ contemporary, not his progeny. Furthermore, this horizontal interruption of lineage through time is mimicked in the maddening syntax noted above. Despite the speaker’s clear insistence on ordinal priority, the modifiers themselves betray such a fixation: the word ‘first’ hangs ambiguously between one stanza and the next, paradoxically modifying two clauses at once; Olson describes who comes ‘next’ backwards, going back from ‘Tartarós’ to ‘hunger’, or Chaos; and Typhon is figured as ‘last’ but is *representative* of ‘Tartarós’, who is ‘first’ before Heaven. In this sense, Olson’s syntax is itself a Typhonic interruption of accretive time, abruptly standing in the way of a reader’s temporal experience of the narrative, ‘startling’ one out of received lineages of ordinal priority.

This is, in microcosm, a demonstration of Olson’s ‘protogonic’ trajectory: first, he attempts a quasi-structuralist uncovering of deeper, abstracted resonances through a

comparative mythological analysis (*proto-*); then, he charts the re-emergence of such structure as an immanent architecture of embodied experience—an experience staged through acts of writing, reading, traversing, perceiving, and so on (*-gonic*). Thus the structuring law of earthliness that Olson gains from his comparative mythological enquiry is, via the figure of Typhon, to do with its *recalcitrance*, or its ability to stop a process in its unfolding and hold it in a spatialised form where ordinal relations are complicated. But it is not only through mythology that Olson finds this Typhonic recalcitrance; it is also present in Olson's favourite passage of geological description pertaining to the kame mounds of the earth underneath Dogtown itself, returned to time and again throughout the 'from Dogtown' poems:

Owing to the abundance of drift, this point in any of these localities can not be definitely settled. The first impression was that we had here a great dike of diorite cutting the granite; but every indication in the field points to the opposite conclusion, namely, that the granite has burst up around the diorite, leaving it as an included mass. (Shaler 607)

In Olson's reading, one could say that this part of the geological record is rendered formally homologous to Typhon's rebellion: Shaler is describing a process of glacial drift, a mode of 'aquarian time' (*TMP* 180) recorded in stone producing a recalcitrant opposition that cannot be reconciled. Note the recurrence of uncertain ordinal modifiers, an inability to 'definitively settle' upon a timeline, and the mutual co-dependency of opposites: diorite, pushed down by glacial drift, meets at Dogtown Commons the granite, which was there first, but comes to 'include' that from which one might expect it to be 'cut' off. Just as earth is, in Olson's comparative mythological cosmology, the conflicting middle-point between under- and over-domes, here once again Dogtown Commons appears as the siting ground for the mutually constitutive presence of conflicting archetypes.

As Olson writes in another 'from Dogtown' poem, 'The Cow / of Dogtown',

there is enough wildness, or profiles in
the rocks, the inhabitation of their shapes,
to supply plenty of company – none of the

irritation and over-presence of nothing-
nesses which makes woods or any
place else than the kame meadows of
Dogtown and this bold height of it,
not as interesting.

(TMP 319)

The rocky ‘profiles’ and the poet’s ‘inhabitation’ of them provides a model for navigating an archive that spans thousands of years across multiple continents, not only supplying ‘plenty of company’ but prefiguring a formal principle of structuration for what Olson would elsewhere call the ‘*commisure*’ or the boundedness of apparently discrete particulars (TMP 269; cf. Woods 239). The intimation of what lies as an alternative—an ‘over-presence of nothing-/nesses’ which do not have the same earthly solidity as the ‘profiles in / the rocks’—also reminds us of the previous Chapter’s analysis of wateriness: a plurality that by its very overabundance places itself under erasure. What earth apparently affords Olson is *the holding together* of a tensile, recalcitrant opposition, rather than allowing opposing or counter-factual pathways to drift uncontrollably away. In other words, the core tension between Olson’s earthly and aqueous imaginations might be described in abstract terms as the difference between a relation that holds and a relation that escapes. The word ‘interesting’ here is particularly telling: via the Latin root (*inter* [between] + *esse* [be]), ‘interestedness’ takes the connotation of ontological liminality, or, more simply, a ‘between-being’, in the sense that to be interested in something is to exist at the edges of one’s own limits, to feel the gravitational pull of the interesting object; but to *remain* ‘interested’ is to prolong that state, moving back and forth between its limits, establish the solidity of their opposing walls by a kind of engaged, textual echoing.

This is not the first time Olson has fastened upon the word ‘interesting’. In ‘MAXIMUS – FROM DOGTOWN II’, once again the word is drawn into the orbit of three definitively *solid* objects:

earth is interesting:
ice is interesting
stone is interesting

(TMP 179)

The tercet is taken from one of the most visually striking pages of Book II of *The Maximus Poems*, a columnic organisation both down and across the page, where readers are encouraged to approach line and stanza from more than one direction. Do we read in the vein of Typhon's rebellion—that is, horizontally; or do we read in the vein of Zeus and Kronos—that is, vertically? Echoing Shaler's diorite and granitite, these two reading strategies sit somewhere between incision and inclusion, once again a re-emergence of deeper geological structures that one navigates as an 'unsettling' problem of readerly consciousness. In other words, these columns challenge us to think within the space of the 'between', utilising presentations of text that force one to return to the middle of the page as the experiential locus of a charged, 'interested' reading. This kind of strategy is also recapitulated in many other of the 'from Dogtown' poems: 'The Cow of Dogtown' is largely made up of Maximus' personal, lyric voice and verbatim sections of Shaler's geological record; the speaker veers between geology and lived experience without quotation marks or other punctuating gaps—again unsettling our ability to mark out decisively an intersecting boundary, allowing for the possibility that technical, geological language might 'burst up' or be 'included' within the personal, or vice versa. Once again the continuum between the *proto*- and the *-gonic* is complete: deeper structure reappears at the level of the phenomenologically immediate, a disequilibrium bounded within the spatially closed tensions of the poem as an imminent, conscious experience.

If 'On First Looking out...' posited the aqueous as a way of rethinking the historic wrongs of colonisation by escaping outwards across space and time to potential visions of America that might transformatively extend the limits of the national subject; the 'from

Dogtown’ poems reply through a different, considerably more earthly sensibility, fixating on tensile, bounded oppositions and working through them, back and forth. We gain a sense of what this is all building towards in the triumphant, if not entirely convincing, final poem of the Book, entitled ‘The River Map and we’re done’. The poem begins in the vein of many that we have just discussed: with the attempt to answer a historian’s question about the local history of Gloucester. But, line by line, the narrative of the historical event fades as the voice is taken over by the topographical formation of a river running between various (and by now familiar) bipolar landmarks:

at one point Rocky Hill and Castle Rock
 [...]
 Between Heaven and Earth
 [...]
 directions the Banks
(TMP 371)

I indent these quotations to preserve their attendant typographical dualities—once again the text itself seems to want to give projective form to this figurative generation of a ‘between’ via the establishing of two points. Here, however, the river is presented as a narrative staging ground for a *directed flow*—that is, the course of the river working its way out towards the sea. On the following page, the voice shifts once again to the personal before quickly modulating back into the cosmic and the oracular:

the firmness of the Two Hills
 the firmness of the Two Directions
 the bottom of the vase the rise
 of the power of the Sea’s plant

right through the middle of the River
 neap or flood tide

inspissate River
 times repeated

old hulk Rocky Marsh
(372)

Here, the ‘firmness’ of a bounded opposition provides ‘direction’ and ‘power’; by establishing oneself at the between or ‘the middle’, one launches back towards the sea with a reinvigorated sense of where one is going. The word ‘inspissate’—i.e. to thicken, or congeal—speaks to a relation that holds; caught between two oppositions, one locates oneself as positioned, and the momentary interruption of flow allows one the space to change stance and face the world with a sense of intentionality. By the poem’s very title and its use of the word ‘done’, we see here an immediate contrast with an earlier, coastal Maximus, feeling ‘undone’ on the shore. In Prynne’s words, the poem has been brought ‘back home’, looped back to a pivotal recalcitrance that gives the poet the leverage to begin a new orbit out into the sea.

On the other hand, however much the penultimate poem of Book II seems to want to declare a ‘mission accomplished’ of sorts, or a renewed leap off the land announcing redoubled orbital ambits towards the horizon, its title—‘The River Map and we’re done’—retains a decidedly harried sensibility, with the poet resorting to the *narration* of new, directed actions but without a clear sense of what kinds of subjective gains he is actually taking with him from the ‘profiles of / the rocks’. The poet must have had some sense of this, leaving the last poem of the Book as a two-line reference to *Moby Dick*’s Ishmael afloat and hanging on to an empty coffin, trying to stay alive amid the currents. Visually, the contrast between the two final poems is striking: one a clearly directed flow of text pushing down the page, the next a single couplet floating amid a wash of blank space. Arguably, the difference speaks to a fundamental acknowledgement of tension in Olson’s ‘leap onto the land’. Whatever momentary bindings of earthly solidity the poet achieves in his inhabitation of the ground under his feet, such flashes of coherence remain partial and incompletely glimpsed; deeply meaningful but broader beyond that which the pages of a poem can hold in place. Certain local Gloucester town legends, certain passages of Hesiod, Shaler or Jane Harrison ‘startle’ the voice of Maximus through their partial disclosure of deeper metaphysical structures; they

hold the poet's interestedness to the extent that the poems themselves begin to take on certain facets of their shape and form, but in their coherence they retain an unbearable silence; a looming inability to pronounce upon human affairs. One could say that the end of Book II in many senses turns *The Maximus Poems* inside-out: beginning as an attempt to incorporate into the space of the poem the tensile dynamisms of the kinetic outside, the poem ends as a text subsumed by its outside, silenced by the indifference of the materials it incorporates.

iv. Postscript: the reconstructed agent

I mean, the poetry I've written in this new *Maximus* is all, in a sense, all really essentially Dogtown. If the first Town was the Town town, the fish town, the second town, the second volume, is Dogtown, and the third is what I'm now working on.
[...]

The second book was on a thing called Dogtown. The third book, which I am now writing, is on I will not say. ('BBC Interview', *Muthologos* 218; 225)

The third book of *The Maximus Poems* has a decidedly ghostly quality, and not just in the commonplace sense that most unfinished, posthumous publications feel haunted by the lingering absence of authoritative catharsis. The final book has been recounted as a failure of Olson's public voice (Bram 137), or the fault-line upon which the sonorous authority of 'Maximus' finally falters; critiqued as the moment in which the line between note-taking and poetry finally crumbles (Case 114-15; Weaver 275-76) and much more beyond. While it is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis to address such positions surrounding Book III with the rigour they deserve, it might be appropriate to suggest, via the indented quote above, that the defamiliarising contrast of the third Book is in part due to the way in which it encourages us to radically reconceptualise our definitions of 'material imagination'. As we have seen, Olson underwrites the first two books of *Maximus* with elemental metaphors: the first book's 'fish town' is appropriately drawn out towards the sea and its rhetorical and imagistic layering is in large part indebted to an oceanic, horizontal pull; the second book's 'Dogtown' is rather concerned with earthly containment, or the establishing of relations that hold amid a wash

of perpetual differentiation. However, the final book (with its textual presentation almost entirely indebted to the brave work of George Butterick after Olson's death) doesn't quite have the same kind of projective-elemental underpinning; with Olson's words to the BBC interviewer in mind, one could argue that he never really made it to the point where he could 'say' what the Book was 'on'. *Its* material unconscious has much more to do with notes scrawled on the backs of literal envelopes, grocery bags and junk mail: regardless of Olson's eventual intentions for the final Book, the form in which the poems appear to us is underwritten by their status as recuperated found objects. As Kindellan argues, to approach such poems one must necessarily distance them from Olson's authoritative statements regarding the undergirding elemental kinetics made transferable by the typewriter (96-100); these poems simply demand a different interpretive frame, one which this thesis does not have the space to reconstruct.

In many senses, Alfred North Whitehead concludes in four sentences the conceptual problematic that Olson spent two Books worrying about, in his well-known evocation of the dialectical imbrication of becoming and being:

Ideas fashion themselves around these two notions, permanence and flux. In the inescapable flux, there is something that abides; in the overwhelming permanence, there is an element that escapes into flux. Permanence can be snatched only out of flux; and the passing moment can find its adequate intensity only by its submission to permanence. Those who would disjoin the two elements can find no interpretation of patent facts. (338)

If *The Maximus Poems* can be described as an attempt to 'join' or to think the 'two elements' of flux and permanence—water and earth—together, then it is fair to say that Olson, in his twenty-year embodiment of such a task, also carried over Whitehead's vocabulary of *survival*: 'abides', 'escapes', 'snatches', 'submission'—all words that connote a less than harmonious relationship with the elements one finds oneself ensconced within. That Olson could at once declare so forcefully the possibility of an authentically human kind of agency, proudly

recuperated through a poetics of imaginative openness to one's environment, yet at the same time write a poem that destabilises itself to such an extent that it can only end with a sense of overwhelming personal vulnerability, is perhaps the most affecting facet of his work. To return to one of the maxims of 'Projective Verse': 'FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT' (COCPr 240)—the actual experience of reading *The Maximus Poems* in their totality might better be described as an experience of content extending into, through and overriding form, where the poetic subject is minimised as the maximalist expanse of a world beyond the page breaks down its organically autonomous constitution, rather than reinvigorating or consolidating it. As this thesis turns from the work of Olson to that of Langston Hughes, this concern will forcefully reassert itself: to what extent is a material imagination something to be *survived* as opposed to *affirmed*?

-3-

Improvising in the Interstices:
Langston Hughes and the
Formation of the Collective Subject

-3.a.-
'Late' Langston Hughes
and the Agency of Interstitial Space

i. Plurivocality and the poetics of survival

To rehearse the formative moments in Langston Hughes' literary career is to adopt a vocabulary of twists and turns: abrupt departures through broad geographies of cultural and political activity typify the ethos of a poet who, in his own words, aspired 'to bring the poetry to the people' (*I Wonder...* 39-67); to use language in direct connection with multiple audiences and to draw lines of solidarity across racial, economic and social divides. As a consequence, *periodicity*—that is, the criteria by which we separate a continuous temporal process into more or less clear intervals, and the hierarchies by which we designate some intervals as more or less germinal, definitive, causative, etc., than others—has become a clear bone of contention for much of the ever-growing body of criticism generated in the poet's shadow. It makes a difference how we locate Hughes as both a poet of the 'Harlem Renaissance' in the 1920s and one of the Popular Front era in the 1930s; how we narrate both the perceived locality of Hughes as a poet almost synonymous with a single neighbourhood in New York and his life as a voyager traversing the global networks of the Black Atlantic; how we balance his presence in mainstream literary canonisation, his significance for the Black radical tradition and his status as a reclaimed queer icon. Questions like these are made thornier by Hughes himself, who, as we have seen (1.a.iii.), was adept at reconstructing his own history and artistic positions anew in the face of historical change and variable audiences. Therefore, the critical task, to echo the well-known title of Isaac Julien's film, is to be forever 'looking for Langston', or navigating lines of continuity within a literary life made visible through the fractal lens of revision and reinvention; of multiple forms of address and historical periodization. The purpose of this introductory section is

thus to account for my own periodization of ‘late’ Langston Hughes as an imperfect but useful analytical frame when discussing a key aesthetic development seen most significantly in the period directly following the second world war, evidenced in particular by the publications of his two late masterpieces, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) and *Ask Your Mama* (1960). To do so, it will be necessary to provide my own narration of the poet’s career leading up to this period, and to explicate how my readings of these latter works are contextualised by an undergirding history and poetic trajectory.

The ease with which Hughes’ name so frequently conjures into being the period often referred to as the Harlem Renaissance can be in equal parts illuminating and analytically foreclosing. While it would be improper to ignore Hughes’ importance to 1920s literary culture and his position in speaking directly to the major pressure points of black intellectual life during that period, the framing of Hughes as a ‘Harlem Renaissance poet’ (leaving aside for now the broader, problematic nature of the term ‘Harlem Renaissance’ itself) risks closing us off to the ways in which intervening years and literary contexts both built upon and diverged from this early high point in the poet’s career. As we have seen, a great deal of critics at the time of Hughes’ post-war publications had a tendency to palm off the author as a throwback, or a poet of the 1920s who just happened to still be writing in the 1950s and 1960s. For more contemporary critical discussions, similar temporal foreclosures precipitate analytically limited perspectives: the tensions and intellectual vicissitudes of Hughes’ 1920s output risk being carried forward in time with little sense of historical dialogue or intellectual mutation. Since the turn of the millennium, there has been a veritable spate of criticism which aims, as it were, to ‘re-periodise’ Hughes, or reassess his literary significance from the vantage point of less well-trodden historical grounds.³² Of these accounts, Smethurst stands out in

³² For accounts which foreground the impact of the Communist Left and time spent in the USSR in the early 1930s, see Smethurst’s *New Red Negro* for a comprehensive overview of the period (93-115;

my view with his analysis of how Hughes' aesthetic developed and extended in the years immediately following the 1920s. In his publication on the Popular Front's influence on African American letters in the 1930s, Smethurst argues that Hughes and other left-leaning mass modernists adopted an aesthetic position that aimed towards an on-going ' "re-creation" of the folk or popular voice' (12). In the face of dwindling financial support during the Great Depression, coupled with relatively high-profile cases of revolt and reconciliation with various political groups and institutions, Hughes' shift towards a greater range of mass audiences, mediated by an expanded set of institutional and political alliances, contributed towards an aesthetic that increasingly valued polyvocality and the ability to shift between different stylistic and rhetorical modes of address. Indeed, according to Smethurst,

the wide variety of voices, styles, and themes employed by Hughes in the late 1920s and early 1930s and addressed to equally disparate audiences become largely unified by the end of the decade in a manner that is crucial to the development of his later work. (94)

What typifies 'late' Langston Hughes, then, is an attempt to consolidate, within structurally 'unified' poetic wholes, the multiple styles and modes of address that he had cultivated during the pre-war decades. The democratic agora of longer works such as *Montage* and *Ask Your Mama* is, in this sense, indebted to Hughes' attempt throughout the 1920s and 1930s to speak to multiple audiences; to reposition the African American folk voice against and through contrasting social collectives—an endeavour which this section aims (partially) to reconstruct.

144-163); Barbara Foley's *Spectres of 1919* for a more revised inclusion of Hughes' radical Leftism within the peak Harlem Renaissance period; Kate Baldwin's *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain* for Hughes' travels in Soviet Uzbekistan (86-148); Brian Dolinar's *The Black Cultural Front* for the impact of Leftist radicalism on the Simple stories in particular; Grogan's essay on the intersection of constructivist theatre with Hughes' agitprop poetry, returned to again below. For an account which extrapolates out from Hughes' role as a translator, see Kutzinski. See Josh Kun's *Audiotopias* for Hughes' hybrid critical race politics via the Spanish-speaking Caribbean cultures (143-83), and Isabel Sotro's two essays on Hughes as a Spanish Civil War poet.

As Chinitz underscores, Hughes' modulations through various political and institutional alliances were more often than not a matter of survival for a poet who frequently found himself caught at the intersection of personal poverty, political uncertainty and structural racism (*Which Sin...* 3-6). Hughes himself would stress this mentality of survival in the opening pages of his second memoir, *I Wonder as I Wander*, published five years after his hearing at the McCarthy Senate subcommittee. Recalling his financially desperate state following the 1929 stock market crash, Hughes opens his autobiography by announcing: 'If I were to live and write, at all, since I did not know how to do anything else, I had to make a living from writing itself. So, of necessity, I began to turn poetry into bread' (3). Within the context of the memoir's opening chapter, there is ample reason to read this transmutation in two ways: bread as the facilitator of the author's literal subsistence but also in its more collectivist dimension as providing food for other, starved populations: poetry itself as a miracle that sustains life and that which can be shared with others. And while Hughes' opening emphasis on his own material constraints allowed plausible deniability for past political alliances that had become, by 1956, a potential public-image hindrance (Rampersad, *II* 259-60), it also legitimated his position as a writer through which the social totality of an underrepresented underclass could find a voice: the figure of an itinerant poet, travelling both within and without the USA, open to various kinds of literary work and social collectives, authorises a polyvocal writer inclined to speak on behalf of the many. By *surviving* in the interstices, Hughes navigates the totality.

This latter strategy of authorisation I find to be in itself more valuable for this thesis than the recurrent critical debate surrounding the role of compromise and political integrity

of Hughes in the pre- and post-war writings.³³ The manner in which Hughes as an individual should or should not be judged, for example, for his liberal turn in the 1940s and 1950s away from the revolutionary fervour of the 1930s (Dawahare 33-34) is less interesting to me than the extent to which the textual record of his movement between various political and cultural organisations is a way of reading agency into writing. By writing to, for and through various assemblages of cultural and political agency, said writing probes the limits and affordances of the kinds of agency such organisations anticipate. It is for this reason that the following survey of Hughes' pre-war writings does not just account for the emergence of texts as a result of political and cultural alliance, but seeks to understand the way in which Hughes poetically reconstructs agency as a formal and thematic concern, using his writing to self-reflexively question the available conditions for action within a politicised literary or performative context. The attempt to turn poetry into bread, I argue, facilitates an enquiry into how poetry might help one to 'survive'.

For all the well-worn critical overtures towards polyvocality and changeability in the work of Hughes, some things of course always remain the same. Music—in particular, jazz and the Blues—famously functioned throughout Hughes' career as a kind of sonic interlocutor to much of the poetry, providing not only thematic interest but an underlying structural rationale to the various twists and turns of Hughes' aesthetic development. Blues antiphony, bebop chromaticism, and jazz fusion instrumentation all take their places at various stages in Hughes' career as the inspirational geneses behind stylistic changes in direction, with musical cultures and styles often represented as equivalent to political organisation in their capacity to dynamise and elicit liberatory change. As a consequence,

³³ For the most comprehensive literary-critical account of the way in which compromise is thematised in Hughes' writing and public discourse, Chinitz remains the gold standard. See also Susan Duffy *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes* (1-25).

different genres of performance anticipate different relations of communal interactivity; different ways of integrating and managing various articulations of communal agency. For Hughes, how people play together carries over into how they might survive together.

While I cannot presume to synoptically account for Hughes' early career with the level of historical rigour that can be found elsewhere, the following survey is an enquiry into the way in which Hughes innovated his approach to poetic form in conjunction with his lifelong sensitivity to the material necessities of political re-alignment. My claim is that Hughes uses poetic form as a way of testing out the expressive affordances of a particular political-cultural formation. Form, in other words, asks: what can this political formation offer? what kinds of utterance does it sanction? and what does agency look like through this formation's particular conceptual lens? Questions like these set the stage for the argumentative thrust of the next two sections of this chapter: that a key formal development of Hughes' 'late' poetry is the inclusion of agentive 'interstitial' space within the text's formal requirements. Such an inclusion, it will be argued, is indicative of a realisation that form cannot just account for agency in the positive sense—Hughes' late poetry not only asks and formally embodies the question 'what is to be done?' but also probes and worries about the limits of action and agency in a material context that is open and vulnerable to externalities which seek to destabilise the agent's capacity for action in the first place. Herein lies the principle difference between the material imaginations of Charles Olson and Langston Hughes: while the former promulgated an open poetry that assumed over anything else that whatever external material force was 'let in' to the poem would extend, augment or otherwise *broaden* the poem's capacity to affect; the late output of the latter was by necessity forced to contend with the fact that an 'open' poem is also vulnerable to externalities that might rather subdue, constrict or indeed completely annihilate the communal subject that the poetry is supposed to uplift. Dealing with this reality—or, surviving in spite of it—becomes the central

concern for an author whose work was centrally preoccupied with the extent to which poetry might lend power to a people.

ii. From *The Weary Blues* (1926) to *A New Dawn* (1938): architectures of resistance

Hughes was quick to position the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ as an important but politically ineffectual moment, remarking in retrospect that ‘The ordinary Negro had never heard of the Renaissance—and if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any’ (*The Big Sea* 228). Such an aside is an exemplary stab at the lasting preoccupation of ‘uplift’ during the 1920s—the ‘New Negro’ as one amid the ‘Talented Tenth’ (Du Bois, ‘Talented Tenth’ 33-75) of an emergent urban black middle class, uplifting the lumpen and uncultivated masses migrating in unprecedented number from the agrarian south.³⁴ Hughes’ reflections from the vantage point of the 1940s make it clear that such a framing was always problematic, but they also throw into question the fraught political complexities of how art ‘does’ anything in the first place; how it furthers the course of particular actions and how it receives agentive capacity from material sources. Juggling the twin necessities of speaking *for* and *with* the race via the creation of marketable aesthetic objects or performances, much of the time for white enjoyment, would prove to be an insurmountable contradiction so long as cultural production was materially tied to an uneven economy of white patronage and consumption (Huggins 128-29). As a poet whose own career had been rocked by the capricious infrastructure of patronage during the late 1920s (Rampersad *I* 167-6, 185-88; Hughes, *The Big Sea*... 311-26), Hughes was certainly in the right position to voice suspicion of an elitist bourgeois trajectory

³⁴ This reductive oversimplification of perhaps one of the most complex demographic shifts in American history has been remarkably persistent within the cultural imaginary of the Great Migration, to the extent that one of the most important recent accounts of the hundred year period, Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns*, still has to situate itself as a refutation of the image of the rural Southern migrants as the bearers of ‘family dysfunction’ and economic precarity to the North (14). As Wilkerson attests, recent analysis of demographic data has proven this to be a completely false framing (Ibid.)

tethered to white taste. Any aesthetic that was to be effective in the sense that it might adopt a meaningfully combative attitude towards the status quo would have to emerge more directly with and through grassroots involvement and somehow extricate itself from the reifying, fetishizing dynamics of racial capitalism—or, as a disenchanted Du Bois reflected in 1933, ‘a literature written for the benefit of white people and at the behest of white readers’ (Du Bois, ‘The Negro College’ 181).³⁵

However, this is not quite the whole story. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is difficult to speak of the flourishing of African American intellectual and cultural production during the 1920s through a rigid vocabulary of goals and achievements, success or failure, theory and practice. This becomes especially apparent by considering the controversial nature of the very term ‘Harlem Renaissance’—especially for our purposes, as Hughes himself was potentially the first person to coin the term in distinction from more general, universalist monikers such as ‘Negro Renaissance’ or ‘New Negro Renaissance’ (Mitchell II 649). In Mitchell II’s words, Hughes’ usage in his 1940 autobiography *The Big Sea* implied that, ‘While the “Negro Renaissance” offered a long-term interracial cultural vision, the “Harlem Renaissance” described a fleeting convergence of black artists in a single place and time’ (Ibid 660). To assume this geographically and historically enclosed term without situating it within

³⁵ My use of the term ‘racial capitalism’ here has a somewhat double-voiced quality, drawing together two uses of the term that to my knowledge rarely find themselves imbricated. The first is the more general theoretical term deployed by Cedric Robinson in his landmark text inaugurating the conceptual framework of the Black radical tradition, *Black Marxism*. The term is here not intended to connote a subsection of capitalism that concerns race or racism, but rather that racism is inherent to the development of the historical bourgeoisie and capitalist institutions, rather than accidental (cf. 24-28): there is not capitalism other than racial capitalism; capital can only accumulate through the maintenance of severe inequality between social groups, a disparity which is consistently enshrined and underwritten by racial categories. Nancy Leong’s recent, more specific legal coinage of the term—broadly defined as ‘the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person’ (2153-54)—speaks aptly to the ‘New Negro’ as it was fetishized and exploited during the 1920s, although I would always tend to place these specific processes within the broader, more theoretically radical framework of Robinson.

the broader conceptual framework of ‘Negro Renaissance’ as a trans-historical and trans-geographical continuity³⁶ is to risk overlooking the lasting significance of the 1920s as an especially intense outburst of cultural and intellectual productivity whose implications both looked back and projected forwards in time. Through this frame, what is most striking and potent about the 1920s turns out not to be the extent to which a unified movement successfully actualised a set of stated aims. Rather, what is more long-lasting is the enormous amount of questions the period generated regarding the modalities by which cultural production gives anticipatory form to a novel political subject. As Jeffrey Stewart reminds us,

The New Negro was, in reality, an on-going complex transaction between a black sense of self and a sense of self as urban, industrialized, and also white—a balancing act of constantly referring backwards and forwards, from lessons and loyalties of the past to creative immersions in an unruly present. (18)

The conceptual *unruliness* of the New Negro as a social and political archetype, and the extent to which disagreement and departure so often dominated the 1920s literary *milieu*, reflects a discourse committed to stretching the limitations of blackness; limitations that were and continue to be prescribed within the structuring context of racial capitalism yet ultimately are unable to subdue the destabilising persistence of black intellectual life itself. Taken collectively, the textual record of the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s represents an enunciation of race that ties self-reflexivity to self-regeneration, establishing tensile dynamics that would continue to be important for later, geographically dispersed endeavours to foster agency within communities of colour via cultural means—whether that be Harlem’s continued ‘symbolic status as a fulcrum of black politics and culture’ (Smethurst, *The Black*

³⁶ Henry Louis Gates attributes the first usage of the term ‘Negro Renaissance’ to William Stanley Braithwaite in 1901; as well as Anna Julia Cooper’s formulation of ‘The New Negro Literary Movement’ in 1904 (‘Harlem on Our Minds’ 164). For how the term reappears in various forms in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and in the critical afterlife of the 1920s, see Mitchell II.

Arts Movement... 111) during the initial iterations of the Black Arts Movement in the early 1960s (Ibid 147-153; Neal 641; Cruise 62-63); its importance for the *negritude* movement in Africa, France and the Caribbean (Edwards, *Practice...* 24-25); or its place within more recent attempts to reclaim gay and lesbian countercultures in ways that look forwards to contemporary representations of queer black cultures (Vogel 280-81).

Hughes' contributions to such 'on-going, complex transaction[s]' of black identity during the 1920s were multifaceted, and an exhaustive account of his output during the period would be impractical here. However, a good way of unpacking Hughes' multifaceted positioning during the 'Renaissance' would be to take a closer look at a well-known essay whose dynamic tensions are often reduced to simple slogans and reductive readings: that is, his 1926 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', published in *The Nation* as a direct response to George Schuyler's 'The Negro-Art Hokum' one week earlier. After excoriating the middle classes for their apparent drive to turn away from autochthonous art forms of the black masses like jazz and the Blues, Hughes develops his broadside into an affirmation of these latter forms as exemplars of an authentic racial consciousness with the well-known line: 'jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America' (*LHCW* 9 35). As has been argued elsewhere, Hughes falls into numerous rhetorical traps in his evocation of race as essential, 'inherent' and determined; the 'eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul' (Ibid) is rightfully read as a capitulation to white exoticisation draped in the garb of anti-bourgeois sentiment (Johnson 23-4). Even Chinitz, who argues that Hughes's output taken as a whole offers a more inclusive and performative construction of racial authenticity, concedes the point that 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' is a regrettably 'restrictive version of authentic blackness advocated polemically' (66). Nonetheless, throughout the essay one can readily observe a rhetorical tension between, on the one hand, an evocation of jazz and the Blues as sonic transmitters of a defined, univocal race-consciousness, and, on the other, as

contingent materials to be incorporated into broader, more indeterminately defined, artistic visions. The essay is, after all, an injunction for his fellow artists *not to* proscribe certain artistic forms in the name of preserving a tighter party line: the principal example he offers to support his own position is Toomer's *Cane* (34), a hybrid text that sits at the intersection of various black vernacular traditions and interwar modernist techniques of fragmentation, and one whose portrayal of both agrarian and urban African American cultures can hardly be described as straightforwardly 'restrictive' or univocal. In the final allusion of Hughes' essay, we gain a sense of the stakes behind this paradoxical enunciation of a coherent 'racial character' alongside more constructivist gestures towards on-going reinvention: 'We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves' (*LHCW* 9 36). Echoing the well-known spiritual by John Wesley Work Jr., here the strategy once again amounts to a shoring up of black agency, understood as both breadth of capacity and vital power: 'the racial mountain' provides for Hughes something to stand on as a firm foundation for a living and combative artistic tradition, and yet the temples themselves are both plural and futural, anticipating a kind of blackness open to transfiguration and revision.

Hostile reviews of Hughes' first two poetry collections, *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes for the Jew*, would accuse the poet of publishing transcriptions under the name of poetry, or simple reproductions of folk forms lacking any sense of artistic intervention. As Stephen C. Tracy has since comprehensively argued, this was far from the case: Hughes adapted Blues formal structures and fed them through his poetry to extend, reform and transfigure the possibilities of the written word in dialogue with a musical tradition that was itself constantly developing and innovating (Tracy 170, 180-81). Consider, for example, the way in which the rhetorical limits of Blues antiphony are stretched and tested via a formally expansive poetic arrangement in 'The Cat and the Saxophone':

EVERYBODY
 Half-pint,—
 Gin?
 No, make it
 LOVES MY BABY
 corn. You like
 liquor,
 don't you, honey? [...]
 (LHCP 89)

Antiphony is here broadened away from its status as a bivocal musical structure and into three, or even four, overlapping voices: the two people at the bar speaking, and the song on the jukebox, composed by Spencer Williams around a standard Blues antiphonal refrain. Even in the second line's doubling-up of punctuation (with the contiguous comma and em-dash's conflicting implications of both continuation and interruption), it is clear that the poem centres upon the ambiguous gap between a call and a response, or the way in which one leads into or positions itself against the other. Furthering this ambiguity, the textual effect of two calls and responses superimposed onto each other creates a third antiphonal relation from the aleatory synchronicity of the music set against the lovers' conversation:

Say!
 EVERYBODY
 Yes?
 WANTS MY BABY
 I'm your
 BUT MY BABY
 sweetie, ain't I?
 DON'T WANT NOBODY
 Sure. [...]
 (Ibid)

Just from this selected passage, the range of what constitutes a call and a response is multiplied through a host of rhetorical possibilities: calls are at once commands ('Say!'), supplications ('ain't I?') and direct questions ('Yes?'), while responses range from reassurances ('Sure') to contrasts ('EVERYBODY' vs. 'I'm your') to interruptions ('BUT MY BABY') to affirmations (i.e., 'Yes?' into 'WANTS MY BABY'), and so on. Stable markers positioning one utterance as a call and the other as a response break down—the

lovers are not distinguished by speech marks, and capitalised and noncapitalised text can take on the form of either or both. Hence, the sheer plurality of calls and responses broadens the field—sometimes ironically so, with the Waller line ‘my baby don’t want nobody but me’ responded to pre-emptively: when the ‘respondent’ says ‘Sure’, they unintentionally invert the intended meaning of the original call. In this example, then, Hughes’ poetics of transcription goes beyond merely upholding the Blues as a potent example of African American folk art; rather, the poem multiplies the Blues’ formal features and pushes them to something approaching an absolute limit for the kinds of speech made possible by antiphonal relations.

Antiphony is, however, not the only Blues or jazz device explored in the poem. Much like how jazz absorbs and signifies upon classical motifs and variations, Borshuk and others have observed that ‘The Cat and the Saxophone’ signifies upon the Lil and Albert fragment that closes the ‘Game of Chess’ section in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (Borshuk 58-60, Wintz & Finkelman 1245). Whereas in the latter, a conversation about an abortion is interrupted by the bartender’s apocalyptic, capitalised pronouncements of ‘HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME’ (Eliot 68-9), Hughes ironically subverts this famous section by placing a commonplace, flirty conversation against an invitation to live more exuberantly: ‘hurry up please it’s time’ indeed. However, this is not to suggest that Hughes’ appropriation of Eliot is a straightforwardly humorous or whimsical inversion—something of Eliot’s foreboding and fragmentary atmosphere remains in the incommensurability of the lyric form with the scene it is trying to portray: reading this poem out loud is certainly nothing like having, say, Fats Waller on in the background; vocalised as a lyric, the poem reads more like a Samuel Beckett monologue. As Summers-Bremner has persuasively argued, the modernisms of both Hughes and Eliot do converge in their shared appreciation of formal dissonance and existential alienation, however the two aesthetics set out from contextually oppositional poles: while the

fragmentary, ‘Unreal city’ of Eliot’s London emerges out of a sense of totalising death, coldness and an insufficient capacity for feeling; the fragmentation of Hughes’ Harlem seems to attend the ways in which ‘African Americans are credited with too much feeling, and the commodification of this feeling by white America displaces them from access to[...] history’ (Summers-Bremner 272). Through quotation, Hughes carries over the alienation effects of an Eliotic modernism but probes and subverts its significance through the contrasting position of the black voice(s): the apparent hedonism of black culture breaks down at the very moment in which one attempts to speak it, and the lyric form cannot sustain its own projection of sexually promiscuous black life.³⁷

The final line of Hughes’ essay on ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain’, with its parting allusion to the ‘temples of tomorrow’, is thus more than simply a rhetorical embrace of the future. Hughes’ vision of a developing black art as a principally *architectural* endeavour—a task that includes setting foundations and erecting structures for future experience and action—gels well with the emphasis in his early poetry on formal innovation and hybrid structural play. In the controversial follow-up collection to *The Weary Blues*, *Fine Clothes for the Jew*, published the same year as the aforementioned essay, Hughes would develop his conception of ‘Blues poetry’ in a more systematic way, prefacing the collection by directly referring to the ‘strict poetic pattern’ of the ‘Negro folk-songs known as *Blues*’ (*Poems: 1921-40* 73), and inviting comparisons between similar themes mirrored through male and female voices. The overarching formal housing, as it were, of the collection is particularly of note: Hughes brackets the majority of the text, which consists of more free-form poems

³⁷ Houston Baker’s theorisation of the ‘deformation of mastery’ is apt here, whereby African American artists during the Harlem Renaissance take on the symbolic forms of white modernism and appropriate them to service the ends of a black subject position, or: ‘Caliban is in control, metamorphosing a linguistics of mastery with masterful sound’ (69).

playfully moving through various lyrical and folk structures, with the ‘stricter’ Blues sections serving as introduction and coda. Here, the Blues contextualises the more formally fluid poetry and the latter is consequently made legible through a wider organisational architecture. Much like an architect’s vision of foundations and borders, or closed and open spaces, the Blues are presented here through relation. The questions that the book forces us to ask are not solely to do with what the Blues poems evoke or represent in themselves, but how they relate to the rest of the collection: how do we place them? how do they house or set tone? what do they offer within a broader formal and thematic context? In other words, if *Fine Clothes for the Jew* is one among many attempts to erect a ‘temple for tomorrow’, Hughes positions the Blues as the building’s foundational structures, offering them as a vital framing to help guide and route an on-going process of aesthetic innovation. Even before the ‘conflicting changes’ of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* or *Ask Your Mama*’s typographical idiosyncrasy, *Fine Clothes for the Jew* is an early example of the way in which Hughes works at the relations *between* hybrid formal arrangements, setting up a broader aesthetic frame in which one formal emergence is always viewed and contextualised through the presence of another (cf. Edwards, *Practice...* 61).

In the opening poem to *Fine Clothes for the Jew*, ‘Hey!’, the speaker ends his refrain:

I feel de blues a comin’,
Wonder what de blues’ll bring?
(75)

Here, the speaker recognises the blues as a *mood*; that is, a communal feeling that one does not have so much as it is something that passes over one, a ‘despondency’ (73) felt by the collective as a whole and as such one that is tied up with the warp and weft of communal being. The open-endedness of the speaker’s question at the end is a refusal to reify the blues as a positive or negative feeling; as a de-individuated affect, the blues resists the depressive feedback loops of self-pity and opens itself outward to collective transfiguration. The poem

is, after all, titled as an address; it directs itself in an attempt to sustain and reinforce a sense of inter-subjective contact. But the Blues is also a *form*.³⁸ And one could argue, as we have just been doing, that it is harnessed within Hughes' poetry as an anticipatory mapping of such affective transfigurations of mood; a poetic exploration of how a shared mood can bring disparate voices into novel relations. Jonathan Flatley has argued that this movement between the b/Blues as both mood and form is paramount to Hughes' ongoing 'commitment to attuning black people to their own collective power, transforming what might otherwise be individual experiences of loss and trauma into a powerful political determination' ("Beaten..." 338)—a navigation of affective commonality that precipitates the formation of a more empowered collective subject. In the next section of this chapter, I will probe a little more the political and epistemological tensions of such a sonic anticipation via bringing Hughes' bop musicology into a constellation with those of Amiri Baraka and Ralph Ellison (cf. 3.b.ii.), but for now I want to draw Hughes' understanding of the b/Blues into the orbit of another pivotal theorist whose work also can be seen as a negotiation of mood and form.

For Cedric Robinson, recuperating a global historical narrative of the Black radical tradition was an important endeavour not solely as an academic corrective to the longstanding Western erasure of black history and culture (Robinson 74; n.6 336). Moreover, there were theoretical stakes implied in the task of extrapolating from the historical record moments of resistance of African and black bodies against the colonial world-system hegemony:

Resistances were formed through the meanings that Africans brought to the New World as their cultural possession; meanings sufficiently distinct from the foundations of Western ideas as to be remarked upon over and over by the European

³⁸ For a more technical unpacking of the way in which 'blues' refers to 'a number of separate entities—an emotion, a technique, a musical form, and a song lyric', see Tracy (59-60).

witnesses of their manifestations; meanings enduring and powerful enough to survive slavery to become the basis of an opposition to it. (*Black Marxism* 5)

As subsequent hermeneutists of the Black radical tradition have argued, much of the formal qualities of the Blues and jazz trace their origins back to such ‘cultural possession[s]’ smuggled across the Middle Passage and, theorised as one segment of a tradition emerging dialectically with and against the ‘European witness’, there remains in them ‘enduring and powerful’ contestatory conceptual materials that disrupt the governing assumptions of the ‘foundations of Western ideas’.³⁹ In a certain sense, Robinson’s location of this tradition within the ‘remarks’ of the ‘European witness’ nonetheless presents a similar intellectual challenge to that of Hughes writing ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain’ in 1927: how to extrapolate and redefine what is subversive and powerful in black political formation or aesthetics in a way that doesn’t capitulate to the governing viewpoint of colonial domination that positioned the racialised Other as ‘distinct’ and external in the first instance? In Hughes’ case, this question might be formulated in the following ways: how to conceptually de-stick improvisational spontaneity from the attendant implications of an absence of rationality or capacity to plan?; how to embrace a transformative Blues aesthetic of ‘laughing to keep from crying’ while refuting the incapacitating limits of feckless docility?; how to amplify the resistant sonority of a folk voice without sliding into vulgar nationalism? For Robinson, theory would come to the rescue in its ability to abstract the conceptual parameters of

the character, or more accurately[...] the ideological, philosophical, and epistemological natures of the Black movement whose dialectical matrix we believe was capitalist slavery and imperialism. What events have been most consistently present in its phenomenology? Which social processes has it persistently reiterated? From which social processes is it demonstrably, that is, historically alienated? How does it relate to the political order? Which ideographic constructs and semantic codes has it most often exhibited? Where have its metaphysical boundaries been most certainly fixed? What are its epistemological systems? (*Black Marxism* 167)

³⁹ See Johnson & Lubin and Gray et al. for useful extensions and contextualisation of the continuing influence of ‘Black radical thought’ on a variety of historical and contemporary problematics.

It is indeed possible that Hughes is asking similar questions (questions predominantly concerned with the extrapolation of form, arrangement and relation) albeit via a drastically different register, namely his engagement with formal experimentation in poetry. Much like Robinson's trinity of DuBois, C.L.R. James and Wright, Hughes was one of many twentieth-century black intellectuals who moved through numerous 'social processes', 'political order[s]', 'ideographic constructs' and 'semantic codes'; and as such their life's work can be read as an on-going navigation between various iterations of black agency and possibility. If the b/Blues was one building block in Hughes' 'temple for tomorrow', in that he saw it as an extrapolation of formal structure out of the more nebulous mood of a precipitate 'Black movement', there would certainly be other materials useful for this sense of a developing ontological architecture. As Hughes wrote in a little-known pamphlet published solely in Moscow in 1934: 'New times demand new people. In the Soviet Union, new people are coming into being' (*LHCW*9... 40).

This new, Communist archetype would often be figured by Hughes as one with the potential to totally transcend the colour line. In a triumphant declaration of Communistic internationalism, he writes in a 1934 poem entitled 'One More 'S' in the USA': 'Come together, fellow workers / Black and white can all be red' (*LHCP* 176). To say that Hughes' move left during the 1930s was rhetorically drastic would be an understatement, although it is useful to bear in mind that such a change in political allegiance was complex and multifaceted, evidenced not least by the kind of formal and thematic fungibility his writing took on across genres. As Smethurst reminds us (*New Red Negro* 55-59), the major part of his poetry in the 1930s (and especially his major collection of 1937, *A New Dawn*) embodied the rural, definitively masculine folk archetype privileged by the US Communist Party's (C.P.U.S.A.) institutional attachment to the Black Belt Thesis: a poetry voiced through declamatory calls for virile physical power; the replacement of variable folk positions like

‘Young Singer’ and ‘Aunt Sue’ (*LHCP* 23, 35) with named male revolutionaries like Vladimir Lenin, Tom Mooney and Ozie Powell (164, 183, 188); alongside a valorisation of principally male labour at the expense of his earlier sensitivity to themes of domestic labour, motherhood and sex work. Contrastingly, however, Hughes’ prose and dramatic works seem to offer drastically different perspectives, with their shared emphases on staging or presenting lived human stories that stand at the peripheral limits of the more officially sanctioned redemptive archetypes. As Kate Baldwin recounts in her exhaustive analysis of Hughes’ accounts of the ‘unveiled’ Uzbek women that he met during his tour around Soviet Central Asia in 1934,

the Soviet Union enabled Hughes to renegotiate the potentials of internationalism for his own uses. For Hughes, the promise of a Soviet-inspired internationalism lay not only in its ability to disrupt conventional national boundaries, but in its ability to remap culture and in so doing reconfigure subjectivity. [...] As a conceptual apparatus, unveiling fostered a rethinking of in-betweenness, a comfort with gender dislocation, and a corresponding critique of conventional mappings of ‘home’ and masculine selfhood. (94)

Specifically, as Baldwin reveals, the figure of the (un)veiled Muslim woman in the transitioning political environment of post-Revolution Central Asia offered for Hughes a radical reformulation of the ‘veil’ as articulated famously by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois, *Souls* 4-5). If, in Du Bois’ articulation, the veil was announced through a quintessentially heteronormative register (in that Du Bois’ first realisation of his own ‘double consciousness’ was provoked by rejection at the hands of a white, female object of desire), Hughes would find in Uzbekistan differently gendered homologies of the key phenomenological architecture of black life in Jim Crow America, which would in turn be incorporated back into his prose masterpieces of the 1930s in stories such as ‘Cora Unashamed’ and ‘Slave on the Block’, which re-assess and reformulate queered and differently gendered double consciousnesses back on his home turf (Kate Baldwin 146-48). Contrary to what one might expect from the absolutist rhetoric of Hughes’ poetry of the period, ‘red’ was thus not a definitive and authoritative final say on political possibility—

rather, Hughes' travels East and identification with the Communist Left fostered a much richer network of conceptual and cultural reciprocity that would complicate, rather than override, the limits of black identity.

This is an important point to underscore, not least due to the controversial historiography of the C.P.U.S.A.'s involvement with the black working class during the 1930s. Most famously evoked by post-war African American writers such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, the Communist Party's influence on black working class culture was often remembered as an oppressive, top-down hierarchy that required black consent to a model of organisation which more often than not overrode the specificities of black life. Whether through Ellison's portrayal of the quietly coercive 'Brotherhood' in *Invisible Man* (356-408), or Wright's piercing representation of the Party in his autobiographical novel *Black Boy* (329-75), the image remains of an organisation that valued strict adherence to nineteenth-century European historical and economic theories and a geographically anachronistic elision between Russian and US socio-historical contexts, leaving little room for incorporating into its dynamic structure the 'indigenous' specificities of black cultural, political and religious institutions.⁴⁰ We would be right to speculate that the oft-cited erasure of Hughes' 1930s writing from his own literary trajectory—aside from broader observations of post-McCarthy institutional bias within post-war academia as argued by critics like Nelson (35-41) and Denning (*The Cultural Front* xvi)—is in part a response to this painful history of Party over-coding; Hughes' announcement that 'black and white can all be red' a jarringly unsubtle reminder of 'inter-racialism' edicts propounded at the expense of addressing fault-lines specific to African Americans.

⁴⁰ For the most comprehensive historical account of these organisational and affective disjunctions, and the failure of the Harlem CP in particular to make effective inroads within black working class communities, see Naison (279-84).

Subsequent critics such as Denning, Kelley and Smethurst have persuasively argued for a more nuanced and complex account of Communist imbrications with black working class organisation—both on a geographical register, noting that the nature of black involvement varied greatly across different geographical contexts, especially in the South (Kelley, *Race Rebels* 103-121; Smethurst 33-42), and on the level of individual thinkers, who often related to the Party strategically, adapting for themselves theoretical and organisational traditions in the name of conceptually distinct and theoretically hybrid black radicalisms (Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe* 99-116; Denning Ibid). For my purposes, I would claim that, while Hughes sacrificed a lot in the way of rhetoric during the period, he pioneered novel approaches to poetic form in dialogue with the Communist Left that would extend and complicate the ontological architectures of the propositional black subjects that he had begun to develop during the Renaissance. Such relations of continuity can be found most strikingly by reference to Hughes' preoccupation with form: the recurrence of 'chants' and 'ballads' in the *New Dawn* poems (*LHCP* 164, 183, 188) suggests a broadening of poetic interaction with musicality and the linkage of vernacular forms to other manifestations of specifically spoken language; and the continued engagement with high modernist techniques of fracture and dislocation in poems such as 'Cubes' (175-76) widens Hughes' pool of transfigurative modernist inspirations to include elements of early U.S.S.R. constructivism. But the most dynamic motor behind Hughes' reinvigorated embrace of orality and spatial experimentation on the page can arguably be attributed to the importance of the theatre and the intermedial crossover that attended the rapid acceleration of Hughes' dramatic output during the period.

The 1930s were by far and away the most intensely productive time for Hughes as a dramatist, with didactic, agitprop works such as *Scottsboro Limited* (1931), *Blood on the Fields* (1934) and *Angelo Herndon Jones* (1936) gaining him sustained notoriety as a political agitator

throughout the period (McLaren 34-56). Arguably, the most striking influence for the formal tenor of these plays was Hughes' exposure to Soviet theatre during his sojourn in Moscow in 1931, where he saw various agitprop performances and attended the rehearsals of constructivist luminaries such as Vsevolod Meyerhold and Nikolay Okhlopov (Ibid 7-8; Grogan 588-91; *I Wonder...* 198-201). The collective spirit of such performances, where professional players retained an intimate connection with amateur agit brigades and factory groups, would be felt in the stage directions of *Scottsboro Limited*, with the 'red voices' of the play placed in the audience, thereby troubling the boundary between stage and stalls, and emphasizing the complicity of performer and witness:

Boys: (*Rising*) No death in the chair!
 Red voices: (*Rising in the audience*) NO DEATH IN THE CHAIR!
 (*LHCW5 126*)

Such techniques foreground a Brechtian commitment to a participatory dramaturgy; the audience themselves positioned as an extension of the ‘red voices’ intervening in a contemporaneous miscarriage of justice. The implication is that the judgement and agency of the audience have the potential to be just as empowered or impactful as the all-white jury deciding the boys’ fate represented onstage. The theatre’s status as an artistic practice defined by presence and live-action witness in this sense allowed Hughes to write the word ‘audience’ in a way that he had not done before, leaving a radical opening in the work of art that left no doubt of its entanglement with lived political conflicts outside of the auditorium.

Just as Hughes' admiration for the Blues prompted a poetic exploration of the ways in which one derives *form* from *mood*, the poet's embrace of and stylistic openness towards agitprop theatre would have an equally formalist impact upon his poetry. As Grogan persuasively argues, Hughes' increased tendency to experiment with the space on the page in medially ambiguous poems such as 'May Day Chant' and 'Wait' (cf. Appendix 3.a., 329-30) should principally be seen as a development emerging in dialogue with Hughes' theatrical

experimentation (604-5). The disruption of the linear, temporal flow of the poem, the spatially represented lines of relation between multiple voices on the page, and the fraught distinction between language that directs and language that is spoken all contribute to a sense of a poem whose actualisation has been intentionally foreclosed; a poem which might be organised in a certain manner but one whose staging/reading is an intentionally problematic and uncertain endeavour. As Grogan has it, the kind of readerly agency that these formally ambiguous poems inspire is at once paradoxical and revealing:

our readerly agency exists mostly by implication—by our suggested participation in the mass chorus—here we have the chance, or obligation, to direct our own experience. But this is, in turn, an egoistic move, for it brings agency back to the individual reader, and it means that one experience of reading “Wait” might not resemble any other. If the poem withholds any easy experience of collective reading, it paradoxically does this at the same time it affirms the value and necessity of collective expression. (605)

The question of *who* inhabits these ruptures of poetic spatiality takes on a drastic importance. The kind of collectivity these ruptures point towards are not organised around a privileged archetype (i.e., ‘red’ or ‘Negro’); to the contrary, collective ‘participation in the mass chorus’ is figured here through negative space—or, the interstitial spaces surrounding what the poem explicitly states or represents, complicating in turn a reader’s identification with the mass collective image.

The most illustrative example of Hughes’ incorporation of these dramatic techniques onto the poetic page is arguably the ‘dramatic recitations’ published as a poetry pamphlet *The Negro Mother* in 1931, where a set of folk archetypes—“The Colored Soldier”, “The Black Clown”, and “The Big-Timer” in particular—are given adverbial stage directions in the left hand column (referred to as the ‘mood’), with the poetry itself presented on the right hand side (*LHCP* 147-8, 150-155; cf. Appendix 3.a., 331) Here, what Hughes once referred to as a collective ‘despondency’ is suggested by the most minimal of linguistic cues, while the overall effect of the poem is to be actualised by the reader’s negotiation of these discreet

parts, or the way in which the mood brushes up against the more linguistically elaborate ‘poetic’ text. This compositional style would be taken up with much more experimental élan in *Ask Your Mama* thirty years later, and I will delve into the attendant ironies and complexities of such an aesthetic in section 3.c. For now, however, it is important to note the way in which these texts in particular sit at a pivotal point in Hughes’ career, melding together two aesthetic modes: on the one hand, the giving voice through lyric poetry to an expansive array of folk archetypes that vocalise and provide experiential coherence to grounded and recognisable subject positions; while also preserving in the text-space itself a site of contestation, co-participation and other cues for performative, readerly intervention. The boundary separating ‘mood’ and ‘poetry’ here is an in-built provocation that requires one to read poetic text beyond its internal, propositional content and place it in relation to an enabling context, and vice versa. The importance of such boundaries would come to dominate Hughes’ two major works of the 1950s and 1960s, whether that be in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*’s sudden breaks and disjunctive interruptions, or in the pink and green pages of *Ask Your Mama*. To echo the language of Charles Olson, to emphasize the importance of these spaces of relationality in Hughes’ poetry is to recognise that the ‘poem’ taken as an individual unit is always caught up in a process—the text is, in other words, always *doing* something; it is embroiled within the contextual specificities of a tensile field of emergence.

Anthony Reed has recently argued for a key nuance to be adopted when considering black experimental writing, maintaining that the genre of black experimentalism actively attempts to resist what he refers to as ‘racialised readings’, or the location of ‘texts within a pre-emptive black tradition or black social location... [which] provides a selective, occasionally prescriptive account of the project of black aesthetics as one of rejoinder, protest, or commentary, figuring black writing as reactive rather than productive’ (7-8). Hughes often fits well into such racialised readings, with his reliance on the use of lyric form

to construct accessible and straight-talking folk archetypes, or his self-acknowledged position as a ‘protest’ author responding to urgent political events, or indeed his role in the post-war years as a sort of grandee of black art, called in to provide wisdom on the state or general condition of contemporary black writing. In Meta DuEwa Jones’ words, this image of Hughes has led critics to forever see him as a ‘totemic figure whose pedestal is primarily built on his “authentic” rendering of African American forms of vernacular and musical expression (1145). By way of contrast, I would argue that focusing on the negative space of Hughes’ more formally experimental writing actively works against this tendency, and moves more towards recognising what Reed defines as an attempt to ‘say the *impossible*’:

To say the *impossible* is to produce a statement that interferes with the existing forms of thinking and knowing in a given moment. Experimental texts differ in and defer their own legibility, flaunting racial and literary conventions to produce sentences not yet heard before. Black experimental writing’s dense textual surfaces and surplus of meanings disrupt a politics of expression, stressing the contingent, textual nature of race and the different simultaneous meanings it can have or not have. (22)

Hughes’ openness towards intermediality worked towards the production of such a ‘dense textual surface’, and by leaving room in his printed poetry for the Blues and other musical and dramatic forms, there certainly was room for a ‘surplus of meanings’. In the following two chapters, I focus not only on how Hughes *proliferates* politically expressive poetic forms, but also on the way in which he uses poetic form to ‘disrupt a politics of expression’—how he uses agentive negative space to interrupt, question and destabilise the rigid boundaries of subjective coherence that the poetry is simultaneously attempting to conjure. In his post-war writing, Hughes commits to a poetry that does not stop at the representation of racially inflected position(s), but rather questions the potentiality—the agency—of those positions; how they might remain open to the new and retain a capacity for change. Recalling the architectural metaphor that Hughes expounds at the close of ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain’, it should be possible to read Hughes simultaneously as the builder and the destroyer of temples, as in the closing poem to the collection *New Dawn*:

Not me alone—
I know now—
But all the whole oppressed
Poor world,
White and black,
Must put their hands with mine
To shake the pillars of those temples
Wherein the false gods dwell
And worn-out altars stand
Too well defended,
And the rule of greed's upheld—
That must be ended.

(*LHCP* 138)

Placed side-by-side, these two attitudes towards temples may intuitively be read as contradictory—or, as an example of a poet in two different minds: the one a defence of the need to formulate a consistent and legible ‘racial character’, the other a denunciation of such a project as an act of bad faith. The *formal*, poetic architectures that Hughes lay down on the page, however, suggest something quite different: that the representation of the folk voice necessitates both creation and adaptation, or a drive to constantly reinvigorate a production of racial representation that is, within its own internal parameters, wayward, contingent and open. The aesthetic inheritances attending Hughes’ migrating political alliances in the decade separating *The Weary Blues* from *A New Dawn* can thus be viewed as an accretionary development towards an experimental style that sought not only to represent the race but to continuously challenge the limits and proscriptions of the expressive contexts which make such representation possible.

iii. Langston Hughes between musical and material imaginaries

The emphasis that I have so far placed on architecture is not intended as a throwaway metaphor. It is rather to pre-empt a necessary qualification that when I speak about the negating quality of ‘interstitial space’ in Hughes’ poetry I do not mean that one cannot ascribe certain meanings, concepts or representations to the space on the page not taken up by text. In the case of the ‘dramatic recitations’ contained in *The Negro Mother*, what the boundary

space represents might be relatively straightforward: for example, an auditorium, or any kind of architecture that can hold a body, a musical source and the speaker's words. Put differently, when reading the poem, the space on the page invites us into a virtual performance site. But the sites of *Montage* and *Ask Your Mama* are much more ambiguous. As the next two chapters will elaborate, the former is a definitively local space, where the movements between poems are likened by Hughes to a temporally bound traversal through a neighbourhood; the latter, on the other hand, is global, with the spatial juxtaposition of internationally distinct signifiers implying questions of how bodies and representations migrate through global networks of exchange. To put pressure on the agency of negating, interstitial space within the text, then, is to question the agency of the implied site: what does the neighbourhood *do* within the breaks and disjunctions of *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, and how are the voices of the poems positioned against and in response to such interstitial incursions; likewise, what do global networks of exchange *do* when introduced as an extra-textual interlocutor to the geographically specific signifiers of *Ask Your Mama*? These questions are as much at the heart of Hughes' poetic imaginary as they are at the heart of Charles Olson's insofar as both authors conceptualise the space around the poetic text as fundamentally not neutral. For Olson, the material metaphors underpinning this agentic space were metaphysical and primordial: echoes of an elemental archetypality, where the most fundamental essences of human and earthly Being left traces in the formal embodiment of the poetry on and across the pages of the text. In the *Montage*, Hughes did not need to undergird his own variant of this aesthetic by appealing to questions of primeval origin. His concerns were much more immediate and tangible, less comfortable with abstracted notions regarding the sum of humanity than he was with the lived immediacy of the moment in question. If one is sometimes uncomfortable with the cosmic universalism of Olson's perspective (i.e. that the combination of normative judgements with a totalising vastness of scale oftentimes overrode the more immediate tensions and contradictions closer to home,

as outlined in Chapter 2.a.i), one could see Hughes' own material imagination as an important counterforce. Through interstitial space, Hughes aims his preoccupation with enabling contexts in directed, critical ways: by attempting to textually perform what a particular, geographically distinct environment affords or does not afford black life, Hughes aims his material imagination at the integral battles of his own present moment.

At heart, Hughes' interstitial space is concerned with enabling contexts, or the material conditions of possibility for a collective, plurivocal subject. The extent to which the material conditions of Harlem and other black ghettos across the United States at the time were in any meaningful sense 'enabling', however, was a deeply conflicted issue for Hughes. Three years before his death in 1967, Hughes would link in numerous journalistic articles the surge of destructive energy exhibited in the 1964 Harlem riots to an expression of the abject futility felt in the controlled and coerced geographies of the Northern urban ghettos:

Starting from scratch a century ago with 200 years of slavery behind us and no indemnity at freedom, how can Negroes control job markets, money markets, body markets, numbers, narcotics, or any of the sources of power and millions? But that question answers itself. Should it be repeated? My typewriter shrugs.

So—there are Harlem riots. *So*—bored and jobless kids loot stores. *So*—from furnished rooms with no air-cooling on a hot night, thousands come out into the streets to scream at cops. ('Riots and Reports' 3)

Here, the poet's pessimism regarding the limited efficacy of rioting as an act transitions seamlessly into a pessimism regarding the representation or analysis of the riots or the riots' causes in the media. 'It has all been written about, spoken about, picturized, televised—and nothing basic done about any of it' (Ibid 2). Thus, the shrugging typewriter and the rioting neighbourhood are drawn together by an apparently mutual ineffectuality: they each bring to light and make clear the injustices and poverty of material conditions for African Americans, but neither have the power to structurally transform anything. This does not, however, imply that Hughes' view of the riots was purely negative or that they should not have happened. To the contrary, he makes it clear that he has no time for 'so many indignant words' of

‘absentee Negro leaders who do not live in Harlem, asking that Harlem behave itself’ (4). Having himself lived permanently on East 127th Street since 1948 (Rampersad, *II* 146), Hughes is stressing a belief in the potential of spontaneous collective uprising, or in the power of the neighbourhood as an empowered field of possibility for action. This is clear from the rhetorical playfulness in the indented quotation above. As soon as Hughes reports that his typewriter shrugs, the riots themselves spark it back into life at the very next paragraph; rhetorically stimulated by a redoubled charge of anaphora, the italicised, capitalised interjections imply a sense of recuperated action, or that the material conditions of the ghetto possess a transformative capacity to lay bare new chains of causation: ‘*So—[...]* *So—[...]* *So—[...]*’. Rather than being a completely futile downward spiral, the riots remind the speaker of the potential implicit in the community’s being brought forth. Interestingly, even in this essay format, it is still the interstitial space between paragraphs that mediates the transition between a shrugging and a reinvigorated typewriter. Within the confines of the essay form, Hughes is formally rephrasing the same questions that he was posing poetically in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*: that is, how to extract from one’s constricted and oppressed conditions the tools needed for embodied and agential acts of resistance? Arguably, the phenomenon of a riot provided just the kind of destabilising rupture needed for such a transition, but it would still be the typewriter’s job to listen and to make room for the emergent forms of organisation the riot anticipated.

For Hughes, one of these new forms made itself clear in the rapid, chromatically and rhythmically angular aural landscapes of bebop, a genre of jazz which emerged at the same time as another prominent set of Harlem riots in 1943. As we shall see in the next section, Hughes would see the de-centered and harsh experience of ghettoised urban space as inseparable from the musical language of bebop, with its rapid changes and rough sonic textures. This interlinkage of geographical and auditory space was, however, not a radically

new departure in Hughes' work. It is present in one of the most poignant moments of the poet's first novel *Not Without Laughter* (1929), when the young protagonist, Sandy, finds himself staring transfixed at a crowded dancehall as the bodies move to the music:

The earth rolls relentlessly, and the sun blazes forever on the earth, breeding, breeding. But why do you insist like the earth, music? Rolling and breeding, earth and sun forever relentlessly. But why do you insist like the sun? Like the lips of women? Like the bodies of men, relentlessly? (*LHCW* 75)

This complex rhetorical overlaying of the erotic, the metaphysical, the material and the intangible here reflects a conceptual interpenetration of musical and material imaginations. Music—like the space surrounding the poet and the community—*insists*; it provokes its own causal chain of 'So—[...] So—[...] So—[...]'; it draws the dancer forth and inaugurates a particular mode of being and doing. This musico-material imaginary was often cloaked in the language of, as above, fetishized depictions of black sexuality; or exoticised through primitivist metaphors of a closeness or special connectivity to the land.⁴¹ Despite such an exoticist framing, such descriptions of musical effects nonetheless pose questions about how one's material surroundings provoke one's affective stance towards the world; how one carries oneself and how one acts in response to a given environment. Music, in other words, becomes a language through which Hughes develops his material imagination: the ways in which one's material conditions draw one forth, or lend one agency. This key linkage of the geographical and the musical is the point from which the following analysis of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* kicks off.

⁴¹ See also this depiction of Haitian drummers that Hughes reports hearing during his trip to Haiti and Cuba in 1930: 'Like a mighty dynamo deep in the bowels of the earth, the drums throbbed, beat, sobbed, grumbled, cried, and then laughed a staccato laugh' (*I Wonder...* 9).

-3.b.-

‘beaten right out of some Negro’s head into them horns’:
Improvisation and Embodiment in Langston Hughes’
Montage of a Dream Deferred

i. Transfiguring the assaults of the city

this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of a jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in transition. (LHCP 387)

When Langston Hughes decided to open his 1951 masterpiece, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, with a conceptual elision between jazz and urban space, he was treading on familiar imaginative ground. The ease with which a description of a Charlie Parker solo collapses into an account of urban navigation is not surprising, and the metaphor itself speaks to the heart of the music’s origins in the early twentieth century. To reel off the nascent musical sources that came together to form the hybrid and metamorphic genre we now call jazz is to invoke a plethora of locations and place names: James Reese Europe’s ‘Harlem Hellfighters’ of the 369th Infantry, for example; or Tin Pan Alley’s wealth of song materials for standards; the on-going references to the Mississippi River and other Southern locales that dot classical Blues compositions; and, perhaps most famously of all, the cultural significance of the port city New Orleans, America’s gateway to the Caribbean whose integral strategic and commercial value for colonial endeavours between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries made the city a key nodal point for geographically distinct black Atlantic cultures, and a fault-line for Hispanic, French and British inheritances from Europe. In this sense, jazz not only came into existence in urban locales, but is itself an aural palimpsest; a fusion of ragtime, Blues, spirituals, military marches, slave work-songs, European instrumentation and melodic,

harmonic and rhythmical influences that stretch across and back to the pre-colonised African continent. It is no surprise, then, that the dynamism of urban coalescence—a language of flows and the layering of bodies, ideas and cultures—provides such an apt grammar for the way in which Hughes introduces his bebop poem.

This is, however, not to lionise coalescence over conflict. While it may be a canard of sorts to say that jazz began in New Orleans and spread up the Mississippi to Chicago and then east to New York, its emergence as an attendant to the Great Migration of African Americans in the 1910s and 1920s nonetheless places it firmly within a context of navigating both the city's promises and its prohibitions. The story of jazz is thus inseparable from the way in which urban space polices borders through the spatial disciplines of racial, sexual and economic segregation. As recent arguments in American social geography attest, the 'neighbourhood' is the analytical category through which structural racism becomes legible in U.S. urban centres: environmental borders, codes of access and prohibition and uneven markers of geographical distribution provide a conceptual framework for the ways in which inequality is reinforced and maintained (Sharkey 1-15). To say that jazz carries with it these vocabularies of oppression goes beyond a basic acknowledgement of the fraught contexts of segregation, appropriation and politicised playing that define both the history and the historiography of the music.⁴² Sadiya Hartman, in her recent publication on the role of black intimate life during the turn of the twentieth century, offers a much more conceptually

⁴² Here I have in mind (although these contexts are by no means limited to) debates that raged most forcefully and controversially during an outburst of politicisation of the music's history and future significance by performers and critics during and after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Baraka's essay 'Jazz and the White Critic' is a particularly acute summation of one side of this argument, Matzorkis' 'Down Where We All Live...' provides a direct rejoinder. See also Kofsky for an account of the institutional ramifications of such forceful disagreement (9-21). For a nuanced account of the period and the manifold differences between performers and critics, black and white, see James Robinson's 'The Challenge...'

generative iteration of the relationship between the aesthetic and its environmental conditions of existential precarity through her introductory narrative of the unnamed ‘Girl #1’—an elusive, ‘young yet raw’ figure who is initially defined by reference to the neighbourhoods she inhabits (*Beautiful Experiments* xvii):

Most days, the assault of the city eclipses its promise: When the water in the building has stopped running, when even in her best dress she cannot help but wonder if she smells like the outhouse or if it is obvious that her bloomers are tattered, when she is so hungry that the aroma of bean soup wafting from the settlement kitchen makes her mouth water, she takes to the streets, as if in search of the real city and not this poor imitation. The old black ladies perched in their windows shouted, ‘Girl where you headed?’ Each new deprivation raises doubts about when freedom is going to come; if the question pounding inside her head—*Can I live?*—is one to which she could ever give a certain answer, or only repeat in anticipation of something better than this, bear the pain of it and the hope of it, the beauty and the promise. (Ibid 10)

To say that music or poetry touches upon urban relations is not solely to argue that the work is merely imprinted by or reflective of the social. Rather, the frame of the aesthetic—what Hartman is perhaps calling here ‘the pain’ and ‘the hope’ and ‘the beauty and the promise’ of ‘anticipation’—navigates, responds to and seeks to transfigure ‘the assault of the city’. The question ‘*Can I live?*’ thus possesses an impossible insistence that the very mechanisms that enforce existential precarity can be transfigured into the conditions for agentive life, and it is with this in mind that I propose we read Hughes’ opening preamble to his poem. In other words, I want to put pressure on the relationship between, on the one hand, the introduction’s two principle yet passive verbal constructions—‘marked by’ and ‘punctuated by’—and, on the other, the state of a community’s being ‘in transition’. By using bebop to formulate a poesis of survival, or a poetry that poses the question ‘Can I/we live?’, Hughes is *probing the impossible potentiality of repressive urban space*, navigating routes by which marked or otherwise punctuated bodies might wrest collective agency out of the assaults of the city to which they are subject. First, however, it would be useful to explicate more clearly why bebop in particular should suit Hughes’ poetic enquiry into this relationship between an anticipatory aesthetic (a ‘dream deferred’) and its environs.

ii. The ambiguities of bop sociology

In the words of Michael Denning,

the making of music—organized sound—is fundamental to the organization of social order, to creating social space and social solidarity. Sound constitutes subjects as social subjects, creating and sustaining social groups. The work of music is not only a performance of social order; its very form presents an abstract model of the social order. (*Noise Uprising* 11)

In outlining this sociologically inflected manner of listening, Denning is making a claim for hearing politics back into music, and in so doing unsettling the Romantic notion that musical ideas emerge autonomously out of the minds of individual innovators, removed by merit of their own genius from a political, cultural or social *milieu*. But it is worthwhile to worry the final terms of Denning's assertion, namely that music provides a 'model' for some sense of 'order'. If the attempt to extrapolate a social formation from a formalist musicological vocabulary is by now a methodological commonplace within the fields of cultural studies and beyond,⁴³ one should still hedge such an extrapolation with the much more rudimentary acknowledgement that music is one of the most nonrepresentational forms that we can speak of. In comparison to, say, a bar chart, the interpretive gap between the 'abstract model' and a propositional 'social order' is demonstrably larger, and music provokes its own hermeneutic conundrums with respect to the way in which one extracts the latter out of the former. Acoustics, for example, change the way a single piece is heard from location to location, and live performance itself is tethered to an ambiguous moment in time and space whose limits are not rigidly defined, and is recoverable only in another form, whether that be an LP or a listener's memory. Which of these is the model, and from which do we extrapolate a social order? Perhaps it would be more accurate to rephrase the point and say that at the same time as music performs and announces a social order, its medial status is such that the broadness

⁴³ I am here thinking of a predominantly Marxist intellectual tradition whose key figures span from Theodor Adorno to Ernest Bloch to Jacques Attali and Paul Gilroy.

of its potentiality worries the ontological status of the social order it represents. In other words, when we phrase the social as music, we anticipate what it might be like for the social order to waver and thus become structurally malleable. Or, one hears in music the potential to dis-order the ‘abstract model’ of the social—‘not only disrupting the present order but figuring new orders, new rhythms, and new harmonies’ (Denning, *Ibid* 13).

In my view, Langston Hughes was receptive to this understanding of music most significantly in the way that he heard bebop through *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Bebop enters his work as a wavering concept, sometimes suggestive of one social formation and sometimes suggestive of another. But perhaps it would be best to clarify with more precision the nature of these wavering formations by contrasting two of his contemporaries whose respective accounts of bebop sociality were, comparably, more rigid—namely, those of Amiri Baraka and Ralph Ellison. The former would certainly have concurred with Denning’s formulation quoted above, and indeed his major, defining musicological work—*Blues People* (1963)—would be dedicated to extrapolating the defining characteristics of ‘Negro existence in [the USA]’ out from an understanding of the way African American music developed over time (ix-x). Music was, in Baraka’s view, one of the only cultural forms able to tell such a story, principally due to the peculiar fortitude of its non-artefactuality: ‘These nonmaterial aspects of the Africans’ culture were almost impossible to eradicate’ by the horrors of slavery and its afterlife (16). Thus the musicology of the African diaspora recuperates a history—what Baraka calls a ‘blues continuum’—from the perspective of those denied meaningful access to artefactual genres like writing; a sonic history that might evade the overcoding grammar of white supremacy. A good example of Baraka’s idiosyncratic social musicology might be found in his own narration of the legendary origin of jazz in New Orleans:

The Downtown people acquired most of the European instrumental techniques and disparaged the vocal blues style that raged Uptown in the black belt. But the repressive segregation laws passed at the turn of the century forced the ‘light people’

into closer social and economic relationships with the blacker culture. And it was the connections engendered by this forced merger that produced a primitive jazz. The black rhythmic and vocal tradition was translated into an instrumental music which utilized some of the formal techniques of European dance and march music. (*Blues People* 139)

Here, jazz emerges as the result of dialectical process, and not the more or less authentic decisions of a set of privileged actors or innovators. The racist and economically hostile topography takes centre stage to the extent that class war and racial antagonism can be heard in the sonic texture of music itself. In this sense, jazz is socially symptomatic, evidencing the effect of a material, historical process: the reinforcement of the border between ‘white’ and ‘black’ partially dismantles the older border between ‘light’ and ‘dark’. Thus, jazz can be heard like a social text is read: the varied twists and turns of musical innovation tell a story that, in Onwuchekwa Jemie’s words, ‘encompasses the polar extremes of [African American] experience, namely: *resignation*, or the impulse towards assimilation; and *revolt*, or the impulse towards nationalism’ (‘Introduction...’ 103).

Baraka’s account constantly threatens to fold into reductively simplistic and normative formal terms: i.e., too much emotional affinity with the artificially compositional and instrumental ‘European’ style equals resignation to white power; a great howl of improvisational and vocal expression equals a more authentic political opposition.⁴⁴ Even so, Baraka was at his most brilliant when formulating, through his own favourite genres and musicians, the mode by which music electrically charges an agentive historical subject into

⁴⁴ As bell hooks demonstrates, this kind of proscriptive anchorage of a ‘Black Aesthetic’ so prominent within the broader Black Arts Movement ‘was a self-conscious articulation by many of a deep fear that the power of art resides in its potential to transgress boundaries’ (68). Music, for hooks, ‘is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming’, and not an ‘organic’ expression of that space’s determinant characteristics (Ibid 65). hooks thus argues that the critical task is to ‘re-open the creative space that much of the black aesthetic movement closed down’ (69), or to embrace the B.A.M.’s ‘oppositonality’ while introducing at the same time a queered ‘strangeness’ which resists absolute foreclosure. The reflections on Hughes and interstitial, negating space below are articulated with such a challenge in mind.

being. Bebop would be key in this instance. For Baraka, Charlie Parker's harsh chromaticism, his rhythmical angularity and his aesthetic of refusal and anti-performativity reflected the 'psychological tenor' of the early 1940s, its 'social form' that of riot and revolt (*Blues People* 210). But Parker's importance was much more than a passive reflection of a social instance. As he writes in a poem published a decade later,

There then came down in the ugly streets of us
inside the head & tongue
of us
a man
black blower of the now
The vectors from all sources — slavery, renaissance
bop charlie parker,
nigger absolute super-sane screams against reality
course through him
AS SOUND!

(‘Am/Trak’ 193)

Parker in this scene participates in an evocative permeability between embodied musician, a social collective's history and their literal environment as he plays the 'vectors from all sources'. But this formulation goes much further in the sense that Baraka privileges this space 'inside the head & tongue' as an oppositional and transformational locus—the 'SOUND' of bebop is the dialectical counterforce to a historical iteration of oppression. Through his saxophone, Parker announces a newly autonomous black revolutionary subject forged 'inside', both 'a man' and 'of us', a musical counterforce to be weaponised 'against reality'.

Ralph Ellison, in his review of *Blues People*, would find much to mock in Baraka's conceptual blurring of musical techniques and class-based political agency. 'One would get the impression,' he writes, 'that there was a rigid correlation between color, education, income and the Negro's preference for music[... Baraka's] theory flounders before that complex of human motives which makes human history and which is so characteristic of the American Negro' (*Collected Essays* 282). Ellison's own conceptualisation of jazz, by contrast, more often took on a negating and anti-representational flavour; his was one of slipping 'into

the breaks', whereby 'the jazzman must lose his identity' in the moment of detaching himself from the ensemble (*Collected Essays* 267), and in these moments of plunging, evading and flight—most clearly sounded out by swung time's movement out of the metronomic, mechanical count—one might recuperate one's humanity over and against the dehumanisation of social categories or classes.⁴⁵ However, Ellison did not afford this will-to-be-human to bebop. What he perceived as the genre's abject lack of lyricism, its jettisoning of swung rhythms as it pushed higher and higher tempos, and its tendency to mock and ironize standards and popular melodies, all amounted to 'a near-themeless technical virtuosity[...] a further triumph of technology over humanism' (325). This reduction to pure technology was, for Ellison, intrinsically linked to a particularly urban kind of desensitisation, one which came as a direct consequence of ghettoization and the refusal of equitable living conditions:

His speech hardens, his movements are geared to the time clock, his diet changes, his sensibilities quicken and his intelligence expands. [...] One's identity drifts in a capricious reality in which even the most commonly held assumptions are questionable. One 'is' literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a 'displaced person' of American democracy. (Ibid)

If, for Baraka, the body of Charlie Parker was the site of political subjectification, a transformative locus for an oppositional subject in revolt, Ellison's Parker was 'a revolt, apolitical in nature, which finds its most dramatic instance in the figure of the so-called white hipster' (262). In an argument that can often seem Adornian in its intensity (cf. Adorno 'On Jazz' 47), Parker is here subsumed into the mechanistic certitudes of the culture industry, a titillating fetish object for novels like Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, evacuated of the deeper,

⁴⁵ For a useful overview of the way in which Ellison's musicological positions developed over time see Anderson. See also Muyumba for a contrasting triad of Ellison, Baraka and James Baldwin and the way these authors' 'communicated their pragmatist critiques of civil rights political and social changes, African American identity, black masculinity, and black cultural production' through their analyses of Parker (23-47).

human recalcitrance that had apparently characterised Louis Armstrong's generation in the 1920s and 1930s.

Thus bebop sounds out seemingly contradictory formations of socio-political agency: one predicated on the awakening of class consciousness and self-location; the other a total surrender of the ability to act or to locate oneself meaningfully due to a sonic complicity with the racialising machine. Heard through either Baraka's or Ellison's ears, bebop translates into either an agent-centred or a structural model of socio-political formation; it sounds out the black agent as either the subject of its own story or as an object of the system's total indifference. However, rather than pin this divergence down to the individual musical tastes or philosophical projections of the authors in question—rather than satisfying ourselves with Julian Levinson's conclusion that the literary representation of bebop is always a co-optation of the genre into narratives exterior to it, 'conceptualized through metaphor and applied to narrative problems' (85)—I would rather take this divergence as saying something true and profound about bebop itself. For as much as one might, channelling Ellison, question Baraka's formulation of the 'nigger absolute', as if the subject in question could ever truly overcome the racist structure that positions the black body as a 'nigger' in the first place; one is equally hesitant to accept Ellison's deaf ear to moments of stolen humanity and agency that might well emerge within the historically contingent mechanisms of racial positioning proper to bebop's time. Indeed, that bebop can simultaneously invigorate and perturb questions of social agency would be foundational for the way Langston Hughes heard the music—as we will see in the foregoing consideration of *Montage*, and in his more journalistic commentaries, writing as he did in the wake of the genre's relevance and explosive contemporaneity. Through Hughes, in other words, we can hear both Baraka's and Ellison's versions of bebop as mutually constitutive, as we waver between polarities.

Some of Hughes' most perceptive comments about jazz in the post-war period are spoken through the character of Jesse B. Semple, a straight-talking folk interlocutor who frequently debates and engages with the narrator on multiple occasions in the columns of the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Post* between 1943 to 1965. Semple's—or, 'Simple', as he comes to be known—opinions on jazz appear on first glance to anticipate the symbolic systematicity of Baraka, using different playing styles, tempos and so on as crudely representative of different inflections of political agitation. Indeed, not only does Simple seem to anticipate Baraka's method of hearing jazz, but also seems to share in the latter's taste. See, for instance, Simple's views on how the 1930s Swing era—for a 'jazz band like Duke [Ellington]'s or Hemp's [Louis Armstrong's] or [Count] Basie's'—would best align with situations in which whites and blacks come together to 'work out integration':

Start serving tea to 'Tea For Two,' played real cool. Whilst drinking tea and dancing, the race relationers could relate, the integrators could integrate, and the desegregators desegregate.' (*Simple Takes a Wife* 142)

The Swing Era's legacy of capturing a mainstream white audience and skyrocketing the popularity of jazz into a household genre is clearly on ironic display here. As DeVaux writes, swing music was inseparable from a vast and expansive system of mass cultural production brought into being by the boom of new media (radio, recordings, film) in the 1930s (116-131). With gigantic corporations in New York and Los Angeles exercising tight control on the production, distribution and aesthetic norms of this global musical empire, black innovation was simultaneously constrained by the structurally racist machinery of these institutions, yet, nonetheless, 'the penetration of jazz-oriented dance music into the popular mainstream promised to reward a much wider stratum [of performers]' (Ibid 119). Simple perceptively finds a similarity between this corporate framework and the ideology of 'race relations', the genre acting as a code for the belief that political progress can be made through

the harmonious balance between institutionally authorised identities ('relationer') and institutionally authorised actions ('relate').

Simple gives bebop, by contrast, an entirely different history. Quizzed by the narrator on the subject of where the name 'bebop' comes from, Simple answers:

From the police beating Negroes' heads[...] Every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club says, 'BOP! BOP! ... BE-BOP ... MOP! ... BOP! [...]
[...] That's where Be-Bop came from, beaten right out of some Negro's head into them horns and saxophones and piano keys that plays it. (Ibid. 228)

Simple's reflections here would be a key predecessor for the way Baraka heard and represented bebop: at a time of intense communal anguish and material desperation, the 'SOUND' of bebop is a way of transfiguring this moment of collective pain into something so explosive it must be written in capital letters. But there is a crucial difference between how Simple and Baraka metaphorically embody the genre. For Hughes, there is no 'inside of us'—no privileged interior of a subject doing the sonic transformation. The creator of the sound is not, say, Miles Davis, who was nearly beaten to death on the street outside a packed venue he had just filled (Carr 347-49), but rather the policeman's 'billy club.' There is, in other words, something of Ellison's bebop in the narrowness of the gap between the sound and the technical mechanism of sustained oppression. And yet Simple continues the metaphor in a way that emphasizes not how a music comes to be, but rather the potential a music has for a liberatory array of effects. He continues: 'Folks who ain't suffered much cannot play Bop, neither appreciate it. They think Bop is nonsense—like you. They think it's just *crazy* crazy. They do not know Bop is also MAD CRAZY, SAD CRAZY, FRANTIC WILD CRAZY—beat out of somebody's head' (Ibid.) In the very moment in which Simple introduces a collective subject (an 'us' in contradistinction to 'Folks who ain't suffered much', who can't 'play' or 'appreciate' the music) and celebrates the affective and technical complexity of the genre that is properly *theirs*, this moment is finally shut down by an

understanding of the black body as an instrument rather than origin. Disturbingly, it is the policeman who remains the ultimate virtuoso.

It is in this respect I think we can read this ‘Simple’ story as a tentative acknowledgement of the way bebop sounds out a conception of agency that does not locate its emergence from a contained subject position. For whatever is ‘mad’, ‘sad’, ‘frantic’ or ‘wild’ about bebop is not constituted within the incubatory chamber of the subject, but snatched in pieces and in fragments from the inevitable degradations the city thrusts upon its objects. Or, put differently, in one of the most frequently anthologised and famous passages of *Montage*, ‘Harlem [2]’:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

(*LHCP* 426)

In this poem, the space in which the ‘dream’ is situated is obscure: it is inferred only by its effects upon the dream-as-object: it dries, it makes stink, it ignites and so on. What is more, no mention is made of a ‘dreamer’ or someone doing the dreaming—and yet this clearly does not imply that the dream is disembodied. Rather, in Peter Brooker’s words, ‘The poem warns[...] of unrest and riot[...] but there is no sense that this would be mobilized through any organised social agency.’ (69-70) This uneasiness over agency—that the space is precisely affecting the dreamer’s dreams irrespective of the dreamer’s normative assumptions about what is and what is not sensible action—undergirds the ontological problem that the *Montage*

sets itself. In what remains of this chapter, I will argue that Hughes merges urban space with bebop not as a way of re-imagining or inhabiting place—as that would imply a pre-existing subject doing the imagining or the inhabiting—but rather as a mode of countenancing an actualisation of agency that is not underwritten by a delineated, pre-existing agent. If bebop is ‘beaten right out of some Negro’s head into them horns’ by the cops, how are such assaults rerouted into an actualisation of agentive, meaningful action? If bebop can be said to provide a sonic model for such a question, Hughes translates that model into a written, formal poetics.

iii. ‘Jazz poetry’

If it was difficult for us to posit a strong relation between bebop and a particular model of ‘social order’, it is equally ambiguous to plot a clear path between jazz and poetry. At first glance, the formal merger of bebop and the lyric is counterintuitive. If lyric poetry can be thought of as composition *par excellence* (as in, a contained and pre-planned piece, with some sort of clear organising principle such as a volta or a rhyme scheme that should not be subsequently tampered with), then bebop’s well-known emphasis on improvisation and contingency, sociality and collective authorship seems an odd fit. The legacy of Charlie Parker’s ‘Koko’ makes its way through various spaces and historical moments: the Savoy recordings, the Dial recordings and many other live performances; east and west coast Parker; Parker the outcast to Parker the jazz mainstream’s darling (Gioia 187-216).⁴⁶ None of these instantiations of ‘Koko’ can be reduced to one privileged time and place—nor indeed can they be reduced to Parker himself, as Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and a host of other musicians and producers contributed just as much to each performance’s own specificity. Hughes’ *Montage* would perhaps be more productively aligned with either the LP

⁴⁶ See also Reisner for an engaging oral history of the Bird’s life and musical legacy.

or the score sheet, in that it presumes the status of an artefactual record of a non-artefactual medium—that is, sound. Brent Edwards has called this relation a ‘poetics of transcription’, in that ‘jazz poetry’ ‘is rooted in its double status or categorical undecidability: it is somehow *both* transcription and score, hovering on both sides of the inaccessible present of the performance’ (*Epistrophies* 80). ‘Jazz poetry’ in this sense exists as an effect of the music at the same time as it acts as a cause, asking us to re-hear sound in a different aural or spoken context.

Such contexts establish relations of re-sounding in multiple, often overlapping, domains that might include thematic, aural, conceptual and/or performative approaches. An exemplary instance of such relations is the publication of Everyman’s anthology *Jazz Poems* (Young 2006), where the criterion for inclusion seems to range across poems about jazz performances or named musicians; poems aurally mimetic of musical patterns; poems taking structural inspiration from more abstracted understandings of musical form; and poems underpinned by an expanded sense of improvisational writing methods as performance. It is beyond my scope here to provide a full account of such intermedial complexities,⁴⁷ although it would be helpful to nonetheless make clear which relations of continuity I stress in my own reading of the *Montage*. If we read, as Borshuk does, a couplet like the following as imitative of bebop’s ‘disruptive breaks in the articulation of melodic lines’ (Borshuk 74), then we do so in both an aural and conceptual sense:

Liberty and Justice
 Hub—For All
 (LHCP 390)

⁴⁷ Such analytical, theoretical work on the subject of ‘jazz poetry’ can be found in Erik Redling’s *Translating Jazz Into Poetry* (2017), in addition to older, influential accounts such as Feinstein’s more historically situated *Jazz Poetry* (1993) and Yaffe’s account of jazz as it intersects with literary genres beyond poetry, *Fascinating Rhythm* (2006).

To my ear, the accentuated '*Hub*' interrupts the scansion in a way that forces the reader to pronounce the second line's three syllables as equally stressed. Thus by disrupting the soporific inanity of the pledge of allegiance's iambs, Hughes rhythmically brings to the surface his nation's foundational hypocrisy. This technique displaces recognisable formal and rhetorical structures for subversive ends, and is a strategy which has its own pivotal place in the history of bebop: apocryphal accounts, for example, report of how Parker 'invented' the genre by completely upending and transfiguring the changes for the jazz standard 'Cherokee' in a way that was clearly intended as an ironisation of the former piece's possessive and problematically racialised sexual imaginary (Gioia 188).

To say such aesthetic strategies are properly those of 'jazz poetry' is of course valid, but the question remains regarding the extent to which such aural and formal affinities are sufficient. Rhythmic displacement is after all hardly unique to bebop, and emphasizing the music's ability to subvert or deconstruct musical signifiers—in other words, by treating jazz as a 'language'—is perhaps to overcode what is specifically noisy and non-representational in music within a much too straightforward linguistic frame of signification. In the words of media theorist Julian Murphet, what is lacking in this account is a much broader conception of a 'mediatory code': a way of bringing poetry and music together on the basis of *both* a formal or aesthetic 'logic', as we have just done, *and* the two media's 'social conditions of possibility' (9-10). In other words, one must ask how to read *Montage*'s evocation of bebop by not only accounting for the way the poetry sounds and signifies, but how the social conditions that produced the music imply a particular mode of reading or re-sounding the poem.

The kind of history of bebop to which we have just been alluding fits rather comfortably within a limited analytical framework that sees impressive technical innovations

emerging from the minds of privileged innovators. The notoriety of the virtuoso within bebop and the genre's emphasis on fast, rhythmically complex, individual solos rather easily folds into an account which de-privileges any sense of the aforementioned 'social conditions of possibility'. But to see bebop as a celebration of radical individualism would be a mistake, as Miles Templar wrote in his 1948 reply to this very criticism:

The back-up is not a subordinate thing in bop. Bop back-ups are essential to the solo. It's those sustained chords behind Diz that make his solos wistful. Those saxes are analogous to the chorus in a Greek tragedy. They raise their voices, questioning the protagonist, agreeing with him on certain points, wondering about others. (cit. Belgrad 188)

It is not so difficult, then, to apply such a communal understanding of bebop to Hughes' 'community in transition' (*LHCP* 387). The very nature of a 'montage' means that no individual piece of the poem can be said to truly function without its situation in the community: as we move through the montage, each individual unit appears to us as the emerging of a soloist from a bebop 'chorus'. And like the essential role of the back-up, the echoes and reverberations of voices prior to any given poem constantly work to re-contextualise the hermetically sealed lyrical unit. One need only look to the titles of many of the poetic units: 'Preference', 'Question', 'Ultimatum', 'Warning', 'Wonder', 'Tell Me', 'Situation' (391-96). Each poem announces itself, like in Templar's Greek chorus, as a 'raised voice'—an interjection that seeks to butt in and reconfigure what has been said before. Each individual voice in this heteroglossic field thus works to challenge and reshape the community within which it is situated in a way not dissimilar to Cornel West's description of a 'jazz freedom fighter':

To be a jazz freedom fighter is to attempt to galvanize and energize world-weary people into forms of organization with accountable leadership that promote critical exchange and broad reflection. The interplay of individuality and unity is not one of uniformity and unanimity imposed from above but rather of conflict among diverse groupings that reach a dynamic consensus subject to questioning and criticism. As with a soloist in a jazz quartet, quintet or band, individuality is promoted in order to sustain and increase the creative tension with the group—a tension that yields higher levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective project. (150-151)

West's emphasis on individual expression as the engine or life-force within a collective—as something to be encouraged so as to not let the group's organisational structure calcify—sees improvisation as an unburdening of creative dynamism, or a freeing up of creative potential from within that produces positive and necessary social functions. In his account, the dialectic of social whole and individual part is latched onto a dialectic between structural rigidity and personal, creative deformation. Similarly, to read Hughes' poem is to witness individual voices constantly reconfiguring and transforming Harlem every time a single poem 'conflicts,' 'breaks,' or 'interjects' against the whole. Individual and collective agency, therefore, mutually substantiate each other through such on-going 'interplay'.

I am, however, tentative of aligning Hughes' own formulation of bebop with this vision of a wellspring of Bakhtinian, autonomous yet interlinked voices working to bolster one another's sound. For example, we might look to Hughes in his speech to the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival, and notice once again a yoking of jazz music with notions of fluidity and wateriness, but in a way that sounds very different to West's placement of such fluidity within the deformational capacity of individual, agentive soloists:

Jazz is a great big sea. It washes up all kinds of fish and shells and spume and waves with a steady old beat, or off-beat. And Louis [Armstrong] must be getting old if he thinks J. J. [Johnson] and Kai [Winding]—and even Elvis—didn't come out of the same sea he came out of, too. Some water has chlorine in it and some doesn't. There're all kinds of water. There's salt water and Saratoga water and Vichy water, Quinine water and Pluto water—and Newport rain. And it's all water. Throw it all in the sea, and the sea'll keep on rolling along toward shore and crashing and booming back into itself again. The sun pulls the moon. The moon pulls the sea. They also pull jazz and me. (*LHCW* 9 369)

Just as in Simple's evocation of the policeman's billy club, what is most expansive and exciting about jazz—its capacity to perturb boundaries and decalcify clear and demarcated structures of order—is exactly that which disciplines and constricts the agency of the performers. In Hughes' account, music does not emerge from the singer as a form of disruptive autonomy, but rather disrupts and subjects the singer's autonomy as such, pulling

them to and fro for its own inscrutable ends. Hughes' recourse to a material imagination of water might in this sense be directly compared to the dislocating tides of Olson's *Maximus Poems*: the singer is always and already submerged; the question has more to do with where the tide will decide to wash them up.

In this formulation of jazz, it can be argued that Hughes is actually speaking to a more probing conceptualisation of improvisation, and especially the kind of improvisation often valued by bebop musicians. While improvisation colloquially carries connotations of an unburdening of creative energy, a loosening up of musical order through an embrace of spontaneity, the experience of learning how to improvise often tells a completely different story. This is especially paramount in the informal institution of 'paying one's dues' within jazz cultures that prize technical virtuosity and complex improvisational performativity over all else. Gioia even suggests that there is something geographically specific to New York in this, in that the city's cramped basement clubs and tightly packed urban terrains were a fitting counterpart to the claustrophobic and punishing competitive rituals of not only bebop but another New York predecessor to the genre, Harlem Stride in the 1920s (195). Indeed, there barely was a bebopper in the scene who did not have their own story of ritual humiliation and rebirth, and the history of the genre and its afterlife is crammed full of stories of competitive domination and one-upmanship, with clearly masculinist overtones: whether it be Jo Johnson throwing a cymbal at Charlie Parker midway through the latter's solo, or Dizzy Gillespie cut down by another trumpeter during his early performances in Philadelphia, or indeed Tommy Flanagan's valiant failure to adequately live up to John Coltrane's 'Giant Steps' (Gioia 195; 270).

It is this notion of aggressive masculinity in bebop that makes me anxious that West's metaphor of the 'jazz freedom fighter' does not quite fit. To be sure, I am not denying the

genre's originality nor the expressive vitality of individual musicians—I am merely observing that West's distancing of jazz from 'uniformity and unanimity imposed from above' is not quite adequate to the oftentimes rigid and punishing hierarchies for which bebop is renowned. That some of the most unique and unexpected moments of improvisatory expression are inseparable from rigid discipline and repetitive practice should not surprise us. As the jazz musician and theorist Vijay Iyer reminds us, musical improvisation is the intermingling of two distinct skills that form 'dual extremes of a continuum': on the one hand, it sets in motion a 'melodic approach' of notes, rhythms and harmonic contrast; and, on the other, a 'kinesthetic or spatiomotor approach' which is to do with how the body is moulded and shaped by the possibilities offered by the instrument (397). This second approach qualifies any account of improvisation that overemphasises unforeseen spontaneity. We find ourselves returning to Baraka's origin story: jazz at its essence is the 'forced merger' of the organic with the inorganic; the sound-producing human with the sound manipulating machine. To improvise well, one must spend years working on becoming-with one's instrument, teasing out its potentials by aligning the body with what its interface affords. In the language of cognitive science, improvisational skill is *acquired* rather than *learnt*:

Unlike learning, acquisition is an endogenous process which is a direct consequence of environmental influences[...] Once acquired a pattern will remain stored in the central nervous system like an electrical field, holding and forming anything entering its sphere of influence. (Hall 225)

In this sense, improvisation is the conceptual bedfellow of survival. One does not learn how to survive by reading about it. Rather, the very process of living from one day to the next moulds one's body to its environment, instinctualising the ways in which one might approach dangerous things like staircases, heights or white policemen. In other words, the affordances and potentials of one's environment are inscribed upon the body: the way we walk, dance, run or play are expressions of our embedded, material contexts.

When Jesse B. Semple asserts that bebop is ‘beaten right out of some Negro’s head into them horns’, perhaps he has in mind that an improvisation is not so much played as it is *survived*. If bebop signalled a revolution that expanded the sonic possibilities of instrumental technique, it could only do so by allowing one’s instrument to constrict or mould the improviser’s body more tightly. One could perhaps listen to a solo by Charlie Parker—its runs, breaks, rhythmic disjunctions and jagged melodies—as an exercise in survival: not a spontaneous conversation between free, autonomous subjects, but rather a collective attempt to create something unforeseen even subject to conditions of delimiting bodily discipline. In this sense, bebop performatively engenders its own combative environment (high tempos, expectations of angular melodic complexity, intense competitiveness and so on) so as to render the successful improvisation a premonition of impossible survival. Similarly, the liminal, negating space of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* performatively evokes an environment that constricts, interrupts and fragments, with the poet/reader improvising a path through such precarity. In this sense, Hughes’ poem attempts to survive the assaults of the city as Charlie Parker plays a saxophone.

iv. Montage of a dream deformed

In 1929, Sergei Eisenstein⁴⁸ outlined in plain terms the key tension of filmic montage—that is, how two juxtaposed images are made vectorial when put one on top of each other; how

⁴⁸ I begin with Eisenstein here as a conscious attempt to merge analysis of Hughes’ poetry with the kinds of Leftist cinematic theory he would have been in proximity to during the formative period of his time in the USSR. As we have seen in 3.b.ii, constructivist theatre arguably had the greater influence on the development of Hughes’ political aesthetics, but considering the proximity of Eisenstein to figures within the theatre like Vsevolod Meyerhold (Seton 46-55), more lateral links of continuity between dialectical montage and the filmic imagination of Hughes seem not only apt but necessary. For an account of *Montage* that picks up on Hughes’ relation to the cinema within the American or Hollywood context, see Brinkman (86-87).

they imply a sense of dialectical progression not on a purely conceptual level but rather on an affective and perceptual plane:

For the idea (or sensation) of movement arises from the process of superimposing on the retained impression of the object's first position, a newly visible further position of the object. [...] From the superimposition of two elements of the same dimension always arises a new, higher dimension. (*Film Form* 49)

Crucial to montage, then, is this dimensional interplay between space and time: on the one hand, the tensions and 'ideas' proposed within the individual units; on the other, the progressive dynamism of the ways in which these units are put into motion. Importantly for Eisenstein, however, this latter dynamism is deeply connected to perception and affect, rather than representation. In this sense, the two dimensions in question are not necessarily individual shot vs. the film as a whole, but rather the film as a linear sequence of shots pitched against the viewer/perceiver's '*emotional dynamization*' of the subject matter (57). In other words, the first dimension concerns representation, the 'higher dimension' concerns how the viewer's perceptive capacities are *implicated* in the representation.

This distinction is important to bear in mind first and foremost when approaching Hughes' *Montage*, if only because it is important to note that Hughes' poem, despite its 'disjunctions' (*LHCP* 387), *does* have a narrative of sorts—an observation rarely foregrounded by criticism on the subject.⁴⁹ After a few sections of introductory, agenda-setting poems (388-90), the text moves on to predominantly domestic themes: gossip on the stoop, rent-related worrying, spousal disagreements and intimate, indoor moments (391-4); before moving outside towards the street and its various institutions: the movies, jazz clubs, street corner gambling sites, dance halls, homelessness and imprisonment (395-403). After a series of small

⁴⁹ For Kathy Schultz, such analytical oversights are part of an on-going tendency within historical criticism of Hughes' poetry to favour the analysis of lyrical excerpts over more holistic accounts of Hughes' publications as long forms—a position that I am broadly sympathetic to and have tried to incorporate throughout this chapter (111-112).

vignettes that continue to meander around different street corners (404-9), Hughes focuses on educational institutions and the attendant class antagonism that goes with some portions of the black population going from ‘Low to High’ (410-14). From here, the text moves towards scenes situated in churches, and other church-related practices like funerals (414-20)—next, to spaces which allow for momentary visions of multicultural unity (420-25), and finally the sequence concludes with some more general perspectives upon Harlem viewed from a greater distance (426-29). We could thus attribute to *Montage* the narrative of a journey: the reader wakes up, leaves the house and goes on a journey through all the various institutions that make Harlem what it is. For now, it is sufficient to note that the various stages of the journey—and all the attendant musings of Hughes’ plurivocal speakers—are grounded and contextualised through institutionally specific scenes with clearly demarcated borders: domestic space, cultural space, spaces of spirituality, spaces of education and so on.

But perhaps this characterisation of the poem is misleading, if only because it places much too much credence in such an ontologically unstable figure as the ‘reader.’ A journey, after all, implies a series of navigational decisions: where do I go from here? In what fashion? And why? We are, in *Montage*, certainly being taken on a journey, but there is no real suggestion of this journey *belonging* to a coherent, agentive or purposeful subject. The best comparison that I can think of is the ‘Wandering Rocks’ section of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*: the episode certainly contains lots of ‘wandering’, but the subject of the verb is not Odysseus but rather the rocks themselves. Gigantic and fleet-footed, the wandering rocks lithely skip over Dublin, carving it into pieces and sections, but without ever affecting the day-to-day business of the city’s inhabitants. At once present and absent, the rocks announce themselves by creating ruptures that are exhilarating precisely because they do not follow the straightforward navigational (or, in Joyce’s case, *narratological*) intentions of the characters in the story. To return this to a cinematic vocabulary, both *Montage* and ‘Wandering Rocks’

stand in opposition to the narrative montage technique of ‘cutting on action’, mastered by Alfred Hitchcock: that is, when what is happening in the shot (the ‘lower’ dimension) *dictates* the ‘sensation of movement’ in the montage (the ‘higher dimension’) (cf. Dancyger 97-109; Ascher/Pincus 349-50). For both Hughes and Joyce, the true ‘subject’ of the wandering is the environment itself—an interstitial displacer that does not necessarily find its representational counterpart in any one of the individual units.

In this sense, the spatio-temporal logic of Hughes’ poem as a whole (its ‘sensation of movement’) can be seen as a counterpart to the Situationist *dérive*—a transposition of the somnambulant surrealist ‘unconscious’ onto the outward spatial ‘*ambiance*’ of the city (Debord 62-66). Think again to the persistent questioning of ‘Harlem [2]’: the vectorial drive of the dream—its deferral—is set in motion not by the deep unconscious of the dreamers themselves, but by the mysterious processes of its environment. In many ways true to Debord’s insistence on the revolutionising potential of these uncovered processes, Hughes similarly foregrounds the modes by which such spatial disjunctions produce disruptive effects: they can make the dream ‘explode’. Consider the transition between ‘Ballad of the Landlord’ and ‘Corner Meeting’ as a particularly astute example. The former is a dramatized argument between a black tenant and his exploitative landlord, culminating in the former’s imprisonment on dubious charges (*He’s trying to ruin the government / And overturn the land!* [402]). As Borshuk notes (83), the medium of representation is vital here—his incarceration is announced in the form of newspaper headlines:

MAN THREATENS LANDLORD
 •
 • •
 TENANT HELD NO BAIL
 •
 • •
 JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL
 (403)

The authority of the white written word over the black speaking subject is on full display here: newspaper headlines fit reality into a crude and rigid grammar; they simplify a multifarious and contextually contingent set of circumstances into a reductive sequence of cause and effect that effaces dissent. Black experience, in other words, is reified in the prison of written text. Nonetheless, the capitalisation of the tenant's experience clearly also has sonic implications—it entices the possibility of a raised voice, a change in vocalisation—perhaps indeed the possibility of speaking back. Such a possibility is actualised in the proceeding poem, 'Corner Meeting':

Ladder, flag, and amplifier:
what the soap box
used to be.
The speaker catches fire
looking at their faces.
His words
jump down to stand
in listeners' places.

(Ibid.)

As far as the gap between the two poems is concerned, here the city-as-subject announces itself not as a static backdrop to a set of experiences, but rather as an agent of 'emotional dynamization' (Eisenstein 57). The city's interruptions may well dislocate and interject, but in doing so they recontextualise and offer new affective potentials for the significance of each individual unit. In other words, the movement between a county jail to a political rally on a street corner performs through montage the experience of liberation as a pre-emptive affective reality. In transcending the individual actors within each unit, the disjunctive rhythms of the city offer roadmaps for social and political change.

Harlem—its 'changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms and passages'—thus announces itself in the interstitial space between each poem. It is, in this sense, a factory for political consciousness—a machine that traduces social boundaries. No wonder, then, that many of the city's inhabitants seek a rather literal

identification with the urban arena itself, as Harlem maps the human body onto itself. In the poem ‘College Formal: Renaissance Casino’, a ‘golden girl’ and a ‘lad tall and brown’ dance until they become ‘the heart / of the whole big town’ (410); the transition between ‘New Yorkers’ and ‘Wonder’ aligns a southern girl’s teeth, (‘The same old spark!’), with the lights coming on in ‘Early blue evening’ (394); and the poem ‘Buddy’ introduces an impoverished persona who cannot afford a coat, only to be compensated metonymically by the next poem, ‘Jukebox Love Song’, in which the singer clothes his beloved in ‘neon lights’, ‘busses, / Taxis [and] subways’ (392-3). But perhaps the two best examples of this desire to ‘become Harlem’ can be seen in the poems ‘Projection’ and the oft-cited ‘Theme for English B.’ In the case of the former, the very streets and landmarks of Harlem are evoked as interlinked and intermingling bodies:

On the day when the Savoy
leaps clean over to Seventh Avenue
and starts jitterbugging
with the Renaissance,
on that day when Abyssinia Baptist Church
throws her enormous arms around
St. James Presbyterian
and 409 Edgecombe
stoops to kiss 12 West 133rd
on that day— [...]
(404)

Such an invocation of Harlem as multiple bodies embracing one other may provide some insight into the hesitating ontological uncertainties of the latter poem, ‘Theme for English B’:

But I guess I’m what
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page.
(I hear New York, too.) Me—who?
(410)

That Harlem is multiple bodies commingling and interweaving into one another may indeed account for the poet’s momentary uncertainty about his own being—that to *be* Harlem is to *become* many. With Hughes’ Whitmanian influence on full display, it is clear that a principle

concern of *Montage* is a similar insistence on ontological multiplicity, in that each moment of contact between poems is an extension of these characters' desires to align themselves with the hybridizing and metamorphosing potential of their environment. Just as in 'The Cat and the Saxophone', 'Theme for English B' conceptualises the poet's relationship to his city as a form of exploded antiphony: calls and responses bounce into each other at such a rate that it becomes impossible to tell the caller from the responder: 'Me—who?' The emotional dynamisation of the montage as a whole (i.e. Harlem) is thus an ontological ideal that transcends the limited positions of the characters contained inside the individual poems.

According to de Jongh, Hughes' reassertion of Harlem in the early 1950s as a space for self-making separates itself from earlier attempts during the Harlem Renaissance by merit of its emphasis on 'deferral' (138). Rather than Harlem being represented as a sort of authentic holy land for the awakening of black consciousness, he conceives of it more as a factory for subjective development; a way of foregrounding the diverse ways in which the black 'capital of the world' is constantly immersed in the *process* of identity formation, rather than the location of a certain privileged, authentic identity. Like a factory, however, Harlem runs the risk of breakdown, exploitation and alienation even as it promises ontological augmentation. If Ellison's 'invisible man' gains a fleeting sense of power in becoming invisible—in merging with his environment to the extent that the contours of his 'self' can no longer be set apart from the shifting contours of his world—he also experiences a shattering identity crisis that forces him underground, unable to find any meaningful agency in the urban maelstrom (*Invisible Man* 479-512). Similarly, Hughes writes:

From river to river,
Uptown and down,
There's liable to be confusion
when a dream gets kicked around.
(428)

The dissonance at the heart of Hughes' *Montage* is that the expansive potential for imagining (or 'dreaming') a plurivocal political consciousness is inseparable from its being 'kicked around' or fragmented, ultimately incapable to arrive at a consolidated totality.

That this 'confusion' is both open and productive while also shattering and prohibitive is portrayed as a tightrope walk. For example, one might consider the explosion of 'Dream Boogie' into scat singing as a joyful and powerful act of creative destruction: 'Sure, / I'm happy! / Take it away! // *Hey pop! / Re-bop! / Mop! / Y-e-a-h!*' (388). Sound here encroaches onto sense in a way that implies an expansive commitment to manipulating and creating new ways of speaking. The spatial pun on 'Take it away!' both signifies to begin but as well to push 'it' beyond; to mould and direct sound towards new linguistic possibilities and new spaces. Nonetheless, this technique of onomatopoeic, linguistic disintegration can have the absolute opposite effect ten or so pages later:

Setting in the wine-house
Soaking up a wine-souse
Waiting for tomorrow to come—
Then
Setting in the wine-house
Soaking up a new souse.
Tomorrow...
Oh, hum!

(401)

Here, the speaker resorts to humming rather than speaking because what will happen tomorrow is perfectly clear. The differences in his repeated refrains are ironic—the movement from 'wine-sauce' to 'new sauce' is an arbitrary development, with the assonance of 'w' and 'n' inverted to connote cyclicity and repetition. Indeed, he ultimately finds no response to his call and so gives up on language in favour of pure sound—a tragic retreat from a public voice. Importantly, the 'Wine-O's exasperated gasp of 'Oh, hum!' follows the same poetic logic as 'Dream Boogie's scat insofar as it closes a poetic unit with the notion of

sense disintegrating into sound, only this time it signals foreclosure and stasis rather than openness and creative dynamism.

It is significant to note also the poems which surround these two examples. In the case of 'Dream Boogie', the next poem narrates a Garvey-esque parade which usurps and overthrows the 'Seven ladies / and seventeen gentlemen / at the Elks Club Lounge / planning planning' (388). The way the poem announces such a counter-parade is enunciated through bebop's eponymous trochaic rhythm:

PARADE!
A chance to let
PARADE
the whole world see
PARADE
old black me!
(389)

The end of the second poem is, in other words, a pleasingly apt successor to the first poem's conclusion, with the signifiers of colonial military power—the parade—being taken over and re-articulated by the colonized; an image which provides a conceptual rhyme with how bop scat singers re-inhabit and re-mould the master's language. Even though Harlem wrenches us from indoors to outdoors—from a jazz bar to a boulevard—continuity is found among the poetry; a way of sustaining one context's liberatory action into the next. The poems surrounding 'Wine-O' also follow this logic, but with precisely the opposite effect: the poems 'Green Memory' and 'Relief' are self-consciously nostalgic pieces pining for the Second World War. Both poems celebrate wartime as a time for economic reintegration and augmented labour opportunities for African Americans—yet both carry the bitterness felt by many African Americans in response to white America's deaf ears, and indeed the

disquieting notion that the valuation of ‘the War’ as a ‘wonderful time’ must go hand-in-hand with the subjugation of ‘them Poles and Greeks’ across the Atlantic. These poems are thus extensions of the Wine-O’s song—a desire to participate and aid the white man’s war is translated into a cyclical and ineffective spatial praxis that trades a temporary feeling of false liberation (‘Soaking up a wine-souse’ vs. ‘the War: / when money rolled in’) for a postponement of real liberation (‘Tomorrow...’ vs. ‘if those white folks want to go ahead / and fight another war[...]'). I have highlighted these ‘areas’ of Hughes’ *Montage* because both emphasize the conflicted ways in which a theme ‘transitions’ between poems: in some cases a musical trope translates itself into a liberatory praxis; in some cases, it grounds to a mumbled halt.

Hughes’ Harlem is thus profoundly double-voiced, but not solely in the way we might expect. Alongside Du Bois’ double consciousness of selfhood—whereby Hughes, through his poetry, has to juggle speaking both as an American and as a ‘Negro’ (*The Souls of Black Folk* 5)—Hughes reflects a two-ness in the affectability of the utterance itself. Whether employing the rhetorical trope of becoming-Harlem or a jazz-inflected disintegration of language, or indeed the appropriation of white America’s military ethos—the reader is left unable to straightforwardly designate any of these strategies as strategically desirable *in themselves*—the same strategy can open up or foreclose, depending on its context. Creative potential is thus largely determined by its context, and this context is not dictated by a recognisable subject: each poetic unit is always-already immersed in Harlem’s ‘conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections.’ In this sense, a poem’s potential cannot be effectively actualised unless Harlem’s interstitial dynamism can successfully ‘transition’ it.

It is in this sense that we might invoke Charlie Parker to underline the complex ways in which Hughes evokes bebop as the underlying ethos of survival to this anxiety lying at the heart of the poem. After all, it was Parker who announced that, in a bebop improvisation, any note was permitted to go with any chord—as long as it was played in the right context (cit. Gioia 188). If this statement is to be believed, it should not be interpreted as a legitimatisation of the notion that an improviser can play whatever she wishes whenever she feels like it. Rather, the improviser must become an agent of her own context; a being fully in-sync with what their context affords them, or which notes it allows them to ring out. A reading of jazz improvisation that remains faithful to the attempt to de-mystify the notion of improvisation as the expression of an inner, authentic self does, I would argue, offer a way of reading Hughes' *Montage* as embodying a similarly shifting attitude in relation to a determining context. As the philosopher Ray Brassier has argued,

The improviser must be prepared to act as an agent—in the sense in which one acts as a covert operative—on behalf of whatever mechanisms are capable of affecting the acceleration or confrontation required for releasing the act. [...] In this sense, recognizing the un-freedom of voluntary activity is the gateway to compulsive freedom. (64)

As standalone pieces, the individual units of Hughes' *Montage* offer snapshots of Harlem that can be quite easily taken out of context and contemplated for their own sake. But such a mode of isolation would ignore the central, paradoxical image of Harlem in the poem: its presence as an external determinant; as a catalyst for 'releasing the act' and for dynamizing the individual unit. Bebop's 'disc-junctions' (387) are thus not useful in and of themselves—improvisation is a way for the player to survive their dis-locating and disruptive context; a way of recognising the compulsive freedom in determinations that lie beyond their immediate control.

Perhaps the central metaphor of the poem that epitomises this conflict between disjunction and continuity occurs at the close of 'Neon Signs':

Mirror-go-round
where a broken glass
in the early bright
smears re-bop
sound

(397)

The shattered mirror is a common enough metaphor for fragmented identities, multiple selves, or disjointed subjectivity. But the affective core of this fragment is surely the word ‘smears’, at once a brass mouthing technique and an invocation of broken glass piercing the skin and smearing blood. Contained within this double-voiced allusion are connotations of both rupture and suture, forcing us to question what happens *after* the reflection of one’s self is shattered, or what form it will take when it is smeared back together. Hughes’ poem—ambiguous, plurivocal and nondogmatic—does not give us an answer, preferring to open and close with an unanswered question: ‘Ain’t you heard?’ (388, 429). But in this sense Hughes posits jazz improvisation as a mode of smearing the subject back together again; a mode of re-cognising the continuities in a disjuncted and shattered urban space. The exact form that subject will take—appropriately enough if we accept its im-provised nature—remains unforeseen, tethered for now to the interstitial ambiguities of the transitions *between* poems.

-3.C.-

Transnational Agency and Implicated Media
in *Ask Your Mama* (1960)

i. The view from Newport: riot and revolution

The material imagination of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* conferred upon the interstitial space surrounding the individual units of the poem much of the disjunctive, abrupt and unstable elements of twentieth-century urban experience. By figuring the white space on the page as quintessentially not neutral, Hughes puts pressure on the degree to which a collective subject (in this case, ‘contemporary Harlem’) can be coherently formulated through the material geographies that carve up and atomise their individual constituents. In the previous chapter, I argued that, for Hughes, attempts to embody such collective agency necessarily took on a strategic or improvisatory ethos, in the sense that a provisional, open-ended subject is smeared together by finding a way through the disciplinary constraints that actively interrupt straightforward lines of continuity. Insofar as this is a poetic exploration, such an ethos folds into an improvisatory hermeneutics, as readers themselves are encouraged to improvise readings across and through the poem’s ‘disc-junctions’.

The publication of *Ask Your Mama* ten years later sees Hughes return to a modernistic embrace of dynamic, interstitial space, and much of what has just been observed can be brought to bear on the latter poem in turn. *Ask Your Mama* is a beguilingly difficult textual object, an intermedial melange of poetry, musical stage direction, explanatory paratext and innovative typographical and visual design. The interstitial marginalities inherited from the dramatic poems of the 1930s (cf. 3.a.ii) demand engagement and participation: space acts as a provocative distance, problematising one’s actualisation of the poem and forcing the

reader into different kinds of performative readings. Furthermore, the openness of the volume's textual potential is given even before one begins to *read*: the pages are pink, and the typeface alternates every two pages from black to blue. No overt rationale or symbolic frame is given for these decisions, although one is heavily implied: the colour of the typeface is clearly a reference to the Fats Waller song 'Black and Blue', memorably performed by and associated with Louis Armstrong, to whom the poem is dedicated. Thus the medial hybridity of the work seeks to express itself through foregrounding the very materiality of the codex as an interpretive field, engendering a disruption of the usual expectations of background neutrality which points towards a need to be hermeneutically reconciled with the main text in improvisatory and playful ways.

While a great amount of the *Montage* is cosmopolitan in its referentiality, with Harlem acting as a nodal point for a wider sense of diasporic connectivity (see the geographically distinct references in poems such as 'Relief' [LHCP 401], 'Brothers' [424] and 'Good Morning' [426-27], for example), its material imagination, as we have seen, is lent structure and form within the hard limits of a locality; it is a quintessentially *placed* poem. In the preferred vocabulary of Charles Olson, one could say that the neighbourhood is the local 'fundament' that 'startles' a collective iteration of international agents into being (2.c.ii). It may be helpful, however, to consider *Ask Your Mama* the other way around. The poem refuses to settle on a central hub or locality, as can be inferred by the very first lines of the opening 'mood', 'Cultural Exchange':

IN THE
IN THE QUARTER
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
(LHCP 477)

Here, the placement of a locality hesitates, revealing a kind of geographical precariousness that worries notions of ownership, measurement and relationality. The mood then continues

to stitch together a sort of ‘transnational Weltanschauung’ (Schultz 121), with textual and musical signifiers navigating a variety of transatlantic locales. Within six pages, we move through Northern Europe, Northern and Southern USA, various decolonising African nations and the Caribbean. As Joshua Kun has argued (146), *Ask Your Mama* is a prototypical textual embrace of the Black Atlantic as a generative and hybrid geographical space, through which mongrel cultures and international assemblages create dynamic spaces of belonging underwritten by a material imagination of water rather than land (cf. Gilroy 1-40). If *Montage* was an enquiry into the extents of collective agency framed within a particular locality, *Ask Your Mama*, it will be argued, asks the same questions but on a global, geographically decentred scale.

This pattern of exploding the local repeats itself in the manner of the poem’s very composition and the events to which it was written, in part, as a response. Hughes composed the first drafts of *Ask Your Mama* on small scraps of hotel stationery, locked in his hotel room following the notorious fallout from the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival. The event itself ended in chaos after reaching full capacity, as a large mob of drunken, predominantly white young men who had been refused entry responded by vandalising the town outside the festival grounds, routing the place so violently the National Guard were called in to intervene (Rampersad II 314-15). Hughes was to read on the final day of the festival, and did so after the City Council announced that this would be the last year of the event’s existence. It was by all accounts a sombre performance. Hughes shared the stage with Blues legend Muddy Waters, the latter performing a song Hughes had co-written with the Chicago pianist Otis Spann the night before, ‘Goodbye Newport Blues’:

What’s gonna happen to my music?
What’s gonna happen to this song?
What’s gonna happen to my music?

What's gonna happen to my song?
This is a hard, hard world to live in
And it'll be here all along.
(Waters 1.25-2.15)

There is a thematic resonance here with the italicised question at the end of *Montage's* 'Harlem [2]': a tremulous anticipation of an uncertain future felt in the aftermath of an explosive but politically fraught moment of collective violence. In Rampersad's words, Hughes saw the white rioters as 'dry tinder, to which black jazz had been a lighted match. [...] Africa had returned to haunt Europe. The descendants of masters now danced to the music of the descendants of slaves; American "civilization" had began, in however modest a degree, a fateful slide toward revolution' (*II* 316). From the vantage point of the days immediately following the festival's cancellation, the political trajectory of such a nascent 'revolution' was difficult to plot. Neither a directed attack against the corporate authority of the festival's big money gatekeepers, nor—as was commonly held in the press at the time—a completely inchoate and drunken mob, Scott Saul writes that the riots at the very least revealed the festival's 'central tension':

the Newport fest had grown rapidly by promising a new public freedom to its new audience, at the same time that it hoped to leash this freedom to a corporate ideal of orderliness. The youths did not want to destroy the institution of the Festival (and in fact, they vandalized the town rather than the park); they simply wanted it to live up to its self-image. (146)

In many ways, *Ask Your Mama* was Hughes' response to such an ambiguous provocation: while on the one hand the riots were a clear rupture in the festival's corporate attempt to rebrand jazz as 'cool' hedonistic weekend privilege, the rioters could only bring themselves to voice short-sighted demands for more efficient and accessible consumption, throwing black performers under the bus while they were at it. In what follows, we shall see this theme recur again and again throughout the long poem. Although barely mentioned in an overt or direct way, the Newport riots haunt the poem as a prototypical example of a spontaneous

uprising that fails to exceed the vicious cycles of commodification and expropriation that underwrite its emergence.

Once again, Hughes would find in poetry and music the means to extrapolate an agentive sense of directed *form* out from the nebulous, undirected *mood* of rebellion (3.a.ii). But this was already happening in a more literal fashion on the side-lines of the festival itself. The event also gained notoriety for another reason, this time on the part of the performers rather than the audience. Spearheaded by the likes of Charles Mingus and Max Roach, the ‘Newport Rebels’ organised an alternative festival to protest, among other things, the racist pay gap between black and white performers and the side-lining of more formally innovative and politicised players to smaller stages with less accessible time-slots (Saul 125-29). Highly critical of the main festival’s commercialist ethos, the Rebels’ fest was a valiant attempt to create a space for jazz that avoided the reactionary institutional baggage of segregation and commodifying hedonism that dogged Newport; it was a key flash point for the direction jazz was going in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, whereby debates over the shape and stylistic direction of the music were unapologetically debates about oppositional forms of social and political organisation (cf. Baraka and Ellison in 3.b.ii). In the face of growing dissatisfaction on the part of both white consumers and black performers, the Rebels knew that any solution would have to emerge through carving out an autonomous space within which the social and performative contexts of jazz could be redesigned from the ground up.

The rioters and the Rebels, then, can be seen as a local instantiation of the broader tension that *Ask Your Mama* projects onto a massive, global canvas. For Hughes, the early 1960s were a crisis point for a world order that had seemed, in the decade immediately following the war, to be immovable: African nations were decolonising, by force if necessary; the early tremors of what would become the Civil Rights Movement were making themselves

felt in the United States; and jazz musicians were taking the material conditions of music-making into their own hands to an extent that was unthinkable during the genre's previous 'golden age' in the 1920s. Questions pertaining to the structure and form of agency had never been so vital: all around the world, revolutionary moments were either on the horizon or already going on—the question was how and through which agents could lasting change be actualised. Like many influential treatments of the poem, I view *Ask Your Mama* to be taken up primarily with these questions: as a statement of 'Third World hope' (Jemie 121); or as an 'Afro-Modernist epic' (Schultz 119-150); or as an example of 'jazz internationalism' (Lowney 111-30); or indeed a textual attempt to reproduce what the Newport Rebels had tried to instantiate locally: 'A counterfestival in the form of multimedia verse' (Saul 143). But unlike these appraisals, I want to carry over the formal vocabulary that I have, in the previous chapter, extrapolated from *Montage*, whereby Hughes invests the liminal spaces of experimental formal arrangements with a countermanding agency that conflicts with and exerts itself upon the poem's textual constituents. For *Montage*, such an agency was characterised by the policeman's billy club and the pervasive 'assaults of the city' in localised ghetto spaces; in *Ask Your Mama*, the vocabulary gets noticeably more complex. In attempting to stitch together an international network of like-minded, revolutionary agents across and through the space on the page, Hughes simultaneously formalises the material processes that impede, frustrate and refuse such endeavours. The material imagination of the poem, I argue, has to do with the poem's medial self-consciousness: the codex itself is foregrounded as an object bound up within the authorising global channels of racial capitalism that the poem itself rallies against. Subsequently, one's reading of it becomes similarly implicated within the inextricable logics of colonization, extraction and exchange. In other words, Hughes' unease in the face of the riots and the dream deferred is made palpable, or given literal weight, by the codex's material intransigence working against the kind of politics that the poetry demands.

ii. Damaged media/implicated media

Critical evocations of a ‘reader’ are more inadequate than usual when addressing *Ask Your Mama*. I prefer instead the ungainly but appropriate melange ‘reader/director/player’ as it keeps at the forefront the intentionality of the text as that which is always on the verge of actualisation through multiple genres of potential performance, and that one single ‘reader’ must be willing to orient themselves through a shifting sense of intermedial reciprocity. As Hughes himself noted regarding his accompanied performances of the poem at the time of its release: ‘Whatever [the musicians] bring of themselves to the poetry is welcome to me. I merely suggest the mood of each piece as a general orientation. Then I listen to what they say in their playing, and that affects my own rhythms when I read. We listen to each other’ (cit. Tracy, *LH and the Blues* 57). This sense of ‘orientation’—that the poem comes into being through ongoing recalibrations of distance and proximity between individual players—fits the predominating literary register over the poem’s twelve moods. Kathy Schultz labels it an ‘Afro-Modernist epic’ (xviii-xviii, 119-49) because of Hughes’ deployment of Homeric catalogues to raise up a geographically dispersed sense of collective identity and lineage. Time and again, the poem lists a host of contemporary and historical African, Caribbean and African American revolutionaries, civil rights leaders and organisations, blues singers, jazz musicians and other literary visionaries from the New Negro Renaissance and beyond—all of whom throughout the poem are assembled into various improvised pantheons, giving them a provisional, quasi-heroic status.⁵⁰ To be sure, Hughes’s aim here is not to deify these figures, nor to instrumentalize them into a homogenised and univocal synthesis. Rather, it is an attempt to recombine and reconfigure lines of alliance and solidarity within a speculative textual landscape that is, at the moment of one’s encounter with it, yet-to-be-enacted. Given

⁵⁰ This strategy of cataloguing is foreshadowed in Hughes’ 1951 ‘A Prelude to Our Age: A Negro History Poem’ (*LHCP* 379-84), in a much more linear attempt to sketch out a ‘negro history.’

that the poem takes the form of a score waiting to be performed—a ‘general mood’—we are ourselves made complicit in orienting these constellations, and thus the poem appears to stop short at the moment of setting such collective formations in stone. The poem, and the sense of collective formation it anticipates, is always to take place *somewhere else*.

To speak of the text’s register as worldly and transatlantic in the heroic sense is to tell only half of the story, and is to miss the poem’s undercutting humour. For all its gestures towards the containment of capital-H History, some of the poem’s most affecting moments come in the vivid depictions of the local, everyday warp and weft of post-war African American experience: the smells of collard greens ‘gently stewing’, a family not finding the small change to put in the heating meter, and, as per the poem’s title, a set of comebacks spoken via the rhetorical context of ‘playing the Dozens’. Indeed, in the poem’s tepid initial trade reviews there was a tendency among reviewers to set what was perceived to be the newspaper-headline-like, pretentiously name-dropping appeal to worldliness in the epic catalogues *against* the apparently more authentic (and thus acceptably poetic) folk evocations of the everyday (cf. Dace 636, 637, 643-4). But to reduce the discontinuity between these registers to a question of aesthetic preference is already to foreclose the ways in which the poem’s vertiginous oscillations between the locally-oriented and the globally-projected act antiphonally, functioning more often than not as self-reflective critique, rather than just two incompatible rhetorical registers imperfectly aligned. Take, for example, this epic pantheon that comes early on in the first mood, a mix of black literary giants old and new, and the actress and singer Pearl Bailey:

RALPH ELLISON AS VESPUCCIUS
 INA-YOURA AT THE MASTHEAD
 ARNA BONTEMPS CHIEF CONSULTANT
 MOLTO BENE MELLOW BABY PEARLIE MAE
 SHALOM ALEICHEM JIMMY BALDWIN SAMMY
 COME WHAT MAY—THE SIGNS POINT:
 GHANA GUINEA

AND THE TOLL BRIDGE FROM WESTCHESTER
IS A GANGPLANK ROCKING RISKY
BETWEEN THE DECK AND SHORE
OF A BOAT THAT NEVER QUITE
KNEW ITS DESTINATION

(478)

Freed from the rigid determinations of the land, the transmogrification of recognisable U.S. landmarks into entryways onto a ship founds this projected community on water; such visions of the oceanic offer routes of hybridity that permeate geographical, linguistic and religious borders, recapitulated aurally by the vowel-drift between Ghana and Guinea. The passage luxuriates in its own initially posited hierarchy breaking down, and the consequent lack of a destination seems to legitimate its playful and optimistic embrace of hybridity—a sociality that never arrives at its homeland or any other destination but rather one that resists capture while being open to contingency: ‘COME WHAT MAY’. But it is easy to forget that this oceanic embrace of the global springs forth from a seemingly throwaway metaphor a few lines earlier, in the relatively more local confines of Jim Crow Mount Vernon: ‘PUSHCARTS FOLD AND UNFOLD / IN A SUPERMARKET SEA’ (473). The utopian and internationalist thus is pre-emptively undermined in the sense that the latter passage’s oceanic currents have already been coded via the flows of capital: cultures, thinkers, languages and singers are all up for grabs in the dematerialised realm of commodity-space, or, as Hughes puts it in the mood’s ‘liner note’: ‘in the American social supermarket blacks for sale range from intellectuals to entertainers’ (527). In other words, Hughes’s playful re-imagination of these figures as *agents* directing the ship is already undercut by the historical perpetuity of their status as *cargo* in the poem’s chain of association. Hughes’s heroic pantheon remains tied to the sight of groceries in a shopping cart.

Afropessimist criticism has of late pushed to the limit questions surrounding the compatibility of political agency with the social category of blackness.⁵¹ Hughes' paratactical undercutting of such transatlantic visions of utopian solidarity—in Rampersad's words, the poem's overwhelming tone of 'sardonic contempt' (*II* 316)—might be in this sense comparable to R.L.'s assertion, in response to questions surrounding cultural appropriation, that

the violence of anti-blackness produces black existence; there is no prior positive blackness that could be potentially appropriated. Black existence is simultaneously produced and negated by racial domination, both as presupposition and consequence. Affirmation of blackness proves to be impossible without simultaneously affirming the violence that structures black subjectivity itself (Web, n.p.)

For all the work of cultural and literary celebrities who seek to build a robust notion of agentic black *identity*, Hughes' shopping cart remains both the 'presupposition and consequence' as the *positionality* of the black subject is governed by material forces that lie outside of the domain of cultural representation. Elsewhere in the poem, similar themes of undercutting are reflected by foregrounding the material, medial implication of cultural and political representation. The epic status of the poem, and its ostensible ability to re-imagine the African diaspora, is frequently vexed and undercut by troublesome media, inadequate partial objects whose faultiness or complicity obtrudes upon the attempt to knit together a transatlantic totality. These inadequate partial objects appear in many shapes and sizes throughout the poem, and provide a constant foil for the representation of collective identity. There is, for instance, something striking about just how many *broken* media there are scattered throughout the poem, pointing towards a media ecology out of joint with the

⁵¹ I have in mind here a broader corpus of works by Frank B. Wilderson III (*Red, White and Black; Afro-pessimism*) and Jared Sexton ('The Social Life...') in particular as being self-consciously formulated through the term 'Afro-pessimism'—although the term remains a controversial and contestable framing, a debate which we do not have the space to reconstruct here. See *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* for a useful set of core and peripheral representative texts.

demands we might want to place on it. In the ‘Ode to Dinah’ mood, the section begins with the speaker complaining that the TV isn’t working and is thus unable to show the centennial celebrations of ‘100-YEARS EMANCIPATION’ (489)—or, as the metaphor goes, the static on the TV is figured as snow freezing the Niagara Falls, a key gateway within the geographical imaginary of runaway slaves and Progressive Era black political opposition. Whiteness muddies the medium of representation either literally as an ever-present, unlocatable atmospheric noise (static), or metaphorically as a weather-effect (snow). The speaker’s inability to access the kind of historical lineage demanded by the constant reiteration of Homeric catalogues—and even the metaphorical repertoire he might deploy to code such proscriptions—is underwritten by the material contingency of the broken medium.

In the case of the television, whiteness wins out when the medium of representation is *broken*; but when a jukebox appears a few moments later, the problem is more a question of mediating technologies working all too well. The heroine of the mood, the jazz singer Dinah Washington, is figured as trapped and contained by the very medium projecting her voice:

AS EACH QUARTER CLINKS
 INTO A MILLION POOLS OF QUARTERS
 TO BE CARRIED OFF BY BRINK’S.
 THE SHADES OF DINAH’S SINGING
 MAKE A SPANGLE OUT OF QUARTERS RINGING
 TO KEEP FAR-OFF CANARIES
 IN SILVER CAGES SINGING
 (491)

Here, the word ‘quarters’ is particularly of note, as it is an important word in *Ask Your Mama* more broadly, most moods beginning with some permutation of the refrain ‘in the quarters of the negroes’. In terms of its redeployment here, I think it is a heavy-handed pun but one which nonetheless reinforces what we have observed regarding local-global movement—in this case, a movement outward from one’s local confines (one’s quarters) implies being

turned into someone else's profit via the heavily policed infrastructures ('BRINK'S') of capital accumulation. The extent to which such expropriation is made so hideous is clear from the surrealistic play of large and small: the preciousness and beauty of 'SHADES OF DINAH SINGING' is reduced to one of the smallest possible monetary denominations, one whose expansion into the realm of millions only serves to render Dinah homogenous, undifferentiated and powerless. Further, this dual signification of 'quarters' betokens a move from the qualitative into the quantitative: black expression as something that is to be counted rather than something that counts. These patterns of reification, commodification and medial damage reoccur throughout the poem, and reach their most rhetorically grotesque in the antepenultimate mood, 'Bird in Orbit', with reference to 'THAT GENTLEMAN IN EXPENSIVE SHOES / MADE FROM THE HIDES OF BLACKS / WHO TIPS AMONG THE SHADOWS / SOAKING UP THE MUSIC' (518). There is a hideous circularity to such an image—whereby the potency of the historical medium of dissent and rebellion among African Americans ('THE MUSIC') only serves to strengthen and fortify the armature of the oppressor, whose power is still rooted in the ontological inferiority of black life under slavery.

Given the poem's imaginary of intransigent materiality—a materiality that works against and in spite of the dreams of a projected, global collectivity—is it any wonder that Hughes placed so much emphasis on the non-neutrality of the text at hand? That is, alongside the confining, broken and implicated objects that litter the poem's imaginative landscape, one could argue that the codex of *Ask Your Mama* and its pink pages irresistibly offers itself up as a comparably troublesome object. With this in mind, the question remains to what extent are such relations of inevitable implication explored through the reader/director/player's *encounter* with the medial and formal dimensions of *Ask Your Mama* itself? Before we can answer this question, however, some more detail as to the implications of interacting with this text is necessary.

iii. Sounding it out, or, drawing lines to a beat

Brent Edwards, in his aforementioned explication of the ‘poetics of transcription’ (3.b.iii.), has persuasively argued for a formalist articulation of the ways in which an inferred ‘musical accompaniment’ in African American written forms inscribes itself into the visual texture of the poem itself. In his probing analysis of the ‘blues poem,’ he writes that

We are not provided a musical backdrop when we read a blues poem; part of the way we recognise it is by *seeing* the stanza structure, the rhyme (and the words themselves, which are intimately involved in a formal dynamic—blues conventions of image or address have formal as well as semantic value). Sight is forced to infer an absent sound. (*Epistrophes* 80)

With this in mind, Hughes’s presentation of musical accompaniment in the poem is not simply a ‘backdrop’—the sound of the performance in a passage like the one below is synaesthetically produced through the movements of one’s eye across the page; the visual inhabitation of the poem *sounds it out*, intimates an aural mode of expression through the logic of embodied traversal through the poem’s formal requirements. Here, however, our eyes do not ‘recognise’ the familiar environs of a straightforward blues structure. To borrow the vocabulary of R. Baxter Miller’s pioneering early analysis of the poem, we are instead confronted with a much more complex and ambiguous verbi-voco-visual space, one which works through the spatial overlaying of numerous textual ‘frames’ which ‘[call] into question the boundaries between poetry and music’ (Miller 5):

IN THE
IN THE QUARTER
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
WHERE THE DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER
DUST OF DINGY ATOMS
BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND.
AMORPHOUS JACK-O’-LANTERNS CAPER
AND THE WIND WON’T WAIT FOR MIDNIGHT
FOR FUN TO BLOW DOORS DOWN.

(*LHCP* 477)

*The
rhythmically
rough
scraping
of a guira
continues
monotonously
until a lonely
flute call,
high and
far away,*

In Meta DuEwa's Jones' terms, the italicised right hand text in the printed version of *Ask Your Mama* can be read both vertically and horizontally, creating an ambiguity in the intended function of the text itself: 'In this way, language bordering the right edge of the pages[...] functions as both musical instruction and poetic text' ('Listening...' 1164). In the case of the above, enjambment creates moments of grammatical suspension wherein the apparently musical instruction contiguous to the poetry migrates over irresistibly to intervene, engendering multiple ways of reading the poem. In this non-conventional reading, 'doors of paper' might well be '*scraping*' / 'dust of dingy atoms'; the preposition '*until*' seems to want to imbricate itself into the hanging line 'the wind won't wait for midnight'; and the soft wind instrument—the '*lonely / flute call, / high and / far away*'—ironically reappears on the left hand side of the page as a gust that can completely blow the doors 'DOWN', as opposed to, say, 'open'. Furthermore—and as a counterpoint to Jones' observations about the ways in which the apparently instructional language blurs into poetic language—the left-hand text takes on a certain instructional quality of its own. It is difficult not to read the 'doors of paper' as an instructional cue for a performative reading, wherein pages, rather than being turned, are instead opened, closed or indeed completely '[BLOWN] DOWN'. Such wordplay arguably authorises and instructs a playful unpacking of the codex, whereby boundaries demarcating apparently autonomous textual sections are transformed into thresholds through which readerly intervention moulds and manipulates the text as a multiply potentiated object.

All of this is to say that the principal hermeneutic approach of *Ask Your Mama* is that of *plotting lines* across the page, as we work out how to bring together two seemingly distanced textual objects. Non-conventional reading practices like these account for the spatial dimensions of the poem. But lines in poetry are also a way of marking time; a way of beating out the poem in metered chunks—and for all of *Ask Your Mama's* spatial ambiguities, its

temporal complexity is no less vital to its experimental performative effects.⁵² Arguably, a good way to bring this out of the poem is to begin by considering what the poem could have become, in earlier drafts. Rarely spoken about in criticism on the subject, the *Ask Your Mama* drafts held at the Beinecke Library at Yale University indicate an open-minded enquiry on behalf of the poet into the way in which one might ‘sync up’ the frame of musical accompaniment with the frame of the poetic text. Indeed, once the poetic text (originally, as noted above, composed in fragments on small pieces of notepaper) had been positioned in an order that stayed more or less consistent until the published first edition, the bare-bones structure of musical accompaniment does not change so much in terms of genre and instrumentation. Rather, what Hughes seemed to struggle over was the manner by which the musical instruction keeps up with the variously implied temporalities within the primary poetic text.

Let us return to the ‘SUPERMARKET SEA’. In Hughes’ first attempt to add musical accompaniment to this passage, the musical cues were given the same ordinal status as the ‘liner notes’: indexical markers to be considered at a remove from the primary text at the back of the volume (cf. Appendix 3.c., 332). The instructions here contain very little reference to how the music should be, as it were, ‘hooked’ onto the poetry—each shift in style and genre is represented in a list format, with each entry perhaps corresponding to stanza breaks in the poetry, but without any explicit instructions for exact timing. Further, while the musical direction is written with much less flowery language than the one we are accustomed to in the finished copy (although, we can see the beginnings of the final product: note the flute described as being ‘like a cry for help’ in Hughes’s handwritten revision at the

⁵² See Scanlon for a comparable analysis of the role of diachrony in Hughes’ deployment of the vernacular, and the way *Ask Your Mama* generates a temporality of the Dozens that cuts against the grain of much of the social science and anthropological work surrounding the vernacular tradition.

top of the page), here it is the verbs which are the most interesting in terms of descriptive musical notation. The spatial metaphors underpinning Hughes's negotiations of genre, instrumentation and playing technique remind us that this is an aural topography conjured into being through language and as such is open to the interpretive ambiguities that such figurative description entails. How to perform 'steady DRUM beat closing on BLUES chord' in 'Shades of Pigmeat', for example? Does the chord come *after* the drum beat and thus close the mood, or does the drum beat enclose, capture, surround, *play over* or otherwise *close in* on the chord, played first? In any case, both poem and musical instruction are two texts put in relation but kept at a distance: two figurative topographies, one musical, the other imagistic, autonomously determined and brought into relation more or less entirely by agency of the reader/director/player.

Cut to Hughes's second major alteration to the musical cues, one which is, as it were, more in line with the spatial arrangement of the final text, but which can be seen as an outright contradiction of the central ethos of the original (cf. Appendix 3.c., 333-34). Here, the quote marks seem to want to strip away language's capacity for figurative ambiguity: lines become metronomic, quantifiable chunks evenly cut and equally distributed. The poetry and music are mutually imbricated but only to the extent that they are both measured by the mechanical certitude of the line break. Arguably, the music is here an afterthought, hooked on and inessential to the poem, with the band leader reduced to the role of a metronome: keep going, keep going, keep going, now stop. Just as with Pearlie Mae and co., the music is reduced to a count, in many ways comparable to the quantificational reduction of a price-tag implied later on in the 'Ode to Dinah' section. Rather than being two horizons, imperfectly striving to meet each other in the external, potentiated space of a future performance, here said performance is proscribed by the printed page through an ethos of transcription that at least aspires towards compositional precision. The introduction of the instruction "TACIT" at

this point is also significant. Granted, it is a knowing *misspelling* of the word ‘TACET’ used in traditional classical scores—Hughes is signifying upon the Latin here—but the introduction of the faux-Latin still brings to mind a sense that this draft marks a shift towards the mastery of the composer over the composed and the written text as that which pre-emptively over-codes the contingency and flexibility of an improvised musical performance.

In the final version of the first edition, Hughes does not completely jettison this metronomic count of the line. While the overall lineation of the poem still marks time, the quantified count brushes up against a much more ambiguous and figurative sonic spatiotemporality made strange and potentiated by the ambiguities inherent to language.

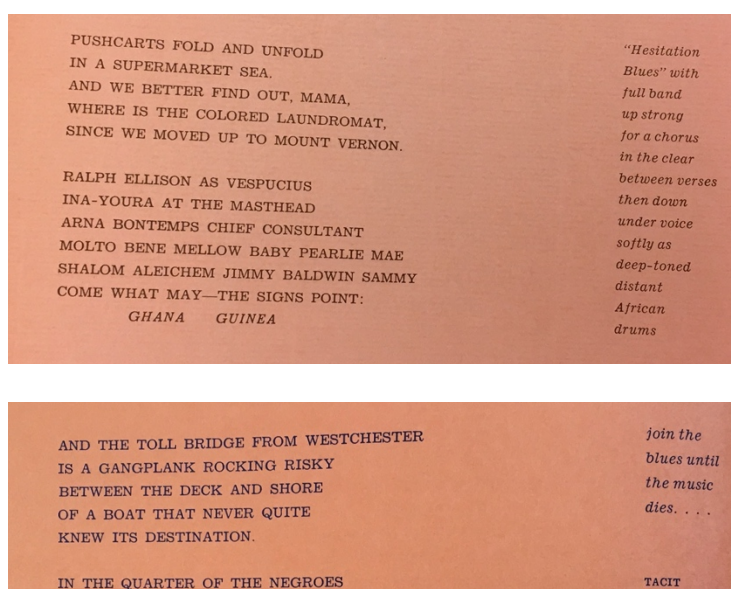


Figure 1. Hughes, *Ask Your Mama* [first edition] 5-6

For example, ‘[I]n the clear’ might refer simply to the gap between verses, or what one could call the poem’s *formal* or perceptual temporality (i.e. the time it takes to literally pause ‘*between verses*’), but the phrase has idiomatic connotations that might refer to the manner of playing within the poem’s *figurative* temporality—perhaps as an invitation for the band to improvise; to get clear of the persistent questioning of the ‘Hesitation Blues.’ Note too the suggestive difference between ‘fading out’ and ‘dying’, and indeed the roster of metaphorical language

that could imply adjustments in either volume or tempo: ‘*distant*’ or ‘*down / under voice*’ rather than languishing or quiet; ‘*up strong*’ rather than loud or upbeat. Time is thus explicitly marked and quantised by lineation at the same time as its beat is softened, as the kind of rhythmic and temporal flexibility between beats is left to the ambiguities of language.

Thus, in both the work’s spatial and temporal dimensions, Hughes engenders within the composed, instructive score an integral uncertainty regarding how the text is to be enacted, introducing a strong sense of readerly agency that is nonetheless shaped and guided by clearly drawn frames and regularly counted beats. By drawing the reader/director/bandleader into a medially ambiguous space where they have to work both with and against the generic and formal limitations of the medium as it is presented, the *challenge* of the poem is to constantly hear the original feeling for the beat while traversing the poem’s cross-medial avenues of performative possibility, and, in this, the reader’s experience mirrors the central dilemma facing Hughes’ cast of revolutionary performers. In other words, *Ask Your Mama*’s constant preoccupation with the forging of international coalitions of global agents finds a formal homology within the reader/director/player’s attempt to knit together different, interarticulate temporal and medial differences around a centred and consistent anchor of the linear beat. Navigating the poem’s formal requirements, then, forces us to engage directly with the kind of problematic that Hughes’ fraught political moment was forcing him to confront: that meaningful collective agency can neither exist within static or restrictive delineations of communal forms (a metronome), nor without an autonomous sense of structural anchorage. Keeping the ‘feel’ of the beat, as opposed to rigidly hammering it out, forces a reader/director/player not to lose track, to keep in mind the performance as a unified temporal event whereby the players are structurally undergirded by a shared sense of original feeling.

iv. ‘UNTAKEN DOWN ON TAPE’: The page as threshold

Live performances of *Ask Your Mama* have taken many different shapes and sizes. Laura Karpman’s 2009 interpretation of the piece and Ronald C. McCurdy’s 2013 performance serve as particularly good examples of two methodological polarities between which a potential performance can place itself. Karpman’s version is almost Wagnerian in its grandeur, taking each of the musical reference points in the italicised text and expanding them out into a vast, orchestral assemblage—incorporating into the mix styles and musical genres that go beyond 1960s US musical culture: the ‘Shades of Pigmeat’ mood, for example, utilises hip hop sampling and DJing techniques, and the piece as a whole makes use of a broad array of digital sound manipulations. And despite the primary medium for the piece’s continued listenership being audio-based—with a CD and LP being released in 2015—Karpman’s background as a filmmaker was just as vital to the original performance as her proficiency as a composer: the performance was set to filmic montage, which speaks pertinently to the poem’s visual idioms of framing and dynamic juxtaposition. In other words, Karpman represents an expansive and compositional style of performance which jumps away from the codex to push the dimensions of what the poetry on the page can only imply. McCurdy’s version, by contrast, is a more historically informed performance, its improvisational style indicative of what one might imagine Hughes’ own, unrecorded collaborations on the piece with figures such as Charles Mingus might have sounded like (Rampersad *II* 280). Stripped down to a bare-bones jazz ensemble switching when needed between instruments, McCurdy keeps a pronounced fidelity to the pacing of the poetry on the page, with a single male voice speaking the poetry in dialogue with the band. In Karpman’s more composed version, voice and music are much more fluidly imbricated, but less receptive to spontaneous dialogue between participants.

Both interpretations speak to the breadth of potential inherent in the text. Despite their clear differences, both artists and their respective processes stand as a testament to the variability of Hughes' liminal space; a practice of forging connections between the poetry and the music, whereby either side inflects or cross-contaminates their counterpart's proper medial idiom. If there ever was a visual companion piece to the sense of excitement one feels in the face of these varied performances, Hughes' own plotting of lines between left and right in the poem's draft stages are in themselves a fascinating textual object: they perform a map of actualisation, a palpable sense of excitement in the face of verbal and sonic intermingling (Appendix 3.c., 335). Note how the red pencil markings enclose and defy the quotation marks; how the horizontal lines syncing up Hughes' new, more figurative musical instructions are not only functional edits but also appear like gestural marks, a reminder that each 'sounding out' of a line is an act completed, a synthesis made by an agentive and embodied reader/director/player. The close of the 'Horn of Plenty' mood, for example, crystallises the moment of transition from a marked, metronomic count to something more fluid, with the red and grey pencil replacing the straight vertical line of the repeated quotation marks with a more squiggly and wave-like formation—an erasure that destabilises homogenous applications of convention and allows 'BOUNDARIES [TO] BIND UNBINDING'. Of course, none of this is to import reductive intentions to the mind of Hughes when he was composing his poem—he most likely would not have considered these drafts as autonomous artistic objects. Nonetheless, what reading *Ask Your Mama* back through these drafts achieves is a visual imprint of how the poem solicits participatory, interventionist readings. Even in the first edition's glossy and precious final form, the piece is always on the verge of being actualised: each line still needs to be drawn; the poem needs to be in some sense unbound for it to be bound together again.

Herein, however, lies a vivid contradiction or tension within the work. The first edition—with its glossy pink pages, its typographical detail, its elegant geometrical designs on each numbered mood heading—gives an overwhelming sense of objectivity, in the sense of an aesthetic whole completed, valuable in both artistic and monetary terms. And yet the process of reading/directing/playing cuts against this sense of aesthetic finality, demanding musical exteriorities to be brought to bear on the text and the liminal space to be inhabited, intervened in, perhaps even written over. In other words, the formal effects of the text demand a different kind of valuation to its materiality, one which expresses itself through de-objectification, and bringing the poem into life beyond its shiny, smooth edges. This contradiction repeats itself at a thematic level as well: the form of the poem asks us to build coalitions, to draw lines between spatially dispersed parts, at the same time as the text's sardonic and pessimistic ironies constantly remind us of the impossibility of attributing agency to these temporary hybrid morphologies. In the ironically titled mood 'HORN OF PLENTY', Hughes reiterates this sense of implicated impotence on a formally self-reflexive level:

DANCERS BOJANGLES LATE LAMENTED \$\$\$\$
 KATHERINE DUNHAM AL AND LEON \$\$\$\$
 ARTHUR CARMEN ALVIN MARY \$\$\$\$\$\$
 JAZZERS DUKE AND DIZZY ERIC DOLPHY \$\$\$
 MILES AND ELLA AND MISS NINA \$\$\$\$\$\$[...]
 (LHCP 498)

On the one hand, the currency symbols reflect the mood's takedown of the black middle classes moving from low to high, in that each new moment of artistic expression is embedded within the accumulative logic of capital which fractures and isolates individual voices both economically and geographically: 'I MOVED OUT EVEN FARTHER FURTHER FARTHER[...] / AND I'M THE ONLY COLORED' (Ibid 499). But there is a sense too that the dollar signs take up precisely the space that we as readers are supposed to inhabit; they block the page with their own lines, leaving no room for anyone else's gestural marks. Or, they *pre-empt* the central

perceptual rhythm of the poem's readerly expectations, and by being there *before* our eyes traverse the potentiated space on the page, our own engagement is, from the start, implicated within the logic of commodification and accumulation. We are, like Dinah's voice in the preceding mood, '[CLINKED] INTO A MILLION POOLS OF QUARTERS'. Read this way, drawing lines becomes tantamount to fixing things in place, or reducing the pluripotential pinkness of the page into a rigidly delineated object that can only be owned rather than shared. If the poem presents itself to us as open, is not a reading/directing/playing of it by necessity an act of closure?

This sense of wavering valuation that the poem implies—this crisis of whether one's response to it should be to keep it open rather than attempt to close it—is a tension that attends jazz music more generally. Jazz, after all, lives through live performance; its lifeblood is rooted to its being felt by a present audience sharing the same moment in an open unfolding of space and time. And yet the affective release of the unforeseen (i.e., improvised) becoming real in that very moment itself takes part in a massive economy of recordings that cross over space and time, closed off within the limits of tape, vinyl or binary code, where (it is promised) the revelation of the unforeseen can be seen and re-seen again and again. As we have attempted to show, a key theme of *Ask Your Mama* is to resist this latter reification inherent to the medium of transcription, whether that be a jukebox, a vinyl, or a tape recording. But to put too fine a point on this critique of transcription would be in many ways to ignore another irony: namely, that Hughes was an involved and obsessive collector of jazz recordings himself. Even during his long and frequently arduous journeys across the Uzbek steppe, he lugged with him his portable record player and a briefcase stuffed full of jazz LPs (Hughes, *I Wonder...* 108-9). As Jonathan Flatley's illuminating work in the archives reveals, one can read through reams and reams of numbered lists that Hughes would periodically make of his favourite albums throughout his life—a prototypical example

of the behaviour of an ardent fan; a constant rearranging and reshuffling of one's obsession, throwing new connections into light by consistently curating and re-organising one's acquisitions as they are accumulated ("Beaten..." 325-26). For Flatley, this impulse towards listing and re-shuffling feeds into Hughes' 'revolutionary mood'; an impulse that has reappeared time and again across this chapter—that is, the poet's ongoing attempt to stitch together collective subjects and re-form them anew in light of changing political realities ('How...' 504-5). *Ask Your Mama's* playful Homeric catalogues are no exception to this pattern, although the poem's self-consciousness about the limits of fetishized accumulation forces one to question the political effectiveness of making and re-making lists of privileged actors.

Nonetheless, it should be possible to take these contradictions not as foreclosures but rather as provocations. In one of *Ask Your Mama's* more optimistic moments, Hughes foretells of a coming insurrection that escapes the delimiting proscriptions of medial capture:

FROM THE SHADOWS OF THE QUARTER
SHOUTS ARE WHISPERS CARRYING
TO THE FARTHEST CORNERS SOMETIMES
OF THE NOW KNOWN WORLD
UNDECIPHERED AND UNLETTERED
UNCODIFIED UNPARSED
IN TONGUES UNANALYZED UNECHOED
UNTAKEN DOWN ON TAPE
(*LHCP* 507)

In my view, it would be a mistake to read these lines as a nostalgic longing for an authentic mode of unmediated communication—a demand for a kind of global primitivism in the face of an exploitative, totalising media ecology. The very fact of *Ask Your Mama's* awareness of itself as a 'lettered', 'codified' and 'taken down' object seems in itself to reject such a demand. I would rather see Hughes' chain of negatives in the stanza as a provocation towards a certain kind of reading, or listening, or directing, or playing—one which the liminal spaces of *Ask Your Mama's* form constantly asks us to consider. Rather than seeing the 'UNDECIPHERED'

and ‘UNLETTERED’ as a privileged prior state, what would it mean to conceive of such as a process, or a manner of engagement? How does one ‘uncodify’, ‘unparse’, or ‘untake-down’ *Ask Your Mama*, and in so doing consistently formulate a collective subject that refuses its proscription as a defined, objectified thing? Within one’s reading of the poem, questions such as these are not proposed by a dramatized character or narrative voice. Rather, it is *Ask Your Mama*’s insistent materiality—through its foregrounding of the page as yet-to-be-traversed and its performance as yet-to-be-actualised—that constantly demands us to unstitch our own lines, to conceive of the page as a door to be opened, rather than as a passive canvas that receives our projections. The material imagination of *Ask Your Mama* is in this sense an embodiment of the dream deferred, and a methodological reminder that such a deferral might indeed imply its own kind of agency, because to defer is to consistently reject artificial closure; to be ‘UNTAKEN DOWN’ is to be brought up. To listen to the material imagination of *Ask Your Mama* is to hear that there is so much more to do.

-4-

Architectures of Being:
Frank O'Hara and Intermediality

-4.a.-

Newsprint, Cinema, Radio, Television: Medial Friction in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara

i. Situating the intermedial encounter

The intermedial poetics underpinning Langston Hughes' late long poems in many ways speak to a refusal to be trapped inside a form or a constrictive mode of expressivity that proscribes limits to what an agent can experience or do. The culmination of this aesthetic (represented by *Ask Your Mama's* charged confrontation of music, poetry, performance and image) seemed to suggest that by defamiliarizing the material status of the printed page—by allowing other, notional materialities to intervene, to reshape and to potentiate the liminal tensions of blank space—intermedial art carries with it an insistent rejection of closure. By making uncertain what the ontological contours of the art object *is*, one puts it to the recipient to decide what it *could* be; to reframe the contexts within which it might mean and affect. The spaces that Frank O'Hara conjures through his poetry are in many ways a fitting continuation of the kinds of questions that Hughes' intermedial geographies were persistently asking: O'Hara's poems simply do not ask us to view the bustling Midtown streets through one stable field of perception. Rather, the scenes for O'Hara's selves are composed as disjunctive assemblages of different media: a scrap of celluloid here, an Abstract Expressionist painting there; Rachmaninoff twinkling across the airwaves over the clatter of dancers' feet. One could say that O'Hara is not just interested in or concerned by other media—rather, in the words of Redell Olsen, his poetry performs 'a refraction of the self through successive forms of mediatization' ('Kites...' 194).

Consider, for instance, the poem that so pointedly provoked Robert Lowell, composed in transit to a poetry reading in which they were both participating—that is, ‘Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)’⁵³ The naked urgency of the newspaper headline from which the poem takes its first line dictates the tone of the whole piece: each clause adopts either the simple past or the simple present; each action is expressed in the urgent manner of a headline; and the piece itself shows a commitment to unravelling those infamous ‘5 Ws’ of journalism, in that the poet interrogates who, what, when and where—although perhaps falls short at the ‘why’. Not only does that day’s newspaper headline carry with it the desired authenticity-effect for a poet performatively writing a poem on the way to its reading, but it also acts as an affective corollary for a nervous poet, late and stuck in traffic on the streets of Manhattan. This chapter will predominantly be concerned with such overlaps between forms of media and spatial navigation; specifically, how they impinge upon O’Hara’s conceptions of personal or collective agency—that is, the ways in which O’Hara draws himself and others forth using the variegated logics of film, radio and television. In essence, the focus of this section can be summed up by a single punctuation mark contained within a much-cited phrase regarding a whole genre of O’Haraisms—that is: ‘I do this, I do that’ (cf. Gooch 283-329). The question I would like to ask is: what, in O’Hara’s poetry, takes the place of the comma—what *mediates* the first clause and the second, thus connecting a set of discrete actions into an embodied traversal of imagined space?

Intermediality has been at the heart of criticism on O’Hara ever since path-breaking works by Perloff (1977), Altieri (1973), Breslin (1983) and Ward (1993). The latter of these examples perhaps puts it best when trying to account for the oftentimes bewildering nature

⁵³ For a full recounting of this event that has subsequently been considered critically as a useful metonym for the aesthetic differences between O’Hara and ‘confessional’ poetry, cf. Gooch 386-7. Cf. also Perloff, *Poet Among...* 13.

of O'Hara's poetry: Ward writes that 'his constant practice was to bring one form of expression to life by forcing it to abrade or include another from which it is conventionally distinct' (*Housing...* 37). It is this specifically *material* language of abrasion or friction that brings to the foreground the importance of contact between media in O'Hara's poetry—not a smooth overlaying of expressive forms, but a reciprocal meeting that leaves a material impact upon both parties. Perloff's well-known assertion that O'Hara puts words on the page as Pollock might fling paint on a canvas (*Poet Among...* 70) has effects for both painting *and* poetry: techniques borrowed from painting and applied to poetry like those narrated in 'Why I Am Not a Painter' (FOCP 261-2) inspire novel ways of reading and writing, but O'Hara's connection to the Abstract Expressionists through his poetry also provides novel ways of looking at and experiencing the canvas. Such dialogical ways of reading and seeing have provided a critical impetus for numerous articles, but in this section of the thesis I want to respond to Brian Reed's provocation to radically expand what constitutes intermediality in O'Hara's work. Taking his cue from the 'phenomenological turn' in contemporary media studies, Reed warns us against viewing O'Hara's moments of medial contact—poem/painting, poem/film, poem/dance and so on—as the interaction of two or more ontologically distinct forms, removed from their instantiation within an experiential context. The resulting criticism, he argues, has led to a purely semiotic analysis of different medial logics that fails to account for the way one inhabits or experiences already-intertwined media systems within a phenomenological field. So, when confronted with an intermedial work like O'Hara's and Norman Bluhm's 1960 collaboration *Poem-Paintings*, rather than solely ask what happens to the medial logics of 'painting' and 'poetry', 'one ought to ask: What sorts of perception and cognition do these artworks solicit and reward? How do they occupy space? What spaces, virtual or actual, do they generate or suggest as one interacts with them?' (219). Rather than take critical interest in the intersection of two or more media simply for the sake of the media themselves, this chapter keeps at the forefront the way in which intermediality

generates phenomenological space, and how O'Hara's adoption of different 'media-logics' develops our view of his 'spatial poetics', a poetics that Yasmine Shamma has recently underscored as the bedrock of first and second generation New York School Poets (1-31).

When discussing intermediality and the work of Frank O'Hara, critics tend to ground themselves in the poet's collaborative work with, say, artists and filmmakers, and highlight moments in the surrounding or resultant pieces (be they poetry or otherwise) where traces of intermedial contact occur. Given that O'Hara worked most directly with visual artists, film-makers and within the theatre, it is unsurprising that these remain popular subjects for critical enquiry.⁵⁴ But the media ecology that O'Hara inhabited was not limited to these areas alone: music, for example, appears as a constant presence in his life and poetry, even if the time he spent actually training to be a concert pianist was ultimately short-lived, and his facility with the keys something more often than not showcased in private (Gooch 243). Similarly, Epstein's comprehensive accounts of O'Hara and the cinema productively distinguish between the poet as a moviegoer and as a co-collaborator ("I Want..." 95), but have little specifically to say about the increasingly prominent role of television as a vehicle for moving images. Further, one might naturally compare the voice of O'Hara's criticism within the pages of *Art News* against that of his poetry, but it is less often the case that one notices, as we have done above, just how much *daily news* intrudes upon the poetic voice as well. What links all of these relatively niche critical lacunae is the status of these media as predominantly consumed rather than produced—they belong, for O'Hara, more to the domain of leisure than work, and as such do not leave so many significant artefactual case

⁵⁴ For further studies on O'Hara's collaborations with Bluhm, see in particular Shaw, 'Gesture in 1960...'. For O'Hara's collaborations with Alfred Leslie in *The Last Clean Shirt* see Kane. More discursive and formalist works outlining O'Hara's engagement with other media in his poetry proper are too numerous to include exhaustively here, but for film see in particular Epstein, 'I want to be at Least as...'; and Chalmers.

studies for critical consideration. It seems hard to analyse, say, O'Hara's appearance on the TV program *USA: Today* (Moore, n.p.) as a moment of authorised intermedial contact in comparison to the way one might frame the production history of *Try! Try!* But for a poet whose *Lunch Poems* so famously unsteadied the border between leisure and work, and whose poems constantly require us to reconsider the inherited assumptions behind what one does or does not count as productive artistic practice, it would seem unwarranted for these apparently less productive media to be treated as marginal or unserious. It is with this in mind that I have chosen to focus on media that, within O'Hara's sphere of reference, might seem to tend towards leisure over work—consumption over production—but in actuality reveal themselves as active agents in the way O'Hara weaves different technologies of mediated articulation into his poetry.

Still, the question remains: to what end? Why invite such a horde of mediated experience into one's poetry, and what functions do these mongrel assemblages presume to perform? An answer may be gleaned by comparing O'Hara's material imagination with that of Olson, as explored in Chapter 2. For the latter, no matter how much the watery materialities of the Atlantic dispersed and proliferated the subject's sphere of reference and potentiated capabilities—the enduring point of such journeying was to incorporate one's expanded horizon into a universal human subject who could adequately meet the demands of his age. Whether one is talking about *The Special View of History*'s predominating emphasis on 'actual, wilful man' or the centrality of 'Maximus' as a poetic persona, effective agency resides, for Olson, in the ability of poetry to formulate a coherently articulated, singular agent to authorise more ethical or desirable modes of being. Arguably, and especially since Shaw's 2006 publication *The Poetics of Coterie*, O'Hara can be positioned as categorically opposed to this tendency, in that his poems are not cumulatively addressed to an abstract, representative entity such as 'Gloucester', a location that also presumes to contain and be contained by the

continued addresses of Maximus. Rather, O'Hara's poems are literally addressed to actual people, or written self-consciously in their presence, or placed within a constantly shifting sense of time and space that does not seem to require Olson's counterbalancing insistence on 'a reliable fundament'. For Shaw, O'Hara's 'referential field' is one 'characterized by fluidity, appropriation, and "indiscrete" nods toward second-person audience figures inside the poems', and these 'referential practices, which depend upon a blurring of boundaries between the writing subject and its reception framework, become analogues for less centralised and hierarchical models of social and intellectual interaction' (*The Poetics of Coterie* 65).

If O'Hara's 'coding and overcoding' of 'proper names' (Ibid 19) undermines notions of identity and authority within projected communal imaginaries—it is not so hard to extend this argument to the way O'Hara 'codes' and 'overcodes' the medial status of the poem itself. That is, if the typewriter for Olson was a kind of zenith of poetic possibility, or the ultimate medium for a truly poetic expression, O'Hara never seems to sit comfortably within the medium he is currently in, or follow in Clement Greenberg's conception of the modernist impulse as the attempt 'to determine, through [the medium's] own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself' (5). As we shall see, O'Hara often seems to wish that his poems would cease to operate exclusively *as poems*, preferring instead the capabilities of a radio broadcast, or a television set, or indeed—and perhaps most famously—a telephone. In his last major work, *Biotherm*, O'Hara takes this sense of medial discomfort to a new level, in a panoply of evasive manoeuvres through a multiplicity of medial frames. If agency for O'Hara is ultimately authorised by the subject's immersion in a shifting and non-centralised form of intellectual collectivity, intermediality, it will be argued, intuitively experiential architectures for the kinds of decentred being proper to the poetics of coterie. By insisting on refracting

oneself through the phenomenal structures of other media, one undermines the status of a public, singular subject as the ultimate underwriter of poetic expression.

ii. Poetic ‘design’ and media saturation

Before jumping into the variegated medial logics of film, radio and television in O’Hara’s poetry, one must account—as we have done in the work of Charles Olson and Langston Hughes—for the formal and rhetorical modalities by which O’Hara can be said to ‘let in’ such material externalities. In comparison to the former two authors, O’Hara presents a certain methodological difficulty. While Olson’s voluminous tracts of poetics establish numerous potential metaphorical and interpretive frames for the words on the page that can be read in tandem to contextually co-constitute one another; and where Hughes’ well-documented shifts through active political and aesthetic formations leave clear yet tensile implications regarding how to read his later, formally hybrid poetry, O’Hara’s overt mockery of convoluted statements on poetics in the much-anthologised anti-manifestos ‘Personism’, ‘[Notes on *Second Avenue*]SSaW 13), or investing the poem’s language with more gravitas and authority than is inherent within it.

This is, however, not to say that O’Hara never wrote ‘serious’ statements on poetics or aesthetics, only that we tend to think that his sincerity is irrevocably bound up with his

evasive ironies—when he declares that his new, cutting-edge movement may be the ‘end of literature as we know it’ (*FOCP* 499); or claims over three pages in an unsent letter to the Paterson Society why he really isn’t equipped to make a statement about his own poetry. This playful double-voicedness is of course an entirely sincere claim for what poetry is and what poetry can be, but to respond to such ironies too literally as an unsophisticated refusal of poetics or theory may cause us to condescendingly dismiss times in which O’Hara does seem to be theorizing a more or less coherent framework, as Perloff does in her treatment of the poet’s art criticism. O’Hara, she writes, never quite mastered stylistically the sort of theoretical and discursive criticism best exemplified by Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg—in fact, O’Hara’s difference to these critics is predicated upon an approach that is more reminiscent of *fin de siècle* aestheticism: ‘O’Hara’s Paterian comments on particular paintings’—and not his over-arching theories of painting and art in general—‘are often very valuable in that they force the reader to take another look at the canvas, to *see* it as if for the first time’ (*Painter Among...* 90-1). Perloff’s defence of O’Hara’s art criticism as the culmination of aesthetically well-tuned observations effectively precludes interpretive access to a generalised *way of seeing*. The critic is ultimately a black box: a painting goes in, a satisfying perception may or may not come out, but the perceptual mechanism remains obscured each time. This kind of critical attitude arguably frames O’Hara as a kind of mystic of first-hand experiences, comfortably sequestered within his own poetic aura and unable—rather than cannily unwilling—to abstract.

It is with the spirit of light-hearted critical defiance, then, that this chapter takes as its authoritative yet unavoidably arbitrary benchmark for O’Hara’s poetics a lesser-known piece of writing entitled ‘Design, Etc.’ A brief scan of the notes for a lecture given at The Club in 1952 may surprise those used to the unconventional and anti-academic manner of much of O’Hara’s published prose. The talk’s tone is uncharacteristically staid and

systematic, its lexicon centred around the academic shibboleths ‘form’ and ‘content’, and Maximus himself even gets a positive mention, specifically his innovation of treating ‘the typewriter as an instrument, not just a recorder of thought’ (34). The reference is apt, as in ‘Design, Etc.’ O’Hara is in many ways thinking congruently with the essential ethos of Olson’s seemingly endless tracts of poetics: that is, attempting to gain some theoretical handle on the underlying, experiential dimension of poetry by offering an abstracted map of how such experience functions instrumentally. Contrary to ‘Personism: A Manifesto,’ poetic experience is here displaced from the evasive, paradoxical space ‘between two persons’ (FOCP 499) and given a perhaps more prosaic local habitation and name.

The first definitions of design that O’Hara lays down root the concept within the *act* of poetry and the notion that such an act must be *for* something:

1. *A plan, formed in the mind, of something to be done or produced; a mental project or scheme in which means to an end are laid down; as a design for revolution; also, a preliminary intellectual conception, as of a poem or an argument.*

2. *Purposive planning as revealed in, or inferred from, the adaptation of means to an end or the relation of parts to a whole...* (33)

In these definitions, O’Hara clearly draws a link between purposive intention on the part of an author—‘*formed in the mind*’—with observable characteristics in the poem. Predominant throughout is O’Hara’s enquiry into a poem’s utility—what does it *do*? What is its purpose, its intent? What is, perhaps, its design upon *us*? As the essay proper begins, we are led to believe that this sense of ‘purposive planning’ is a characteristic necessarily separable from the more familiar categories of form and content:

I would say that design as it relates to and exists in Poetry, is the exterior aspect as opposed to the interior structure which we call form. Form may be completely mysterious to the reader, though nonetheless real in its existence and causality; design must be apparent, it *is* that which is apparent to the eye and ear. (Ibid)

Design thus speaks to a poem's immediacy or perceptual *first-ness*. It is what we are aware of before we start to interpret—a sort of 'what-is-it-like' quality that occurs to us before we even know what the poem is about. The first example of this quality that O'Hara highlights is fairly predictable: the way a poem is presented on a page—in other words, 'the look or format' (Ibid). Quick to distinguish such a quality from *formal* attributes like quatrains, voltas and conceits (which necessarily presuppose a sort of relationship to a poem's 'interior' development or structure), here design is always discussed in relation to a perceiving subject's eye or an enunciating subject's voice. The way our eyes are drawn across a page, or the way our voice adopts a certain tone, bears the signature of the poet's *design*—the mode by which the poem is made immediately present.

However, 'Design' quickly moves beyond its initial separation of the visible from the legible. Admitting that the poem's visual or sonic immediacy is perhaps only a trivial example of 'design', he extends the definition to that which 'works beneath the surface of the poem and still does not slip into the category of form, because it is not part of the same structure emphasis that form is' (35). Vital here is this notion of design 'working'—it is part of the poem's cumulative process—the way it is put into motion by either the reader or the writer. It is appropriate then that O'Hara conceptualises it in terms of a journey: 'Design guides, it seems to me, the meaning through the formal rapids of the poem's requirements and restrictions past Scylla and Charybdis into open water.' (35) Scylla here is defined as the forms a poet inherits from tradition—'the poet's associations with the forms he is using, associations with the use of that form on previous occasions by himself, and the stunning triumphs of others with that form'; Charybdis is the (sometimes overwhelmingly) deformational force of 'the poet's passion for poetry and his own ideas' (Ibid). Design is thus a delicate balancing act between restriction and movement, the practised and the improvised,

the restrained and the unleashed, measure and mess. In one of the essay's more lyrical passages, O'Hara describes the effects of a good design thus:

As the poem is being written, air comes in, and light, the form is loosened here and there, remarks join the perhaps too consistently felt images, a rhyme becomes assonant instead of regular, or avoided all together for variety and point, etc. (35)

One could say in this sense that 'design' is not form but rather the *surface of form*—what kind of friction the eye experiences as it moves across the page; the extent to which the reader slips and slides through the poem's 'meaning', or whether they get caught in its gnarled eddies or sandpaper-like coarseness. O'Hara describes the qualities of design almost like chinks in form's armour: an unexpected half rhyme or a strange shift in tone reveals that form has an 'exterior aspect', a sort of texture or material consistency whose relation to the 'structure emphasis' of the poem may indeed be arbitrary or, at the very least, follow a different kind of logic; demand a different kind of treatment.

Design, in this sense, might be comparable to what we call a poem's *tone, style, or manner*—but O'Hara's use of the specific term 'design' as something abstractly plottable and systematic elevates these things beyond the strictly personal, and wraps us up in a familiar O'Hara-esque paradox: that is, the authentically-felt artificial construction: 'insofar as we feel the "personality" of the poet in the poem, as opposed to what the poem says literally, design is present' (Ibid 34). The scare-quotes are appropriate as, for O'Hara, design tells its own story—it can be part of the poem without being confined within the contours of an individual 'personality'. Personality bleeds out of such reductive individuations and is reconstituted as a compositional or poetic technique: telling shifts in tone or idiosyncratic ruptures in poetic form are abstractable units of a new, artificial construction. Of course, this prompts an obvious follow-up: what is it exactly that a poem enacts via its design, if not a straightforward signature of the author's personality? Keeping in mind this notion of a navigation between Scylla and Charybdis, we might say that a poem carries with it *a design for*

a mode of being or traversal. A poem pre-emptively enacts what it is to inhabit a space: how to move differently through its constricting formalities without being either overly constricted or completely untethered. Design, for O'Hara, maps a route—it 'guides' our movements through the world's 'requirements and restrictions, past Scylla and Charybdis into open water.'

More broadly, the metaphors O'Hara uses to talk about the act of writing a poem often fall back on this notion of a body moving through space. Perhaps one of the most memorable evocations of this poet/traverser figure is in 'Personism', when O'Hara is decrying the overly-cerebral formal work of contemporary poets:

I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, 'Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep!' (FOCP 498)

Nor, one would imagine, does one carefully think about one's route or take pains to deduce the most efficient path by consulting a map. To the extent that a poem is analogous to running through a city with the intent to escape, such a 'design' is wired into the immediate sense perceptions of the escapee. The entryways, shortcuts and access routes present themselves in an improvisational manner not dissimilar to the way in which we have discussed Langston Hughes' poetic evocation of Harlem. To the extent that O'Hara is engaged in a similar project of conjuring the experiential dimensions of urban space, what both this section of 'Personism' and the broader argument of 'Design, Etc.' seem to imply is that this spatial experience is mapped onto the immediate, sensuous experience of the poem itself; the moves that a poem's 'exterior aspect' allows one to make; the way the poet feels their way through the form, and the kind of friction one feels against its surface.

The kind of premium O'Hara places on 'going on one's nerve' and *instinctive* sense, while being fully aware that this 'natural' intuition is still bound up within the artifice or the

‘design’ of the poem, should not be seen through the lens of paradox necessarily. Rather than a wry deconstruction of authenticity, O’Hara’s self-aware appeal to mediated immediacy should be seen—like the man running from the knife-wielding maniac—as an imperative of survival in a hyper-mediated landscape which overflows with immediate sensations. Whether in the maximalist and hedonistic imagined landscapes of poems such as ‘Ode to Joy’, with its single rolling sentence swallowing an abundance of exotic delights (*FOCP* 281); or in the more familiar New York streets conjured in *Lunch Poems*, with their way of cataloguing the poet’s experience through the punctuation of commodities—the landscapes O’Hara feels most at home in may well overpower and subdue the less well-prepared. ‘Personism’, after all, was first published only a year before celebrity-cum-media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s ground-breaking *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, which brought to popular discourse the longstanding anxiety about the effects of media in the twentieth century on cognition and perceptual awareness. In a well-known image from his follow-up book, *Understanding Media*, McLuhan would describe the post-War subject—submerged in cinema, radio and television—as a latter day Narcissus: the self spread across the surface of a pool of water, rippling and indeterminate, as the subject is trapped in a state of narcosis, overwhelmed by the complex interweaving of mediating currents (41-48). Just as a hammer might be considered as an extension of the hand, McLuhan believed that twentieth-century mass media were extensions of the human nervous system, and these technological innovations coupled with a global and rapidly globalising world meant for McLuhan a new form of human subject, disembedded and stretched thin (19-21).

We can catch a glimpse of this new, extended sensibility in the well-known poem ‘The Day Lady Died’, as the cosmopolitan speaker locates himself at the epicentre of the globalising world. There is a heavy sense of narcoticisation in this poem, as the speaker moves through numerous different media—magazines, bank balances, advertisements,

codices, train timetables and so on—but none are given the time for prolonged attention by the speaker:

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
in Ghana are doing these days

(FOCP 325)

Here, the writings of people five thousand miles away from the poet are brought into rhetorical proximity with close friends and throwaway consumables—they are subsumed within the speaker's daily routine to the extent that any serious appreciation of a formerly colonised country at the end of a complex, decade-long history of transition is muffled by local effects—the mugginess of New York in summer. This kind of muggy confusion between the local and the global—i.e. that the poet's intimate tone only serves to emphasise the distance between Ghana and New York—leaves room for a single, insufficient word in response: 'ugly'. At once hyper-connected to multiple continents and indeed thousands of years of history (as he dithers over whether to buy a book by Hesiod or Verlaine), he is simultaneously put to sleep by 'quandariness' in the face of an overload of choice and variety (Ibid). The word 'quandariness' is an apt one as it literally means 'who-' or 'what-ness', a reduction of specific and individuated names to the blanket generality of interrogative and relative pronouns. All of this changes of course by the time we arrive at the final stanza—a *memoire involontaire* provoked by the printed image of Billie Holiday who has died in the early hours of the morning (Appendix 4.a., 336) Like in the text with which we started this chapter, 'Poem (Lana Turner has Collapsed!)', it is a newspaper headline that authorises and provides the *raison d'être* for the poem as a whole, singling out a throwaway lunch break spent muddling around the city and endowing it with the aura of significance. Just as the newspaper headline in the previous poem makes the poet anxiously aware of the traffic surrounding him, so here does the printed word spur O'Hara into taking account of the events leading up to his iconic

wave of affect. Where once the ‘muggy street beginning to sun’ seemed to narcoticise, and in so doing suspend meaning, the imposition of the headline forces O’Hara—and his readers—to look again and recognise the untapped reservoirs of potential significance latent within the everyday. Despite ourselves, we read *against* the speaker’s feeling of quandariness; the sharp headline slices a hole the fuzzy gauze of lunchtime and inaugurates O’Hara’s experience as a poetic whole which is open to interpretation.

My aim here is not to add another holistic interpretation of this poem to the mountains of prior close readings, but rather to simply note that it is the newspaper headline itself that causes a shift in what O’Hara might call the ‘design’ of the poem. We go from dozily accompanying O’Hara in his perambulations through the city to performing an engaged act of interpretation concerned with the who, what, when, where and why; we move through the poem in a different way, with a different sense of the poem’s design upon us. In the words of O’Hara’s notes to ‘Second Avenue’, the poem has gone from being ‘high and dry’ to ‘wet and reflective’ (*FOCP* 495). In what remains of this chapter, I want to expand upon this logic. My claim is that O’Hara co-opts the technological functions of different kinds of media to produce different ‘designs’ for his navigation of poetry. In the following analyses of O’Hara’s treatment of cinema, radio and television, I will consider the ways in which O’Hara ‘goes on his nerve’ within a media ecology that, according to McLuhan at least, *extends* the human nervous system to strange and unexpected places. Throughout, I will attempt to answer the following questions: what kinds of embodied being do the sense-extensions of cinema, radio and television suggest?; how do these media, within O’Hara’s poetry, conjure into being novel ways of inhabiting space?; and by what linguistic means are these modes of spatial navigation and ways of inhabiting encoded onto the poem’s ‘design’?

iii. Cinema

From the very beginning of O'Hara's career as a poet, the medium of film is infused with connotations of illicit desire and seductive oneiric flights. Take, for example, this 'Poem,' composed during O'Hara's years as a graduate student at the University of Ann Arbor:

it's
not the blue arc we achieve
nor the nervous orange poppy at

the base of Huysmans' neck
but the secret chlorophyll
and the celluloid ladder hid-
den beneath the idea of skin.

(PR 5)

Again seeming to pre-empt McLuhan's claims of the narcotic effects of an image-saturated postwar culture, O'Hara correctly codes the pleasure of cinema's oneiric fantasmagoria—like the 'poppy at / the base of Huysmans' neck'—as an intimacy wedded to hiddenness: people tucked away in dark rooms sharing the same light-induced hallucination. In a suitably decadent manoeuvre, O'Hara blurs the line between the organic and the inorganic: as the 'celluloid ladder' somehow involves itself in a process of photosynthesis (which is not such a perverse image, really: a film takes and uses light much like a plant uses chlorophyll to absorb light and transfer it into energy), film is privileged as a consciousness-expanding force, inhabiting the speaker with a visceral and embodied immediacy, sprocketing into life from within.

What's more, O'Hara's linkage of celluloid to human skin speaks volumes for the kinds of sensuous channels through which this consciousness-expansion pulses. In many ways rhyming with the recent work of film theorist Laura U. Marks on 'tactile visibility' (138-45), here the poet envisions celluloid tape as providing an ontological foundation for the sense of touch. Playing upon the etymology of the word 'film', which comes from the proto-

Germanic word for skin or animal hide, O'Hara effectively reverses the way we would approach the word philologically. In this poem, it's not as if the notion of 'skin' hides behind the word 'film', waiting to be uncovered by the dutiful philologist. Rather, this notion of celluloid hiding *behind* 'the idea of skin' implies that skin is the actualisation of film; that celluloid in some way *authorises* our notions of tactility, feeling and so on. And this shouldn't surprise us: what is a montage if it isn't two things touching each other? A film is a rapid accumulation of these moments of contact—a filmmaker's art is located in the interstitial zone between one image and another. Further, O'Hara alludes formally to the polyvalent between-ness of both film and skin by the line-break interrupting the word 'hidden.' Skin is, after all, another word for hide: it is that which covers and separates us from the world, as well as that which gives us a consistent shape and stops our innards leaking out. However, by opening up the word 'hidden', O'Hara points to the other function of 'hide'—that is, it is the part of our body which is farthest away from us, straddling the outside of our being, perennially coming into contact with otherness. Skin is simultaneously that which opens us out to the world even as it is the precondition for our withdrawal from it.

For O'Hara, then, the ladder of celluloid becomes a useful mechanism with which to explore the interwovenness of the open and the hidden, intimacy and alienation. I'm lingering on these examples from O'Hara's slightly mawkish earlier poetry, because I think they offer a slightly different way of reading the poet's later, more well-known odes to cinema. A reasonable interpretation of such later work may be that cinema appeals to O'Hara because of its capacity to project the images of fantasy—to generate outlandish figures through which we might identify. And while this is in many ways true, it is not quite the whole picture—O'Hara's early habit of using the mechanisms of cinema as a mediator for intense, romantic attachments implies an outlook that sees in film something that is always trying to supersede and transcend simple questions of both projection and representation. Take for example

another untitled early poem, where—in the middle of an exhortation that addresses itself to an absent lover—montage initially appears as a metaphor serving to bring the two back together:

But then by expert
montage, a mountain growing

out of a diamond, the same
principle, you appear before me.

I spill your whiskey: you are
beautiful. When my back is

turned you still love me.
Mirrors go blind in our flame.

(PR 13)

Here, O'Hara uses enjambment in the same way a director might make cuts during post-production, as practically every line and stanza break following the initial nod ('expert / montage') plays upon the imagistic technique of unexpected frictions emerging from tensile juxtapositions. After giving a predictable example, where two visually similar images are added together so as to combine their connotations (a mountain being stable, unmovable and reliable, while a diamond is a highly valued treasure; small acts of kindness carrying gigantic significance, and so on), the cuts that follow are perhaps more conceptually engaging, as they bring to the foreground that montage is at once a cut and a bringing together, operating thus upon the paradoxical surface of skin. Take the gap between 'You appear before me' and 'I spill your whiskey'. While the first line cements some notion of visibility—the apparition of a lover whose physical appearance is, throughout the poem, obscured—the next line immediately directs the gaze away from the apparition to an image of something falling away from him. By encoding montage onto the design of the poem thus, O'Hara's moment of contact is simultaneously a moment of withdrawal; a momentary apprehension of the whole of a person is met by our gaze ricocheting away from them. A

similar technique occurs in the gap between ‘my back is’ and ‘turned’—the latter resolves the dangling predicate even as it reinforces a sense of social unease. In many ways, the blind mirror is an appropriate metaphor with which to end: intense passion, just like the moment of contact between two images in a film, does not necessarily entail perceptual clarity or a straightforward image of self. Rather, the gap between inner and outer—the skin that is at once the barrier and the gateway—is felt to be an unstable, combustible surface at the very moment in which one makes contact.

Thus the skin of cinema also holds significance for O’Hara because it is a volatile surface. I cannot help but think that this final evocation of fire speaks to celluloid’s infamous flammability—a major hindrance to the average cinema-goer’s viewing experience in the years before acetate took over as Kodak’s preferred material for film, two years after the writing of this poem. I would maintain that O’Hara extends the metaphor of montage to include celluloid’s very chemical instability—that, in the process of images (and people) being smashed into one another, looming over the proceedings like modernity’s sword of Damocles, is forever the possibility of auto-ignition. One is reminded of the infamous central scene from Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), and his directorial signature of intense confrontations mediated by panes of glass and translucent curtains, intervening layers of skin that, when broken, do not present an authentic and unified person but rather a dizzying void, a terrible rupture. In the words of Susan Sontag, the scene is

a statement about the complexity of what can be represented, an assertion that the deep, unflinching knowledge of anything will in the end prove destructive. A character in Bergman’s films who perceives something intensely eventually consumes what he knows, uses it up, is forced to move on to other things. (78-79)

O’Hara’s register is different to Sontag’s—less concerned with epistemology as he is with affect, the surface of film speaks to a sense of touch that threatens to consume what is felt, to be so overwhelmed by a moment of contact that the edifice of self collapses, an act of

creative destruction that ‘move[s] on’ to things hitherto unfelt and unknown. O’Hara, like Bergman, believes that film pushes our sense of ‘who-ness’—our ‘quandariness’—to breaking point, in the sprocketing forward of affective collisions with alterity.

In a landmark paper on O’Hara’s poetic treatment of cinema, Andrew Epstein, during the course of his analysis on the poet’s early film-poem ‘An Image of Leda’ makes a key distinction between the kind of film we have been speaking about so far—its material or technological function as a medium—and the images that such a process happens to project:

Actors and cinematic images are but insubstantial shadows, gorgeous surfaces much like the swan, which is only the form Zeus takes as his ‘disguise’ when he descends to earth. But beneath the disguise and artifice of the film, there is a potent force, ‘reality’ or ‘being’ inherent in the medium, like Zeus existing in all his divisive power beneath the feathers of the swan. (“I Want ...” 107)

Within the context of this poem in particular, wherein the beating of Zeus’ wings is linked to the sound of the projector sprocketing (‘We our- / selves appear naked / on the river bank / spread-eagled while / the machine wings / nearer’ [*FOCP* 36]), it is easy to see in film, as Epstein does, the ‘complex mixture of ambivalent feelings [O’Hara felt] towards the cinema’ (94). For O’Hara, cinema promised both transgressive rapture and liberation at the same time as it gloried in the mechanical and constrictive gaze of the culture industry: ‘Our / limbs quicken even / to disgrace under / this white eye’ (*FOCP* 36). As much as O’Hara might seek an ontological union between the ladder of celluloid and human skin, it is thus difficult to justify forcing him into the same orbit as, say, Dziga Vertov, whose vertiginous imagined hybrids of the human and the technological hardly scream ‘Personism’. However, I would like to jump off from Epstein’s conclusion and push this notion of film’s ‘onto-mediality’ further. Rather than see ‘the machine wing[ing] / nearer’ as ‘a kind of cultural criticism’ (118) about the mechanical and impersonal ‘power’ hiding behind the seductive play of images, I would rather consider how O’Hara maps the medial characteristics of

cinema onto the ‘design’ of the poem, thus encoding cinema with a sort of spatial logic. In other words, I want to move away from ethical questions surrounding whether O’Hara felt that cinema was or was not good, to a more descriptive consideration of what kind of fundamental *action* does the mechanism of cinema perform—how is it incorporated into a poetics of ‘going on one’s nerve’?

Sontag’s notion of film ‘using itself up’—her sense of cinema’s virtue lying in precisely its ability to expend itself, to self-destruct in the rapid overlaying of sensory stimulus—is a satisfying contradiction that attends O’Hara’s perhaps most well-known ode to cinema, the 1955 poem ‘To the Film Industry in Crisis’. Ostensibly, the poem is a celebration of cinema, a triumphing of ‘you, Motion Picture Industry’ over ‘lean quarterlies and swarthy periodicals’, which, although replete with ‘Poetic Insight’, lack any sense of vitality or desirability (*FOCP* 232). In an attempt to align his poetry with this superior medium, O’Hara offers a disjunctive, page-long montage of his favourite actors and their respective scenes, stitching together the most intense and titillating moments of Hollywood into a dizzying vortex of cinematic imagery. A snippet:

[...]Mae West in a furry sled,
her bordello radiance and bland remarks, Rudolph Valentino of the moon,
its crushing passions, and moonlike, too, the gentle Norma Shearer,
Miriam Hopkins dropping her champagne glass off Joel McCrea’s yacht
and crying into the dappled sea[...]
(*FOCP* 232)

If the poem begins as a *defence* of the film industry at a moment of crisis, O’Hara proceeds to revel in the crisis itself, perhaps even accelerating it. Taking some of the most potent critiques of the mainstream cinema of the time (that the actors, plots and stories of cinema are mass-produced and infinitely replaceable, tacky and meaningless) O’Hara turns such critiques into a dynamic compositional principle, inventing a kind of montage totally alien to the Hollywood cinema the poem ostensibly celebrates. If montage in Hollywood must put two

or more images *on top of* each other, here O'Hara invokes a kind of cutting procedure where each new image seems to erase and write over the former: the film he compiles is an anarchic mess, there are too many names to process at once, and each new image refutes and undermines Hollywood's general emphasis on linear development and consistent characters. In other words, the surface of the poem itself becomes remarkably like that of Bergman's celluloid, in that it can only take so much perceptual inscription before it flickers out of imaginative reach. Montage is here rendered all-consuming: faces propelled into fame for their individuality and uniqueness blur into one another, no action seems to have either cause or effect, and all is submerged in a wave of dramatic moments without the build-up of suspense or dramatic context. Rather than asking us to fit the disparate images together in a single string of narrative or thematic coherence, the design of the poem, through a relentless process of overwriting, calls for a cathartic dissolving of the images it projects.

My recourse to watery imagery is here in keeping with many of the images that attend O'Hara's poetic musings over cinema. Take, for instance, this moment in 'Second Avenue',

and I am a nun trembling before the microphone
 at a movie premiere while a tidal wave has seized the theatre
 and borne it to Siam, decorated it and wrecked its projector.
 (FOCP 140)

I would note here that O'Hara's surrealistic leaps of fantasy (gender-bending into a nun, being transported geographically to Siam) do not take place through the lens of a fully functioning projector but attend a vision of the projector's destruction. The implication is that in destroying the projector the tidal wave has also 'decorated' the movie theatre; it has conferred upon it a reward proper to its function. Once again, water seeps through O'Hara's imagistic repertoire in 'In the Movies' (1954), a poem whose title literally signifies the experience of receiving oral sex in a movie theatre, but one which also points towards the kind of onto-mediality Epstein refers to above: what is it like to be 'in' in the movies; to

adopt or perform its technological mode of being? Everything ‘plunges’, is ‘drowned’ or ‘mired’, ‘splashes’ or ‘storms’: ‘Waves break in the theatre’ (*FOCP* 206-9). Not only does water and the sea appear as the predominant images of the poem, but the imagistic overlapping that the poem itself performs also adopts a sort of liquid inexactness, spilling away at the sides:

We take the silver way along the rocks
and with my head upon your chocolate breast
the screen is again a horizon of blood.
The drapes flutter around us like cement.
In your drowning caresses I walk the sea.
I am gilded with your sweat
and your hair smells of herbs
from which I do not care to peer.

(209)

Here, we oscillate between an imagined coastal landscape and the movie theatre, below and above the surface of the sea. What is felt to be the most internal of liquids—human blood—is evoked as the farthest and most external of water’s limits, the horizon. Heaviness and lightness co-exist, intertwined with both death and life—the speaker is both drowned at the bottom of the sea but continues to walk through it. The miniscule and the vast—beads of sweat and the fathomless deep—both absorb the speaker with equal power. What the movie theatre seems to provide is not only a convenient place for illicit sexual acts but a liquefying of extensively demarcated realms. Internal and external, the miniscule and the cosmic, are both located one inside the other in a state of flow.

In a certain sense, we have come back full circle to the poet’s days in graduate school writing love poems about the erotics of ‘expert montage’. What constantly attends O’Hara’s evocations of cinema is a sense of the breakability of the linear development montage seems to create in its arrangement of images. Montage is simultaneously a cut *and* a gesture towards continuity. Each rung on the ‘ladder of celluloid’—each space between one image and another—contains this indeterminacy. For O’Hara, the mechanism of film suspends

spatial arrangements ordered into neat patterns of continuity and discontinuity; it asks us to consider what is continuous about the distinct at the same time as it asks us to break down what was previously thought to be continuous. Over here and over there, inner and outer, this person and that person—all distinctions blur the quicker the projector sprockets.

iv. Radio

Radio is arguably the perfect technological metaphor for the way in which the New York School radically revised Romantic notions of poetic inspiration. Inspiration is here neither breathed into the poet-container from without, as in divine inspiration, nor does it stem from a creative spirit localised within the individual's mind. Neither descending from without nor erupting spontaneously from within, inspiration is no longer a rare miracle but rather something as common as the oxygen we breathe anyway, present wherever we are and always accessible. We no longer wait for the Muses to call upon us—the Muses are already broadcasting themselves, 24/7, wherever we are—the poet's job is simply to tune in; to pick up and transcribe the poem that is always going on, whether on top of a mountain or on the 'muggy' New York street 'beginning to sun'. This notion of broadcast—of content being somehow present in the very ether—has clear implications for O'Hara's on-going insistence that *his* poetic movement wants to take the poem out of the space between two covers and put it 'squarely between the poet and the person' (*FOCP* 499).

Some of the major musical developments of the New York *avant-garde* happening contiguously to O'Hara—and with which O'Hara was oftentimes personally acquainted—were similarly preoccupied with probing the way sound inhabits space as a materially situated set of vibrations, rather than just accepting at face value sound's status as a carrier for musical expressions and ideas. The post-war saw the birth of what would come to be known as American Sound Art—with composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass experimenting

with tapes, reverb and complex editing procedures; La Monte Young and David Tudor inventing novel ways of ‘scoring’ musical compositions; and free jazz artists like Ornette Coleman bringing timbre, polyrhythms and atonality into the practice of improvisation. Common to all of these migrations of music into sound is the reassertion of sonic projection as inherently contingent and dependent on situated context. An atonal, procedurally-generated composition like John Cage’s *Music for Changes* (the premiere of which John Ashbery and O’Hara attended and spoke rhapsodically about together [Gooch 209-10]), for example, highlights beyond any doubt the material contingency of the piano’s keyboard. It is very easy to forget that the ebbs and flows of a Chopin nocturne, when played exquisitely, are the result of skin pushing against a set of ivory keys. When the pianist’s hand is clenched into a fist, however, or when a sequence of flattened fourths intrude arhythmically upon a phrase, the surface of the piano’s keys forcefully intrude as an aural problem, as something that cannot be dreamed away, reminding us that sound is material, embedded and thus contextual.

Sound, in other words, can be located when music falters. This logic can arguably be taken to its limit when we consider one of the most notorious compositions of the American post-war—John Cage’s ‘4’33’ (1952)—wherein a full orchestra come onstage only to hold their instruments aloft on the precipice of sound-making, not making any sound for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. As any serious listener to the piece will know, the composition is not four and a half minutes of silence. To borrow terms from visual art, Cage presents the ambience of the auditorium as a kind of atmospheric *surface* for a musical composition: people breathing, clearing their throats, creaking in their seats—all of this is like an auditory canvas; the surface onto which musical ideas are flung. Unlike a mass-produced cotton or linen canvas, however, this surface is transient and specific to a place and time; it is woven into the contingent assemblages of people and bodies in space. A

concert and a radio broadcast thus can be seen as two different kinds of surface; and such aural topographies set the conditions of possibility for how sound affects and is affected by the space in which it is situated. Phenomenologically speaking, sound carries on its surface the imprint of the space that receives it.

These critical oscillations between the surface of a painting and the surface of a radio broadcast a useful preamble to one of O'Hara's best poems about the radio. This poem is in many ways a quintessential example of O'Hara's intermedial poetry. Much like 'To the Film Industry in Crisis', O'Hara appraises the merits of two media, probing what they might afford and eventually settling on one over the other:

Why do you play such dreary music
on Saturday afternoon, when tired
mortally tired I long for a little
reminder of immortal energy?
All
week long while I trudge fatiguingly
from desk to desk in the museum
you spill your miracles of Grieg
and Honegger on shut-ins.
Am I not
shut in too, and after a week
of work don't I deserve Prokofieff?

Well, I have my beautiful de Kooning
to aspire to. I think it has an orange
bed in it, more than the ear can hold.
(FOCP 234)

Like in many of the examples of avant-garde composition above, the surface of broadcast sound can be heard when music falters—in this case it is when the music's affective timbre does not quite correlate with that of the listener. Broadcast music is aurally fitted onto a prefabricated rhythm of work and leisure time; its surface is heavily striated, always having to accommodate itself to a rigid and obtrusive structure. Notice in particular O'Hara's playful disjuncture between the noun 'shut-in' and the existential state of *being* shut in. Implicit here is that music is *supposed* to interact with this less tangible, existential state, but radio profanes

music through reification; it assigns that state to a societal role that O'Hara cannot inhabit: someone who literally never leaves the house. Radio cannot give O'Hara 'immortal energy' because its status as a mass medium tethers it to the mortal and the grounded—specifically the way in which life is assembled from and striated by prefabricated clusters of leisure and work, rejuvenation and expenditure. De Kooning's canvas, by contrast, is represented as authentic to O'Hara's emotions—it inhabits O'Hara's free time without being 'dreary' or pre-programmed. It blasts a hole in the regulatory membrane of the day-to-day—it allows the claustrophobe to 'aspire'—literally speaking, it allows him to breathe. While radio inscribes itself upon and thus reinforces the boring confines of fixed stone walls, the canvas is a half-open window.

This notion of radio as that which reinforces and produces a sort of confined set of spatial arrangements is, however, not only a way for O'Hara to moan about the banalities of work and leisure time. The humour of a passage like the following, for example, highlights the atmospheric effects of safety and closure that music can generate, when better attuned to the listener's desires: 'A sudden rush of recorded music / makes the child on the rusting fire escape / back towards the fire' (*PR* 43). There is more to this passage than just the hyperbolic suggestion that Schumann is so good the child would happily burn alive listening to him—it is also to understand that music itself provides architectures of safety that work to guard against the external forces of chaos and entropic decay. Ask anyone striding down the street with headphones in their ears and you will hear something similar—music produces a frame or structure into which embodied experience can fit, wherein they are momentarily protected from the disorderly and disembedding frequencies beyond their domain of control. In another early poem, O'Hara details a winter spent 'bored, / lordy was I bored' in his apartment, lonely and anxious, desperate for human contact, against the painful and atomising elements:

No, I was really nuts,
miserable. I called Jane and John
and Al and Waldemar and Grace and then
got scared, hung up, screamed!

and couldn't get out a window
because I'd locked them all, because
I'm six flights up. And it's been a
terribly cold winter, radio's been broke.

(PR 67)

Here, the phenomenological dimension of sound—as that which buttresses the speaker's feeling of interiority—is felt in its absence. Without the radio or other forms of broadcast human contact, an enclosed space is felt to be constrictive, suffocating and claustrophobic, rather than secure and rejuvenating. It is not as if the speaker really wants to get out—rather, radio and the telephone *let people in*, they populate a space with a buttressed sense of placehood, a security of what's in *here* as opposed to out there. The trauma of the above poem is not that the speaker cannot get out but rather that his anxiety has snowballed to such an extent that he can no longer bear to let anyone in:

“It's only me knocking on the door
of your heart” whined the radio
while I bawled feverishly, eating
an orange, salting it up a little.

(Ibid)

A knock at the door carries with it numerous shifts in the affective register of an interior space: it can induce panic, excitement, a reawakened sense of sociality, to name but a few. In any case, a knock on the door transforms the felt experience of interiority; operating upon the border between inner and outer, radio similarly consolidates an interior atmosphere as an affective buttress against the chaos of the outside.

However much the speaker of ‘Radio’ complains of the dreariness of radio, the aforementioned poem at least makes it clear that the medium itself is not at fault—radio performs an imperfect but vital role in fortifying one's sense of interiority. Still, the final

synesthetic, tactile-aural metaphor of ‘Radio’—‘Well, I have my beautiful de Kooning / to aspire to. I think it has an orange / bed in it, more than the ear can hold’— is often interpreted as a general statement regarding music’s non-representational nature (Epstein, ‘On Frank O’Hara...’ n.p.) Music cannot ‘hold’ anything because it does not deal in the representation of things, and O’Hara chooses painting over music because he favours de Kooning’s abstract but undeniably figurative representation of a bed (or is it a couch?):



Figure 2: *Summer Couch* by Willem de Kooning.

I’m not totally convinced by this argument, as it is clear from the poem that, in this instance, Grieg or Honneger would have served just as well as de Kooning, if it weren’t for the radio’s miserly distributive ethos. As ever, O’Hara here values abundance over restraint—the problem with what the ear can hold when it is listening to the radio is that the broadcast is, on the contrary, too graspable, too easily fitted into the hand. De Kooning’s canvas is slippery and lively; it exceeds our grasp. To merely conclude that O’Hara values painting over radio because one is more representational than the other is to miss the wider point at stake—that radio has the *potential* to transform inner experience from the claustrophobic and rigid to the nourishing and life-affirming in spite of the actuality of the broadcast.

Perhaps a good example of the way in which radio can be seen as slippery and lively—and thus ‘more than the ear can hold’—can be found in a rather singular O’Hara poem entitled ‘A Whitman’s Birthday Broadcast with Static’ (1954). Quoted in full, it reads:

Pas la jeunesse à moi,
ni delicacy, ich kann nicht, ich kann nicht, keines
Vorsprechen!
Ugly on the patio, silly on the floor, unkempt,
dans le vieux parc je m’asseois, et je ne vois pas
à droite ni à gauche.
Personne! mais des bruits, des vagues particulières,
und ich habe Kummer, es könnte ihm ein Schaden
zustossen, lacht der Kundschafter.
And then someone comes along who’s sick and I say
“Tiens, ça! c’est las de l’amour, c’est okay!”
and fall.
Da, ich bin der Komponist, und ich bin komponiert.
(CP 224)

This poem clearly presents a problem to those without a simultaneous working knowledge of French, German and English, and this linguistic difficulty is further compounded by more common, signature O’Haraisms: a first person narrator that seamlessly bends through different perspectives, identities and positions in the scene; the disorienting paratactical arrangements of emotional apostrophe and narrative description, and the more general imagistic pleasure of surprising and surreal disjunctions. As the poem’s title suggests, all of these techniques are a homage to Whitman’s infamous self-contradiction: how to be oneself as a poet (‘ich bin der Komponist, und ich bin komponiert’) and at the same time contain multitudes, in this case figured through the infringement of static (‘des bruits, des vagues particulières’). Indeed, it is difficult to think of a better combative to O’Hara’s ‘dreary’, Saturday afternoon broadcast than static—the revenge of electromagnetic, atmospheric noise upon the rigidly striated and numbered frequencies—intensive process breaking down extensive borders. Putting one’s hand on the dial and working one’s way through static in this sense disrupts the authority of the broadcast: the various grammars that we live by—whether that be French or German, Saturday music vs. Thursday music, the body at work

and the body in bed—these distinctions are much more tenuous and transient than they seem, yet the way in which the poem's title figures static as an *accompaniment* to the broadcast is apt. To submit fully to the static is to risk being consumed and undifferentiated, reduced to pure noise: 'es könnte ihm ein Schaden / zustossen, lacht der Kundschafter.' To adapt the metaphor with which I started this section, O'Hara does not tune in because he wants to hear the broadcast, but rather because the process of tuning itself allows him, like Whitman, to imagine a way of traversing the differentiated in a continuous manner. However unsuccessful the communication may be in O'Hara's poem, its design forces us to attend to the way meaning might slip through different frequencies and the concomitant interiorities such slippages might suggest. Beyond any individual language is the babble of nonsensical and entropic static, yet it is only through such noise that any coherent transition in subjective experience might be achieved.

We can by now note a clear difference in the medial affordances of film and radio, as demonstrated through O'Hara's experiments in poetic design. In the case of the former, film is most often attributed to a phenomenological stance towards the outside. Tidal waves, combustibility and urgent exhortations to leave the home attend O'Hara's film-logic as that which is always pushing beyond the confines of representational imagery, burning the frame in an ecstatic leap outwards, or an urgency that compels one to reach beyond language and to 'move on' to whatever lies beyond the page. Whereas the mechanisms of cinema provide for O'Hara a push outwards, the mechanisms of radio rather imply a recalibration of the inward. The spaces in which O'Hara more often than not situates the radio are interior, homely spaces—and in such poems the speaker's attitude towards these spaces relies heavily on how and if the radio is functioning. The radio, in other words, contributes to the phenomenological construction of interiority: rather than seeking to break away from the

self—as O’Hara’s speakers tend to do when watching films—radio reinforces but affectively colours the speaker’s sense of interior being.

v. Television

I have focused on emphasizing the oppositional nature of O’Hara’s imaginaries of cinema and radio as I feel it provides an interesting preamble to the next intermedial moment of contact I want to highlight in O’Hara’s poetry. Once again, to borrow the words of McLuhan—‘the content of any medium is always another medium’ (8); or, more accurately, a cluster of other media. In the language of contemporary media theory, television is a ‘remediation’ of the two media I have discussed so far (Bolter and Grusin 11): while it works predominantly in the imagistic idiom of film (through montage, spectacle and narrative), it is, technologically speaking, an extension of broadcast radio, and thus participates in the kind of regimentation of the day-to-day to which I have previously alluded. For this chapter, I find particularly interesting how O’Hara deals with the oppositional nature of these two medial idioms even when they are contained in the same form. Does television, without the material presence of celluloid and a projector, dampen or domesticate the combustible potential of images in sequence? Does television’s appearance in closed, homely spaces produce a different kind of interior space to radio? How do historically specific social practices surrounding the watching of television change the way we conceive of image and sound in the first place?

In the words of media theorist John Ellis, ‘Broadcast TV is the private life of the nation state’ (5). From its very inception and proliferation during the post-war, television was figured as the physical centrepiece of any domestic environment, and a sort of representational apparatus for the state-approved version of what an effective or ideal private sphere would entail. With gendered advertisements specifically timed to be slotted into

profitable moments of the work/leisure cycle, sitcoms and dramas whose plots centred around various iterations of the nuclear family, and serial programming structures which emphasized repeatability and renewal rather than change—one might say that television co-opted the idiom of the image into the normalising functions of broadcast radio that we saw O'Hara struggling with earlier. Raymond Williams once defined this shift as the shift from 'programming' to 'flow':

What is being offered is not, in older terms, a programme of discrete units with particular insertions, but a planned flow, in which the true series is not the published sequence of programme items but this sequence transformed by the inclusion of another kind of sequence, so that these sequences together compose the real flow, the real 'broadcasting.'

(*Television* 91)

As we have already seen regarding O'Hara's anguish about the implied value judgements of radio broadcasting, television is in many ways a continuation of the same ethos. 'Flow' disavows the ability of individual segments to, in Williams' terms, 'interrupt' (Ibid) the stream: the individual segments are automatically subsumed within a seamless cycle of viewing patterns which abide by pre-established norms. In many ways, O'Hara echoes Williams' unease about the normalising functions of televisions in his well-known poem 'Ave Maria', a sardonic plea to the 'Mothers of America / let your kids go to the movies!' (*FOCP* 371). Bristling throughout the poem's descriptions of the dark rooms in movie theatres is the poet's joy at their facilitation of illicit sexual encounter, daring hedonistic fantasies, and an escape from the domesticating lameness of the home. The poem ends, however, with a warning:

so don't blame me if you won't take this advice
and the family breaks up
 and your children grow old and blind in front of a TV set
seeing
 movies you wouldn't let them see when they were young
 (Ibid 372)

This evocation of blindness seems a long way from the line I quoted earlier in the chapter—'mirrors go blind in our flame'. TV here intercedes as a stand-in for the neurotic repressions

of the over-sheltered; TV, unlike film, does not allow the image to ‘go beyond’, it dampens its combustible potential, repeats its elements of fantasy on a serialised loop, subsumed in the cyclical flow of the broadcasters. Image as a facilitator of desire rots into an obsessive fetish, even a stimulus to compulsive masturbation, ironically undermining the heteronormative reproductive ethos that the content of early, 1950s television was ostensibly supposed to champion: ‘the family breaks up’.

Nonetheless, it’s worth taking O’Hara’s finger-wagging at couch potatoes and boob-tube junkies with a pinch of salt, if only because of the existence of one highly constructed yet delightful photo, which shows O’Hara, James Schuyler, Joe LeSueur and John Button posing, documenting in photograph their weekly ritual of going to the latter’s apartment to watch golden age Hollywood films on the television.



*Figure 3. Frank O'Hara, John Button, James Schuyler, and Joe LeSueur (left to right), 1960, watching TV at Button's.
Photo by John Button (using a timer). (Photo taken from Epstein, "The kismet..." n.p.)*

This photo communicates to me a rather different understanding of television's incessant entanglement within sociality and its function as a mediator for social life. As Ellis argues,

while cinema holds the viewer's eye through the principle of the gaze, television's perceptual function, as it were, is more angled towards that of the *glance*.

The role played by sound stems from the fact that it radiates in all directions, whereas view of the TV image is sometimes restricted. Direct eye contact is needed with the TV screen. Sound can be heard where the screen cannot be seen. So sound is used to ensure a certain level of attention, to drag viewers back to looking at the set.

(128)

Ellis' breaking up of Williams' concept of 'flow' into an interplay of both image and sound is useful here because it situates the television as an ongoing, materially situated interaction between viewer and medium. Rather than taking the structure of a programming schedule as a straightforwardly determinative correlate for a repressive mode of being, Ellis envisions the television as a mediating device that is not only subsumed-within and subsuming-of daily life, but also one which forever carries the potential for interruption as the glance gets carried away. In other words, the image is not all-consuming, or all-consumed; it is interrupted and awkward, perforated by the everyday cadences that it occupies. There is something of these interrupting 'glances' and transient attachments in a late O'Hara poem entitled 'Platinum, Watching TV, Etc.', written while O'Hara was visiting his close friend and co-collaborator Norman Bluhm. Of particular note is not so much the TV itself as an overwhelming object of fascination, but rather a part-object quietly interrupting O'Hara's epistolary mode, and their intimate economies of sociality, adoration and vulnerability.

Do I feel your hand on my leg? I think I do, and I think
you want to steal the platinum in my kneecap and
then fly the country in your little pipe-plane, as you
sit at your desk pretending to be Virginia Grey

I wish you'd pretend to be Anne Meacham, I adore Anne
Meacham and besides, she's a genius

that's the way I see it, stubborn as a mule hitched to a
new EDSEL that won't move because it wasn't built
to move in the medium (TV never moves, not the
way words move on the page or paintings move
inside themselves)

that's why I love Anne so much: she moves inside herself

and yet the stage is under her, untorn, and underneath
its somber surface all that platinum is safe, strong,
glittering in privacy and holding things together
(PR 189)

It is of note how this poem begins as a consideration of O'Hara friend through the medium of different TV actors; how it seems to brush aside the television itself as a mechanical, inhuman and clunky piece of kit: Meacham is so admirable *in spite of* the inferior medium she inhabits. Meacham herself did not appear on television as frequently as Virginia Grey—she was more famous rather for her performances as a stage actress on Broadway, particularly in Tennessee Williams productions (Isherwood B0007). Hiding behind this comic reassertion of high/low snobbery is a continuation of 'Ave Maria's dire warning about the degenerating effects of television: she is so good because she does *not* contribute to the medium's proper functioning; she interrupts it, and in so doing defies TV's immobile inflexibility ('TV never moves'). That is, of course, until the final three lines, with a volta ('and yet...') that switches emphasis from the foregrounded actors to the background of their setting within the cathode ray tube itself. The implied metaphor here is remarkable: the hazy grey glow of the black and white TV is like platinum: firm, structural and valuable. As the poem comes into contact with the television screen itself, we are left with an image of interior privacy as a space of cohesiveness and safety, warmth and a highly treasured reliability. The television is endowed with the preciousness of the private moments it attends.

It is worthwhile to take a detour at this point through a bit of the contemporary reception culture surrounding O'Hara. One potential reason for the recent resurgence of attention in the poet's work—both within and outside of the academy⁵⁵—is the ease with which O'Hara is situated within our contemporary media ecology. As Todd Tietchan has

⁵⁵ This is obviously a partial account; there are plenty of reasons for the current re-emergence of interest in O'Hara, most of which are usefully detailed in Hampson and Montgomery's introduction to *O'Hara Now*.

recently observed (45-61), O'Hara's networked references to social coteries and friendship groups, semi-performative intimacies and shifts in the performative self, accompanied by an overarching writing style valuing the immediate and the authentic, sits rather well within contemporary discourses surrounding networked social media, or what Zara Dinnen has termed the 'digital banal' (1-18). As well as the poetry itself being thematically and formally appropriate in this sense, it also helps that O'Hara himself was remarkably well-suited to being filmed. In an era of YouTube and videos shared across multiple platforms, it is difficult to find a hipster O'Hara aficionado who has not seen the US National Education Television's 1966 *USA: Poetry* segment on the poet, and the way in which O'Hara's 'performance' during the broadcast feeds back into the poetry itself (Moore). In a now iconic moment of televised poetry, O'Hara, halfway through co-composing at the typewriter with Alfred Leslie, picks up the phone and arbitrarily types a phrase that his mediated interlocutor has said to him into the script itself (Ibid). It couldn't have been more perfect had it been staged, and the overall effect cements the blissfully awkward telephone as the key medium that unlocks O'Hara's poetry. But the reason I want to go down this detour, especially in relation to the poem cited above, is that I think the fact that this iconic moment takes the form of a *televised* image, saturated in the platinum, 'glimmering privacy' of the cathode ray tube, is important. As well as a fortuitous filmic record of O'Hara's sometimes improvisational writing style, the film also contains O'Hara reading many of his most well-known poems, alongside stock footage of O'Hara and Leslie wandering around New York and the latter's art studio. In an era where one finds it more and more difficult to detach O'Hara's words from this mediating, televised context, the poet's observation in 'Platinum, Watching TV, Etc.' couldn't be more relevant. The poignancy of seeing O'Hara pick up the phone and type a random phrase into the piece is not related to the piece in question becoming more clear; the piece's meaning or literary context is not necessarily clarified over and above general gestures towards the role of the aleatory in post-war literary production. The function of the broadcast is less to do with

signification than it is to do with *significance*: encased in the glowing platinum frame of the television, a private moment is made precious despite the clearly artificial context of the scene. In other words, the television's glow endows upon its image a sense of *value*—and while on the one hand I would argue this to be a key factor in O'Hara's ongoing legacy as an artist, I also claim that the poet recognized this medial facet and deployed it in what I would call his 'television-poems'.

As an example, consider the late intermedial poem 'Fantasy,' which bears the subtitle '*dedicated to the health of Allen Ginsberg*' (488). The poem essentially concerns the speaker going over the plot of a so-bad-it's-good 1944 propaganda film entitled *Northern Pursuit*, in which Helmut Dantine single-handedly repels a counterfactual Nazi invasion of Canada. Interspersed within his off-hand criticisms, synoptic descriptions and sarcastic bouts of enthusiasm for the film, the speaker talks to a dyspeptic Allen Ginsberg who is locked in his bathroom and won't come out; eventually making him an alka seltzer as he proclaims his final word on the movie in question: 'I'm glad that Canada will remain / free. Just free, that's all, never argue with the movies.' I think this is a television poem not only because of the domestic setting, the way in which the speaker *glances* back and forth from plot to domestic chore (a tonal oscillation that is mirrored by the semi-columnic layout in the poem's form)—but also because it follows the aural anchoring logic that we saw Ellis describe as the fundamental aspect of the role of sound in television:

How do you like the music of Adolph
Deutsch? I like
it, I like it better than Max Steiner's. Take his
score for *Northern Pursuit*, the Helmut Dantine theme
was...
and then the window fell on my hand. Errol
Flynn was skiing by.
(Ibid.)

The ellipses here speak volumes for the way in which the film is situated within the domestic space: caught between the gap between sound and image is television's dual role as an anchor for interior space at the same time as it is something that can be resolutely ignored. Instead of being enraptured, lost to the tides of montage in the movie theatre, here moving images are reduced to the level of the banal; the speaker is constantly submitting to or resisting being drawn back to the image, which perforates but cannot fully overwhelm the rhythms that surround it.

This feeling of arbitrariness, clumsiness and awkwardness is often interpreted by critics to be purely satirical in character. Broadly speaking, this poem is often considered to be a sarcastic account of the failure of grand narratives, a postmodern undermining of narrative's ability to construct 'acceptable structures of value' (Altieri, 'The Significance...' 92), or perhaps a good-natured poke at Ginsberg's political utopianism as a comparable fantasy to those offered by Hollywood, the poem ending on the meaningless embrace of a nebulous 'freedom' (Shaw 149-50). However (and perhaps at the risk of taking such a witty poem too seriously), we might find ourselves struck by the extent to which *Northern Pursuit's* ridiculous imagery in fact *does* correlate and complement the narrative of O'Hara trying to coax his friend out of the bathroom to administer an alka seltzer. The image of a snowy avalanche quite pleasingly corresponds to the image of baking soda fizzing in a glass of water, this sense of everything crashing down as a mirror to Ginsberg's fallen state; the way the huskies gobbling down 'another fatter spy' sort of metaphorically performs Ginsberg ingesting the medicine; and the preposterous appearance of the ridiculously camp Hollywood hero Helmut Dantine, 'alone in the snow', the only one left who can fight on behalf of Canadian democratic society, seems to me a perfect counterpart to O'Hara's motherly blustering around the kitchen trying to save Allen's day. Rather than the poem highlighting the *failure* of post-war narratives, I feel that this poem rather revels in the resilience and

robustness of stories; that even the pulpiest of pulp can hold together an uncertain moment and lend to it an aura of vividness and significance. When O'Hara says 'never argue with the movies', it is because movies are not supposed to offer propositional statements; embedded within real situations that are already telling their own stories, the television confers upon its trivial surroundings a vividness proper to the social bodies who receive them. Fantasy is here not a means to escape the trivial or go beyond, but a way of reinforcing each small act of kindness and love with the sturdy yet glimmering aura of platinum. It is also worthwhile to bear in mind that the subheading of the poem connotes a toast, a speech act whose singular purpose is to endow value and significance onto a particular time and place. Ironic, perhaps—considering Ginsberg's fallen condition—yet here television and an alka seltzer perform what alcohol cannot, the 'holding together' and sanctifying of a shared moment.

*

One could perhaps name poems like the ones we have just been considering O'Hara's 'intermedials'—that is, lyric poems addressed both to people *and* other, more desirable technologies of representation beyond the poem itself. These latter media are invited to leave their imprint on the poem's design: they can be formal metaphors for the centred or de-centred self; underwriters of safe, architectural spaces; or ways of structuring intimacy within moments of interpersonal reciprocity. In many ways analogous to the intermediality of Langston Hughes' Blues architectures, what often might seem on first glance to be a throwaway poem weighing up the respective aesthetic merits of poetry and cinema, or radio and the canvas, or television and the stage, actually reveals serious value judgements regarding how to be and be together with others in the world; how to push outwards beyond constricting limits and how to recalibrate those limits to form shared, communal spaces. If one can speak of such 'intermedials' in architectural terms, then, and to borrow a phrase from Charles Molesworth, they are quintessentially '*nervous architectures*' (61-74; my italics).

This is so because the kind of media that O'Hara is interested in are, in the parlance of Marshall McLuhan, extensions of the human nervous system; they intervene in the affective dimensions of the subject's embodied emplacement in the world. O'Hara's 'intermedials', in other words, anticipate and explore the kinds of ontological and affective modalities of embodied consolidation.

But Molesworth also tinges the word 'nervous' with another sense; that O'Hara's speakers are nervous because the space between Scylla and Charybdis is a perilous and nerve-wracking passage: 'A sharp dialectic of freedom and obsession energizes the poems; in spite of their desire to be objects, they retain numinous possibilities. [...] though the poems want an objective structure, a clear architecture, they yet, inescapably it would seem, act out of a boundless trust of their own nerve' (74). Similarly, O'Hara's definition of 'design' in many ways amounts to the ability of one to keep within a form while remaining maximally uncomfortable about it: new technologies of artifice offer ways to undermine a poem's formal coherence, but the poet must move on lest they become proscribed by that very undermining technology. The poet, in other words, constantly finds himself uncomfortable within his own skin, perennially seeking new materials for embodied coherence. How fitting, then, that one of O'Hara's most memorable long-form masterpieces should take the name of an after-sun lotion: 'a marvellous[...] preparation full of attar of roses, lanolin and plankton (\$12 the tube)' (O'Hara, 'Letter to Don Allen' 116-20), the title *Biotherm* speaks to a desire to be comfortable in one's skin, while refusing to let that skin harden; to keep the pores that mediate between in here and out there open and alive. The extent to which O'Hara finds some form of remediative palliation in such ongoing transactions between inner and outer, or just another kind of nervous aesthetic skittishness, will be a central theme of the following, final section.

-4.b.-

‘[These] dedelie stroke[s]’: *Biotherm* (1961-62)
as the Song of His Salves

i. Against death and sunburn: poetry as remedial writing

Frank O’Hara’s final long poem, *Biotherm*, is a complex interweaving of the interpersonal with the intermedial; at once an intimate address to a close friend and a self-reflexive enquiry into a host of mediating cultural artefacts at a time of historical and political unease. More specifically, the elastic intimacies of a friendship—its rhythmical, momentary denunciations and fragile reconstitutions; its daily trade-offs between bursts of giddy intensity and anxious claustrophobia—here serve as a kind of underlying design for a critical exploration into the affordances of different kinds of artistic production. If, as critics such as Shaw and Epstein have recently argued (Shaw, *The Poetics...* 19-37; Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies* 51), O’Hara typically works through questions of his own agency by putting himself in relation to provisional and contingent coterie networks or friendship groups (be they real and/or imaginary), nowhere is this process more formally *textural* than in the pages of *Biotherm*. Pronouns as varied as Bill Berkson, Wallace Stevens, Aristotle, Greta Garbo, Altair-5 and Prokofiev mix and mingle within its pages, but so too do their native technologies of emergence; *Biotherm*, I will argue, is not only a queer society of people but of things as well—specifically, the cultural artefacts that serve as everyday prisms for the way ‘Frank’ and ‘Bill’ mediate their friendship. If the previous chapter considered specific and contained lyric articulations of intermedial friction, then this chapter wants to focus on how O’Hara extends this intermedial aesthetic into a sustained, longer poetic exploration. In other words, I want to consider how the material architectures of different cultural media help O’Hara to ask how different kinds of agency can be achieved alongside a lived and dynamic interpersonal

relationship: how do one's friends aid one in being and becoming, and how do different cultural technologies extend such insights into embodied attitudes towards the world?

For such a tonally unpredictable work, it is only fitting that O'Hara wavered over its title. In a letter to Donald Allen, he offered two other candidates: *M.L.F.Y.* (an abbreviation of 'my love for you') and a quotation from an obscure Sir Thomas Wyatt poem, *Wherebye Shall Seace*.⁵⁶ Reimagining *Biotherm* through this latter, potential title is arguably a useful way of teasing out a kind of artistic rationale for *Biotherm*'s strange and disjunctive intermedial landscape: O'Hara's sixteenth-century interlocutor can be seen here as making a self-conscious provocation about the *act* of poetry, one to which the later poet cannot help but write in response. In Wyatt's lyric 'To make an ende of all this strif...', the speaker gives voice to a stringent desire for finality in death—'to chaung the lif / Of him that lyves alwais in payne' and welcomes 'This dedelie stroke, *wherebye shall seace* / The harborid sighis within my herte' (Wyatt 233-234; my italics). On one level, the poem reads like an exceptionally clear-headed suicide note, with repeated deictic diction like 'This' and 'Now' bringing a present intensity to the speaker's need for closure; death seems to be hanging at the edges of the poem's final words. But this is more literally the case when one takes into account the amount of self-referential punning Wyatt deploys when describing this moment of welcome annihilation. 'This dedelie stroke' could refer just as much to the strokes of a pen as to some exterminating angel exterior to the text; if death gives meaning and the possibility of a legacy, so too does *writing* 'To place assignid' (Ibid, my italics); and if 'strif' and 'payne' can be seen as a 'contrainte' leading only to death, the poem's own highly formal and constrained verse

⁵⁶ I have attempted to hew as closely as possible to the edition that O'Hara most likely would have used—one which transliterates Wyatt's spellings and includes the poem as officially composed by Wyatt—that is, Muir's 1949 edition: a likely source during O'Hara's time at Harvard University. I am grateful to Christopher Stamatakis for helping me navigate the details of Wyatt's post-war publication history, as well honing many of my undisciplined excursions into the Early Modern period.

form—a sort of chain-linked, circular ballade—gives an entirely different flavour to the lines ‘Nowe bye constrainte I do agre / To loose the bonde of my restore’ (Ibid). Poetic writing is, in other words, a welcome form of death; a way of stopping the ongoing and painful intensities of life in place, memorialised in the solid persistence of words on the page.

O'Hara, in his letter to Allen, is at pains to make clear how his poem does not share such a morbid fascination. After quoting the wider couplet in which his potential title is included, he writes that '*M.L.F.Y.*, I hasten to add, is not like that at all though, so don't get your hopes too high' (116-120). Indeed, reading the poem's vacillating first few lines as a *response* to the authorial, clear-headed voice of Wyatt's suicidal speaker, one gets a sense of the specific aesthetic difference that O'Hara may have had in mind:

The best thing in the world but I better be quick about it
better be gone tomorrow
 better be gone last night and
 next Thursday better be gone
better be
 always or what's the use the sky
the endless clouds trailing we leading them by the bandanna, red
(FOCP 436)

This is, by contrast, a poem that does not want to take ‘to place assigned’—it breathlessly tries to keep breathing; to perform its attempt to stay in the transient, living moment, prevaricating before it can even become a poem, if a poem, via the Wyatt, is concurrent with the act of getting oneself ‘gone’. Here, the speaker persists; in Bill Berkson’s words, ‘The poem has been thrown into play, instantly exhilarating’ (12). In contrast to Wyatt’s deictic temporal and spatial precision, ‘this’ and ‘now’, with O’Hara it is difficult to locate oneself in space and time as we are shunted back and forth from ‘tomorrow’ to ‘last night’ to ‘next Thursday’, in the vague space of ‘the world’, populated by a bristling, numinous ‘it’. Whatever the latter ‘it’ is, it clearly refuses to be written and therefore refuses to be killed by finitude. It is thus fitting that the three words O’Hara should take from Wyatt’s original would be a

preposition, an auxiliary verb and a verb: ‘wherebye shall sease’. Stripped of the subject and objects to which they relate, one might sense a note of triumph in how the word ‘sease’ ceases to cease anything in particular, paradoxically hanging open and rescuing the ‘harbourid sighis within my herte’ from the deadly act of writing. Morton Feldman once noted that ‘secreted in O’Hara’s thought is the possibility that we create only as dead men’ (14). By aligning itself to Wyatt’s poem at the same time as formally attempting to escape its self-reflexive poetics, *Biotherm* begins by acknowledging the imperative of poetic creation (‘better be gone[...] or what’s the use’), but strives towards an aesthetic that mitigates the deathly finitude of a finished, created thing. Like the indents and empty space infiltrating the poem’s opening stanza, the speaker seems to want to give the poem room to breathe, even if that means ‘sustaining’ the hectic modulations of ‘all this strif’.

However, it may be premature to position *Biotherm* and ‘To make an end...’ through such a zero-sum comparison. Dolven, in his remarkable study of poetic style through the case studies of O’Hara and Wyatt, similarly falters on the way in which one brings the reference to Wyatt into dialogue with the broader stylistic architecture of *Biotherm*. After situating the moment in the finished text where the quote finally ends up appearing, following the line ‘“Continuez, même stupide garçon”’, Dolven remarks:

Continue, stupid boy: the request is not any less urgent for being so offhanded. Wyatt’s lines are an answer. But what kind of answer? Does the older poet oblige, offering another way of carrying on? Or does he intervene as the bad conscience of the poem’s concatenative appetites, a rebuke to gallic nonchalance and a reminder of some more final finality? (4)

Perhaps the best answer to these questions would be: both or either. Despite the tonal authority of the earlier poem, it is difficult to straightforwardly position Wyatt as this wise elder poet declaring the possibility of such ‘final finality’ through the written record of a poetic subject. This is so principally because the vast majority of Wyatt’s texts might not have presumed to achieve the privileged status of ‘place assignid / for ever more’ in the first place.

Wyatt, like O'Hara, was a coterie writer: his texts had a materially instantiated life of circulation, with multiple edits and revisions added to his poems, not always necessarily penned by Wyatt himself.⁵⁷ It is not unreasonable to suggest that O'Hara would have been at least aware of the irony of Wyatt's poem announcing a final and transcendent permanence in the very moment of setting pen to paper—the speaker of the poem himself even seems to undercut his own thesis, with the paradoxical imagery of unbinding and rebinding throwing into question the exact nature of this final liberation from the contingent shackles of cyclical earthly existence:

To place assignid for ever more!
Nowe bye contrainte I do agre
To loose the bonde of my restore
Wherein is bounde my liberte.
(234)

It is significant that at the moment of breaking from one's earthly bonds, the speaker of the poem can only seem to imagine another, mirrored kind of constraint. The speaker's 'liberty' may be released by the act of writing, but it is not so clear that the 'constraint' within which it consequently finds itself is any more free. More likely, 'place assignid' is just as much bound up with the strife of life: texts are written over, they move through other people's hands. In other words, to be 'freed' from one's corporeal body into a textual corpus is not necessarily a final transcendence; the poet merely trades one contingent form of material embodiment in for another. 'To make an ende'—i.e., to *write*—is thus simultaneously to continue in another form: the geometry underpinning Wyatt's poem is, after all, that of a circle, not a line; it ultimately ends on the words with which it began, prolonging in an infinite loop the speaker's anguished lamentations of living strife.

⁵⁷ For a richer explication of the extents to such textual ambiguity in manuscript scholarship on Wyatt, see Stamatakis (1-36)

If Wyatt's poem was ultimately concerned with the passing over of human embodiment into textual embodiment, O'Hara might be said to further this logic into a sort of chaotic Russian doll formation: the speaker of *Biotherm* sporadically moves through many different skins, each manifesting as a discordant interruption against the rhetorical and formal embodiments that precede it. As we have intimated in our survey of O'Hara's 'intermedials', and as we shall see in the following sections, these embodiments are poetically wired through the designs of film, drama and music, but also through genre pastiche and the incorporation of functional textual forms like dinner menus. As Geoff Ward has written, *Biotherm* is in many ways a nervous and frustrated poem, its 'depthless montage[...] less the flickering intimacies of the relationship in life than its capacity to mobilize O'Hara's feelings of frustration, of things not going anywhere, and of failure to get what is exciting about otherness and what is simply irreconcilably other into a liveable ratio' ("Housing the Deliberations"...' 25). Perhaps the intermedial restlessness that we have been observing is the formal conceit of such exasperated discomfort; of acknowledging the impossibility of an aesthetic containment that can ultimately bring the speaker's relationship to the object of his desire into a satisfying and resolute form. But Ward puts too fine a point on what he sees as the overriding 'sourness and bile' of *Biotherm* (21): to the contrary, the speaker seems to be more often than not thoroughly enjoying himself, embracing the erotic frisson underpinning the poem's deferential prolongation. One might recall that, in Wyatt's text, poetic death is also evoked by the speaker as a 'remedy': the poet does not need to actually kill himself to palliate his pain; the act of writing is a more than adequate surrogate. Likewise, O'Hara would finally name the poem so preoccupied by waste, failure and frustration after a salve; a way of palliating the painful daily circumlocutions of freedom and constraint, flight and rest, mess and measure, not by escaping the circle but by learning how to inhabit it, how to live within its oftentimes cruel disruptions and reversals. The following analysis of *Biotherm* proper will be itself concerned by this paradoxical preoccupation, charting the way O'Hara attempts to

salvage some sense of the remedial through the remediated; how the provisional embodied housings of different media, stripped of their claim to finitude, give way to temporary moments of affective revitalisation in a textual environment that is irrevocably impacted and sustained by lived ‘strife’.

ii. Opening the closed: medial exit-strategies

If the title’s reference to skin therapy points towards a need for the poem to heal or to protect, it is worthwhile to consider what the speaker wishes to be protected from. In a literal sense, O’Hara claims in his letter to Allen that the cream is most useful after taking too much sun; but when the brand name actually appears in the poem it is in the form of a cryptic relaying of reported speech, apparently mocking the final few lines of William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson V*, :

“measure shmeasure know shknew
 unless the material rattle us around
 pretty rose preserved in biotherm
 and yet the y bothers us when we dance
 the pussy pout
 (FOCP 439)

The measure intervenes, to measure is all we know,

a choice among measures

the measured dance

“unless the scent of a rose
 startle us anew”
 (Williams, *Paterson* 239)

‘[M]easure shmeasure know shknew’: although apparently a parodic and unceremonious send up of Williams’ impersonal, high modernist tone, the line is arguably a rather astute rephrasing of *Paterson V*’s final thoughts on the nature of poetic measure. Key to the latter’s formation is that the relationship between written, poetic language and the lived, material instantiations of sound that it attempts to ‘measure’ is ‘contrapuntal’ rather than, as it were,

homophonic (Ibid). Measure is not a technique for absolute knowledge of the world; it does not line up with the real in fixed lines of equivalence, but rather each poetic measure is a necessarily temporary and autonomous framework ('a choice among measures') that abrades the material world in a constant process of creative imbrication. O'Hara's comedic portrayal of the very word 'measure' mutating through aural drift is itself an exemplar of the contrapuntal modes by which 'measure' dances with the 'material' ambiguities of sound. If 'biotherm' is here seen to 'preserve' what Williams codes as the numinous immanence of the sensuously imbibed world, then the implication is that the poem as a whole is designed to keep the dance going, to keep the transactions between text and sense fresh and consistently interlaced. But the dance is also an interpersonal one, with O'Hara's reworking of Williams' cryptic and impersonal pronouncement 'Satyrically, the tragic foot' (239) into a private joke between the speaker and Berkson: 'the pussy pout'. Biotherm is, in effect, a pharmacological prescription for both a dynamic material imagination and a charged, interpersonal relationship; a facilitator that, in the words of David Herd, 'permit[s] the closest possible relationship with [one's] condition of inspiration' (*Enthusiast!* 158). When the speaker says that he is 'guarding [the poem] from mess and measure' later on in the text (*FOCP* 444), he is—as we have seen in the earlier essay on poetic 'Design' (3.a.ii.)—attempting to stop it becoming one over the other, preserving the poem's own insistently regenerative ethos from becoming either completely oversaturated mess or too rigidly proscribed measure.

But bracketing the citation of Williams for a moment, it might be useful to attend to a less literary interpretation of the line 'pretty rose preserved in biotherm'—that is, the image of applying a salve to sunburnt skin. Read this way, the line jars. After-sun would not *preserve* redness or pinkness; in fact, quite the opposite: one uses it to speed up the process by which evidence of too much sun disappears. It can, in other words, be seen as erasure rather than preservation. Or, more accurately, this is to say that organic regeneration necessitates the

relentless overwriting and erasure of prior states. A reading such as this arguably forces one to qualify any kind of pean to O'Hara's celebrations of life, regeneration and vitality ('no more dying', in the words of 'Ode to Joy' [*FOCP* 281]) with a more restrained questioning of the kinds of death such new beginnings must necessarily leap off from; what kinds of negation are presupposed by each new affirmation. Andrea Brady sketches out the stakes behind such a way of reading O'Hara in her essay on another of the poet's cryptic and fast-moving long works, 'Second Avenue'. For Brady, O'Hara's stylistic tendency to startle us anew can be seen as less an exhilarating movement of imaginative flight than a willed abnegation of communicative responsibility. Citing Francis Picabia's Dadaist tract 'Francis Mercil', Brady writes that 'O'Hara's personae are products of invention and forgetting, a refusal of reflection and a desire to be "sterile for others", to reduce the reader's potential for gain through co-making of the poem's meaning' (68). O'Hara's poetics of 'distracted absorption' thus constantly turns away from us, a textual strategy that disempowers the reader as a legitimate co-participant in the hermeneutic exchange. A reader is

restrained by the tyranny of superficiality into respecting the poet's autonomy, without enjoying any of her own. In that case, freedom is a site of consumption of authorial choices devoid of the ethics of selection, devoid of history or context. (Ibid 69)

Sunburn is the marker of having been in the light for too long; of having been *seen*. It can be read in this sense as simultaneously a mark of visibility and as an index of vulnerability. To seek to soothe or undo such vulnerability may be understandable and probably desirable, but it may also be an impossible attempt to regain a prior invisibility; a way of relieving oneself of the pressures of complicity determined by the more rigid laws of causation instilled in 'history' and 'context'. Of course, O'Hara's regenerative poetry cannot escape history nor context, just as much as a poem can never truly escape its reader in the moment of its reading. In his own words, 'the y bothers us as we dance': consistent models of causation persist in

the poem as a pressing discomfort, something that can never be completely evaded by the poet's dance-like manoeuvres between mess and measure.

The formal disjunctions of 'Biotherm' thus resist strict grammars of continuity. The poem reserves its right to be 'startled anew'. Indeed, in O'Hara's factitious movie credits for the 1944 romantic comedy *Practically Yours* pasted into the beginning of the poem as a spuriously 'found' document (Shaw, *Poetics* 77), the speaker makes his attitude perfectly clear with the line: 'continuity by the Third Reich' (FOCP 437). By implication, the line can be read as a self-reflexive nod towards the poem's own ethics of *dis*continuous montage. Throughout the work, the liminal spaces between each fragmented new emergence are occasionally pocked by small-capitals connectives ('BUT', 'AND'), adverbial qualifiers ('THEN', 'NEVERTHELESS', 'ALWAYS'), thematic titles ('PROKOFIEVNA', 'BACK TO SATIE', 'MENU'), or onomatopoeic interjections reminiscent of those found in comic book strips ('POOF', 'BANG'). This smattering of explicatory headings and mediating sign-posts can be registered as a pattern but their meanings are so inconsistent that they undermine any confident tracing of a single logic of continuity throughout the poem. Furthermore, 'Biotherm' regenerates itself formally as well as rhetorically: the text has the visually kinetic feel of projective verse, modulating through various patterns of indentation and line-length, unable to sit still within one formal idiom. Complementing the text's complex and variable visual texture, the intermedial strategies that we have previously seen as the central concerns of isolated and specific lyric meditations become urgent collisions brought together like a multi-dimensional Rauschenberg collage or *Merz* assemblage.⁵⁸ It is helpful here to take a distanced view and briefly catalogue the kinds of friction that occur when such disparate elements are brought

⁵⁸ It is important to stress that *Biotherm* more often than not appears to us *like* a collage, rather than being literally made up of cut and pasted previous wholes. As Cran reminds us: 'Collage in O'Hara's work is difficult to define because it operates conceptually—it is rarely possible to say that this or that fragment of text has *actually* been cut and pasted from elsewhere' (138).

into relation, as to only quote selectively from the poem ignores somewhat the sense of its development over time. After the opening scrawl of breathless notes quoted above, the voice modulates to the intimate and conversational (436-37), before erupting into non-linguistic sound markers imitative of female opera singers, which then turns into a line of newsprint, which then, at the mention of 'Aristotle', turns into a parodic logical syllogism, ending upon a comic book's 'POOF' (437). The voice of a gossip magazine then lapses into camp conversational speech, which turns into a list of film credits, brushing quickly past a Colette quote, then melting into a pornographic Marx Brothers set piece which has as its main protagonist neither Groucho nor Harpo but Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Ancient Mariner (437-38). From this perspective, we might locate two central qualities that define *Biotherm's* strategies of renewal and disjunctive regeneration: on the one hand, the sheer rapidity with which the speaker uses up and moves beyond one single medial register (each section of text only ever lasts a maximum of six or seven lines), and the technique of superimposition, whereby two or more media are entangled within one another's medial logics for self-consciously implosive effect.

But the question remains: is there anything driving this need for constant remediation other than the arbitrary whims of the remediator, relentlessly striving to reaffirm, in Brady's words, his own 'autonomy'? Is the limit of authorial agency in *Biotherm* merely the illusory freedom not to act in response to any form of necessity? Rona Cran argues that these questions become necessary and essential whenever collage is taken up as an artistic method: by denying the *inherent* necessity of parts leading on to other parts and stressing the *artificial* nature of grouped particulars, collage is 'heavily dependent on the artist's action of choice which in the act of ranging over the collage in question, the viewer cannot afford to ignore' (32). But it is at this moment where the metaphor from the visual arts breaks down. Unlike painting, we inhabit the poem in a linear fashion, with an irresistible temporality of

cumulative development. What is more, *Biotherm*'s authorial persona does not sit comfortably just outside or 'ranging over' the poem—within the text, the lyric 'I' remains constantly embedded, even if the embodied architectures through which he moves differ wildly. The effect is actually more like witnessing a person navigating a collage or some kind of assembled installation, moving through discontinuous and arbitrary particulars, testing out their affordances and the kinds of expressions they make possible, before moving on to another. In many ways similar to the disjunctions of Langston Hughes' *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (2.b.*iv.*), one gets the sense that both the reader's and the author's affinities are split between the implied subject attempting to navigate the poem's ruptures, and the obscure, exterior authorial hand that makes such rupture define the textual landscape in the first place.

In some cases, this exterior arranger is even named. Consider, for example, the aforementioned shift from newspaper article into logical syllogism: after a whimsical attempt by the speaker to widen his addressee's sexual horizon beyond limited heterosexuality, 'Aristotle' enters, seemingly intent on developing a counter argument:

NEVERTHELESS (thank you, Aristotle)

I know you are interested in the incongruities of my behaviour, John
just as Bill you are interested in the blue paint JA Oscar Maxine Khnute
perhaps you'd better be particularly interested POOF

(Ibid)

Here, the shift in tone and form responds to an injunction from without: the arrival of Aristotle shifts the speaker's tercet into a parody of a formal syllogism, with the first two lines each taking an assumed or given proposition and the third paving the way towards, but never really arriving at, an apparently necessary conclusion. But this is of course an inevitably *flawed* piece of argumentation, taking only the exterior aspect of a syllogism rather than any pretention towards internally consistent logic. Fittingly, the stanza ends by transforming

from a logic textbook into a comic book, with the brute onomatopoeia ‘POOF’ taking the place of whatever final resolution is to be gained by applying Ashbery’s worries about O’Hara’s behavioural ‘incongruities’ to Berkson’s love for ‘blue paint’. In other words, one could read the stanza as a rebellion against the attempt to halt the poem’s evasive, ‘incongruous’ style by imposing a rigid criteria of validity or truthfulness—it is not a coincidence that the final, hybrid addressee’s last name (the one presumably personifying the ‘conclusion’ to the syllogism) homophonically recalls that of King Canute. Additionally, the alternative meaning of the word ‘POOF’ as pejorative slang for gay person raises the stakes of such an aesthetic commitment. If O’Hara’s parodic syllogism tries to bind the artist’s ‘behaviour’ to some form of artistic technique, whereby ‘incongruous’ actions are somehow to be read through the use of ‘blue paint’, the implied conclusion is that naturalising aesthetic strategies by suturing them to certain kinds of ‘behaviour’ can only take the form of a reductive and painful othering akin to the objectifying language of homophobia. Whichever way one reads the botched syllogism, the effect amounts to the same: the lyrical voice self-consciously reneges on its imposed rhetorical modality for fear that it will insincerely locate a sense of cumulative finality where there is none to be had.

Biotherm, it could be argued, pits voice and form against each other. Put differently, it could be conceived as a relentless playing out of medial exit strategies, whereby the speaker luxuriates in his ability to escape from mechanical impositions that seemingly bear down from elsewhere. Indeed, what truly separates this poem from some of O’Hara’s other rhetorically evasive works is precisely this split sense of interior evasion working against exterior imposition: rather than a cataloguing of beguiling disjunctions presented through a sustained, consistent formal architecture like the ones in, say, ‘Second Avenue’ or ‘12 Oranges’, the speaker is always reacting to whatever new aesthetic domain he seems to be momentarily ensconced in. This can be seen through the acknowledgment of loaded personal

pronouns such as Aristotle, Prokofiev or Satie, or self-consciously appealing to the formal devices in question like in the ‘MENU’ section or

you were there I was here you were here I was there where are you I miss you
(that was an example of the “sonnet” “form”) (this is another)
when you went I stayed and then I went and we were both lost and then I died
(442)

There is a sense in these lines of the speaker overcoming or out-doing the sonnet, but it is not completely certain whether the tone is parodic or revenant: is it discarding the sonnet as predictable and delimiting, or celebrating its capacity to formalise the dizzying reversals of personal attachments? Arguably, there is room for these lines to do both; to my mind, the stanza reads as if the sonnet has been disrobed—at once implying a sort of antagonistic divestment of authority and status, but at the same time exposing a kind of vulnerability at the heart of the form, seeing it for what it is underneath its accidental accoutrements. To be sure, these lines are a light-hearted assertion about the *essence* of ‘sonnet’ ‘form’, but these archetypal sonnets may in many ways surprise us: one of the most controlled and authoritative lyrical forms has been reduced to an uneasy wavering, a directionless hesitation over difficult-to-articulate oscillations of social isolation and existential unease. It is ironic that there are no clear prepositional markers that might indicate a turn or a volta in O’Hara’s two ‘examples’—no ‘yet’ or ‘but’; these ‘sonnets’ are repetitive and paratactical rather than argumentative and revelatory. To be sure, these are in many ways accurate parodies of certain kinds of sonnets—a speaker addressing his absent beloved, meditating on a problem or affective disequilibrium—but the speaker undermines the form by resisting or unsettling its expectations of closure; the sonnet can no longer swerve us towards a new direction of thought or a resolution of tension, the speaker merely dwells upon his anxious existential and affective state in prolonged anticipation: finality carries no meaning or sense of closure.

This is not to say that the voice of *Biotherm* refuses all closure necessarily—just that inherited written forms (whether they be derived from philosophy or poetry) are systematically revealed to be perennially unable to provide it. Nowhere is this better typified than with the appearance of Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, first taking the role of a pornographic sex pest, then clanging out recognisably Coleridgean ballad constructions descending into nonsensicality on the fringes of what one presumes to be a Nevada nuclear test site:

but even that extended a little further,
 out into the desert, where
 no flash tested, no flashed!
 oops! and no nail polish, yak
 yak, yak, Lieut.
 no flesh to taste no flash to tusk
 no flood to flee no fled to dlownd flom the iceth loth
 (438)

If the *Ancient Mariner* can be described as an archetypal man with a message, travelling around the world sagely communicating his didactic tale, here he seems completely out of sync with the time. The bewildering inversion of scale between shooting an albatross and dropping a nuclear bomb points towards a kind of horrific sublime that disjuncts even the call and response symmetry of ballad verse form. Like Gregory Corso’s horrifically mutated geographies (1.a.i.), O’Hara’s *Mariner* speaks a poetry decimated by the Bomb and the crudeness of mass culture, but the ghostly architectures of prior verse forms persist as echoes and scraps, robbed of their internal logic of cumulative consistency or didactic revelation but nonetheless available materials for *Biotherm*’s disjunctive textual space.

Elsewhere in the text, however, there are spaces of affective intensity that are less self-consciously pre-occupied with the inadequacy of the medium to sufficiently house the message. The ‘PROKOFIEVNA’ section is a particularly good example of this, with the stylistic signature of a modern composer perhaps allowing O’Hara a more adequate sense of aesthetic

architecture than those provided by closed poetic forms. The section itself is a remarkably sincere emergence of a contained lyric voice, with the speaker moving outwards from an imagistic flash of memory ('you are posing in your checkerboard bathing trunks' [440]) to addressing his and Berkson's feelings of possessive isolation ('I would never leave you / if I didn't have to' [441]) and the precariously drawn line between intimacy and claustrophobia ('it doesn't matter much / doing without each other is much more insane' [Ibid]). The signposting of 'PROKOFIEVNA' as a temporary interlude or transition is fitting. Its tone contrasts with the relentless irony and humour of the text surrounding it; the piece itself could be isolated as a single lyric meditation in the vein of one of O'Hara's Rachmaninov poems: a poem tuned to the specific frequencies of a sonic attitude. In a certain sense, however, it would feel wrong to understand the 'PROKOFIEVNA' section as formally mimetic of a particular Prokofiev piece or style. More likely, Prokofiev's ultimately tragic fate as a composer needing to work within the contexts of alienating social regimes—whether that be those encountered as an exile abroad or those that defined the fraught political environment of the Soviet Union in the late 1930s—carries particular symbolic purchase as an identifiable archetype for the speaker's isolated exhortations about having to go back to work:

Soviet society taught us that
is the necessity to be "realistic" love is a football
I only hear the pianos
(441)

Arguably, Prokofiev's ability to *hear* the pianos even while being ensconced within the strategic parameters of a political game allows the section to end with a particularly hard-won piece of lyricism which palliates the feelings of impending isolation explored throughout the section:

okay, it's not the sun setting it's the moon rising
I see it that way too
(Ibid)

Once again, a closure metamorphoses into an opening—this time not through formal insubordination or sardonic undermining, but through the acknowledgement of a personal or artistic lesson gained. Unlike Aristotle's rude interjection earlier on in the poem, Prokofiev's music presides over the poetry as an index for an intimacy sustained despite the intimate moment itself being disrupted by an alienated and alienating professional context. It allows the speaker to carry on without leaving what is important behind.

Thus, to borrow the words of Berkson himself, the poem's interlocking assemblages of different media and expressive forms 'herald different ways of keeping going, pushing the poem into other, unforeseen areas' ('Air and Such' 15). But the poet does not keep going like a steamroller, callously flattening any and every artistic form that appears in his way. As we have seen, *Biotherm* presents a more textually and texturally complex process of starting over, one which probes and unsettles its given model of medial finitude before discarding (as with Aristotle's syllogism), or reworking (as with the 'exemplary' sonnets), or absorbing (as with the 'PROKOFIEVNA') the affective and creative possibilities of its structural limits. In other words, the voice and the media in which it finds itself relate to each other dialogically, engaged in a sort of dance whereby the speaker absorbs some or none or most of one medium's expressive affordances before probing at the apertures through which it might pass over into other formal constraints. In this sense, the poem's ludic experimentation cannot be separated from a certain kind of critical poetics, or a discourse which explores and affirms a practical attitude towards an 'open' artistic and creative process. Unlike Olson's bold and declarative tomes of poetics, however, whose capitalised pronouncements of 'Open Form' rely upon a rhetorical *clearing out* of prior forms in favour of a completely new beginning, or a blank page receptive to the typewriter's projections; O'Hara's own way of keeping the poem 'open' might be better described as *an ongoing opening out of the closed*; of not

taking for granted the authority of the closed form, revealing certain of its limits to be potential thresholds.

iii. Mediations in an emergency

In an influential 1979 paper on O'Hara's aesthetics of fracture, elision and—most importantly—parataxis, Bruce Boone argues for a specifically queer language that enters into discourse as a kind of coded oppositional space, or 'group praxis' for a politically vulnerable population who do not necessarily have recourse to explicit or 'sanctioned' discursive practices (63-66). If, in a pre-Stonewall era, 'speaking queer' tended not to have a public grammar emerging from queer voices in the open, coteries of gay or otherwise sexually non-normative collectives, according to Boone, cultivated a discourse that prized linguistic strategies of disguise, deniability, discontinuity and intimation over identity, continuity and explicit address (75-86).⁵⁹ Indeed, if we refer back to the Aristotle section of *Biotherm* cited above as an example, O'Hara self-consciously parodies the reduction of subversive or potentially 'incongruous' aspects of behaviour to a legible aesthetic pattern as an inevitably *exterior* imposition that delimits the speaker's agency.⁶⁰ In many ways reminiscent of Hughes' utilisation of charged, liminal space (3.a.ii.), if a collective subject is to recognise themselves

⁵⁹ Boone's vocabulary for coded oppositional discourse is plotted between two theoretical axes: V.N. Vološinov's social linguistics in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and Franz Fanon's analyses of linguistic-political oppression in both *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin White Masks*.

⁶⁰ Although O'Hara and Berkson's relationship was, by all accounts, not a sexual one, Gooch documents how their relationship operated on an indeterminate line between friendship and romantic attachment: intensely intimate, possessive and private, but still nonetheless resistant to the expectations that attended such affects (Gooch 377-92). Indeed, the conversation to which the Aristotle section refers is more literally an account of 'John Ashbery's mild enquiry to Frank and [Bill...] as to what was really going on between [them]' (Berkson, 'Air and Such' 11). In this extremely limited sense—in how Berkson and O'Hara's relationship disrupted and made tenuous normative associations surrounding friendship and romantic partnership and the role of sexual consummation as a mediator between the labels of 'straight' or 'gay'—I would tentatively frame their relationship as a queer one.

in the text, it will be via the things not said; where only the people who know *really know*, and those who don't can only see a rupture, or a textual practice that resists hermeneutic closure. In Mutlu Blasing's words, O'Hara's emphasis on indeterminacy, ceaseless change and interpretive ambiguity is 'less an essential or a historical value than a defensive response to a state of emergency; indeed, it signals less a freedom than a necessity[...] To resist a reified identity is necessary for survival—as a gay man, for example' (56). Alongside Boone's triumph of O'Hara's parataxis—which is clearly on display in *Biotherm*'s highly unpunctuated and disjunctive syntax—we might add to the poem's catalogue of survival aesthetics the art of the unattributed quotation, where speech marks throughout the poem signify a shift in voice and position but without the kind of accountability that a personalised attribution would imply. Seen through this lens, the oft-cited 'in-jokes' of *Biotherm* (Perloff, *Poet Among...* 174) may be understood as a way of formulating an identity as an implied but crucially unnamed phenomenon; the semantic and affective content of the words on the page existing in a more untethered sphere of potential attribution.

Might we similarly plot *Biotherm*'s intermedial 'opening out of the closed', as I have described it, on the same axes of aesthetic discontinuity and communal survival? To be sure, *Biotherm*'s register is a long way from the explicitly political, although it certainly inhabits a politically uneasy referential domain, ranging, as we have seen, from nuclear test sites to the mechanical arbitrariness of mass cultural forms. Following Boone, we might say that the politics of *Biotherm* lies not in its explicit referential content but its formal and rhetorical strategies of displacement—in this case, of refusing to allow an expressive utterance to be contained and completed by the formal requirements of its medium. Even O'Hara's own cultivated aesthetics of poetic distraction and displacement do not get a free pass here: in the 'BACK TO SATIE' section, we get a sense that even forms predicated on a certain openness and receptivity to fluid contextual contingencies risk in themselves becoming structural

underwriters of proscriptive closure. The section comes after the ‘PROKOFIEVNA’, and seems to serve as a kind of counterweight to the former’s intimate and bare mode of address; Satie seems to shift the speaker into an ‘I do this, I do that’ self-parody:

when the *Vitalità nell’ arte* catalogue came in the mail I laughed
 thinking it was *Perspectives USA* but it wasn’t it
 was vitality nellie arty ho ho that’s a joke pop
 [...]

Lo! the Caracas transport lunch with George Al leslie 5:30 I’ll
 be over at 5

(441)

In many ways, Satie is an appropriate musical reference point for the kind of poetic register most memorably housed in the City Lights edition of *Lunch Poems*—a collection whose dilatory six-year publication process would finally be completed a year or so after the time of *Biotherm*’s writing. If poems like ‘The Day Lady Died’, as we have seen (4.a.iii.), affect the reader through a certain permeability between background and foreground, whereby the apparently contingent and unimportant frictions of the everyday tonally vie against weighty historical events for poetic significance, then the ‘furniture music’ of pieces such as *Carrelage phonique* (Phonic tiling) or *Tenture de cabnet préfectoral* (Wall lining in a chief officer’s office) perform a similar blurring sonically.⁶¹ Likewise, a discarded magazine on the counter, or a diary entry for daily lunch plans offer tonal breaths of fresh air to contrast with the emotionally possessive intensity of the previous section. Indeed, ‘furniture’ carries much of the interpretive weight for the section’s array of references and aesthetic commitments, with the contents of a work desk providing clues for the gnomonic evocation of an ‘anti-Cocteau movement’:

[...] I’m dying of loneliness
 here with my red blue green and natch pencils and the erasers
 with the mirror behind me and the desk in front of me
 like an anti-Cocteau movement

⁶¹ Bill Berkson, it should be said, has a different response to the move from ‘PROKOFIEVNA’ ‘BACK TO SATIE’: ‘Note how the “vitality nellie arty” lines mime the hilarity of typical Satie rhythms (one “hears,” for instance, the zippier strains of *Sports et divertissements*)’ (‘Air and Such’ 14).

(Ibid)

As Ward notes, if Cocteau's movement in *Orphée* was to loop the present back into the past through a cinematic retelling of ancient myth, whereby characters face the mirror directly to push through into a deeper realm of metaphysical revelation (Appendix 4.b., 337-38), O'Hara's 'desk, by contrast, has erasers and pencils on it, but no metaphysics about or in it. Once again the bumped-into, the constraining work-tool, life's hard furniture, are the agents of freedom more than deep spaces without resistance, which may only lead to forms of death' ("Housing the Deliberations" 26). Lonely perhaps, but it is nonetheless an aesthetic that recalls the particular flavour of O'Hara that we have been discussing: a poetry bound up with the background; a poetry turned away from officially sanctioned mythic archetypes, submerged more faithfully within the stuff of the everyday.

Arguably, however, the subsequent stanza warns against emphasising too stringently *one* of O'Hara's many stylisations of poetic imminence as a kind of final answer or proscriptive norm for a commitment to 'open' poetics. As Chalmers reminds us, O'Hara is profoundly ambivalent about his 'anti-Cocteau movement' (239-40): he doesn't want to be at work anyway, and the stanza remains ambiguous about whether the Orphic mirror or the MoMA desk would make a preferable aesthetic underwriter.⁶² There is also perhaps the implication that the 'I do this, I do that' aesthetic of the *Lunch Poems* is by this point in O'Hara's career an almost regressive or de-potentiated manoeuvre: the heading's formation as *returning* to Satie—despite the composer's name being completely unmentioned in the previous lines—gives the sense that this aesthetic is a throwback, something only bearing the appearance of the new but in actuality is a merely repetitive affectation. Indeed, the section's

⁶² In her exhaustive essay centring on the thematic and conceptual affinities between *Biotherm* and Jean Cocteau's Orpheus trilogy, Chalmers defines O'Hara's 'anti-Cocteau movement' as 'a reversal of a reversal, a movement against a style in which mythic backwards movement predominates' (245).

fascination with background-becoming-foreground is put under pressure a few lines later, where the speaker recalls that throwing oneself open to the contextual and the contingent may leave one vulnerable to exteriorities that are fundamentally unwelcome:

then too, the other day I was walking through a train
with my suitcase and I overheard someone say “speaking of faggots”
now isn’t life difficult enough without that
and why am I always carrying something
well it was a shitty looking person anyway
better a faggot than a farthead
or as fathers have often said to friends of mine
“better dead than a dope” “if I thought you were queer I’d kill you”
you’d be right to, DAD, daddio, addled annie pad-lark (Brit. 19th C.)
(441-42)

There is something unnerving about the speaker’s adoption of the straight-edge, 1950s father’s rhetoric here, despite the passage’s clearly parodic tone. How to parse the acknowledgment ‘you’d be right to’, for instance? Coming after such an admission, the absurd patternings of linguistic play around the word ‘DAD’ seem less a sardonic deconstruction of authority than a recursive obsession with it, or an inability to outfox painful impositions of identity by a mere change of tonal attitude. The speaker is ‘always carrying something’, something not emerging authentically from inside but an irritatingly external item of baggage. A suitcase? A self? In any case, what began as a stylistic and formal change of direction that seemed to liberate the speaker out into the potentiated tension of the background—‘life’s hard furniture’—culminates in the background limiting and foreclosing the speaker’s identity in turn, trapping him inside a claustrophobic carriage on a linear train-track. For every affirmation, a consequent negation; there seems to be no privileged aesthetic register that can escape such a relentless dialectic of entrapment and release; of, to reformulate the words of Wyatt, ‘[these] deadly stroke[s]’.

And so the poem, stripped of the viability of this mode of expression, shifts into another and on it goes. To the extent that this is ultimately a poem about the affordances of

a relationship (about how ‘Bill’ and ‘Frank’ construct themselves through and with each other), different kinds of mediated articulation are thus imposed upon this process as harbingers of inevitable calcification; as ultimate agents of interpolation that will bring identity out into the sun, thus making the identified vulnerable to a kind of reification inadequate to the plasticity of the relationship as it is lived. It follows, then, that the kind of interpersonal agency that *Biotherm* affirms is one to be found in the break; in moments where the poem doesn’t go according to plan, where the design falters, when the medium breaks down. Such medial precarity is everywhere to be seen in the poem; the sequence could be described in this sense as a ranging catalogue of mediations in an emergency. The poem is self-conscious about this, constantly referring to things not going according to plan: ‘well everything can’t be perfect’ (442), ‘I don’t think I want to win anything I want to die unadorned’ (438), ““oops!”” (441), or, in a playful send-up of Ezra Pound’s hectoring pedagogical tone:

now this is not a tract against usury it’s just putting two and two together
and getting five (thank you, Mae)
(Ibid)

Arguably, O’Hara’s ‘putting two and two together / and getting five’ is a much broader critique about the very framing of poetry through the revelation of an underlying equation of necessity; a parody of a poet speaking on behalf of ordained and authoritative truth conditions, be that economics, philology or mathematics. We might want to think back to Olson’s declaration that the task of the contemporary writer was to ‘square the circle’ (2.a.1), or to show some proof of mathematical necessity before he can be adequate to speak for his time and place. The kind of poetry—and consequent sociality—that O’Hara values in *Biotherm*, by contrast, does not achieve its agency through such allegiance to a recuperated trajectory of necessity; it appears rather when doubt muddies or challenges such necessities, when lived reality reveals a paradoxical surplus that escapes a particular discourse’s criteria of sufficiency.

There is often a sense in O'Hara's long poems of an arbitrarily decided upon ending. How else could it be, when so much of his poetry, as we have seen, seems to want to actively prohibit a last word? The word 'always' stalks the pages of *Biotherm* as if the speaker is trying to talk his way out of the poem's inevitable termination: it is there in the very first stanza, and it provides the subheading for the poem's final section, alongside other totalising and futurally expansive terms such as 'never', 'endless' and 'all'—but also alongside less definitive words like 'somewhere', 'quite' and a twice-repeated 'perhaps' (448). Maybe some amalgamation of these two columns provides the best way of describing *Biotherm*'s spirit: a poem of the always perhaps—an aesthetic that cleaves perennially to such moments of wavering and doubt, establishing them as a regulative norm to underwrite an 'endless' struggle against the calcified and the statuary. But it would be inadequate to view the kind of agency that the poem affirms solely through the lens of grandiose struggle and unrest. The poem is, after all, named after a sun cream brand. In bringing the exterior limits and internal requirements of mediated experience into view, the poem also asks how to keep going within and alongside them; how to take what one can from mediating forms without taking their inevitable impositions and constrictions too seriously. The titular after-sun lotion makes a return in the final words of the poem, working its way through a deeply affecting extended metaphor that places the ongoing metaphysical fluctuations between identity and emergency, between visibility and fugitivity, onto the level of the everyday:

yes always you said it first
 you the quicksand and sand and grass
 as I wave toward you freely
 the ego-ridden sea
 there is a light there that neither
 of us will obscure
 rubbing it all white
 saving ships from fucking up on the rocks
 on the infinite waves of skin smelly and crushed and light and absorbed
 (448)

To wave at someone is to recognise them; it is to fix them in place and establish their visibility within the context of a relation. But this kind of waving differs from the kind of waves that the end of *Biotherm* goes on to affirm; a wave that recalls motions of ‘weaving’ or ‘weft’; of things oozing and flooding into one another; of clear markers of ‘me here’ and ‘you there’ breaking down. The sun cream also begins by making Berkson visible—it covers him in ‘white’, turning him into a lighthouse marking safety and solid ground, before the image itself seems to crumble down and become ‘obscured’ by the speaker’s rhetorical submission to the ‘infinite waves of skin’. Was there ever a passage more comfortable in its juggling of the differentiated and the undifferentiated, the liquid and the solid? The speaker can imagine Berkson to be both a deadly quicksand and yet also an individually distinct, Whitmanian leaf of grass; the term ‘ego-ridden’ both connotes an independent, guiding consciousness riding and directing the tidal drift, but also a sense of that consciousness disintegrating back into the sea itself—the sea is full of egos, ultimately surrounding and containing them.

In this sense, the poem’s conclusion finds itself asking the same questions that we have uncovered time and again over the course of this thesis: does one derive one’s sense of agency from a clearly defined and identified subject position, or is agency to be found in precisely the breakdown of that subject, in the freedom to become otherwise? One gets the overwhelming sense that O’Hara favours the latter over the former, ‘the infinite waves of skin’ providing a momentary vision of untethered freedom, the desire for which presumably underpins the poem’s ongoing attempt to escape from its calcifying formal embodiments. Nonetheless, what is remarkable about *Biotherm* is its inability to sustain such visions of total flight: it is a poem that constantly comes up short, a poem that always has to find its agency through the navigation and subversion of a constricting imposition. Indeed, *Biotherm* highlights the extent to which complicated negotiations of identity and agency are intensely suffused within the versatile rhythms of everyday encounters: every poem or television

programme that one confronts in a hyper-mediated modernity exposes variable trade-offs between vertiginous liberation and impending foreclosure; problems that must be lived with as an ongoing attendant to experience itself. *Biotherm* succeeds in mapping this lived negotiation of agency as a daily practice, as an artistic appendage to the on-going reality of testing personal relationships, work/life dissonances and hegemonic social prejudice. If O'Hara constantly asks how one can live freely, he is also acutely aware that such a question is much too loaded to ever be answered satisfactorily. Agency is not something that can be miraculously gained by poetry but is rather an ordeal to be lived with and through it; an ongoing attempt to open one's words out, even as mediating structures beyond one's control seem constantly poised to close them down.

-5-
Coda

I, Too, Sing America

The figure of Walt Whitman has reappeared at varying intervals throughout the course of this thesis. His presence, however, has not been entirely unproblematic; his prophecy of a new America and a futural American subject sits awkwardly within a post-war poetic corpus infused by an overriding sense of doubt. Langston Hughes' famous demonstration that he, 'too', could sing America (*LHCP* 46)—that the very signifier of this ideal national subject was capacious enough to reconcile the nation's real survivors of enslavement and colonisation—was, by the time of *Ask Your Mama's* publication in 1960 an increasingly attenuated commitment. For Hughes, the threat of riot within precipitated an internationalist plunge outwards, one which threatened to defy the bounded coherence of Americanness even as the poet worried over the material channels mediating such a transition. Olson, too, would stress American pluri-potentiality—the nation as a 'complex of occasions' (*TMP* 185), open enough to be redeemed via reciprocal back-and-forths between shore and horizon—and although Olson championed Melville as the oceanic progenitor of modern America, the central contradiction that this thesis has highlighted within Olson's material imagination is perhaps best expressed through a Whitmanian register. If the deep patterns of geological time promised Olson consolidating formal structures for the containment of multitudes, such structures confronted the poet more often than not through their cosmic silence, or a dwarfing incommensurability with situated human actions and local meanings. Finally, if O'Hara's remediative aesthetic of 'opening the closed' can be conceived of as a sort of body electric—a way of expanding the affective, embodied potentials of a poet 'going on [his] nerve'—what we have shown here is that such a commitment is much easier declared than

it is lived; an aesthetic which demands that a poem be more stuffed full of life frequently wavers through its acknowledgement that the act of writing itself can also be considered a form of death. As Gregory Corso's grotesque parody of the word-en-masse in 1958 forcefully suggested, the inherent contradictions of an open, perpetually affirmational poetic subject writing under a national banner could no longer be ignored.

The story that this thesis has found itself telling three times over has arguably been one of crisis; the shared aesthetic that we have named a material imagination has repeatedly shown itself to be drawn towards instability, where the question of human agency continually rears its head as the poet both includes and is subsumed by the notional agency of their materials. Thus, the poets we have considered come to temper their affinities with vibrant matter in a move reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence's polemical castigation of Whitman's poetics of 'merging':

What can be more mechanical? The difference between life and matter is that life, living things[...] have the instinct of turning right away from *some* matter, and of blissfully ignoring the bulk of most matter, and of turning towards only some certain bits of specially selected matter. (243-44)

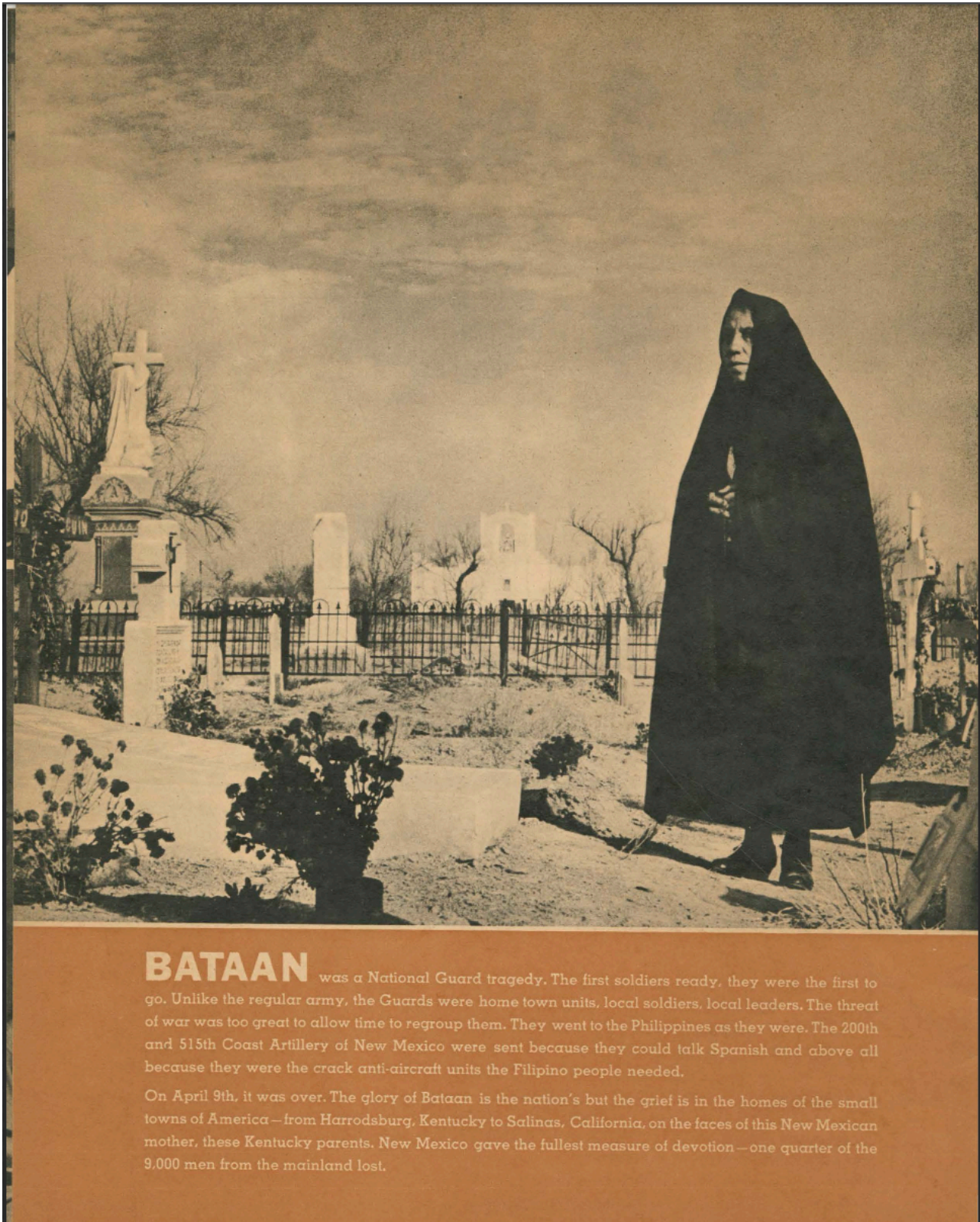
Whitman's radical sympathy was, for Lawrence, a problematic self-sacrifice that foreclosed the ability of the subject to act meaningfully in the world: by flattening the human into an unconditionally horizontal ontology, one would necessarily be alleviated of the ethical responsibility to act *on behalf of* others (259-60). Olson, Hughes and O'Hara have been shown to perceive this extreme flatline as a limit case for their own material imaginations: in *The Maximus Poems*, it appears through aqueous visions of an endless, aimless voyage out; in both *Montage* and *Ask Your Mama*, it appears as a capitulation to racial capitalism's consolidation of the material world; in *Biotherm*, it appears as the claustrophobic finality of the medium's mechanical limits. In all of these cases, the three poets 'merge' until the very notion of an embodied, human agent becomes tenuous, threatening to be captured by obscure,

mechanical agencies beyond the poet's control. But in so doing, the poetry they produce is profoundly potentiated and, ultimately, optimistic. In starkly different poetic modes, contextualised through radically contrasting literary traditions, the textual experiments of Olson, Hughes and O'Hara are a testament to poetry's ability to radically expand the lenses through which the subject conceives of its being and acting within the world. By bending, stretching and destabilising the poetic subject, these poets ultimately stay true to the Whitmanian prophecy of an ethical and agentive subject-to-come. Only by probing at such a being's extents and limits can the implications of this prophecy really come to light, and it is in the spirit of determined imaginative renewal that the poetries of Olson, Hughes and O'Hara can be said to write agency.

Appendix

1.a.

Page 26: ‘...an attempted reorientation of American-ness is implied through combined rhetorical and visual strategies...’ (Olson and Shahn)



BATAAN

was a National Guard tragedy. The first soldiers ready, they were the first to go. Unlike the regular army, the Guards were home town units, local soldiers, local leaders. The threat of war was too great to allow time to regroup them. They went to the Philippines as they were. The 200th and 515th Coast Artillery of New Mexico were sent because they could talk Spanish and above all because they were the crack anti-aircraft units the Filipino people needed.

On April 9th, it was over. The glory of Bataan is the nation's but the grief is in the homes of the small towns of America—from Harrodsburg, Kentucky to Salinas, California, on the faces of this New Mexican mother, these Kentucky parents. New Mexico gave the fullest measure of devotion—one quarter of the 9,000 men from the mainland lost.



THE PARENTS OF WILLARD AND CLAUDE YEAST, HARRODSBURG, MEMBERS OF KENTUCKY'S 192ND TANK BATTALION LOST AT BATAAN

BATAAN fue una tragedia para la Guardia Nacional. Porque estaban listos, fueron los primeros en ir. A diferencia del ejército regular, los Guardias eran unidades municipales, soldados y oficiales locales. La amenaza de guerra era demasiado grande para dar tiempo a reagruparlos. Fueron a las Filipinas como estaban. Los regimientos números 200 y 515 de artillería costanera de Nuevo México fueron enviados porque hablaban español y sobre todo porque eran las unidades Ases de artillería antiaérea que tanto necesitaban los filipinos.

El día 9 de abril, todo se había consumado. La gloria de Bataan es la gloria de la Nación, pero su amagura es de los hogares de los pueblos de América—desde Harrodsburg, Kentucky hasta Salinas, California. Se refleja en los rostros de esta madre de Nuevo México y de estos padres de Kentucky. Nuevo México dió la medida completa de su devoción—al perder una cuarta parte de los 9000 hombres que la nación envió.

ACTION

was America's answer to Bataan.

America demanded fighters, workers, farmers. All these the Spanish speaking Americans gave to their country.

Along the U.S. side of the Rio Grande 1 out of every 2 Spanish speaking males between the ages of 15 and 65 is either in the armed forces or has left his home to farm, to mine, to build ships and planes.



La respuesta de América al desastre de Bataan — ACCION!

América pedía soldados, campesinos, trabajadores, labradores. Los americanos de habla española los aportaron todos.

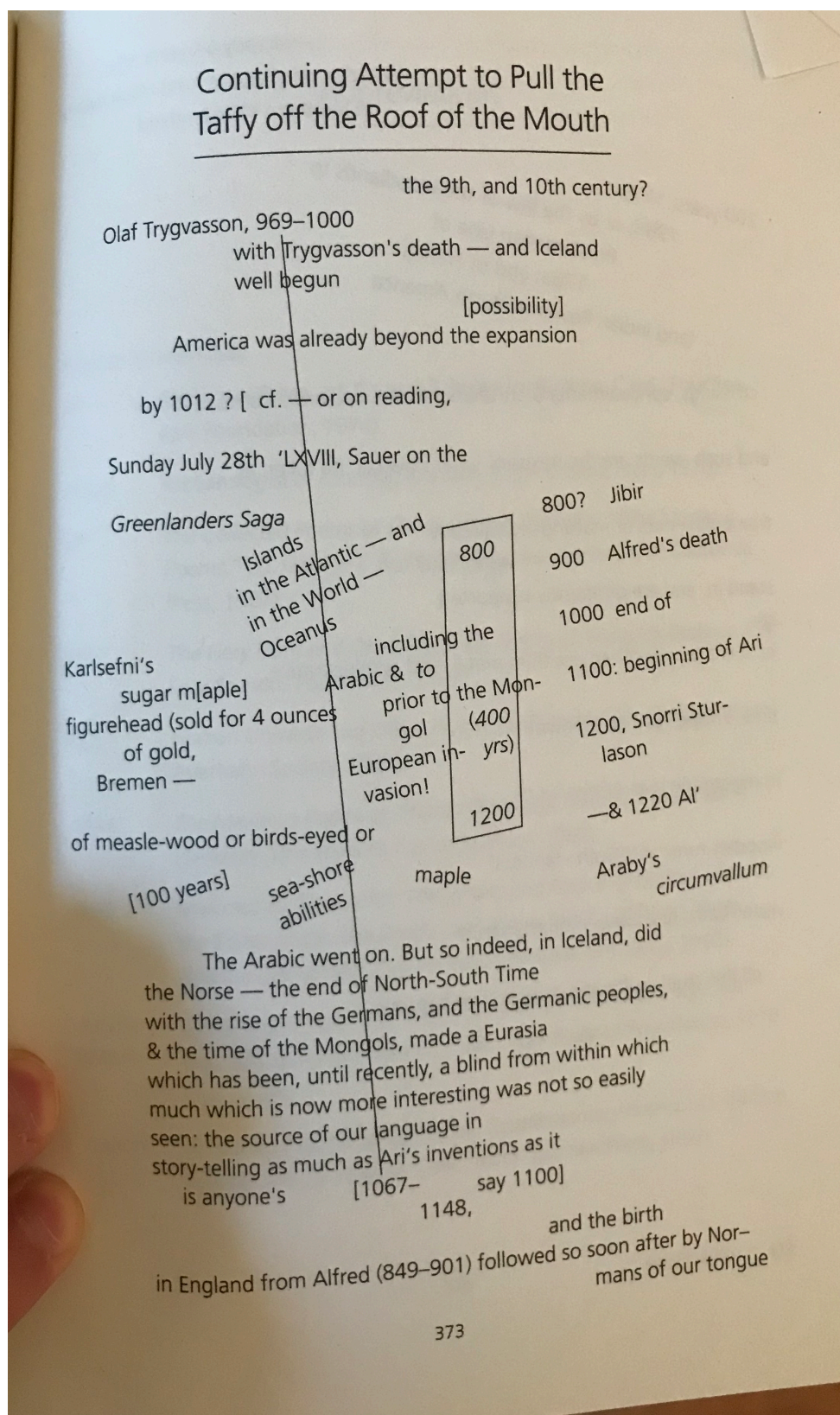
A lo largo del Río Grande uno de cada dos varones de habla española entre las edades de 15 a 65 años están actualmente en el ejército o han salido de su hogar para dedicarse al cultivo de la tierra, a la minería, a fabricar barcos o aviones.

2.b.

Page 126: ‘... ‘The map itself[...] is valuable for Olson not because of its cartographical accuracy [...] but because it communicates the phenomenological intensity of the Americas as a landmass ...’ (La Cosa.)

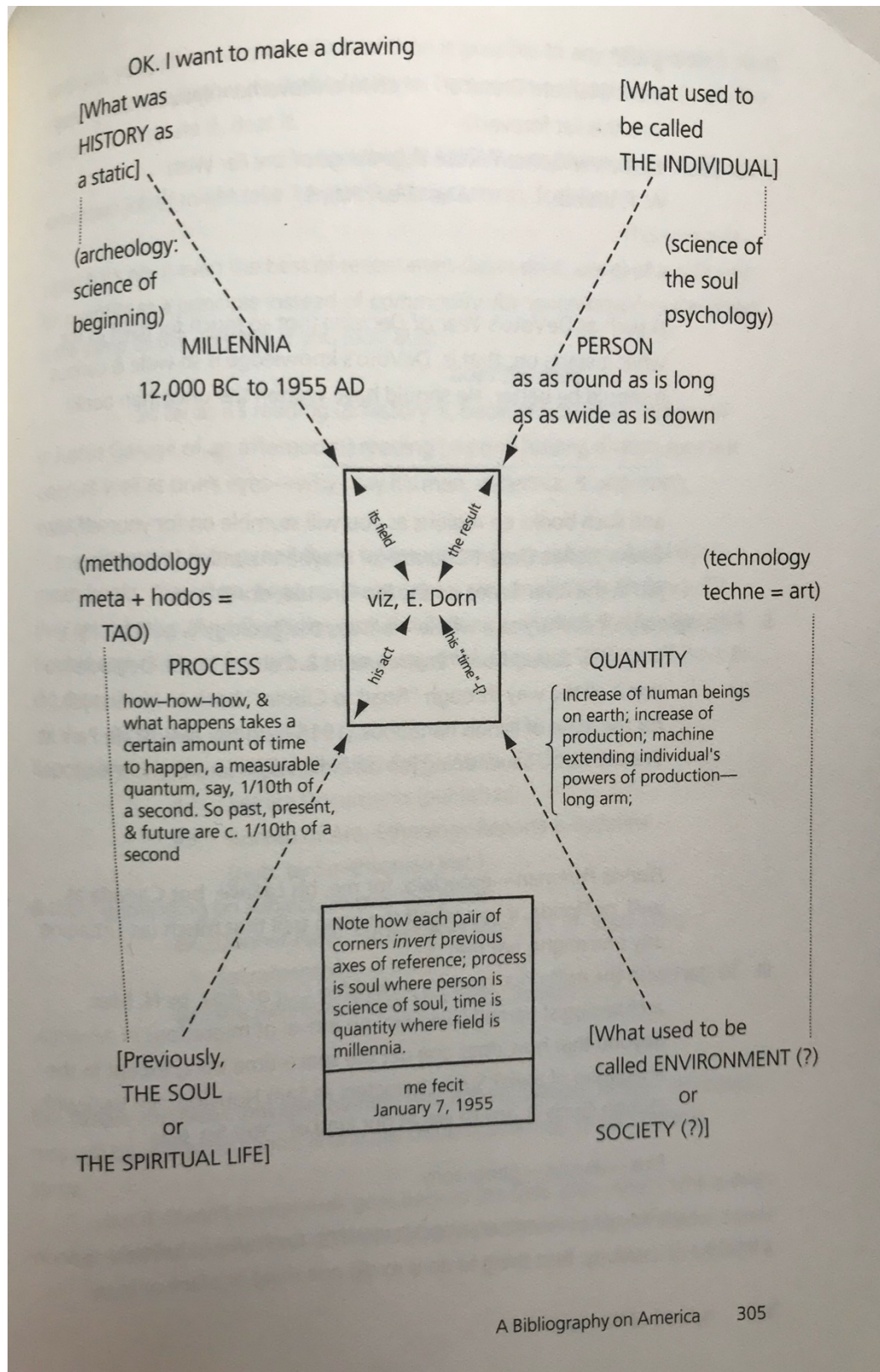


Page 131: '... 'Continuing Attempt to Pull the Taffy off the Roof of Mouth' can be read as a re-opening of the kind of investigative technique that the poet had begun to explore in the early 1950s—albeit this time in a much more visual and diagrammatic spatial arrangement...' (COCPr 373)



2.c.

Page 144: '...I want to highlight how the poet's own local field (mapped along the four axes of Dorn's immediate experience) acts as an organising matrix for an incoming rush of data pertaining to a much broader spatiotemporal universality...' (COCPr 305)



3.a.

Page 182: '...a poem which might be organised in a certain manner but one whose staging/reading (in a similar vein to "The Cat and the Saxophone") is an intentionally problematic and uncertain endeavour...' (*LHCW1* 136; 234-35)

136 *The Poems: 1921-1940*

Chant for May Day

To be read by a Workman with, for background, the rhythmic waves of rising and re-rising Mass Voices, multiplying like the roar of the sea.

WORKER:	The first of May:
	When the flowers break through the earth,
	When the sap rises in the trees,
	When the birds come back from the South.
	Workers:
	Be like the flowers,
10 VOICES:	Bloom in the strength of your unknown
	power,
20 VOICES:	Grow out of the passive earth,
40 VOICES:	Grow strong with Union,
	All hands together—
	To beautify this hour, this spring,
	And all the springs to come
50 VOICES:	Forever for the workers!
WORKER:	Workers:
10 VOICES:	Be like the sap rising in the trees,
20 VOICES:	Strengthening each branch,
40 VOICES:	No part neglected—
50 VOICES:	Reaching all the world.
WORKER:	All workers:
10 VOICES:	White workers,
10 OTHERS:	Black workers,
10 OTHERS:	Yellow workers,
10 OTHERS:	Workers in the islands of the sea—
50 VOICES:	Life is everywhere for you,
WORKER:	When the sap of your own strength rises
50 VOICES:	Life is everywhere.
10 VOICES:	May Day!
20 VOICES:	May Day!
40 VOICES:	May Day!
50 VOICES:	When the earth is new,
WORKER:	Proletarians of all the world:
20 VOICES:	Arise,
40 VOICES:	Grow strong,
60 VOICES:	Take Power,
80 VOICES:	Till the forces of the earth are yours
100 VOICES:	From this hour.

Overcome

Us.

We

Who have nothing to lose

Must laugh and dance

Lest our laughter

Goes from

Us.

Wait

PICKERS

CHAPEI

FORD

STRIKERS

ALABAMA

NEGROES

CUBA

UNEMPLOYED

MILLIONS

MEERUT

CHILD

LABOR

SCOTTSBORO

GERMAN

COMMUNISTS

POOR

FARMERS

BLACK

I am the Silent One,
Saying nothing,
Knowing no words to write,
Feeling only the bullets

And the hunger

And the stench of gas

Dying.

And nobody knows my name

But someday,

I shall raise my hand

And break the heads of you

Who starve me.

I shall raise my hand

And smash the spines of you

Who shoot me.

I shall take your guns

And turn them on you.

Starting with the bankers and

the bosses

Traders and missionaries

Who pay the militarists

Who pay the soldiers

Who back the police

Who kill me—

And break my strikes

And break my rising—

AFRICA

GRAPE

PICKERS

JAPANESE

CONSCRIPTS

JOHANNESBURG

MINERS

I, silently,

And without a single learned word

Shall begin the slaughter

That will end my hunger

And your bullets

And the gas of capitalism

And make the world

My own.

When that is done,

I shall find words to speak

Wait!

HAITI UNEMPLOYED MILLIONS CALIFORNIA CHERRY PICKERS STRIKING

MINERS ALABAMA SUGAR BEET WORKERS INDIAN MASSES SCOTTSBORO

SHANGHAI COOLIES PATTERSON SUGAR BEET WORKERS COLONIAL

ASIA FRICK'S MINERS CUBA POOR FARMERS JAPANESE CONSCRIPTS

WORKERS JOHANNESBURG MINERS CHAPEI ALABAMA NEGROES

OXNARD SUGAR BEET WORKERS INDIAN MASSES BONUS MARCHERS

FORD STRIKERS HAITI

Revolution

Great mob that knows no fear—

Come here!

And raise your hand

Against this man

Of iron and steel and gold

Who's bought and sold

You—

Each one—

For the last thousand years,

Come here,

Great mob that has no fear,

And tear him limb from limb,

Split his golden throat

Ear to ear,

Page 183. ‘...a set of folk archetypes[...] are given adverbial stage directions in the left hand column (referred to as the ‘mood’), with the poetry itself presented on the right hand side.’ (LHCW1 212-13)

The Colored Soldier

A dramatic recitation to be done in the half-dark by a young brown fellow who has a vision of his brother killed in France while fighting for the United States of America. Martial music on a piano, or by an orchestra, may accompany the recitation—echoing softly, “Over There,” “There’s a Rose That Grows in No-Man’s Land,” “Joan of Arc,” and various other war-time melodies.

THE MOOD

Calmly telling the story. Proudly and expectantly with head up, shoulders back, and eyes shining. Quietly recalling the vision. The dead man speaks with his face full of light and faith, confident that a new world has been made. Proud and smiling. But the living, remembering

THE POEM

My brother died in France—but I came back.
We were just two colored boys, brown and black,
Who joined up to fight for the U.S.A.
When the Nation called us that mighty day.
We were sent to training camp, then overseas—
And me and my brother were happy as you please
Thinking we were fighting for Democracy’s true reign
And that our dark blood would wipe away the stain
Of prejudice, and hate, and the false color line—
And give us the rights that are yours and mine.
They told us America would know no black or white:
So we marched to the front, happy to fight.

Last night in a dream my brother came to me
Out of his grave from over the sea,
Back from the acres of crosses in France,
And said to me, “Brother, you’ve got your chance,
And I hope you’re making good, and doing fine—
‘Cause when I was living, I didn’t have mine.
Black boys couldn’t work then anywhere like they can
today,
Could hardly find a job that offered decent pay.
The unions barred us; the factories, too,
But now I know we’ve got plenty to do.
We couldn’t eat in restaurants; had Jim Crow cars;
Didn’t have any schools; and there were all sorts of
bars
To a colored boy’s rising in wealth or station—
But now I know well that’s not our situation:
The world’s been made safe for Democracy
And no longer do we know the dark misery—
Of being held back, of having no chance—
Since the colored soldiers came home from France.
Didn’t our government tell us things would be fine

with a half-sob and bowing his head in shame, becomes suddenly fierce and angry.

When we got through fighting, Over There, and dying?
So now I know we blacks are just like any other—
‘Cause that’s what I died for—isn’t it, Brother?’
And I saw him standing there, straight and tall,
In his soldier’s uniform, and all.
Then his dark face smiled at me in the night—
But the dream was cruel—and bitter—and somehow
not right.
It was awful—facing that boy who went out to die,
For what could I answer him, except, “It’s a lie!”

It’s a lie! It’s a lie! Every word they said.
And it’s better a thousand times you’re in France dead.
For here in the South there’s no votes and no right.
And I’m still just a “nigger” in America tonight.

Then he sadly recalls the rows of white crosses in France.

Then I woke up, and the dream was ended—
But broken was the soldier’s dream, too bad to be
mended.
And it’s a good thing all the black boys lying dead
Over There
Can’t see! And don’t know! And won’t ever care!

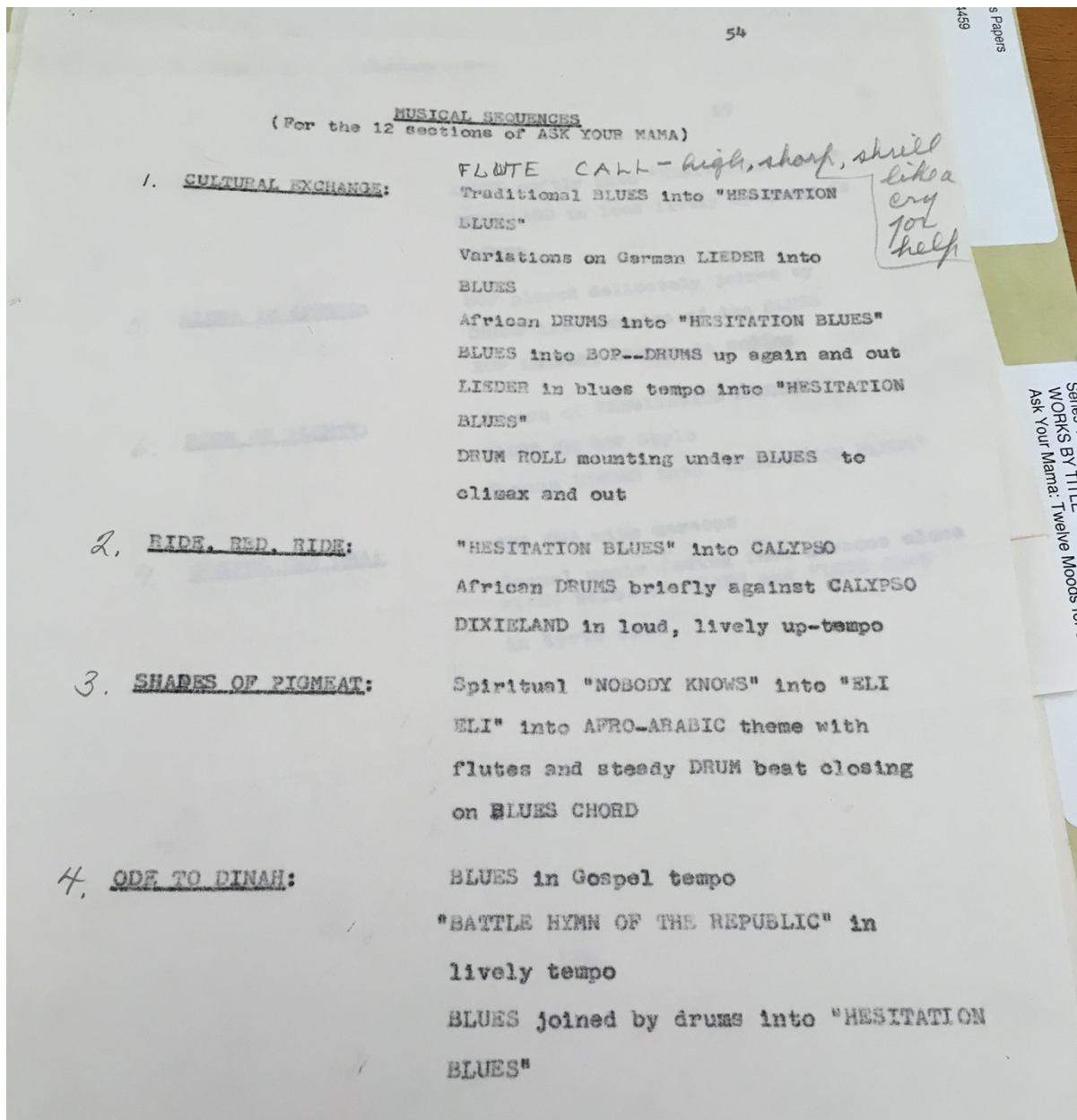
Broke

A complaint to be given by a dejected looking fellow shuffling along in an old suit and a battered hat, to the tune of a slow-drag stomp or a weary blues.

Uh! I sho am tired.
Been walkin’ since five this mornin’.
Up and down, and they just *ain’t* no jobs in this man’s town.
Answerin’ them want-ads not nary bit o’ fun,
‘Cause ‘fore you gets there, ten thousand and one
Done beat you to de place, standin’ outside de do’
Talkin’ ‘bout “we’ll work for 50¢ a day, if we can’t get no mo’.”
And one old funny boy said, “I’ll work at any price
Just only providin’ de boss man is nice!”
You all out there laughin’, but that ain’t no joke—
When you’re broke.

3.c.

Page 236: ‘...the musical cues were given the same ordinal status as the ‘liner notes’: indexical markers to be considered at a remove from the primary text at the back of the volume...’ (Hughes, ‘Music cues draft’ 271: 4459)



AYM I 15

↑

1. CULTURAL EXCHANGE

↑ Music Cues

Traditional 12-bar
BLUES into refrain
of
"HESITATION BLUES"
fading out on 1st-
line of poem. #

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
WHERE ~~WHERE~~ THE DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER
DUST OF DINGY ATOMS
BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND.
AMORPHOUS JACK-O-LANTERNS CAPER
AND THE WIND WON'T WAIT FOR MIDNIGHT
FOR FUN TO BLOW DOORS DOWN. → TACIT

BY THE RIVER AND THE RAILROAD
WITH FLUID FAR-OFF GOING
BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING
A WHIRL OF WHISTLES BLOWING
NO TRAINS OR STEAMBOATS GOING---
YET LEONTYNE'S UNPACKING. #

Lonely FLUTE call.
TACIT

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
WHERE DOORKNOB LETS IN LIEDER
MORE THAN GERMAN EVER BORE,
HER YESTERDAY PAST GRANDPA---
NOT OF HER OWN DOING---
IN A POT OF COLLARD GREENS
IS GENTLY STEWING.

Variations on
GERMAN LIEDER.....
"
"
"
"
"
LIEDER merges into
BLUES..... into
BLUES.....

THERE, FORBID US TO REMEMBER,
COMES AN AFRICAN IN MID-DECEMBER
SENT BY THE STATE DEPARTMENT
AMONG THE SHACKS TO MEET THE BLACKS:
LEONTYNE SAMMY HARRY POITIER
LOVELY LENA MARIAN LOUIS PEARLIE MAE
GEORGE S. SCHUYLER MOLTO BENE
COME WHAT MAY LANGSTON HUGHES
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
WHERE THE RAILROAD AND THE RIVER
HAVE DOORS THAT FACE EACH WAY
AND THE ENTRANCE TO THE MOVIE'S
UP AN ALLEY UP THE SIDE.

AFRICAN DRUMS
against BLUES.....
Music fades OUT.
TACIT

PUSHCARTS FOLD AND UNFOLD
RALPH ELLISON AS VESPUCCIUS
INA-YOURA AT THE MASTHEAD
ARNA BONTEMPS CHIEF CONSULTANT
MOLTO BENE MELLOW BABY PEARLIE MAE
SHALOM ALEICHEM JIMMY BALDWIN SAMMY
COME WHAT MAY---THE SIGNS POINT:

"HESITATION BLUES"
into
BLUES in BOP style...
"
"
"
"
"

GHANA - GUINEA

AND THE TOLL BRIDGE FROM WESCHESTER
IS A GANGPLANK ROCKING RISKY
BETWEEN THE DECK AND SHORE
OF A BOAT THAT NEVER
QUITE KNEW ITS DESTINATION.

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
ORNETTE AND CONSTERNATION
CLAIM ATTENTION FROM THE PAPERS
WHO HAVE NO NEWS THAT DAY OF MOSCOW.

IN THE POT BEHIND THE
PAPER DOORS WHAT'S COOKING?
WHAT'S SMELLING, LEONTYNE?
LIEDER, LOVELY LEIDER,
AND A LEAF OF COLLARD GREEN.
LOVELY LIEDER LEONTYNE.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE NEGROES
NKRUMAH
IN THE SHADOW OF THE NEGROES
NASSER NASSER
IN THE SHADOW OF THE NEGROES
ZIK AZIKIWE
CUBA CASTRO GUINEA TOURE
FOR NEED OR PRAPAGANDA
KENYATTA

AND THE 10M DOGS OF THE CABIN
THE COCOA AND THE CANE BRAKE
THE CHAIN GANG AND THE SLAVE BLOCK
TARRED AND FEATHERED NATIONS
SEAGRAMS AND FOUR ROSES
\$5.00 BAS A DECK OR DAGGA.
FILIBUSTER VERSUS VETO
LIKE A SNAPPING TURTLE---
WON'T LET GO UNTIL IT THUNDERS
WON'T LET GO UNTIL IT THUNDERS
TEARS THE BODY FROM THE SHADOW
WON'T LET GO UNTIL IT THUNDERS
IN THE QUATER OF THE NEGROES.

AND THEY ASKED ME RIGHT AT CHRISTMAS
IF MY BLACKNESS, WOULD IT RUB OFF?
I SAID, ASK YOUR MAMA.

2. RIDE, RED, RIDE

I WANT TO SEE MY MOTHER
WHEN THE ROLL IS CALLED UP YONDER
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES:
TELL ME HOW LONG---
MUST I WAIT?

DRUMS under BLUES...

Music fades OUT.

TACIT

LIEDER in BLUES mood...

LIEDER segue
into

"HESITATION BLUES"

DRUM ROLL mounting
under BLUES
to big
climax
and OUT.

TACIT

"HESITATION BLUES"

(cont on p. 7)

Page 241: '...a map of actualisation, a vivid and palpable sense of excitement in the face of verbal and sonic intermingling...' ('Music cues draft' 271: 4462)

Langston Hughes Papers
 JMJ MSS 28
 Box 271, folder 4462

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SHADOW OF THE NEGROES
 UP WAY UP IN WESTCHESTER
 SHADOW OF THE NEGROES
 WESTPORT AND NEW CANAAN
 IN THE SHADOW OF THE NEGROES--
HIGHLY INTEGRATED
 MEANS TOO MANY NEGROES
 EVEN FOR THE NEGROES --
 ESPECIALLY FOR THE FIRST ONES
 WHO MOVE IN UNOBTUSIVE
 BOOK OF THE MONTH IN CASES
 SEEKING SUBURB WITH NO JUKE BOX
 POOL HALL OR BAR ON CORNER
 SEEKING LAWNS AND SHADE TREES
 SEEKING PEACE AND QUIET
 AUTUMN LEAVES IN AUTUMN
 HOLLAND BULBS IN SPRING
 DECENT GARBAGE SERVICE
 BIRDS THAT REALLY SING
 \$40,000 HOUSES--
 PAYMENTS NOT BELATED--
 THE ONLY NEGROES IN THE BLOCK--
 INTEGRATED.

HORN OF PLENTY
 IN ESCROW TO JOE GLASSER,
 THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT
 IN BILLINGTON'S CHURCH OF RUBBER,
 LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF
 IN GEORGE SOKOLSKY'S COLUMN.
 BIRDS THAT REALLY SING.
 EVERYDAY'S TOMORROW
 AND ELECTION TIME
 IS ALWAYS FOUR YEARS
 FROM THE OTHER
 AND MY LAWNMOWER
 NEW AND SHINEY
 FROM THE BIG GLASS SHOPPING CENTER
 CUTS MY HAIR ON CREDIT.

THEY ASKED ME RIGHT AT CHRISTMAS
 COULD I RECOMMEND A MAID.
 I SAID, YES, YOUR MAMA.

7. GOSPEL CHA CHA
 IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
 WHERE THE PALMS AND COCONUTS
 CHA CHA LIKE CASTANETS
 IN THE WIND'S FRENETIC FISTS
 WHERE THE SAND SEEDS AND THE
 SEA GOURDS MAKE MARACAS OUT OF ME,
 ERZULIE PLAYS A TUNE
 ON THE BONGO OF THE MOON.
 THE PAPA DRUM OF SUN

Piano
 LIEDER.....
 Gently
 yearnings
 lieder
 on
 piano,
 delicately
 sedate,
 quietly
 fading
 on the
 word
 belated...
 TACIT

"HESITATION BLUES" → Again
 very softly... the old
 "Hesitation
 Blues"
 against the
 thall
 of birds--
 but the
 melody
 ends in
 a thin
 high
 flute call.

TACIT P.C.
 Figurine.

Maracas.....
 in
 cha cha
 tempo,
 the
 bongo drums
 joined

#

#

TACIT

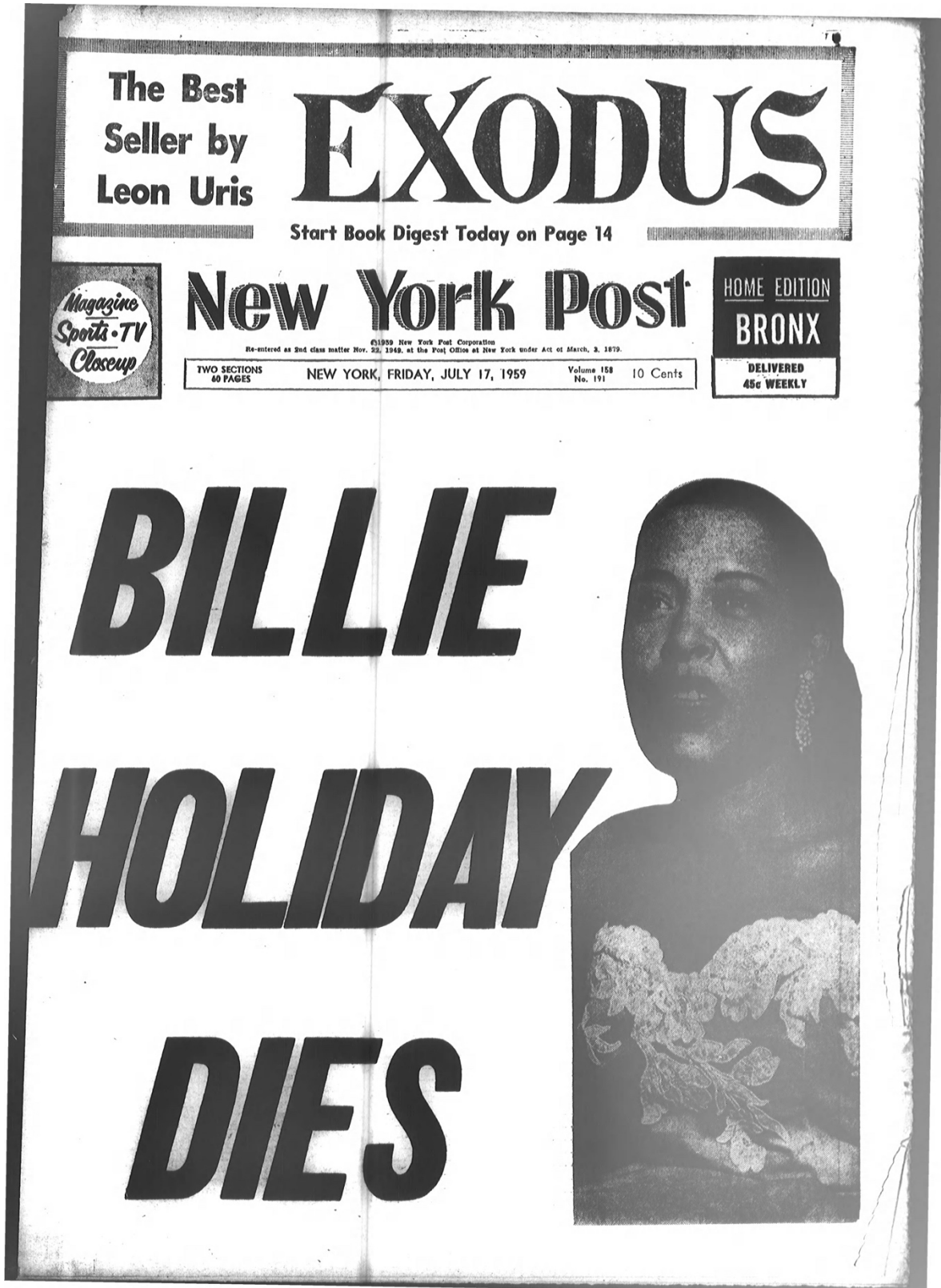
P.C.

dinner interpage

7.

4.a.

Page 262: '...a *memoire involontaire* provoked by the printed image of Billie Holiday who has died in the early hours of the morning...' (*New York Post*)



4.b.

Page 310: “Cocteau’s movement in *Orphée* was to loop the present back into the past through a cinematic retelling of ancient myth, whereby characters face the mirror directly to push through into a deeper realm of metaphysical revelation...” Stills from the Orpheus Trilogy:

Le sang d’un poète (1930)



Orphée (1950)



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