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Aesthetic Activisms: Language Politics and Inheritances in Recent Poetry From the U.S. South

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Aesthetic Activisms: Language Politics and Inheritances
in Recent Poetry from the U.S. South

by

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DEDICATION

For my grandparents, Robert and Rees Hemphill, and for T and P

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation, *Aesthetic Activisms: Language Politics and Inheritances in Recent Poetry from the U.S. South*, is to illustrate how four contemporary poets incorporate and adapt literary forms and linguistic structures to emphasize the exclusionary systems of language that undergird accepted southern cultural practices. *Aesthetic Activisms* looks at four poets, Natasha Trethewey, Fred Moten, Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, and C.D. Wright, who challenge concepts of regional literary inheritances that refuses to recognize a broad plurality of voices and histories.

Aesthetic Activisms focuses on poets whose work re-orient, or centralizes, marginalized experience through form and content, resisting essentialist ideas of southern identity by highlighting the disjunction between normalized language and marginalized presence. Most studies of southern literature begin with an attempt to define a canon based on geographic boundaries and origins, but in Chapter 1 I argue that this pedigree denies alternative southern voices.

Chapter 2 highlights contemporary poet Natasha Trethewey's focused attention on the exclusionary practices of "official" histories. I argue that while her 2006 collection *Native Guard* can be read as an acknowledgement of alternative southern histories, it also problematizes the concept of a multivalent "new" south by its huge critical success—

inadvertently reinforcing some of the ideological structures Trethewey originally intended to dismantle.

Chapter 3 examines Fred Moten's *Arkansas* (2000), which emphasizes social limitations imposed by standardized systems of speech. *Arkansas* uses fracture and vernacular to produce a particular effect, one which reflects the experience of the marginalized citizen and simultaneously offers an alternative mode of communal being. Aesthetically, these poems implicate us in social structures predicated upon exclusionary strategies.

Chapter 4 focuses on Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, whose poetry uses the structures of indigenous oral literatures to create ecopoetical dwelling in the landscape of her texts. I argue that Hedge Coke's ecopoetics can also be read as a decolonization of southern literature's deeply agrarian beginnings.

Chapter 5 focuses on C.D. Wright, whose work follows in the particularly southern literary tradition of the author/poet as witness and documentarian, joining her to a very particular subset of authors like Lillian Smith and James Agee.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When H. L. Mencken's "Sahara of the Bozart" came out in the New York *Evening Mail* on November 13, 1917, it raised a cry of protest from Southerners who would not have their region's cultural presence disparaged. Mencken's essay was, of course, aimed at much more than the Southern aesthetic—when he lamented, "for all its size and all its wealth and all the 'progress' it babbles of, it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert" his condemnation was more focused on regional ideologies than actual poetry—but nonetheless his indictment of the Southern arts remained a difficult criticism to shake, even after the "Southern Renaissance" of the 1920s brought a number of self-proclaimed Southern writers to the world's critical attention.

In truth, the southeastern United States contributed a great deal to American literature in the first half of twentieth century. During the interwar period alone, the South produced an astonishing amount of fiction that represented a wide variety of perspectives on the region. Works like Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward Angel* (1929), William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Light in August* (1932), *As I Lay Dying* (1935), and *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Katherine Anne Porter's *Flowering Judas* (1930) and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), Erskine Caldwell *Tobacco Road* (1932), and Richard Wright *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) were all published within the same ten-year span. Many key figures in

the Harlem Renaissance (Langston Hughes, Hurston, and Jean Toomer) also navigated their own tense and diasporic relationships with the South. Engendered by the Great Migration, these authors (and scores of other Black artists) expanded upon an already-growing African-American literary influence throughout the United States and across the world.

Despite the diversity of this proliferation, or perhaps in response to it, there arose concurrently a deliberate and organized process of exclusion that limited who and what could truly be considered “Southern.” In literary criticism, these limitations erected dense barriers around the literature (and literary artists) who could be included in the genre of Southern literature, permitting only certain subjectivities, themes, aesthetics, and linguistic structures entry into the canon.¹ In relation to modern American poetry, the story of the establishment of a modern Southern literary canon arguably begins with the Fugitive poets, but even as they worked to establish their work as representative of a mature school of American poetics they also actively silenced competing Southern voices, normalizing an essentialist (and mostly false) vision of the South that exists to this day.

The exclusion of certain voices from the idea of southernness was continuous with more explicitly violent social implications, denying African-Americans and other minoritarian citizens entry into both physical and intellectual spaces. Just prior to the First World War the U.S. South saw a significant increase in “Lost Cause of the Confederacy” ideology, likely in response to a more vocal national movement for African-American civil rights. This was also a period that saw a heightened interest in memorialization—the United Daughters of the Confederacy unveiled more than sixty

confederate monuments in the southeastern United States between 1900 and 1920. The central placement of these memorials (generally in close proximity to state or federal government buildings) served as a constant visual reminder that U. S. policy and law was still heavily influenced by nostalgia for the Old South. The 1915 release of *Birth of a Nation* also served to commodify and disseminate the Lost Cause of the American South for even wider audiences, and those same years saw the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and an escalation in violence against African-American men.²

The Lost Cause narrative required that physical and linguistic spaces be heavily-policed in such a way as to exclude African-American perspectives from this iteration of a heroic, white Southern heritage. Erasure of Black lives from the historical record ensured the supremacy of white lives and normalized hierarchies of power that left African-Americans without subjectivity. Systems of segregation that developed in civic institutions (equal access to networks of education, law, politics, medicine, etc.) were thus supported by public rhetoric that located only white actors in positions of agency/perspective. These exclusionary linguistic inheritances were passed down through all avenues of language, prioritizing and institutionalizing standardized forms of English in order to suppress alternative communal dialects and experiences. The grammatical structures of Standard English (SE) are highly racialized in this way, as are the aesthetics of Anglo-European literatures that continue to be centralized in American literacy curriculums.

Southern literature is unique in that this curation was further buttressed by what the critic Mark McGurl has termed “Southern limitation theology,” a series of formal limitations imposed on narration, dialect, and theme in “regionally-defined” texts.³

Attempts to identify cultural characteristics specific to the South made by writers like Allen Tate and Flannery O'Connor coincided with the specification of regional canons made by English Departments in universities, and the image of this monocultural South was further embedded into the national imagination in films like *Gone With the Wind* (1939). In this way, both cultural attributes and aesthetic formations became inscribed in the regional identity, creating an even more restrictive, yet still entirely fabricated, “real” southern literature. These aesthetics still exist, and they are highly racialized and politicized structures of language. By exploring the ways in which the poets included in this project have used language and literary inheritance to validate their own presence in the discourse of Southern literary studies, we not only expand the genre to include their voices but we also find that they have raised into the sunlight those subterranean systems of power that work to normalize social inequities in Southern culture.

The current political climate in the United States has emphasized a need for a deeper understanding of how such exclusionary systems operate on the level of language. Ideas like national “heritage” point to an underlying belief in a “true” historical narrative that takes precedence over alternative histories and experiences. The recent debate that has taken place regarding the removal of Confederate monuments and the kinds of histories entwined with symbols like the Confederate flag are just some examples of an activism that vigorously challenges the limited rhetoric of “historical” artifacts, and these challenges have resulted in a passionate discourse on strategies for dismantling systemic racism as a whole.

Recently, literary critics have been interested in understanding how political and economic systems of marginalization have impacted the aesthetics of American poetry.

Studies like Evie Shockley's *Renegade Poetics*, Dorothy Wang's *Thinking Its Presence*, Timothy Yu's *Race and the Avant-Garde*, Juliana Spahr's *Du Bois's Telegram*, and Michael Dowdy's *Broken Souths* seek to answer the question Charles Bernstein posed in *The Politics of Poetic Form* more than thirty years ago: "In what ways do choices of grammar, vocabulary, syntax and narrative reflect ideology?"⁴ In keeping with this line of critical inquiry, the study of Southern poetry becomes an invaluable exercise in the study of American language politics and in the literary structures contemporary poets are left to navigate in order to affirm their subjective presence within the specific cultural matrix of the U.S. South.

"Real" Southern Literature: The Fugitives Poets

The Fugitive Poets were instrumental in formally establishing many of the cultural and aesthetic trends we now associate with this kind of Southern literature. The group loosely began as a kind of regular social gathering of various intellectuals (academic and otherwise) at the home of Sidney Hirsch (or rather his parents) in Nashville, Tennessee in the early 1900s. Most of the members were associated in some way with Vanderbilt University, with the exception of Hirsch, who had enjoyed some celebrity as the author of *The Fire Regained* (a play set in ancient Greece and performed in front on Nashville's replica Parthenon for the May Festival in 1913).⁵ His sister, Goldie, was popular with Vanderbilt's young male students and visits to the Hirschs' home had introduced Donald Davidson and Stanley Johnson to Sidney, still relatively well-known for his pageant and incredibly well-read. Hirsch had travelled extensively, and he was an engaging conversationalist, so Davidson eventually invited his Shakespeare professor, John Crowe Ransom, to meet him. By 1915, others were regularly attending the group, including Alec

Brock Stevenson and Stanley Johnson.⁶ It was not until 1919, after the group reformed following World War I and, consequently, the same year Ransom's *Poems About God* had been published to somewhat favorable review, that the group began to focus more seriously on poetry.⁷ Of fundamental and often overlooked importance is that this workshop environment was also tempered by Hirsch's interest in etymology, specifically mystical etymology, although Hirsch had also been a frequent visitor of Gertrude Stein while he was in Paris (Stein actually claimed he was somehow related to her and called him "her cousin"), and the two had shared a stimulating interest in language as such.⁸

The group was joined by Allen Tate, who was only a student at the time but was also better versed in modern poetry than any of the other members, in 1921.⁹ Tate was a great fan of T. S. Eliot's work, and, undoubtedly fortified by Hirsch's attention to language, encouraged more interest in experimental form and allegorical content from older members like Ransom and Davidson. In 1922 (the same year Eliot's "The Waste Land" was published simultaneously in both *The Criterion* and *The Dial*) the small coterie decided to publish their own magazine, *The Fugitive*, whose name is variously attributed to either Hirsch or Stevenson. According to Tate, "[A] Fugitive was quite simply a Poet: the Wanderer, or even the Wandering Jew, the Outcast, the man who carries the secret wisdom around the world."¹⁰

The first issue of *The Fugitive* asserted, "THE FUGITIVE flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South," but it would be a gross misstep to assume the Fugitives were fleeing the South in its entirety. At the time of that first publication, southern literature (at least what was being published) seemed divided into two distinct camps. The poetry of the "Old South" was dedicated to sentimentality and

nostalgia for the “Lost Cause of the Confederacy,” and the Fugitives saw a need for a new poetry that reflected the existential crises of modernity. The poetry of the “New South,” however, needed to acknowledge the unique position of a modern South heavily burdened by its inheritances. While the Fugitives professed being against regionalism in literature (in the June 1924, issue of *The Fugitive* Davidson writes, “Place is incidental, it is subordinate; it may even form a definite limitation”¹¹) they were also completely haunted by it. They wanted their work to participate in both contemporary European shifts in poetics and, at the same time, to incorporate the traditional elements from a specific culture that was antithetical to modernist aesthetics. In a March, 1923, letter to Corra A. Harris, a journalist with the Charlotte *Daily Observer*, Davidson wrote, “If there is a significance in the title of the magazine it lies in the sentiment of the editors (on this point I am sure we all agree) to flee from the extremes of conventionalisms, whether old or new. They hope to keep in touch with and to utilize in their work the best qualities of modern poetry, without at the same time casting aside as unworthy all that is established as good in the past.”¹²

For this reason, the work of the Fugitives often embodies a Janus-like tension—poems like Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead” pull desperately at both the past and the future:

What shall we say who have knowledge
Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act
To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the grave
In the house? The ravenous grave?

Leave now

The shut gate and the decomposing wall:

The gentle serpent, green in the mulberry bush,

Riots with his tongue through the hush—

Sentinel of the grave who counts us all!

Tate's speaker is constantly pulled from their attempt to identify with the Confederate soldiers and continually agonizes over his inability to mourn them (to continue in the tradition of memorialization over which the South still conflicted today). The poem itself is as crystallized and mature as any other American poet of the period, but it exhibits a specifically Southern turmoil, much like the twisting and taut syntax William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* would produce in 1936 (the "New South" to Margaret Mitchell's "Old South," *Gone With the Wind*, published the same year?).

The Fugitives relationship to Southern poetry, and to American poetry as a whole, is complicated, particularly considering their later political and literary iterations as the Agrarians and the New Critics (because, despite many critics attempts to separate these groups, the fact remains that they pass core inheritances down the line). The Southern Agrarians are perhaps the most contentious in this lineage. They insisted they were political, whereas the Fugitives were purely poetic, but they shared some of the same core members: John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. Throughout the 1930s, the Agrarians challenged the modernization of the South and presented what many considered a reactionary and nostalgic demand for a return to an Old South that had never existed. Their symposium, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), written by the "Twelve Southerners," called for a return

to an agrarian-based culture, one that was present in the antebellum South but threatened by the industrialization of the North, and that “accord[ed] to the European principles of culture” in a way the rest of the United States did not.¹³ In his introduction to the 1962 re-release of the collection, Louis D. Rubin tried to present this as an extended metaphor rather than a literal suggestion:

The image of the old agrarian South in *I’ll Take My Stand* was the image of a society that perhaps never existed, though it resembled the Old South in certain important ways. But it was a society that *should* have existed—one in which men could live as individuals and not as automatons, aware of their finiteness and their dependence upon God and nature, devoted to the enhancement of the moral life in its aesthetic and spiritual dimensions, possessed of a sense of the deep inscrutability of the natural world.¹⁴

But indications remain that many of the Twelve Southerners *did* consider *I’ll Take My Stand* as a viable cultural reality for the South, at least at the time of its original publication, and the collected essays’ refusal to address issues of slavery in their pastoral, antebellum ideal has remained as problematic to recent Southern literary scholars as has the homogeny of the Fugitive group to begin with.

Janus-like again becomes the approach to these Fugitive-Agrarians, who scholars would both value for their not insignificant contribution to American literature, but also find the need to apologize for or condemn outright in their neglect of minority voices within the Southern literary canon. Southern literary studies in the 1980s and 1990s generally neglected to address systemic racism as a literary/historic force, and either

condemned or ignored instances of racism, misogyny, xenophobia and homophobia by contextualizing them within a historic past.

Understanding that systems of language and political power are inextricably interconnected structures makes it possible to view the Fugitives as both contributing actively and significantly to the tradition of American modernist literatures and to perpetuating a closed system of language (and unsettling ideologies) which denies inclusion to minority artists. The purpose of *Aesthetic Activisms* is not to estimate the cultural value of American poetry like the work of the Fugitives, because they have undeniably influenced American literature and contributed to the formation of a “Southern poetics.” The project here is, instead, to see how the forms and strategies of these canonized writers, which I refer to as “Southern literary inheritances,” have been incorporated and adapted by recent poets to illuminate structures of language that have so often excluded voices from those same histories and literary canons. As Wang writes in *Thinking Its Presence*, “[I]t is in the formal and rhetorical manifestations, particularly the linguistic structures, of the poems that one sees evidence of the impress of social and historical influences.”¹⁵ This is not an apologetic approach to Southern poetry, but instead one which acknowledges the linguistic framework that has helped to support systemic racism, environmental collapse, and socioeconomic disparity not just regionally but nationally as well.

Aesthetic Activisms

The truth is that Southern poetry is limitless in its polyvocality (and even in its geographic boundaries—which are constantly expanded and contracted through various modes of criticism and containment). Any project attempting to tackle “Southern poetry”

must address its fluidity, and most attempt to re-establish categorization simply because “the South” is an unlimited idea, “an otherwise amorphous environment” capable of radical reorientations based on the perspective/location of the viewer.¹⁶ For the Fugitive-Agrarians, the idea of one unified South was a myth comprised of ideals (shared historical narrative, agriculturally-based monoculture, racially homogenous regional heritage) which were entirely political in nature. As Michael Kreyling notes in *Inventing Southern Literature*,

the Agrarian project was and must be seen as a willed campaign on the part of one elite to establish and control “the South” in a period of intense cultural maneuvering. The principle organizers of *I’ll Take My Stand* knew full well there were other “Souths” than the one they touted; they deliberately presented a fabricated South as the one and only real thing.¹⁷

Now, ninety years later, the myth of a singular “Southern” heritage has necessitated a resurgence of those same ideals in order to suppress the possibility of alternative subjectivities in a South again facing a crisis of identity. Because these ideals are so closely wed to the ensured stability of this “fabricated South” it is no wonder that recent poets interested in leaning on the fragility of those cultural structures might choose to incorporate them into their work.

For the four poets included in this project I will investigate, through an analytical framework of formal aesthetics and socio-political context, how the work of each engages a particular Southern literary inheritance and how the adaptation of these inheritances creates a site of inquiry into larger political concerns. Sometimes, as is the case with former U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey, these aesthetic activisms can be

so closely tied to their literary progenitors that they create unintended consequences for the national perception of “Southern” poetics. Other times the work can be read as diasporic, a geographic “flight” from singular subjectivities (Fred Moten’s own “fugitivity”) that underscores how inherited Southern language systems inhibit marginalized citizens throughout the United States. Some of these inheritances originated before colonialization, and by re-integrating indigenous paradigms writers like Allison Adelle Hedge Coke hope to create a new ecopoetical reclamation of the Southern landscape. Finally, in direct opposition to the lacuna that Fugitive-Agrarian erasure has created, comes the tradition of Southern witness: an amendment to historical occlusion through the process of documentary poetics. C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self* performs the act of witness by incorporating the language of multiple registers into an exposé of socioeconomic interdependencies within the prison-industrial systems of Louisiana.

These poets run the gamut from the narrative to the highly experimental, but the one thing all of their work has in common is that they have transformed elements of their Southern literary lineage into a call for active participation from their readers, demanding larger social change. Giving voice to those silenced by history, Natasha Trethewey has made a literary career of questioning the validity of any “official” narrative that would deny the experience of others. Works like her 2006 collection, *Native Guard*, can be read as an aesthetic attempt to acknowledge the palimpsest-like structures of all histories, particularly those dealing with racial presence in both the antebellum and contemporary South. The title poem in the collection, “Native Guard,” best captures Trethewey’s historical vision through its simultaneously chronological progression and circularity, a structure which causes the reader to enact a revisionist understanding of inclusive

historical memory. The poem begins with an epigraph by Frederick Douglass suggesting its theme: “If this war is to be forgotten, I ask in the name of all / things sacred what shall men remember?” This is followed by the poem’s opening gesture, the date “November 1862,” and the first line “Truth be told, I do not want to forget.”¹⁸ “Native Guard” is primarily concerned with the idea of “inscription,” of recording through writing the existence of an alternative, specifically African-American voice during the period of southern history from which it is often denied. The epistolary form of this piece functions as both a new historical “record” and an immediate and personal connection to the reader, granting narration to those muffled by standardized histories of the American Civil War:

. . . what remains: phantom
ache, memory haunting an empty sleeve;
the hog-eaten at Gettysburg, unmarked
in their graves; all the dead letters, unanswered;
untold stories of those that time will render
mute. Beneath battlefields, green again,
the dead molder – a scaffolding of bone
we tread upon, forgetting. Truth be told.¹⁹

These lines are obviously in conversation with Allen Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” and they insist upon inclusion not only historically but textually as well. The key element in this poem, the repetition of “Truth be told” at the very end, requires the reader to return to the beginning and so read through the poem again, this time with a revisionist understanding of the historical context and a recognition that validates the poem’s central argument for inscription.

In “Natasha Trethewey’s Radical Re-Inscription” I discuss how her revision of historical perspective (like the example above) constructs larger and more inclusive narratives but also inadvertently underscores thematic limitations (which I call “continued memorialization”) for Southern literature. Critical reception of works like *Native Guard* (which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2007) reinforced Trethewey’s connection to Fugitive poetics (strangely so did her appointment to U.S. Poet Laureate in 2012 and 2013), problematizing the concept of a truly multivalent “new South.”

In contrast, “Exclusion and Community in Fred Moten’s *Arkansas*” focuses on Moten’s use of language not only contextually but also in a way that emphasizes the limitations imposed by standardized systems of speech. *Arkansas* incorporates received vernacular in direct juxtaposition with standardized English, but perhaps more importantly incorporates the materiality of language-as-text to produce a particular effect, one which reflects the experience of his mother in a segregated South. Moten’s use of fracture and gap force the reader to either subjugate the text by projecting their own meaning onto it, or to experience the anxiety produced by frustrated narrative. His lineation often creates polysemy and the sense of polyglossia, creating multiple registers for the reader to navigate and emphasizing that some of these systems are closed to outside interpretations. The poems in *Arkansas* (and much of Moten’s other work) exhibit what he himself has referred to as a “failure or refusal to communicate,” and the value of these texts lie just as much in their formal obstruction as in their content.²⁰ Aesthetically, these poems embody the nexus points where social networks collide and their resistance implicates us in social structures predicated upon exclusionary strategies. Moten’s subjectivity is far more radical than just exclusionary networks of language, however. His

experiences as a child growing up in “a small black Southern village, that happened to be transported to Las Vegas”²¹ gave him a unique perspective in which language took on a doubleness—both as a system of exclusion and as an insular and communal exchange where meaning was formed internally. Like jazz, Moten’s “consent not to be a single being” is reflected in work that forces the reader to collaborate, questioning the finality of any essential meaning and the politics behind any singular subjectivity. His approach to linguistic structure illuminates those underlying systems of power that support racial segregation in places far beyond the American South, and offers readers an alternative (liberated) way to experience meaning that is not predicated upon valuing one subject position over another.

Collaborative reading is also at the heart of Allison Adelle Hedge Coke’s ecopoetic renegotiation of the Southern Agrarian tradition. In her editor’s preface to *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, Laura-Gray Street defines “ecopoetry” as

a kind of paradigm shift. It is the apprehension of real biological selves (as opposed to fantasy selves) inhabiting this planet along with us, a mix of negative capability and empathy expressed with the cadence, imagery, and wit to make it visceral, so that it lodges in our neural systems and cultivates the environmental imagination that is analogue to the crucial biodiversity of the rainforests and our intestines.²²

Hedge Coke’s ecopoetics invest southern literature’s psychically-distanced pastoral with just this kind of “paradigm shift,” inviting the reader to locate themselves affectively within a complete ecology (to “dwell”—in the Heideggerian sense of the word). Like Trethewey’s “Native Guard,” Hedge Coke’s 2014 collection *Streaming* uses repetition to

redirect the reader backwards in a kind of circular narrative—but unlike Trethewey the nonlinearity in *Streaming* is meant to build parallel topographies that exist beyond the historical record or page. Hedge Coke's world is corporeal rather than textual, it uses what Juliana Spahr might refer to as “anti-state” or “anti-colonial” language that resists conventional/grammatical form by following structures more akin to Native American oral literatures.²³ This is in keeping with Hedge Coke's own experience in the South, both as an agricultural worker and as a woman of Native American descent whose poetry was significantly influenced by the oral traditions to which she was exposed. “Ecopoetical Reclamation in Allison Adelle Hedge Coke's *Streaming*” illustrates how Hedge Coke's poetry can thus be read as a gesture of decolonization of the Southern landscape, a move that reclaims Native American proprietorship through the linguistic event.

“C.D. Wright and the Art of Witness” focuses on the documentary poetics of the late Wright, whose poetry is heavily invested in exposing systems of oppression throughout the South. Wright was a self-proclaimed Southern poet, much like Trethewey and Hedge Coke, but her particular form of activism was one of witness—to testify, to document, to acknowledge culpability—placing her in a tradition of white, middle-class Southern writers who accepted accountability for the social inequities that they understood directly sustained their positions of privilege. In *One Big Self*, Wright juxtaposes different registers or linguistic modes (direct address, received dialogue, court transcripts) and places them in direct conversation with one another to uncover hidden truths about the capitalistic substructures of the Louisiana legal system. In Southern literature, this kind of witnessing is the direct descendent of projects like James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*—texts meant to

speak not to their subjects (those denied agency by socio-political powers), but to readers who occupied positions of privilege (granted by those same systems of power).

Aesthetic Activisms should in no way be considered a definitive survey of recent poetry in the U.S. South. My goal was not to be expansive, but instead to illustrate how four, contemporary American poets were choosing to engage with the Southern literary inheritances that had been used to limit and constrain Southern literatures in the past. These poets are political in that they are dedicated to creating a vision of the South that is not limited, not exclusive—one which takes into consideration the vast multitude of Southern subjectivities and refuses to ignore the systems of language and history that would deny their validity. Present since Anglo-European colonization and bolstered by a limitations “theology” that standardized an essential historical narrative, monoculture, and racial heritage, Southern literature has deeply entrenched these markers of regional identity. By choosing to incorporate and adapt these inheritances in such a way that their stability becomes highly questionable, these poets insist on the mutability of such arbitrary structures that so often erase minority experience from official histories and literary canons. They call into question essentialist arguments for regional identities, and this kind of polyvocality opens up the realm of contemporary Southern literature to include innovative forms and diverse communities, each with their own socio-historical and literary inheritances. Such an approach does very little to limit the scope of Southern literary studies, but it does present new perspectives that can propel the field toward a position of self-appraisal—something relevant and dire at all levels of American culture in this current historical moment.

Notes

¹ This limitation continued well into the postwar period. The critic Louis D. Rubin omitted African-American writers from his 1953 anthology, *Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South*, regardless of the fact that Zora Neale Hurston and many others were actively publishing in the South throughout the Southern Renaissance period.

² See “100 Years Later, What’s the Legacy of ‘Birth of a Nation’?,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, February 8, 2015, npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/08/383279630/100-years-later-whats-the-legacy-of-birth-of-a-nation;.

³ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 155.

⁴ Charles Bernstein, “Preface,” in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (1990; rpt. Berkeley, CA: Roof Books, 2008), vii–viii, vii. See Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011); Dorothy J. Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian-American Poetry Since 1965* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Julian Spahr, *Du Bois’s Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Michael Dowdy, *Broken Souths: Latina/o Poetic Response to Neoliberalism and Globalization* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013).

⁵ See Mark Royden Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies: Donald Davidson and the Southern Resistance* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), particularly “Twentieth Avenue,” 18–31.

⁶ See John Lincoln Stewart, *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), especially “The Fugitives: Beginnings,” 3–31.

⁷ See William Pratt, “In Pursuit of the Fugitives,” in *The Fugitive Poets: Modern Southern Poetry in Perspective*, ed. William Pratt (Nashville, TN: J. S. Sanders and Company, 1991), xiii–xlviii.

⁸ According to Stewart, Hirsch also greatly irritated the assembled poets by “interpreting [their] own poems to them”: “Having long believed that all literary works have an outer and an inner meaning . . . he could not be kept from pursuing to the farthest limit and idea suggested by an unusual word or a supposed parallel between the work in hand and some remote writing known only to himself . . . That the writer might not have intended the meaning Hirsch found was quite beside the point. It was there” (*Burden of Time*, 35).

⁹ Pratt, *The Fugitive Poets*, xxi.

¹⁰ Allen Tate, “*The Fugitive*, 1922–1925: A Personal Recollection Twenty Years After,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 3 (April 1942), 79

¹¹ Quoted in Pratt, *The Fugitive Poets*, xxxii.

¹² Quoted in Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 44.

¹³ John Crowe Ransom, “Reconstructed but Unregenerate,” in *Twelve Southerners, I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930; rpt. Baton Rouge:

Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 1–27, 3.

¹⁴ Louis D. Rubin, introduction to *I’ll Take My Stand*, xi–xxxv, xxxi. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, 33–34.

¹⁶ McGurl, *The Program Era*, 155.

¹⁷ Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), xii.

¹⁸ Natasha Trethewey, “Native Guard,” in *Native Guard* (Boston, MA: Mariner, 2007), 25–30, 25.

¹⁹ “Native Guard,” 30.

²⁰ Fred Moten, *B Jenkins* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 104

²¹ Moten quoted in Andy Battaglia, “Every and All: Fred Moten’s Oneness as a Poet, Theorist, and Artistic Muse,” *ArtNews* (March 27, 2018), artnews.com/art-news/artists/icons-fred-moten-9976/.

²² Laura-Gray Street, “The Roots of It,” *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, ed. Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2013), xxxvii–xl, xxxviii.

²³ See Juliana Spahr, *Du Bois’s Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), particularly “Stubborn Nationalism: Example One, Avant Garde Modernism” (56–109) for connections between avant-garde forms and oral literatures.

CHAPTER 2

NATASHA TRETHEWEY'S RADICAL RE-INSCRIPTIONS

Several years after winning the Pulitzer Prize for her 2006 collection, *Native Guard*, and towards the end of her tenure as Poet Laureate of the United States, Natasha Trethewey mentioned in an interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books* that she was troubled by some of the inadvertent consequences of correlation between her own career and that of her father, the poet Eric Trethewey. As Natasha Trethewey's poetry became the focus of greater critical acclaim, she found that discussions of her work began to include her father's influence with more frequency, essentially expunging from her own public history the lived experience of her black mother. For Trethewey, the implications of both the compulsory link to her white father and the associative erasure of her black mother were problematic, particularly for a poet attempting to navigate the slippery terrain of contemporary Southern identity. "In my thinking," Trethewey asserts, "I'm not my father's appendage. I'm his amendment."

Critics such as Georgia De Cenzo have identified this impulse for inclusion and amendment in *Native Guard*, concentrating their attention primarily on Trethewey's formal treatment of historical material that emphasizes Southern racial dichotomies, and addressing her interest in the relationship "between cultural memory and private memory." Although these critics are correct in their assessment of *Native Guard* as a point of intersection between personal history and the larger narrative of race and region, what they often dismiss in parsing Trethewey's work between the biographic and the

historical is that she is deliberately situating herself within a literary tradition that actively resists her alterity. The most radical “amendment” that Trethewey’s literary career offers may not be *Native Guard*’s re-inscription of “history that was never written,” as Librarian of Congress James Blington has suggested, but instead the complicated inscription of herself, supported by the public reception of this work, into the company of her Fugitive “fathers.”¹

Native Guard’s revisionary history might seem a radical departure (a *fleeing*) from the Fugitive ideal, but her treatment of form, appropriation of a fictionalized historical perspective to fabricate a historical narrative, and her insistence on what I will call “continued memorialization” place her, at least ideologically, within the framework of that tradition. The public reiteration of this contemporary American poet as categorically “Southern” cements not only Trethewey’s place within this lineage, but also reemphasizes that those literary characteristics she shares with the Fugitive Poets are somehow distinctively “Southern” in nature. In this way, Trethewey (and *Native Guard*) complicate the debate over the legitimacy of definitively Southern literature in an unusual way—on the one hand a disavowal of the commodified allegory that is “Southern” culture, on the other a strange evolution of that commodification process.

Formally, *Native Guard* represents a space of amendment. Poems like “Graveyard Blues,” which can and have been read as a challenge to “racial essentialism,”² operate within two literary forms simultaneously, in this case the twelve-bar blues standard and the sonnet, although neither form adheres strictly to conventional rules. Each form carries with it its own cultural and historical connotations, and each of these subtexts work to contribute to the overall meaning of the poem. Blues have traditionally been associated

with the African-American experience, particularly in the Mississippi Delta, and the blues form has been adopted by a number of African-American poets, including Langston Hughes and Etheridge Knight, specifically to emphasize this relationship.³ As a form, the blues standard is therefore powerfully emblematic, representing not only the continuity of black communal experience but also its development into a recognizable poetic structure that can be widely anthologized as an artifact of that experience. On the opposite end of this spectrum is the sonnet, equally weighted with cultural inference and carrying among its fourteen, metered lines a Eurocentric traditionalism that references Elizabethan prosody.

In “Graveyard Blues,” quoted in full below, Trethewey presents us with “biracial” verse, a poem that is as much the product of an African-American formal heritage as it is European, and she does so in order to memorialize her mother, a victim of domestic violence buried without a headstone on June 11, 1985.⁴ Much can be said about the various ways that form functions in this piece, not the least of which would be to note that the repetition intrinsic to the blues form essentially “overpowers” the sonnet form in the merger:

It rained the whole time we were laying her down;
Rained from church to grave when we put her down.
The suck of mud at our feet was a hollow sound.

When the preacher called out I held up my hand;
When he called for a witness I raised my hand—

Death stops the body's work, the soul's a journeyman.

The sun came out when I turned to walk away,
Glared down on me as I turned to walk away—
My back to my mother, leaving her where she lay.

The road going home was pocked with holes,
That home-going road's always full of holes;
Though we slow down, time's wheel still rolls.

I wander now among names of the dead:

My mother's name, stone pillow for my head.⁵

Not only does Trethewey's use of the blues standard imply African-American presence within the work, it literally suppresses the European structure beneath its devices. "Repetition," the poet Annie Finch notes, "is oral-based, undermining the primacy of the written over the heard and reminding the eye, disconcertingly, of the ear's primacy."⁶ The blues syntax in this instance inculcates the literary form with an orality that is not inherent to the Anglo-European poetic structure, and calls attention to the tension produced by the two modes operating concurrently through the textuality of the poem.

Perhaps the most important function of repetition in this piece, however, lies in the incorporation of a formal strategy that exhibits, in miniature, the great "reveal" of Trethewey's *Native Guard* project as a whole. In a number of interviews Trethewey points to the fact the closing couplet of "Graveyard Blues" is an embellishment of the

truth. Her mother was buried in an unmarked grave, without monument or name, and in a 2007 interview with Pearl Amelia McHaney for *Five Points: A Journal of Literature and Art*, Trethewey recalls feeling a sense of guilt for her misrepresentation: “I might want to lie my head down on my mother’s stone and that would be a kind of comfort, but one that was stone and cold. A few months later . . . I could not simply deal with the fact that I had written those two lines in that poem because I felt that whatever obligation I have to truth was being sacrificed by the poem.”⁷ Repetition, particularly compulsory repetition, plays an unusual role in reframing personal and cultural memory; as James Snead puts it: “Instead of a dialogue about a history already past, one has a restaging of the past.”⁸ This “restaging” or “selective re-remembering” is precisely the point *Native Guard* is meant to underscore about the national narrative, that it is permeable, mutable, and prone to omission. Trethewey’s use of repetition in “Graveyard Blues” performs an act of re-remembering that attempts to correct her previous failure at memorialization, but ultimately creates a false history instead.

In the same interview with McHaney, Trethewey describes her attempt at literary remediation by including a second poem, “Monument,” in the *Native Guard* collection:

I started writing another poem to undo the lie that I told in “Graveyard Blues.”
My mother does not have a stone or any marker at all. There’s no marker, no memorial at her grave, and so I started writing the poem “Monument” because I wanted to tell the reader that I had lied about this. It was stunning to me when I realized that I had, for the sake of one poem, told a lie and needed to fix it in another one. But it was the realization that I needed to fix the lie that made me

realize exactly why those elegies to my mother should be in the same book with the Native Guards.⁹

“Monument” represents, for Trethewey, a remediation of “Graveyard Blues,” but its intertextual references also point outward to much larger associative elements that affiliate the poem with the established Southern literary canon as a whole. By incorporating images like the cemetery in which her mother is buried, or the “untended” grave, Trethewey both establishes a “truer” narrative and also links her re-remembered history to the work of Allen Tate, in particular his “Ode to the Confederate Dead.” When read in conversation, Trethewey’s “Monument” becomes a response to the questions “Ode” raises about the speaker’s relationship to the past; both poems become a meditation on the poet/speaker and his or her navigation of historical space and the process of memorialization.

A (Post)modern Elegy

Trethewey’s intentions with *Native Guard* are inarguably elegiac, and the collection’s relationship to Tate’s “Ode” is made explicit by her use of an excerpt from the poem as an epigraph to her own “Elegy for the Native Guards” which immediately follows “Monument”: “Now that the salt of their blood / Stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea.”¹⁰ Tate’s epigraph, which is referenced again in the Notes section of the collection, provides a deliberate point of contact between not only “Elegy for the Native Guards,” but also retroactively enforces the connections between “Monument” and Tate’s “Ode” established by Trethewey’s imagery. In “Monument,” the speaker returns in memory

. . . In the cemetery

last June, I circled, lost —

weeds and grass grown up all around —

the landscape blurred and waving.¹¹

Trethewey's speaker, consumed by "this reminder of what / I haven't done" is unable to mitigate the profound guilt she feels by her failure to properly memorialize the dead, just as Tate wonders "What shall we say of the bones, unclean, / Whose verdurous anonymity will grow?"¹² In both instances, the natural world obliterates material attempts to appropriately "mark" the dead, to remember them in some formal way. In the diegesis of both poems memorialization has been unsuccessful, but externally the texts themselves become their own kind of material marker—linguistic monuments that question the possibility of stable memory and narrative in a way physical stone markers could not.

One of the ways that both Trethewey and Tate negotiate this question of memorialization is through their treatment of time and historical narrative. Trethewey has often described her use of form as a means of escaping the "trap of linear narrative,"¹³ and this is particularly enlightening when considering *Native Guard's* engagement with historic erasure. Trethewey's use of traditional aesthetic forms within the collection can be read as a performative element in and of itself—the text essentially articulating Trethewey's main project of re-inscription by insisting on circular readings that allow space for multiple perspectives.

Beyond its content, *Native Guard's* concern with traditional forms is, ironically, a particularly postmodern approach to disrupting historical, "linear" narrative because postmodern literature so often relies on an understanding of the experiential process of readership. Trethewey's use of form functions on a phenomenological level, and

embedded in the complex arrangement of its various elements can be found the potential for readers to re-orient themselves in established ideas about regional and national histories.

The title poem, “Native Guard,” is a crown of sonnets that is more or less epistolary, although the sonnets are fictionalized journal entries, making the address more ambiguous than a letter. The speaker, however, is involved in the production of letters for Confederate prisoners, many of whom can neither read nor write:

I listen, put down in ink what I know
they labor to say between silences
too big for words¹⁴

In addition, the speaker is inscribed by Trethewey to be “conscripted” into the regiment, a double-writing for the double-consciousness of a freed slave who now writes those things which his former masters cannot effectively articulate. He, in turn, is marked by the scars of his servitude and is created, in ink, by the poet even as he uses writing within the poem

to keep a record, a closed book, not the lure
of memory—flawed, changeful—that dulls the lash
for the master, sharpens it for the slave¹⁵

This “record” is also doubly-chronicled: once in cross-writing, superimposed upon a Confederate’s journal within the narrative of the poem, and simultaneously overlaying the historical record of the Native Guard that exists outside the poem. And this all occurs in the crown, a string of sonnets (again the underlying European form) that must continually repeat itself, the last line of the crown actively involving the reader in return and recurrence. Through the act of reading the poem structure itself authenticates the

experience of memory by making it a monument, a history, an artifact that continues to occur.

Among its twenty-five poems, *Native Guard* includes a pantoum, a villanelle, a cancrizan, a ghazal, and snatches of hymnal, jazz and open-field free verse. She varies metric form, rhyme scheme, and lineation, and superimposes one form upon the other, as in the aforementioned “Graveyard Blues.” Of her use of ghazal to structure the poem “Miscegenation,” Trethewey notes that it was the idea of “disunity,” something she sees as intrinsic to the form, that inspired her technical decisions:

[T]he idea of disunity, the idea that these are closed stanzas that don’t necessarily support or aim to support narrative or even linear movement, that they are separate, that in the juxtaposition of one stanza to the next is some sort of tension, and excitement can happen . . . These things are part of the same story, but I couldn’t imagine a kind of linear narrative poem being able to put all of it together.¹⁶

The unifying element in “Miscegenation” is the repetition of the word “Mississippi” at the close of each of the poem’s couplets. The “disunity” of the poem’s content is then connected to place, emphasized by the lineation and punctuation dictated by the form, and the repeating “obsession” of the poem becomes that place-name’s insistent presence:

In 1965 my parents broke two laws in Mississippi;
they went to Ohio to marry, returned to Mississippi.

They crossed the river into Cincinnati, a city whose name
begins with a sound like *sin*, the sound of wrong—*mis* in Mississippi.

The length of line in “Miscegenation” encourages rapid movement from one stanza to the next, creating a kind of accumulative effect—a build-up of “Mississippi”s which move the word from meaning to object and force new meanings on the place itself. On the level of structure, the process of narration is disrupted by the ghazal form, but this is accomplished narratively as well as the poet/speaker leaps from personal history to literary reference and back:

Faulkner’s Joe Christmas was born in winter, like Jesus, given his name
for the day he was left at the orphanage, his race unknown in Mississippi.

My father was reading *War and Peace* when he gave me my name.

I was born near Easter, 1966, in Mississippi.

Collectively, these leaps control the flow of the poem so that the reader is constantly caught in an interpretive give-and-take, one which requires both a commitment to remember the narrative past and a desire to progress into a narrative future where all things will seem cohesive. The impossibility of closure in such a system is problematic not just for the reader but also for the poet/speaker, who is also haunted by the illegality of her mixed-race birth in Mississippi. Thus the reader’s own need for syntactical completion reflects the speaker’s wish for closure, both desires are quite literally thwarted by the state of Mississippi.

Many of Trethewey’s formal choices in the collection are made to encourage just these kinds of linguistic instabilities; her form often reflects content unspoken or erased, hinting at a kind of palimpsest of historical experience. Using a formal structure like the pantoum allows her to emphasize, phenomenologically, the affect of memory in a way

that free verse could not accomplish. As she noted in a 2007 interview with Remica L. Bingham,

The thing that was important was the necessity of remembering, of rescuing things from historical amnesia . . . Because the poem [“Incident”] was about the necessity of remembering, of retelling, I knew that the repetition of the lines in a pantoum would be a way of enacting that very thing¹⁷

The pantoum, as a formal structure, is driven by an internal repetition: the second and fourth line of each stanza become the first and third, and so on. In traditional pantoum this pattern repeats the first line of the poem in the second line of the last stanza, but in “Incident” Trethewey again infuses circularity into the narrative by “book-ending” the poem with the same line:

We tell the story every year—
how we peered from the windows, shades drawn—
though nothing really happened,
the charred grass now green again.
.
.
.
When they were done, the men left quietly. No one came.
Nothing really happened.
By morning all the flames had dimmed.
We tell this story every year.

In a move very similar to the “Native Guard” crown, this returns the reader to the beginning of the piece and encourages re-reading. The difference between the crown and the single pantoum, however, is that while the repetition in “Native Guard” works to

extend the sonnet series into perpetuity (as a recurring linguistic event/monument) the compact form of “Incident” mirrors the act of “re-telling” a story or relating an intimately shared history. Each line in “Incident,” with the exception of the seventh, is end stopped and relatively short, so that the pacing of the piece is regulated and readerly anxiety is minimized. The way the poem is received is juxtaposed with its content, the traumatic event it describes, and the affect is dissociative:

At the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,
a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns.
We darkened our rooms and lit hurricane lamps,
the wicks trembling in their fonts of oil.

It seemed the angels had gathered, white men in their gowns.
When they were done, they left quietly. No one came.
The wicks trembled all night in their fonts of oil;
by morning the flames had all dimmed.

In this way, the pantoum form “enact[s]” the retelling by moderating it to the point of ritualized repetition, chant-like.

Fugitive Dreams

Throughout *Native Guard*, Trethewey’s work manages to walk a slender line between the slick pyrotechnics of postmodern poetics’ self-awareness and adherence to the operations of the traditional forms. Rather than maneuvering the form to somehow elevate the “baser” content, or using a more modern approach to “liberate” the classical form, Trethewey uses the qualities of each to create a kind of poetic equilibrium, a

balance in which the traditional inherently informs the modern. This is precisely the same fusion that enthralled the Fugitive poets as they grappled to accommodate modernist sentiment without completely abandoning formal constraints:

For example, a running argument was conducted on the question of poetic form, with Ransom generally defending the English tradition of meter and rhyme, at which he had become such a skillful practitioner, and Tate defending the new school of Symbolists, particularly as represented by Eliot and Hart Crane . . . Thus the tenor of critical argument in *The Fugitive* was not preponderantly for either traditionalism or modernism, but rather formed a dialectic that concluded, in the final issue, with a strong argument by Davidson for the new experiments in poetic technique by T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, and Wallace Stevens: “The strangest thing in contemporary poetry,” he observed, “is that innovation and conservatism exist side by side.”¹⁸

According to William Pratt’s introduction to *The Fugitive Poets: Modern Southern Poetry in Perspective*, it was precisely the Fugitive’s insistence on form that separated their movement from the Imagists, and precisely that which kept them from being quite as highly recognized for their poetic innovation.¹⁹ In retrospect, however, this is a significant oversight, for from the Fugitive incorporation of traditional form there branched a new trajectory of modern poetry, one that both acknowledged conventional, Eurocentric origins and at the same time endeavored to transcend them. Fugitives like Davidson included into this merger elements of folk tradition and orality that were regionally specific, further separating the English and American schools while maintaining a strong sense of correlation. This mirrored the Fugitive’s strange approach

to the “Old South,” an ideology from which they claimed to flee, “without,” as Davidson wrote, “at the same time casting aside as unworthy all that is established as good in the past.”²⁰ More importantly, however, this established a relationship between Southern poetry and “appropriated” European form: folk subjects represented in Classical structures of meter and rhyme, modern poetics couched in rather orthodox arrangements. Far from being derivative, this combination created a poetic matrix capable of expressing their historical experience of the South. For the Fugitives, as well as for Trethewey almost one hundred years later, this Southern experience was one of doubleness and liminality, of a present unable to effectively disentangle itself from the past for fear of forgetting.

Like the speaker in Trethewey’s “Native Guard,” the Fugitives turned to written documentation in an attempt to locate themselves historically. Also like “Native Guard,” Fugitive poetry often re-imagined a historical moment from the past through a fictionalized character in order to establish empathy between present-day readers and those abstracted figures of the distant past.²¹ Trethewey’s *Native Guard* insists, through production and reproduction of an imagined historical record, on a new version of history that is more inclusive, acknowledging not only those who have been omitted but also the process of recording that is responsible for their erasure.

For Trethewey, the process of memorialization is dependent upon the production and reproduction of artifact, the manipulation of the historical record, and what Scott Romine might refer to as the subtle “diacritics of difference” inherent to the material record of our culture.²² Trethewey’s interest in the visual image as record is evident by her frequent use of ekphrastic poetry, and by the way she has centrally located these poems at the heart of

her collection, surrounding the “Native Guard” sequence. The four sections of “Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi,” which are all traditional poetic forms, illustrate the ambiguities of “authenticity” that Trethewey finds both fascinating and problematic in any claim of historical objectivity:

I like, on the one hand, [photography] can be seen as documentary. Photographs catch moments that allow us to have a glimpse into something that has occurred and that we can look at. But at the same time, I’m fully aware that angles, croppings, all such formal decisions keep us from some part of the “evidence.” Between what we can see and what is being withheld from us is the place of real excitement for me ²³

Trethewey has chosen to recreate these images in formally structured poems, like the “King’s Cotton, 1907” section of “Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi,” a villanelle, which uses repetition in a very different way than do the other forms in the collection. The villanelle in this instance induces a sense of stagnation, of circularity and stasis, and this is underscored by Trethewey’s frequent caesura and her halting lineation:

Now, negro children ride the bales, clothes stiff with starch.

From up high, in the photograph, they wave flags down

For the President who will walk through the arch, bound

for the future, his back to us. The children, on their perch—

those great bales of cotton rising up from the ground—

stare out at us. Cotton surrounds them, a swell, a great mound

bearing them up, back toward us. From the arch,
from every corner of the photograph, flags wave down,
and great bales of cotton rise up from the ground.²⁴

The “original” artifact, the photograph from which Trethewey drew inspiration for “King’s Cotton, 1907” (fig. 1) was, in itself, a memorialization of sorts: a visual document meant to commemorate a historical event within a particular context. The materiality of the image would suggest, as does Trethewey’s careful description, the “authenticity” of the moment, but the photograph’s meanings have changed since the time it was first produced and it can no longer be read with the same connotations and denotations with which it was made. It is an artifact of documentation, and a construct with a subject both mutable and dependent upon exterior readings. Trethewey highlights the artificiality of this kind of “history” by formatting her own translation in a traditional form that overtly controls the reading experience. “You are Late,” like “King’s Cotton, 1907” and other poems in the series, forces us to encounter the historical moment through a context and perspective we understand Trethewey controls, one which will allow us a double-knowledge of both past and present, of “what we can see and what is being withheld from us” outside the frame of history:

. . . Though she will read
Greenwood Public Library for Negroes,
the other, bold letters on slate, will lead

her away, out of the frame, a finger
pointing left. I want to call her, say *wait*.

But this is history: she can't linger.

She'll read the sign that I read: *You are Late*.²⁵



Figure 1.1. “A Cotton Arch, erected Oct. 21st 1907.”

What this kind of poetic accomplishes is a sort of “continued memorialization,” which is to say it is an always occurring experience of remembering initiated through the process of reading. Unlike stone monuments this poetic monument is impervious to time and is amendable, it can shift to embrace those marginalized by historic perspective. As Trethewey writes, “Some names shall deck the page of history / as it is written in stone. Some will not,”²⁶ and it might be said the goal of *Native Guard* is to “deck the page of history” in a new way.

Fugitives like Tate were still struggling with how to deal with those names that were “written in stone,” how best to memorialize in a way that would not “set up the grave / In the house.” Both Trethewey and Tate were trying to express a very specific “new” mode

of Southern experience that would shed the established, static version of Southern culture in which they wrote. Tate's "Ode" was really an attempt to break free of Southern melancholia, a cultural loop that was endlessly "reproducing the South not as *home* (inhabited place), but as *homesickness*, as an object of nostalgia in both the spatial and temporal senses of the word."²⁷

Trethewey, in her contemporary work, re-inscribes the Fugitive impulse to "Leave now / The shut gate and the decomposing wall"²⁸ of the old South, but this time works like *Native Guard* push back against an old South the Fugitives themselves fabricated through their own continued memorialization. Central to her reclamation of "Southern" (white) literary space is her revisioning of the same structural units the Fugitives used to construct their poetic monuments, yet by working inside the white, Eurocentric discourse traditional form implies Trethewey also moves out of alignment with other more avant-garde "black" aesthetics. As Brain Reed mentions in his essay "The Dark Room Collective and Post-Soul Poetics," Trethewey's "book sounds (and looks) remarkably little like the expansive, improvisatory, open field poetry common during the free jazz and soul years . . . It might be difficult to hear traces of the Black Arts Movement formal experiments in Trethewey's verse."²⁹ For Reed, this formalism places Trethewey's work squarely within the "post-soul aesthetic," a movement invested primarily in challenging dichotomous notions of race, but even within this loose categorization Trethewey's adherence to form stands out. Trethewey's "authenticity" as a "black" voice is brought into question not because of her white, biological father, but instead because of her refusal to disregard entirely the formal language of her white, literary fathers. According to Scott Romine's *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural*

Reproduction the two prevalent models of authentic black discourse privilege either an “urban real” or “an alternative (and no less ubiquitous) regime of black authenticity that looks away from the street—not to Dixie land per se but to a southern home of rural, authentic, and organic folk culture.”³⁰ Trethewey is caught in a double-bind: she simultaneously wants to prove her fluency with traditional form but in doing so her work is denied black subjective presence. *Native Guard* had become a new historical record that would continually memorialize an alternative Southern history, but at the same time it re-inscribed certain “white” aesthetic standards for “Southern” literature. “Form,” writes Dorothy J. Wang, “whether that of traditional lyric or avant-garde poems, is assumed to be the provenance of a literary acumen and culture that is unmarked but assumed to be white.”³¹ For the Fugitives these connections strengthened their literary legitimacy by linking them to Anglo-European modernism, but for Trethewey it problematized what, exactly, she was (or was not) representing by eschewing “black” dialect in her work.

Ironically, when Ransom et al. suggested, in *I’ll Take My Stand*, that the “traditional Southern life,”³² the true Southern life, was one connected to rural and agrarian folk culture they were also assuming that folk culture to be white, so while Trethewey cannot be seen as writing authentically “black” poetry because she is operating within a “white” discourse far removed from the rural South, the Fugitives-Agrarians were advocated for a return to “an unmarked but assumed to be white” pastoral fantasy. Trethewey acknowledges this dynamic in her piece “Pastoral,” in which she figuratively obscures the urban skyline of Atlanta behind a “photographer’s backdrop— / a lush pasture, green, full of soft-eyed cows.”³³ Her opening lines assert in no uncertain terms “I am with the

Fugitive / poets,” and “Pastoral” includes references not only to the Fugitives but also, specifically, Robert Penn Warren—the other U.S. Poet Laureate who had been definitively categorized as a “Southern poet.” Trethewey’s origin and return, her attested belonging, seem somehow suspect in “Pastoral,” the artifice of a rural ideal undercut by the sounds of urbanization, her literary inheritance darkened by the looming shadow of segregation:

We’re lining up now—Robert Penn Warren,
his voice just audible above the drone
of bulldozers, telling us where to stand.
Say “race,” the photographer croons. I’m in
blackface again when the flash freezes us.
My father’s white, I tell them, *and rural.*
You don’t hate the South? they ask. *You don’t hate it?*

If anything has problematized Trethewey’s connection with the South, however, it has been the public’s overwhelming positive reception of her work. As Trethewey’s recognition as a nationally-acclaimed poet spread, so did the frequency with which she was referred to as a “Southern poet,” and in particular with which she was associated with other Southern poets like Robert Penn Warren. In fact, after her nomination to Poet Laureate of the United States in 2012, headlines like “New U.S. Poet Laureate: A Southerner to the Core”³⁴ effectively accomplished the very erasure that had concerned Trethewey in comparisons with her biological father: she became exclusively a *Southern* poet, a “poet-historian” like Warren, a writer who dealt primarily with an essentially Southern experience.³⁵ Her own personal identity was occluded by her new status as a

regional representative, the “nation’s first poet laureate to hail from the South since the initial laureate—Robert Penn Warren was named by the Library of Congress in 1986.”³⁶ While the Fugitives may have constantly reiterated their tenuous location in the southern states, Trethewey became indivisible from The South.

The true amendment that Trethewey’s work affords us is the ability to experience more than one historical memory of region, and in this work we find a way to flee the Old South without discarding “all that was good.” Her work exhibits both a deeply invested commitment to traditional forms and a postmodern sensibility that allows for a more conscientious approach to poetic device, and she has been successful in constructing a new poetic that is inclusive of multiple representations, multiple histories, many Souths. Both Trethewey and the Fugitives were interested in reproducing a new version of the Southern experience, one which depended on formal expression but that could sustain multiple registers of discourse, and both ultimately ended up re-defining the boundaries of Southern aesthetics in the process. By trying to be “with the Fugitives,” Trethewey wrestled with the true limitations of the Fugitive inheritance: the impulse to both preserve and to amend. Trethewey’s interrogation of Southern identity sought to reframe, revise, and reconfigure the record that had so long been held as the one true historical experience, and her work successfully memorialized those minoritarian citizens who had been erased from participating in that heritage.

Notes

¹ Natasha Trethewey, “The Public Life of Poetry: An Interview with Natasha Trethewey,” interview by Jennifer Chang, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 11, 2013, lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-public-life-of-poetry-an-interview-with-natasha-

trethewey/; Giorgia De Cenzo, "Natasha Trethewey: The Native Guard of Southern History," *South Atlantic Review* 73, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 20–49, 20–21; James Blington quoted in "New U.S. Poet Laureate: A Southerner to the Core," *All Things Considered*, NPR, June 7, 2012, npr.org/2012/06/07/154524656/natasha-trethewey-is-named-u-s-poet-laureate#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20named%20its,Library%20of%20Congress%20in%201986.

² Brian Reed, "The Dark Room Collective and Post-Soul Poetics," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 727–47, 741.

³ See John Drury, "Blues," *The Poetry Dictionary* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2006), 42–45.

⁴ See Natasha Trethewey, "Natasha Trethewey: If My Mom Could See Us Now," interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, January 20, 2009, npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99474984.

⁵ Natasha Trethewey, "Graveyard Blues," in *Native Guard: Poems* (Boston, MA: Mariner, 2007), 8.

⁶ Annie Finch, *The Body of Poetry: Essays on Women, Form, and the Poetic Self* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 49.

⁷ Natasha Trethewey, "An Interview with Natasha Trethewey," interview by Pearl Amelia McHaney, *Five Points: A Journal of Literature and Art* 11, no. 3 (2007), 96–115, reprinted in *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 45–60, 48.

⁸ James A. Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Routledge, 1984), 59–80, 67.

⁹ Quoted in Hall, *Conversations*, 48.

¹⁰ Trethewey, "Elegy for the Native Guards," *Native Guard*, 44.

¹¹ Trethewey, "Monument," *Native Guard*, 43.

¹² Allen Tate, "Ode to the Confederate Dead," in *The Fugitive Poets: Modern Southern Poetry in Perspective*, ed. William Pratt (Nashville: J. S. Sanders and Company, 1991), 67–69, 68.

¹³ Quoted in Hall, *Conversations*, 56

¹⁴ Trethewey, "Native Guard," *Native Guard*, 25–30, 27.

¹⁵ Trethewey, "Native Guard," 25.

¹⁶ Quoted in Hall, *Conversations*, 55.

¹⁷ Natasha Trethewey, "Interview with Natasha Trethewey," interview by Remica L. Bingham, *PMS: poemmemoirstory* 8 (2008): 1–20, reprinted in Hall, *Conversations*, 61–76, 65–66.

¹⁸ William Pratt, "In Pursuit of the Fugitives," in *Fugitive Poets*, xiii–xlvi, xxvii.

¹⁹ Pratt, "In Pursuit," xiv.

²⁰ Donald Davidson quoted in M. Thomas Inge, "The Fugitives and the Agrarians: A Clarification," *American Literature* 62, no. 3 (Sept. 1990): 486–93, 491.

²¹ Davidson's "Lee in the Mountains" is an excellent example of an attempt at this historical re-visioning, which gives voice and agency to a historical figure and permits a re-write of historical persona. In "Lee in the Mountains," the reader is able make an immediate and emotional connection with the defeated figure of Robert E. Lee, who,

unlike the Lee presented us in the historical record, expresses remorse, hesitation, loss, and conflicting passions. See Donald Davidson, "Lee in the Mountains: 1865–1870," in *The Fugitive Poets*, 34–37.

²² See Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

²³ Trethewey, "The Public Life of Poetry."

²⁴ Trethewey, "Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi," in *Native Guard*, 21–24, 21.

²⁵ Trethewey, "Scenes," 24.

²⁶ Trethewey, "Native Guard," 28.

²⁷ Romine, *The Real South*, 28–29. Emphasis in original.

²⁸ Tate, "Ode," *Fugitive Poets*, 69.

²⁹ Reed, "The Dark Room Collective," 741.

³⁰ Romine, *The Real South*, 112.

³¹ Dorothy J. Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 20.

³² See Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930; rpt. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), xlvii.

³³ Trethewey, "Pastoral," in *Native Guard*, 35.

³⁴ See "New U.S. Poet Laureate," *All Things Considered*.

³⁵ Trethewey, "The Public Life of Poetry."

³⁶ "New U.S. Poet Laureate," *All Things Considered*.

CHAPTER 3

EXCLUSION AND COMMUNITY IN *ARKANSAS*

“I think poetry is what happens or is conveyed on the outskirts of sense, on the outskirts of normative meaning. I’m trying precisely to work on that edge, and I assume that the content that is conveyed on that edge, on that fault line, is richer, deeper, and fuller than those things that are given in writing that passes for direct.”

—Fred Moten in an interview with Charles Henry Rowell

Fred Moten seems obsessed with edges. They pervade his creative work, are thematically present in all of his collections and visually fracture the page space of his open forms. Edges obfuscate Moten’s scholarly language; violently slashed with parenthetical asides and augmentations these linguistic edges dodge and skirt, simultaneously refusing meaning while elucidating his theories of “subjectless predication.” Moten’s use of aurality, the way he uses elements of specifically Black vernaculars to form insular communal meaning, challenges a linguistic heritage that privileges standardized grammatical structures and grants agency to those linguistic presences that have historically been forced to the margins. Like Trethewey’s *Native Guard* these voices from the edge interrupt and resist, become radical monuments to the failure of language as record, and at their most frustrating and generous create new, inclusive spaces from those relentlessly exclusionary materials.

Moten grew up at the collision point between two very different worlds, at the edge of (at least) two very divergent discursive communities. On one plane lay the city of Las Vegas, Moten's neighborhood situated on its westernmost edge and surrounded by the American desert. Intersecting this was Moten's own small community, a collective unto itself, mostly comprised of Southern African-Americans who had moved to Las Vegas in the late 1950s and early 1960s for work. In a 2018 article with *ArtNews*, Moten recalled his childhood as being deeply saturated with this sense of Southern African-American identity: "I grew up in a small black Southern village, that happened to be transported to Las Vegas."¹ Many of the members of this community originated from the same small towns and regions in the south, and so while the physical landscapes impressed upon Moten's earliest memories were the arid flats of Nevada ("If you left your housing development, you went into the desert—there was desert at the end of our street"), the oral and linguistic topographies permeating his young consciousness were highly regionalized vernacular and narrative structures.²

And at the nexus of these two planes of socio-historic location were even more edges to contend with: the United States was still widely segregated and the borders between racial, economic, and linguistically defined communities were heavily policed. According to Moten, the geographic areas surrounding his birthplace were "known as the Mississippi of the West, and we didn't stray from Vegas because it was a very different atmosphere."³ Moten's mother, often referenced in his work as B. Jenkins, attended a segregated university in Arkansas (the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville) before becoming a school teacher, but was denied employment in both Chicago and Las Vegas when she applied to teach in the still-segregated public schools there. Excluded as an

educator because of her race, Jenkins worked for a time as a house cleaner and performed other domestic work in Las Vegas before finally getting a position at an elementary school on the West Side—the “small black Southern village” where Moten was raised, a place of “intimate, communal life,” where “[i]t seemed like everybody was from one of these tiny little towns in Arkansas.”⁴

Moten’s consciousness, his subjectivity, was the product of pressures exerted by the forces of these highly discordant networks of inclusion and exclusion. Early exposure to language showed Moten that multiple registers could exist within the same speaking group—that the people surrounding him could alter their dialect in such a way as to allow or deny membership into their own private margin. He also saw that these communal dialects fed from a larger meta-language, one that enforced hegemonic structures with their own massive powers of exclusion. If the “music” of his mother’s house was familiar to him, so was the understanding that it was also resistant to this privileged meta-language (“it breaks up meaning’s conditions of production” through augmentation).⁵

[Literary] Objects Can and Do Resist⁶

“New things, new spaces, new times demand lyrical innovation and intervention, formal maneuverings that often serve to bring to the theoretical and practical table whatever meaning can’t. Phrasing, where form—grammar, sound—cuts and augments meaning in the production of content, is where implication most properly resides.”

—Moten, *Black and Blur*⁷

Linguistic edges are dangerous because their double-voice offers “consent not to be a single being,” and this affords a radical recalibration of our understanding of language,

sociality and social order.⁸ For example, the idea of blackness or black subjectivity is inextricably linked to the communicative act(s) of language and their connotative and connective value. According to Moten, blackness is brokenness when juxtaposed against what passes for normative meaning (whiteness), and the strictures that allow these exclusionary practices are encoded in the structures of our written language.⁹ Spoken word, speech, voice, the use of vernacular and dialect, the implication of aurality: these function in what is, for Moten, a communal realm (a “collective orientation”) which is estimated at lower value than the standardized, syntactically “complete” and “direct” English used in the institutionalized transference of knowledge.¹⁰ Privileging the orthographic over the phonetic is as old as the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy (since writing is of the mind/the voice is of the body), but such devaluation can and should be read as highly political.¹¹ As Gavin Jones writes on the use of dialect in late nineteenth-century literature: “[D]ialect could encode the possibility of resistance, not just by undermining the integrity of a dominant standard, but by recording the subversive voices in which alternate versions of reality were engendered.”¹²

The same linguistic resistance that Jones identified as powerful activism in the dialect-literature of the Gilded Age continues to affect anxieties about fragmenting national language/culture in the twenty-first century. The fear of alterity and multivocality (which is really a fear of losing one single, essential cultural identity) manifests in grammatical ossification—a *Standardized American English* (SAE)—and variance becomes deviance: aberrant, criminal and broken. In language, this separation becomes a powerful kind of bigotry, one so deeply ingrained in our literary culture that it undergirds all print-culture,

from production to distribution, and buttresses larger social inequities through established conventions. In 1990, Bruce Andrews wrote

Beyond whatever autonomy we'd like to imagine for language, there's an outside: an organized & powered network; a set of priorities & practices, of exclusions & slightings, of promotions & publicizing—which power relations in society in a certain way. The process by which sense occurs, in other words, is *socially ruled*—staged into discourse & harnessed into ideology.¹³

All of which is to say that the rules of English orthography, syntax, and semantics with which we are inculcated from a very young age do significantly more than build “unified fields of exchange,” they also normalize and prioritize in such a way that “makes some languages [and grammars, and meanings] more powerful than others.”¹⁴

To be out on the edge of language, “on the outskirts of normative meaning,” is to show the ways in which one is divergent from dominant language structures and, at the same time, illuminate those structures through the act of one's divergence. For Moten, this is *fugitivity*, a “being together in homelessness” that refuses the call to positioned subjectivity and instead embraces a collective form of meaning/being.¹⁵

Perhaps this sense of fugitivity can best be understood through music, an art form with which Moten is also intimately connected.¹⁶ The “break” in jazz functions as an edge in that it is an arrest defined contextually, a resisting object that can be categorized as neither music nor silence, but instead makes the listener aware of both at the same time, seeing one *around* the other. The “cut” in jazz, according to James Snead, “overtly insists on the repetitive nature of the music by abruptly skipping it back to another beginning which we have already heard”; in other words, a slight alteration that points to

alternate possibilities, a Bakhtinian “double-voiced word” that “insert[s] a new semantic orientation into a word which already has—and retains—its own orientation.”¹⁷ As Gary Saul Morson writes

The audience of a double-voiced word [and we might add, too, the auditor of the jazz cut] is therefore meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker’s point of view (or “semantic position”) *and* the second speaker’s evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view. I find it helpful to picture a double-voiced word as a special sort of palimpsest in which the uppermost inscription is a commentary on the one beneath it, which the reader (or audience) can know only by reading through the commentary that obscures the very process of evaluation.¹⁸

So, in jazz as in Bakhtin as in Moten’s edges we find “the massive discourse of the cut, of rememberment and redress,” and in the context of southern poetics/experience this kind of (linguistic and/or aural) intervention becomes activism precisely because it refuses to be any one concrete thing.

This is utopic thinking and radical thought, but jazz reflects fugitivity in its collaborative improvisation and “straightforward adequation [in a linguistic sense] of a linear temporality that is often understood to be essential to documentation.”¹⁹ Jazz repeats and redresses in the cut, alters and connects incongruent musical segments affectively, and joins polyphonic fragments referentially, based on the improvisatory decisions of the musicians. Jazz makes equivalencies (connotations) between disparate phrases, building new meanings and new grammars through these aural/communal associative shifts. Moten writes, “[t]ransferences structure that mode of organization out

of which comes another (mode of) aesthetic content”; beyond literary meaning as we (are taught to) understand it, music communicates aesthetically (physically) in ways written language can only attempt to simulate in trope.²⁰ Freed of the “requirement *to mean* in the way that language is so constrained,” jazz still manages to implement a “particular quality of sound that implies and encodes movement, restlessness, a kind of fugal and centrifugal desire and execution.”²¹ Music is able to make leaps in meaning holistically, by implication and in the moment, but an understanding of musical allusions—music’s intertextuality and the repetition/revision of its formal phrases—is still necessary for the full legibility of those leaps. In other words, new collective meanings must be constructed out of received forms in order to effectively communicate, but new meanings will inevitably interrogate those constituent parts through their difference.

Like music, the vernacular (and particularly African-American Vernacular English, or AAVE—Moten’s “music of the speech of the people in [my mother’s] house and in my neighborhood”) also exhibits a collective orientation.²² Spoken vernacular is as community-based as standardized language is nationalistic; both AAVE and SAE depend upon the formal and rhetorical training of their participants, and both therefore use closed systems of reading to emphasize the edges of communal knowledge. Where a spoken vernacular like AAVE or a regional dialect differ from a dominant (power) language is the vernacular’s ability to “signify” on the hegemonic language. Much like a jazz riff, the vernacular becomes double-voiced in this way, communicating through structures of both the dominant and subordinate language, the speech of the smaller community reflecting and refracting that of the larger. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls this reflection “Signifyin(g)” and describes its communal value thusly:

Black adults teach their children this exceptionally complex system of rhetoric . . . allowing—through the manipulation of these classic black figures of Signification—the black person to move freely between two discursive universes. This is an excellent example of what I call linguistic masking, the verbal sign of the mask of blackness that demarcates the boundary between the white linguistic realm and the black, two domains that exist side by side in a homonymic relation signified by the very concept of Signification. To learn to manipulate language in such a way as to facilitate the smooth navigation between these two realms has been the challenge of black parenthood, and remains so today. Teaching one’s children the fine art of Signifyin(g) is to teach them about this mode of linguistic circumnavigation, to teach them a second language they can share with other black people.²³

Jazz and Signifyin(g) reconfigure normative meaning through augmentation—received structures of meaning are signified upon to create an excess which then creates Gates’s “homonymic relation.” AAVE and SAE are both vehicles of connectivity (all communicative acts require both a sender and a receiver, a writer and a reader), but AAVE and vernacular dialects are *unauthorized* modes of communication outside of the boundaries of their discursive communities. It is their inherent double-ness, the augmentation of meaning(s) so central to vernacular dialects that make them (and the sociality they fortify) so subversive and dangerous.

Arkansas as Thought Community

“There might be only a few folks for whom the poems seem worth it (not in spite of but because of their failure or refusal to communicate). But I would say to

these folks that I hope that they can, or will try to, recognize some music that they know in my poems.”

—Moten, “Words Don’t Go There”²⁴

So how does one translate not only the experience of marginalization (emphasized by the politicization of language) but also offer the same aural/communal potential for multiplicity (which is resistant to the ideologies of standardization) that jazz might? How do we share an exclusive intersubjectivity (a communal experience of *non*-subjectivity) with the reading subject? And how do we effectively investigate, through a shared language:

What is it to be thrown into the story of another’s development; and to be thrown into that story as both an interruption of it and as its condition of possibility; and to have that irruption be understood as both an ordering and a disordering movement? And what if one has something like one’s own story to tell? One engages, then, in the production of a subplot, a plot against the plot.²⁵

To be effectively affective (which is to say, to be able to communicate *the experience* of the speaker’s minoritarian citizenship), this subplot needs to leverage the material conditions of linear time, syntax, and semantics against its own stasis. It needs to resist singular meaning in lieu of multiple possibilities of meaning, disrupt, disobey, refuse to keep still.

Not by Opposition, by Augmentation²⁶

“For [Moten] this fugitive quality is the point. We are not supposed to be satisfied with clear understanding, but instead motivated to continue improvising and

imagining a utopian destination where a black cosmopolitanism—one created from below, rather than imposed from above—brings folks together.”

—Jesse McCarthy, “The Low End Theory”

“I want to challenge the law that language lays down while taking advantage of the opportunities that language affords.”

—Moten, “Words Don’t Go There”²⁷

In 2000, Pressed Wafer Books released Moten’s first collection of poetry, a chapbook titled *Arkansas*. In the entire oeuvre of his writing, *Arkansas* registers as a very small mark, one that was soon surpassed by his work in black studies and critical theory and by more widely distributed (and therefore more widely read) collections like *B. Jenkins* (2010), *The Feel Trio* (2014), and *The Little Edges* (2015).²⁸ Even now, at a time when *Arkansas* is digitally available for free on the internet, there remains to be relatively little scholarly focus on the work.²⁹ But *Arkansas* is the seed from which would germinate Moten’s later ideology and poesis; as a document it contains all of his “critical and philosophical sensibility,” all of his radical aesthetic.³⁰ *Arkansas* is important as an example of activist literature because it answers all of the questions posed above through its formal design. It questions normative meaning by disrupting semantic and syntactical values, and in doing so performs the experience of non-subjectivity in a way that implicates linguistic marginalization in meaning-making. *Arkansas* is a radical refusal of the systems that excluded his mother from becoming an educator and, at the same time, offers possible alternative modes of being which allow for multivalence and connectivity.

Arkansas opens with a poem that uses collaborative imagination in a way similar to jazz or shared dialect. The piece “new trouble man” creates connotative meaning between

disparate segments that rely heavily on their oral/aural qualities; taken individually, these lines seem to be sound-based and syntactically incomplete, but as a whole they build meaning through their relation to one another and to meaning outside of the poem. At times, this external meaning or reference is accessible to particular readers and not others, at times the lines themselves contain no meaning beyond their sonic value, making them equally accessible to all readers from all backgrounds. The rhythm of this poem is perhaps its most democratic feature—rhythmic qualities (in any text) are rooted in the body, which is to say, *felt*, but at the same time the corporeal elements in this poem are necessarily language-based. The resulting syncopated effect is similar to sampling in hip-hop, as illustrated in the first lines of “new trouble man”:

I come up hard, baby
new edge come up new up
hard, baby nobody taught
up hard I come
up hard, baby. I come
up hard, baby new edge
yeah aiihyeah

Technically, this poem is constructed from forty-five individual words/sounds, recombined again and again to create different phrases or segments. Semantically “complete” phrases are rare: there are four or five segments that seem relatively complete, yet these are often fractured by lineation and recombined (sampled) from previously occurring segments. Their fragmentation transforms not just the meaning of each segment but also its grammatical mood—line breaks can swing these recombined

segments from the imperative to the declarative to the conditional by transferring emphasis to different elements within each unit. The word “baby” pivots, too, from vocative to object to command verb and back, becoming an interstitial element whose liquidity manages to contain multitudes (including intimate lover, subject, and implicated observer):

I come up hard, baby
mo’ daddy taught up
hard, baby come up cold
baby like scratches hard, sugar
space of skin
up hard, baby come up edge
yeah aihhyeah

In a way, the liquid subject/object here makes perfect sense. Moten’s entire theory of blackness centers around the relationship between subjectivity and objectification, but as a “performance” it is equally important to understand that “new trouble man” is essentially Moten’s riff on Marvin Gaye’s 1972 song, “Trouble Man,” and that *song* (like visual art) contains the potential to address both general and specific audiences simultaneously.³¹ Of the four or five more syntactically correct segments, the one that is most used in recombination to create the bulk of the poem (“I come up hard, baby”) is also the opening line and recurring chorus in Gaye’s song. The line uses a dialect which automatically associates the speaker/singer with certain social networks, but also (as evidenced in both Moten’s poem and Gaye’s song) values the sound of the utterance as highly as it does its meaning. This privileging of sound over meaning, intrinsic to song as

melody first and foremost, makes them more accessible—their sonic values carry greater pathos than their lyrics-as-text.

Yet, at the same time, a poem which is constructed from song also underscores its difference from song through its textuality, and in this way the onomatopoeias in “new trouble man” (which could also be seen as samples from the Gaye’s “Trouble Man”) emphasize even further the failure of the text to operate mimetically. As Jahan Ramazani writes, “[E]ven as poetry appropriates and mimics song, among other genres, becoming ever more porous, it also asserts its specificity.”³² The textuality of “new trouble man” is always at the forefront of its reading—all disruption of the text, all of the poem’s “failure or refusal to communicate” emphasizes its resistance to normative forms of meaning. As readers, we search for syntactical and semantic completion and, being denied that, attempt to find meaning elsewhere. If we are “in the know” we will perhaps make the leap to Marvin Gaye’s single, thereby imbuing the text with an actual aurality, temporality, and context beyond the diagnosis of the poem itself—an associative layer that connects the poem to the world in which (some, but not all) readers live.

If we don’t recognize the allusions (and, unlike one of his predecessors, T. S. Eliot, Moten offers us no footnotes to lead the way) we feel excluded by the difficulty of the text, and our search for meaning in the syntactical fragments will leave us frustrated by a linguistic system to which we do not belong. The poem, then, enacts a marginalization of sorts—it refuses to admit all of us in all of the way—the level of our reading comprehension is defined significantly by the real-life communities to which we belong and requires us to readjust our use of language to accommodate the new system(s).

“new trouble man” reads very much in the mode of a persona poem; as the opening piece in the collection it affords us the opportunity to enter into the speaker’s world from a position of psychic distance. I would argue that this initial distancing creates an openness in the reader that a different mode (say confessional poetry) would not allow—we are trained to “suspend our disbelief” as distanced readers of fiction, and I believe the semantically-fractured structure of “new trouble man” is more successful because it leans so heavily on dialect (it’s “cool” and musical—practically Billboard—and we’re therefore more ready for it). The piece that follows, “but on the other hand, baby,” shifts the psychic distance by removing the persona. The lines are syntactically more complete (more akin to SAE), the vocative address in the title provides us a bridge from “new trouble man” but is definitely no longer liquid, tied instead to a specific “you” addressed throughout the poem. Moten also begins to introduce names at this point: “Jerome, Robert / Pete Williams”, “Antonello”, “Sonny”.

Naming is actually one of the most important features in *Arkansas*. The names work on several different levels interchangeably: they provide cultural scaffolding which locates the work in a socio-historical position outside the text, they create more intimate connection (as intended audience) between the reader and the vocative expression, and they build a collective effort/effect in their accumulation throughout the text. Moten literally “peoples” his work, so while he uses exclusionary languages/structures in “new trouble man” he immediately offers a new intimacy in “but on the other hand, baby” with this burgeoning community of names. “but on the other hand, baby” is really all about connection, emphasized by the word “soledad” (“solitude”) juxtaposed in that aforementioned list of names:

in this full poor cell: Jerome, Robert
Pete Williams, soledad, vanishing
point blade or black and they anticipate

The incarceration here may be figurative (though it seems more literal and in the speaker's "present"—perhaps the result of the violence implied by "point blade or black") but regardless the "full poor cell" is held in stark contrast with the intimate moment that follows, remembered by the speaker from the night before:

while we talk a little about that

shit last night, when I woke up and you
was on that couch I got so scared, that blanket
fit so snug, key and bars, cell and garden

but you talked with me a while. you brushed
and broke with small flicks like Antonello, like Sonny

The "solitude" felt in the crowded cell is replaced by vulnerability—a desire and need for intimacy expressed by a speaker to whom we attribute the same "hard" masculinity as the speaker in the poem prior. The implicit continuation of the speaker (the "contamination" of the second poem by the first) results from the repetition of the word "baby" in the title—a word that we have come to understand functions rhythmically to move the text forward.

In the pieces that follow, “could be gone” and “echo park and montecito,” Moten contracts and expands the borders of this linguistic community again, this time by pushing the boundaries of form on the page. “could be gone,” which, like “new trouble man,” emphasizes the musicality of the line and leans heavily on sonic value for meaning, also integrates negative space into the fracture. Sonically this translates as silence or interruption—much like standing still while snatches of conversation and song flow past you on the street. “could be gone” shifts in between phonetic vernacular and disordered (broken) syntax, at times pushing words to the very limits of their semantic meaning:

if you can do, making *bright* the
latin run like the anglish the hard
flow up smooth to the under it hausa
she move the one drawn
all the way through a brush and space
staircase or a bridge odyssey ayley
so laura, wishing, could feel it,
and hold and what kept on
then the naming, slave
to the image, could be gone

Much like “new trouble man,” “could be gone” instructs the reader how to discern meaning through accumulation rather than linearly—when there is no syntax the mind makes associative connections and assigns grammatical value—but “could be gone” is an

even more resistant and relies even more heavily on phonetic association and “word objects” with external exchange rates (like the word “slave,” which stands out violently in the above stanza). Like atonal (“free”) jazz, “could be gone” refuses to communicate any narrative or temporal stability, or even follow any single line progression, but instead moves forward through a kind of sonically-based grammatical mimesis—it *sounds* like it *should* make sense. Again like free jazz, the composition is thereby able to exhibit multiple tempos and rhythmic layers all at once, moving like thought from one locus of meaning to the next.

“echo park and montecito,” takes the open framework of “could be gone” and concentrates it into visually-solid blocks of text. Perhaps counterintuitively, these dense blocks create a faster pace and an extraordinarily “active” poetic environment, expanding the terrain of the work out to encompass a more diverse landscape and increasing the speed at which the lines are processed to elevate the accumulative effect of the language. “echo park and montecito” is all about rapid consumption, forward-driven like the L.A. freeway. The poem’s apposition creates equivalencies between disparate things but, unlike “new trouble man” or “could be gone,” the form holds them together in a logic all of its own—because we read the long line teleologically we subconsciously make assumptions about its veracity:

from gallery by engine gallery by loose window pulled up inside above you
witness smooth Los Angeles: step, tangent and brush. empty building till you in it,
nobody. and white new connect new spray new squall to move on these steps and
pin, rose and draw, circle round the edge of your cruised and inscribed inside city,

your citywalk and promenade or palisades, the turning sunset whose people is all
you see in pretty mute offramps overflowed hoods dawn malls.³³

Each coordinate adjective and/or verb repositions the subject and moves it slightly, giving an almost cubist effect to the reader/speaker location within each line (for instance: “step, tangent and brush” or “steps and pin, rose and draw, circle round”). Moten also uses parataxis throughout to force relationships between images and emphasize the rapidity of movement between them (“offramps overflowed hoods dawn malls”). All of these slant equivalencies build a kind of logical momentum, a cyclical extended metaphor that connects the speaker (suppressing his blackness for a position in academia) with figures like Latrell Sprewell (the Golden State Warriors player who choked his white coach, P. J. Carlesimo, during a practice in 1997). “echo park and montecito” is, then, a radical reconfiguration of identity for the speaker, and this is reflected in the keeling, kaleidoscopic ecology of the poem that stretches to contain everything from illicit truck stop sex in L. A. to “chopping cotton in Tuscaloosa next to the field house”.

Arkansas as Augmentation

acquisition

grammar and rhythm are

inside rule to

here we make em over

all the way to sing

—from “another long-ass night suite”

Arkansas refuses to sit still. As a diasporic text, *Arkansas* moves from one coast to the other and back, full of reconfiguration and translation. The poems range in form and content, but carried throughout are the vestiges of origin, communal language deeply resistant to exclusionary hegemonic structures and a re-articulation of what it is to mean, to be a subject denied subjectivity. Of all the things *Arkansas* teaches us as readers, perhaps the most important is the arbitrary nature of identity—that a man born in Las Vegas might experience the South and West simultaneously, a palimpsest (or Janus head) of sociolinguistic landscapes.

There are two titular poems in *Arkansas*, each consisting of three separate sections. The first “Arkansas” can be read as sketch of place; it creates parallel historical narratives for both the region and the speaker, as in the section “Cash and Bryant” (quoted in full):

all the white folk mimi loves
have sunk into the moro bottom
they say to say hello
we just think she’s precious

saline, pale ouchitah. panther.
fragments of airport, silent wine
Mississippi red table wine chilled
Temperance Hill and this pillhead

fucker name Steve uglyass
Miz Rogers cross-eyed cow

and that Elmer Fudd looking
principal. various Parkers and

Klappenbachs, Spearses, Matthews
and Gills

The first “Arkansas” maps and peoples the region through dialect; the syntax itself is relatively complete and most of the lines are end stopped rather than enjambed. “Cash and Bryant” presents a “verbalized” account of the Arkansas community from which Moten’s family originates, a sort of family/oral history (remembrance) interspersed with the figurative language of the poet.³⁴ Again, the parataxis makes metaphor without copula, creating an immediate relationship between words (“saline, pale ouchitah. panther”) based solely on proximities. This relationship is then mirrored in the family names listed at the close of the section (“Klappenbachs, Spearses, Matthews / and Gills”). Because the first “Arkansas” is primarily concerned with race, this relation-by-proximity becomes particularly poignant.³⁵

Each of the sections in the second “Arkansas” are titled after place names, but the sections themselves are entirely composed in the vernacular, as if spoken directly to the reader exclusively in the regional dialect. As a closing piece, this is an incredibly intimate gesture, and implies the inclusion of the reader into the small community of the poem. That both these poems share the title of the project, as a whole, might intimate that the reader’s proximity to this radically resistant text has shifted, become closer, and that the reward for the difficulty in parsing a collection of poetry that fails or refuses to communicate might be a broader understanding of what it is to be “meaningful.”

Moten's strategy in accomplishing augmentation (which he has often cited as a revolutionary re-imagining of the singleness of being) in *Arkansas* is a radically fluid and associative approach to a cultural essentialism that would restrict and/or deny certain modes of being and privilege others. *Arkansas* "confronts the *scale & method* by which established sense & meaning reign." As Bruce Andrews wrote: "[W]riting's (social) method is its politics, its explanation, since the 'failure' is implicated one way or another by how reading reconvenes conventions . . . by restaging the methods of how significance & value in language do rest upon the *arbitrary* workings of the sign yet also on the *systemic* shaping work of ideology & power."³⁶ Moten challenges the system by illustrating how alternative modes of speech and meaning can (and do) exist alongside established normativities, how collective meaning can redress exclusionary narratives and provide inclusive communities of thought, new modes of time and history.

Notes

¹ See "Words Don't Go There": An Interview with Fred Moten by Charles Henry Rowell, *Callaloo* 27.4 (2004): 953–66, 960; Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), ix; Andy Battaglia, "Every and All: Fred Moten's Oneness as a Poet, Theorist, and Artistic Muse," *ArtNews* (March 27, 2018), artnews.com/art-news/artists/icons-fred-moten-9976/.

² Moten qtd. in Battaglia, "Every and All."

³ Moten qtd. in Battaglia, "Every and All."

⁴ Jesse McCarthy, "The Low End Theory: Fred Moten's Subversive Black-Studies Scholarship," *Harvard Magazine* (Jan/Feb, 2018), harvardmagazine.com/2018/01/fred-

moten-black-and-blur. Moten adds, “My mom’s best friends—their grandparents were friends.”

⁵ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 3. Here, Moten is actually discussing phrasal disruption in sentences, but he also elaborates on the “lyric materiality” of dialect and its capacity to irrupt: “The line of that [historical] dialectic has got to be broken by another dialect; the trajectory of that narrative has got to be disrupted by some kind of lyric materiality” (10).

⁶ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity” (1).

⁷ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur*, 10.

⁸ “consent not to be a single being” is the overarching title for Moten’s trilogy of critical texts which includes *Black and Blur* (2017), *The Universal Machine* (2018), and *Stolen Life* (2018).

⁹ As Bryan Wagner reminds us, “Blackness does not come from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black during a particular stage in their history. It sounds a little strange to put it this way, but the truth of this description is widely acknowledged.

Blackness is an adjunct to racial slavery” (*Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009], 1). Jack Halberstam, in the introduction of Stefano Harney and Moten’s *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013), illustrates the consequences of this when he writes, “[T]he projects of ‘fugitive planning

and black study,’ are mostly about reaching out to find connection; they are about making common cause with the brokenness of being, a brokenness, I would venture to say, that is also blackness, that remains blackness, and will, despite all, remain broken” (5).

¹⁰ *The Undercommons*, 27.

¹¹ Plato, of course, is often charged with the opposite—privileging the phonetic over the graphic—but this is complicated. As Walter J. Ong notes, “Paradoxically, Plato could formulate his phonocentrism, his preference for orality over writing, clearly and effectively only because he could write. Plato’s phonocentrism is textually contrived and textually defended” (*Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* [1982; New York: Routledge, 2015], 164).

¹² Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 11.

¹³ Bruce Andrews, “Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis,” in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 2008), 23–44, 26. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Juliana Spahr, *Du Bois’s Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 11.

¹⁵ *The Undercommons*, 96.

¹⁶ Moten has published numerous essays as a music critic, focusing particularly on jazz and performance.

¹⁷ James A. Snead, “Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture,” *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr (New York: Routledge, 1984), 59–80, 69.

¹⁸ Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1981), 108.

Emphasis in original.

¹⁹ *Black and Blur*, 40.

²⁰ *Black and Blur*, 3.

²¹ "Words Don't Go There," 962, 963. Emphasis in original.

²² "Words Don't Go There," 959.

²³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 75–76.

²⁴ "Words Don't Go There," 959–60.

²⁵ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 68.

²⁶ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 3.

²⁷ "Words Don't Go There," 962.

²⁸ *B. Jenkins*, for example, was distributed by Duke University Press, *The Feel Trio* (Letter Machine Editions) was nominated for a National Book Award in Poetry, and *The Little Edges* by Wesleyan University Press.

²⁹ *Arkansas* is available through Eclipse Archive, "a free on-line archive focusing on digital facsimiles of the most radical small-press writing from the last quarter century." In addition to *Arkansas*, Eclipse offers a plethora of language-centered poetry, essays, and periodicals by writers such as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Bruce Andrews. Regardless of the fact that such a platform leads to greater general availability than a volume published by a well-regarded academic press, I would argue that promotion for texts included in a digital archive like Eclipse is significantly lower than anything coming

out of Duke University Press (for example), and that this directly affects the distribution of scholarly attention paid. For more information on Eclipse Archive, see eclipsearchive.org.

³⁰ Moten quoted in McCarthy, “The Low End Theory.”

³¹ For further reading on blackness and the subject/object relationship, see “Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester’s Scream,” in *In the Break*, 1–24. “Trouble Man” was the titular single on the album *Trouble Man*, the soundtrack for the blaxploitation film *Trouble Man* (1972), released by 20th Century Fox.

³² Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 188.

³³ “echo park and Montecito,” *Arkansas* (Boston, MA: Pressed Wafer Books, 2000), np.

³⁴ The “Cash” in “Cash and Bryant” refers to the singer, Johnny Cash, who grew up in close proximity to Moten’s mother. He tells this story frequently in interviews.

³⁵ It’s also relevant that Moten’s partner, Laura Harris, is white. Her race is specifically discussed in the opening section of the first “Arkansas,” “Cubie and Mt. Tabor,” and she is referred to frequently throughout the collection.

³⁶ “Poetry as Explanation,” 31. Emphasis in original.

CHAPTER 4

ECOPOETIC RECLAMATIONS IN *STREAMING*

“Writers stream. We come together at gatherings, like the storytellers, singers,
stimulated by knowledge bringers and gestured toward one another along
waterways we call home

. . . . you must have water to survive, and if you befriend the source you find an
entire biosphere opens up within your view.”

—Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, “Streaming”

Moten’s belief in the healing properties of collective meaning would play very well with the work of Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, a poet who has always inhabited the interstices between stable identities, stable languages. Hedge Coke’s world is one of liminality and movement, the verve and tremor to Moten’s edging—a green language built upon her *being-in-place*—both as a person of indigenous ancestry and as the daughter of a schizophrenic. For Hedge Coke, this green language (this *streaming*) is the language of actual experience—it makes leaps in associative logic and builds aurally, much like oral literatures, predicated (like her own knowledge) upon inherited meaning, shared culture and environment. Hedge Coke’s poetry functions like communal song—song as prayer, as visionary world-building that has the potential to reclaim the Southern landscape ecologically by recreating one’s place (one’s biosphere).

Born in Amarillo, Texas, in 1958, Hedge Coke (like Moten) hails from the West, although her ties to the South were geographic as well as relational. Her father was of Cherokee and Huron heritage, and from her earliest memories impressed upon her an indigenous perspective of collaborative community/ecology (“Me, just a slight slice of the greater. We, is where it’s at. Collectively considered”¹). Hedge Coke’s family had also enacted something of a Southern diaspora—her father had moved to Texas for work and her mother, who suffered from extreme schizophrenia, created an isolating environment for Hedge Coke and her sister. The leaps in associative logic sometimes present in her poetry were part of the fabric of Hedge Coke’s earliest experiences of the world, as she has mentioned in a number of interviews, and to a certain extent she normalized her mother’s psychotic episodes of visual and auditory hallucination.

Without tribal status but still marked by her racial identity, Hedge Coke felt the pressures of a still-segregated South when her family returned to North Carolina in the 1970s. “I was the one who heard all the racist talk,” she writes in *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer*, “the things bigots were sometimes afraid to say to darker complexioned individuals. . . what they said behind others’ backs was thrust in my face, a face that must have been a constant reminder of racial mixing.”² Much like Trethewey, Hedge Coke’s biraciality gave her two different, but coexisting, paradigms. On the one hand, Anglo-European culture gave her a literary history with which she could identify (“Shakespeare, Doyle, Dumas, Edgar Allen Poe”³), but on the other it constantly reminded her (ironically, through her ability to “pass” as white) that she was Other.

Hedge Coke’s acquisition of linguistic structure thus developed along several distinct lines at once: the oral literatures of her father, the nonlinear grammars of her mother, and

the stratified socioeconomic dialects of the agricultural working class, of which she was a member. Her work in the fields also helped to underscore the worldview her father had tried to impress upon her from an early age—what we might now refer to as “ecocentric,” or holistic, taking into account the activities of both the culture(s) and the landscape(s) in which she was embedded:

 Laboring, it’s been with us. Some of Dad never left the cotton patch,
 the creek, dust, the war. Some of Mom never left Chief Mountain, Lake
 Louise, Toronto Inglis (War) Factory, or any one of many asylums. Me,
 way deep in tobacco leaf, somehow. Curved by every fold of mountain,
 skim of stream, by each single borne aggression laid out on me and
 every sliver of hope graced within. We are what we’ve been made of, the
 mountains, rivers, streams, and all the plants and creatures ever handled
 by our bodies. What we’ve been through. Story / culture equation we
 know as life⁴

Her work often displays this kind of vigorously inclusive strategy (what one might refer to as a “Whitmanesque” democratizing of topo- and biographic elements).

Hedge Coke’s integration of inherited indigenous literary/oral forms (“[s]tory / culture”) and her personified understanding of the natural world (“curved by every fold of mountain”) actually follow a longstanding tradition in Southern literature that prioritizes the rural/pastoral and associates this idyll with Native populations. Ironically, this tradition, championed by groups such as the Southern Agrarians, celebrated Jeffersonian agrarianism but also showed little or no remorse for those marginalized and oppressed through those same (historical) agricultural practices (slavery, for example, or

the colonization and subsequent eradication of Native populations). As an agricultural laborer herself, Hedge Coke's work problematizes the removed distance such a position of privilege allows and reconnects Native American subsistence farming with environmental stewardship.⁵ Like Moten (and perhaps because they both grew up fluent in the insular language of a diasporic, marginalized community), Hedge Coke uses non-linearity (ungrammatical, non-syntactical, sometimes non-English and certainly *unmarketable* language) to create a new narrative space—a new linguistic biosphere—which directly challenges the nationally-embedded and highly- problematic concept of Southern Place.

A Brief History of This Place

At the root of the word “ecology” is the Greek *oἶκος*, the “house” or “dwelling,” borrowed by the Germans in the latter half of the seventeenth century to coin *Oecologie*, the study of the environment in which one dwells.⁶ American literature has always held, at its center, an awareness of its natural environment, and for the greater part of the history of Eurocentric American literature this awareness was strictly anthropocentric. The primacy of human subjectivity in this matrix meant that the subject was always acted upon, the wild was always something to be overcome and transformed through heroic gestures of colonization. Early colonial accounts of the American landscape engaged the nonhuman environment with an agenda, a rhetoric designed to encourage settlement and therefore a language built for commerce—an evaluation of resources and objectives and obstacles. A distancing language of planning and (political) architecture, it was early American literature's engagement with the environment that initially constructed the

linguistic framework that would later come to justify social inequities like racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia by defining what was and was not Man.

Because the nature of colonial engagement with the American landscape was resource-driven, most of these early accounts also contain empirical data (topographies, maps, taxonomies, dictionaries of indigenous languages). Included in these reports were detailed lists and descriptions of Native American settlements and people which were subsequently returned to the colonizing nations (like England) and published for public consumption (like John Smith's *A true relation of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath hapned in Virginia*⁷). These texts inextricably linked Native peoples with the environment in the Anglo and American literary imagination, supported by a burgeoning market for abduction stories (wherein virtuous colonial maidens are carried off by hostile Native raiders into dark and uncharted—unmapped in English—wild places) and the Romantics fetishizing of both “Indians” and Nature (each “fascinatingly fierce and thrillingly sublime”).⁸

American Puritans had an established tradition of incorporating nature imagery into their poetry for the purpose of religious metaphor, predicated upon the Puritanical fear of the natural world surrounding them (“Nature doth call. / Strive not above what strength hath got, / Lest in the brawle / Thou fall”⁹). According to the moral dichotomies established by Puritanical thinking (what was human versus what was wild), indigenous Americans supported ideological equivalencies between the wilderness and evil, between the “savage” and the devil. Romantic poets looked to natural environment for the very same reasons the Puritans feared it (awe, apprehension, and terror solicited by the unknown—or Other) and championed the nonhuman world to “overcome the alienation

and reification that had emerged with capitalism, industrialization, and urbanization.”¹⁰ They aestheticized the natural world in order to remedy industrial man’s inability to comprehend nature without some form of mediation (as Coleridge puts it, “Art . . . is the mediatrix between, and reconciler of nature and man”¹¹). This aestheticization often took the form of the pastoral epic: idealized natural landscapes peopled with idealized “noble savages.”

Epic American poems from the seventeenth century (such as Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha*¹²) owed a great deal to the so-called “Indian Songs” that were highly popular in newspapers and magazines throughout England, transforming “a supposedly oral spontaneous form into literary printed verse”:

Indian songs fascinated Britons, not least because, being oral and immediate, they were seen as unpremeditated effusions of a culture that embodied all that urban, polite, civilization lacked. Whether they sang of peace or violence, of the spirit or the flesh, Native Americans seemed autochthonous, organic, free.¹³

Like their Romantic counterparts, the Transcendentalists also ascribed moral significance to the natural environment and included Native Americans within the nebulous bounds of Nature (rather than Man). Insisting upon Nature’s capacity for transformative experience, Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that immersion in the natural world held considerable spiritual value for Man:

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. . . . Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.¹⁴

Emerson divided Man's intellectual response to Nature into hierarchical modes of appreciation: estimating nature as economically valuable, finding it aesthetically pleasing, or allowing the wilderness significance in shaping aesthetic structures like poetry:

There is no man who does not anticipate a supersensual utility in the sun, and stars, earth, and water. These stand and wait to render him a peculiar service. But there is some obstruction, or some excess of phlegm in our constitution, which does not suffer them to yield the due effect. Too feeble fall the impressions of nature on us to make us artists.¹⁵

In March of 1842, a young and impressionable Walt Whitman heard Emerson speak on the role of poet in society. Whitman was struck by Emerson's vision of the poet as "liberating god," and he adopted Emerson's belief in the enormous potential poetry contained for the transformation of the reader.¹⁶ The nation's greatest need, according to Whitman, was a poet who could articulate the experience of all Americans as well as the experience of the American landscape (natural and otherwise). In the introduction to the 1855 version of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman emphasizes the combination of human agent and environment:

[The poet's] spirit responds to his country's spirit . . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes . . . To him enter the essences of the real things and past and present events—of the enormous diversity of temperature and agriculture and mines—the tribes of red aborigines—the weatherbeaten vessels entering new ports or making landings on rocky coasts—the first settlements north or south¹⁷

Streaming or not (*Leaves of Grass* does create its own biosphere and is inarguably a work that marries the American poetic to the American landscape), Whitman's text here reflects two inherited sins of the Anglo-European colonial mindset: the first (which even Emerson might call base) is commodification, and the second is including Native Americans in the catalogue of landscape characteristics, far distanced from the "first settlements." In fact, as Lavelle Porter recently noted, "Whitman, the man, actually hoped that white Americans would absorb the naturalistic traits of the Native Americans, but discard the actual people."¹⁸ For Whitman, for Emerson, for Coleridge and even John Smith, the natural landscape was useful—it was filled with plants and animals and wild people—but these objects could never be centralized, never have purpose, unless juxtaposed (sometimes violently) with what they were not.

Enter the Fugitive Agrarian

Although the Southern Agrarians are often conflated with the Fugitive Poets (both groups shared four major members—John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren—and a deep "loyalty to their native region"), most critics place the two entities in separate (though not necessarily opposing) camps.¹⁹ In 1930, at the start of the Great Depression, the "Twelve Southerners" released *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, the Southern Agrarian manifesto, "to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way . . . Agrarian *versus* Industrial."²⁰

The problem with cleanly dividing the Agrarians from their Fugitive predecessors is that it can be argued Agrarianism is as much a reaction to socioeconomic and political forces as was Modernism, and that, from the perspective of aesthetic activism (or, for that

matter, the development of Southern Place as a concept), Southern Agrarians/Fugitives/New Critics all espoused the same kinds of structural/aesthetic predilections. The substructures of language and culture (*form*) that blur between the three groups made everyone uncomfortable in the years following World War II, when Warren and others distanced themselves ideologically from some of the more problematic tenets of *I'll Take My Stand*.

The Southern Agrarian movement is of historical importance in the complicated lineage of American (and particularly Southern) ecopoetics, however. For one thing, *I'll Take My Stand* forges yet another impermeable link between the Southern landscape and white-male-centric pastoral nostalgia (*Gone With the Wind* would be published six years after *I'll Take My Stand*, further burying the South in plantation/Lost Cause narrative), and, at the same time, in a strange parallel form a definitive connection between the natural environment and aesthetic form in general (even while critics have insisted that the text has nothing to do with poetics). John Crowe Ransom was emphatic on the connection between regionalism and aesthetics and, as critics like Eric Aronoff have noted, the leap from ideological cultural spaces to poetic forms in Ransom's work is not a very complex one.²¹ According to Aronoff,

Ransom defines culture as 'pattern[ed]' whole, spatially constructed . . . literally contained in the physical landscape of the geographic region . . . and internally referential. . . . If Ransom defines culture as a whole system of meaning arising from the dynamic interaction of human need and physical geography, these key terms—wholeness, meaning formed from the internal relation of parts in the system—is transposed by Ransom into a theory of the New Critical poem.²²

If *ecopoetry* can be defined (as contemporary poet Forrest Gander has defined it) as “poetry, sometimes called eco-poetry, which investigates—both thematically and formally—the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception,”²³ then Ransom’s aesthetic/environmental connection might be understood to extend far beyond even his New Critical quest for “internal relation.” One thing can be certain, however: Southern literary tradition has always been deeply invested in “the relationship between nature and culture,” although the (sometimes nefarious) reasons for this have varied wildly based on who was in control of the narrative.

Streaming as Eco poetic Decolonization

“As waterways change, move through time, they develop. Each change in watershed begets changes along longer pathways, change continues accordingly. While one waterway breaks out, another corresponds sharing impetus, influenced by other stimuli, breaks out in new ways. These emerging movements may or may not share rules, tenets, manifestations, yet they occur simultaneously, similarities exist by current states of surrounding landscapes, climate conditions, or not.”

—“Streaming”²⁴

American *ecopoetry* really came into its own in the 1950s and 60s when the rising threat of nuclear annihilation drew the public’s attention toward environmental concerns. In his introduction to *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, J. Scott Bryson notes how this new ecological awareness merged with postwar formal experimentation to create a new school of American poetics:

As the American population grew more aware of ecological and environmental issues such as nuclear proliferation, species extinction, and other potential disasters, poets began to speak to such matters in ways they had rarely spoken before. This new-sounding poetic voice coincided with a growing spirit of protest that appeared in the mid-twentieth century, along with the new freedom regarding ‘poetic subject matter’ that surfaced as a result of the emergence of the Beat poets.²⁵

Ecopoetry, then, arose during a period in American literature that emphasized a poetry of resistance (experimental form, orality, investment in reader/listener receptivity) and in a sociopolitical climate of resistance (activism, protest, calls for paradigmatic shift). Poets began to explore the inner-connectivity of humans and their nonhuman environments: a growing concept of “ecology” in which individual, daily activities were understood to have a direct impact on the biosphere in which moved (both locally and globally). This new interest in eco-centric poetics (one in which primary subjecthood was granted to the nonhuman environment) differed from the Romantic poets’ use of Nature, in which pastoral metaphors “remain[ed] aesthetic rather than conceptually challenging, endorsing complacency,”²⁶ and instead encouraged action through affect—personal, experiential connection from text to reader. This would manifest thematically and formally in a poetry that granted subjectivity and agency to nonhuman elements, seeking to emphasize what David Gilcrest has called “the relational identity of the ‘ecological self.’”²⁷

The majority of Allison Adelle Hedge Coke’s work, prior to *Streaming: Poems* (2014), followed a more conventional and narrative approach to poetics. She was, according to her memoir *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer*, highly influenced by her father’s

storytelling and the rhythmic patterns of his speaking voice (the “mobile generational patterning” she would later integrate into her own work).²⁸ Connections between human activity and the natural environment occur frequently in the content of her earlier poems, but it is not until *Streaming* that the linguistic fullness of the “ecological self” becomes markedly present in the form.²⁹ *Streaming* often works to minimize the presence of a separate self through an over-abundance of language, blurring the line of anthropocentric and ecocentric autonomies by slightly torqueing syntactical structure:

Once, we walk long grass into weave
pacing stem wrappings
in concentric circling:
southwise sans temporal sway,
beat to counts, not ticks
in a dream where time poses as dust,
where echo-wrinkles reverberate
consciousness signals against
savannahs—³⁰

The speaker in this poem (and note the communal “we”) works to create something from the environment in which they inhabit, but that environment is loosely defined and enveloping—the action of the speaker dissolves into the action/agency of their surroundings. The grammatical wholeness of this stanza is illusive: the subject and verb seem solid but then slide into potentialities (“pacing” as a verb or an adverb?) and eventually disappear somewhere beyond the colon (which is a mark of . . . equivalency? definition? meaning?). The poem continues

Sandhills overhead, their chortling
carries snow geese back to councils.
In this streaming, seasons shift
far past distressed unravelings,
where grasses seed sparseness
commingle alongside wrinkle weavings, time,
signaling light shocks spreading fingerlike
across blue/white world—

Here the speaker has been re-located outside of the temporal and narrative frame of the poem. The reader can “see” and identify the birds and other natural elements of place, but no specific time—only a connotation of the movement of time and light. In fact, “Streaming” is entirely about movement and progression, but that progression is anything but linear. Hedge Coke recycles lines and words throughout the piece, giving it a cyclical quality. The length of the lines throughout and the rhythmic/sonic pacing of each (as in “two, thirteen, seventeen annuals / canopy contralto over unknown biomes”) moves the piece quickly through what seems to be an endless accumulation of activity—so blurred in the composition that differentiation between human and nature becomes impossible:

Somewhere woven; north of quipu hemp,
hemp laid moundwork blueprint, twined some
where north of periodical cicadas, mock locusts
now shivering night free with streaming song.

If our subjectivity can be said to be comprised of corporeal and historical presence within a physical environment (*agency* that bestows upon us a “location” of identity),

then in this piece we feel the discomfort of subjective uncertainties. Because of this dislocation, the act of reading “Streaming” becomes a negotiation of a semi-familiar, semi-foreign space. Hedge Coke provides markers in the form of constellations (“Dog Road”/Milky Way, “Cygnus,” “Swan,” “Northern Cross”) but many readers lack the ability to read/understand these constellations as points of navigation beyond the allusions they serve (and it should be noted that “Streaming” occurs in a section of the book called “Navigation”). “Streaming” illustrates a landscape that provides its inhabitant with everything they need for subjective location, but also emphasizes our shortcomings as (and potential for) becoming active participants in this world.³¹

The poem opens and closes with a brief translation that reiterates the self-sufficiency of the poem’s environment

Ya, yan, e, tih

kettle

Yah, re, sah Ya, yan, quagh, ke

beans, cornfield

Yat, o, regh, shas, ta

I am hungry

While Hedge Coke never specifies which First Nations language she is translating,³² the repeating call presents an environmental solution to a human problem—the “earth providing” a linguistic landscape that demands active engagement.

These translated phrases also point to another important characteristic of Hedge Coke’s work. Even in her earliest collections, like *Dog Road Woman* (1997), many of her poems operate on some level aurally, incorporating characteristics of oral literatures

(redundancy, aggregation, parallelism, work that is “operational” and “participatory”).³³

Because of this her poetry is sometimes chant-like, often alliterative, and emphasizes phonetic values. Hedge Coke’s work in *Streaming* works on the ear, and thus on the body, and the act of reading becomes a dynamic exchange rather than a passive one—creating the opportunity to dwell in the shared experience of the poem’s Place.

“Dwelling,” in the Heideggerian sense, is essential to ecopoetics, specifically because the political force of ecopoetry hinges upon its capacity to be “experiential rather than descriptive,” and to “conjure up conditions such as dwelling and alienation *in their very essence*, not just in their linguistic particulars.”³⁴ The dis-location ecopoetry such as “Streaming” produces is the result of the tremendous pressure the poet places on the language to perform—to become an event that occurs. The poet Matthew Cooperman describes ecopoetical process thusly:

Considered a process of echolocation, the poem exists as a phenomenological horizon that draws into relation the dynamic experience of being-in-the-world. We may call this experience Being/Topological, the act of the poem as essential mapping of location, directions and ends. The radii that extend from the poem are both centrifugal and centripetal . . . The matrix of the poem is this conceptual space in which sensation, perception, and memory intersect.³⁵

Understood in this context, *Streaming* provides a new kind of mapping, one that locates readers in a topography of experiential language. One of the prevailing metaphors throughout the collection is waterways—waterways, of course, being the first topographical features to be mapped by colonists in North America—but Hedge Coke’s charting of these spaces alters prepositional phrasing and leaves the reader to feel their

way through the musicality of the text or associative elements beyond the page, as in
“Peanut Pond”:

Under poplars, maples
between turtles, black bass,
beauty between pollen
skimmed waters,
Canadians, two pair, lead
at least twenty-four goslings,
creep in from human worry
nearer peeper lives.³⁶

Prepositions of place like “under,” “between,” or “in,” are meant to clarify spatial relations, but in this case only serve to muddy the environment of the poem, moving from what at first appears to be grammatically correct and complete clausal structure into a subject-less morass of floating objects. The reader feels suspended between points of reference (nouns, as are usually the anchor points to language-based poems) and the enjambment, space and punctuation of each line nudges the forward motion of poem haltingly from one point to the next (much like the rocking of a boat). Human participation in this watery environment is actually signaled not by direct action from the speaker but by the introduction of the geese, who bring with them “human worry,” a presence that threatens to eclipse the natural world in the next few lines:

Heron swoop dailies,
kerosene-lighted nights.
Sometimes duty fails academic.

Poetry, practice of everything else:
but is ultimately thwarted again by the work's ecocentricity:

paddled waters, lilies, samaras,
pine needled, caned sprigs,
some sweet vine
wraps hollow maple
flowering while I pen

Here, action (the verb) is a strange adaptation of object (paddle, pine needle, cane) and the vegetation gains subjective agency (sweet vine / wraps hollow maple / flowering). The introduction of the speaking "I" seems jarring, an alien moment suspended in a bucolic world where the human speaker lacks corporeal presence. The poem continues:

over your writing
in the base of this canoe.
Mooring for a moment
over waterworlds below.
Only shift, paddle dip,
To still, straighten.

The "moored moment" that we experience in the "waterworld" of this poem illustrates a central function of ecopoetry: to dissipate the human within the natural landscape until the reader can experience *the essence of the place* for themselves. "Peanut Pond" is in the second section of the book, called "Breaking Cover," and at the point in the collection where the reader has more or less attuned themselves to the sensations of dis-location that *Streaming* generates, learning instead to advance (to navigate) by feel. Because of this

(this newly-acquired skill of “echolocation”), moments of syntactical completion when the human and systemic laws of grammar congeal to “sentence” are jarring. The lines “while I pen / over your writing / in the base of this canoe” literally halt the flow of the piece and freeze the organic environment of the poem into prose text. We are discomforted by the intrusion of human culture into the natural order of the environment and can only feel resolution for the poem when we return to a looser, less ego-centric language from which the “I” is entirely removed (“Only shift, paddle dip, / To still, straighten”).

Direct connection between the body and the landscape of the poem is so important in ecopoetry because it teaches the reader a new way of being-in-place, granting us a different perspective on our location within the environment of the work and, subsequently, the environment of the world at large. An eco-centric view of the actual world beyond the text takes into consideration all elements of the natural environment and is political in that it acknowledges human cultural constructs like capitalism can have a direct and devastating impact on global ecologies. Colonization, much like that grammatical moment in “Peanut Pond,” halts the existing order of one environment and prioritizes the foreign rules which it then brutally enforces. Poems like “Peanut Pond” are important in the context of colonialization because they emphasize how an existing mode of being was already in place prior to contact, a reality that historical narratives in colonized spaces work to erase.

By re-mapping natural spaces like waterways using affectual language, *Streaming* becomes an act of reclamation, an ecopoetical decolonialization of place. Sometimes this project is overt, as in the prose piece “In the Year 513 PC”:

In the year 513 PC—post- contact, post-Columbus, post-cultural invasion—In the year, 513 PC, we heard fluting sounds from southern feathered, feathered never here before this rhyme, never here without zookeeper logic trace. Never. No. Prior to this vast erasure those sounds fell way below equator, left us here without³⁷

“In the Year 513 PC” establishes an inclusive and communal voice (the “we”) that existed prior to colonialization and is therefore aligned with the indigenous population, but the piece is itself located in a time after “cultural invasion,” so therefore more specifically the “we” belongs to the colonized. The colonized voice here is referencing bird call that they were unfamiliar with prior to contact with those colonizing forces, but the language is obfuscating: “Prior to this vast / erasure those sounds fell way below the equator, left us here without / the slightest notion all along”—so, prior to the erasure of the indigenous narrative there existed something of which they were completely unaware. This invasive presence has a consequence as well:

. . . Now no bird’s leaving, tides
receding, waters capture sand like evening fog: Virgin
Islands, Galápagos Islands, Cook Islands, Belize Barrier
Reef, Red Sea Reefs, Great Barrier Reef, Tokyo, Jakarta,
London, New York, New Orleans—

The prose form of the piece pushes the pacing of the line from the very opening, and Hedge Coke’s use of rhythm and rhyme (“no birds leaving, tides receding”) whips the forward momentum even further, so that by the time the reader reaches her catalogue of

place names the sensation of being buried (or being *overtaken*) by the language parallels the poem's theme of rising water.³⁸ Formally, "In the Year 513 PC" enacts its underlying message: colonization brought on shifts in global climate that are now directly impacting all parts of the world—even those colonial points of power. The closing line ("Someone still calling, 'Saving the Earth is not a competition, but an essential collaboration'") is a call to reason from the colonized to the colonizer, one which has remained unheard for some time ("*still* calling").³⁹

Poems like "Streaming," "Peanut Pond," and "In the Year 513 PC" work communally, building an eco-centric environment in which the landscape has primacy and shared understanding (both within the poem and in the world beyond it) is the key to successful environmental advocacy. Hedge Coke's work forms an ecology of its own—it is self-sufficient even as it rejects and dismantles standard forms of grammar and syntax. As a collection, *Streaming* follows in the tradition of American ecopoetry in that it is insistent upon both performative language and a deeper and more wholistic approach to the natural world—but Hedge Coke's work comes from a much more organic place in which her "experiential knowledge" is central to her idea of landscape.⁴⁰ The new topography she creates centralizes this experience *of* language, on our sensitivity to subjective dislocation, and on her generous belief that we can learn to be participatory agents in our own environments. For Hedge Coke, poetry is a method for expanding our understanding of "source" and "biosphere," an important form of environmental perspective which is neither resource-driven nor fetishistic —"an essential collaboration" between reader and Place that values the natural world by being fully present in it.

Notes

¹ Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, “Poetic Statement,” in *American Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics of Social Engagement*, ed. Claudia Rankine and Michael Dowdy (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 158–60, 160.

² Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer: A Story of Survival* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 88.

³ Hedge Coke, *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer*, 25.

⁴ Hedge Coke, “Poetic Statement,” *American Poets*, 159.

⁵ Interestingly, Eric Aronoff has argued that for John Crowe Ransom—Fugitive poet, Southern Agrarian, New Critic—Native Americans “serve precisely as a counterpoint to the abstract forces of the market in their stable, self-contained regional economy” (“Anthropologists, Indians, and New Critics: Culture and/as Poetic Form in Regional Modernism,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 55.1 (2009): 92–118, 110).

⁶ “ecology, n.” *OED Online*, oed-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/view/Entry/59380?redirectedFrom=ecology& (June 2008).

⁷ In full: *A true relation of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath hapned in Virginia since the first planting of that colony, which is now resident in the south part thereof, till the last returne from thence written by Captaine Smith [Cor]one[ll] of the said colony, to a worshipfull friend of his in England* (London: Printed for Iohn Tappe, and are to bee solde at the Greyhound in Paules-Church-yard, by W.W., 1608; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011), name.umdl.umich.edu/A12470.0001.001. When Smith returned to England he expanded the letter into a book (*Proceedings of the English Colony in Virginia*, 1612). See americanjourneys.org/aj-075 for the full text. Scholars have noted the discrepancies in various versions of Smith’s accounts, and the prevailing

opinion is that Smith altered actual events to enhance marketability (of himself and the colony).

⁸ Tim Fulford, *Romantic Indians: Native Americans, British Literature, and Transatlantic Culture 1756–1830* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

⁹ Edward Taylor, “Upon a Spider Catching a Fly.” Taylor (c. 1642–1729) was an early New England poet and Puritan minister who often incorporated his observations of the natural world into his poetry to underscore religious ideologies. Taylor’s work is just one of many examples of early American literature that overlays Christian ethics into the natural landscape and establishes a dichotomy: Christian morality / Wilderness.

¹⁰ Michael Peters and Ruth Irwin, “Earthsongs: Ecopoetics, Heidegger and Dwelling,” *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* 18.1 (2002): 1–17, 3.

¹¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “On Poesy or Art,” in *English Essays: Sidney to Macaulay*, ed. Charles W. Eliot, *Harvard Classics* 27 (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1909), 255–66, 255.

¹² When writing *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), Longfellow used as his source the work of American ethnographer Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. Schoolcraft, himself an early American poet, wrote that trochaic tetrameter “is thought to be not ill adapted to the Indian mode of enunciation,” which may account for Longfellow’s choice in metric structure (Chase S. Osborn and Stellnova Osborn, *Schoolcraft—Longfellow—Hiawatha* [Lancaster, PA: Jaques Cattell Press, 1942], 40). Much like the “Indian songs” in the popular press, *The Song of Hiawatha* represents a highly adulterated attempt by an Anglo-American author to aestheticize an authentic Native American voice.

¹³ Fulford, *Romantic Indians*, 141.

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- ¹⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men: Nature, Addresses and Lectures* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1883), 16.
- ¹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” *Essays: Second Series* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1844), 3–48, 7.
- ¹⁶ *The Columbia History of American Poetry: From Puritans to Our Time*, ed. Jay Parini and Brett C. Millier (New York: MJF Books, 1993), 150.
- ¹⁷ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 7.
- ¹⁸ Lavell Porter, “Should Walt Whitman Be #Cancelled?: Black Americans Talk Back to the ‘Good Gray Poet’ at 200,” *JSTOR Daily*, April 17, 2019, daily.jstor.org/should-walt-whitman-be-cancelled/.
- ¹⁹ William Pratt describes the division thusly: “The Fugitives and the Agrarians were two separate schools, one which was exclusively literary, the other just as exclusively social and political” (*The Fugitive Poets: Modern Southern Poetry in Perspective*, ed. William Pratt [Nashville, TN: J. S. Sanders and Company, 1965], xxxiv).
- ²⁰ Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), xxxvii.
- ²¹ See John Crow Ransom, “The Aesthetics of Regionalism (1934),” in *Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young and John Hindle (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1983), 45–58. See also Aronoff, “Anthropologists, Indians, and New Critics.”
- ²² “Anthropologists, Indians, and New Critics,” 109.

²³ Forrest Gander, “What is Eco-Poetry,” *Harriet: A Poetry Blog*, Poetry Foundation, November 29, 2008, [poetry#:~:text=I%2C%20myself%2C%20am%20less%20interested,and%20culture%2C%20language%20and%20perception.](http://poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2008/11/what-is-eco-poetry#:~:text=I%2C%20myself%2C%20am%20less%20interested,and%20culture%2C%20language%20and%20perception.)

²⁴ Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, “Streaming,” *World Literature Today* 91.3-4 (2017): 36–41, 41.

²⁵ J. Scott Bryson, ed., *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002), 3.

²⁶ Terry Gifford, “Gary Snyder and the Post-Pastoral,” in *Ecopoetry*, 77–87, 78.

²⁷ David Gilcrest, “Regarding Silence: Cross-Cultural Roots of Ecopoetic Mediation, in *Ecopoetry*, 17–28, 21.

²⁸ Hedge Coke, *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer*, 104.

²⁹ Not to be confused with the lyrical essay (of the same name) published in 2017 in *World Literature Today* (although “Streaming,” the essay, and *Streaming: Poems* both incorporate many of the same literary devices for the same reasons).

³⁰ “Streaming,” in *Streaming: Poems* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2014), 1–10, 1.

³¹ Hedge Coke provides a short glossary in the back of *Streaming: Poems* (139–44) and prefaces it with the following statement: “This book contains references to cultural ideology, cosmogony, scientific phenomena, and historical and political events . . . I believe most of these references are readily available for research and hope to lead the reader to discover more, extending the work of the poems. Some cultural complexities will have an aesthetic effect on the audience, while understanding the deeper encoded

properties will resonate more with those more familiar with the culture base (as in any world literature)” (139).

³² Hedge Coke self-identifies as “Oendat, Tsalagi, French Canadian, Portuguese, Irish, Scot, English, Metis, and Creek” (*The Willow’s Whisper: A Transatlantic Compilation of Poetry from Ireland and Native America*, ed. Jill M. O’ Mahony and Mícheál Ó hAodha [Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2011], 15]).

³³ See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, particularly 37–49. Ong also notes that oral literatures tend to be “conservative or traditional,” preserving communal knowledge through “those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving it, who know and can tell the stories of the days of old” (41). I would argue this same appreciation for oral storytelling is responsible for shaping Hedge Coke’s more traditionally narrative poetry. See Hedge Coke’s *Dog Road Woman* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 1997), and particularly “Legacy,” a “dual-voiced performance piece” that incorporates the voice of her father, among others (59–67, 59).

³⁴ Michael Peters and Ruth Irwin, “Earthsongs,” 4.

³⁵ Matthew Cooperman, “A Poem is a Horizon: Notes Toward an Ecopoetics,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 8.2 (2001): 181–93, 186–87.

³⁶ “Peanut Pond,” *Streaming*, 50.

³⁷ “In the Year 513 PC,” *Streaming*, 57.

³⁸ 513 “post-contact, post-Columbus” would be 2005, the year Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans.

³⁹ 2005 was also the year that the Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty meant to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, went into effect. The United States refused to ratify the protocol.

⁴⁰ As Hedge Coke would say: “I have so much to offer in a body of work, and that’s Carolina. . . . It’s a cultural knowledge, it’s a current knowledge, it’s my own experience, and there’s something that’s still here and it’s the same, and will always be here. I feel an obligation to make it known, so I’m happy to write Carolina” (Ellen Arnold, Susan Gardner, and Ursula Couch, “A Conversation with Allison Adelle Hedge Coke,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 60.1 [2006–2007]: 81–100, 94).

CHAPTER 5

C.D. WRIGHT AND THE ART OF WITNESS

“If I wanted to understand a culture, my own for instance, and if I thought such an understanding were the basis for a lifelong inquiry, I would turn to poetry first. For it is my confirmed bias that the poets remain the most ‘stunned by existence,’ the most determined to redeem the world in words...”

—C.D. Wright, *Cooling Time*

At the time of her death in 2016, C.D. Wright was recognized as a major figure in contemporary American poetry. She was prolific, publishing sixteen books of poetry/essays between 1977 and her untimely death at 67, and she was fearless in her formal variance—she championed lyric, narrative, and language-based poetics, wrote in prose block, field verse, and couplet. She believed (fiercely) in the power of the word. While it was difficult to place her exclusively in a particular school of poetics, she was deeply invested in the process of perception and the unique capacity of poetry to offer a new perspective of the world to its readers. She wrote to document, to historicize, *to witness* those lives threatened by the erasure of dominant narrative and hegemony, which makes her work increasingly relevant in a period of time when America and the South finds itself again in dire need of witness.

To Document and Bear Witness

There is a strange impetus to mark a definitive line between “poetry of witness” and “documentarian poetry,” even though the driving force of both categories seems to depend upon modes of identification between poet, text and reader. In 2014, W. W. Norton released the anthology *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English, 1500–2001*, edited most notably by poet-of-witness Carolyn Forché, who included in her introduction the following definition:

In the poetry of witness, the poem makes present to us the experience of the other, the poem *is* the experience, rather than a symbolic representation. When we read the poem as witness, we are marked by it and become ourselves witnesses to what it has made present before us.¹

Like the ecopoetics discussed in the previous chapter, Forché’s poetry of witness is grounded in the affective topography of the poem—by reading the work one purportedly experiences the trauma of the event and “survives” it, ideally spurred by that dwelling toward political action.

There is, however, a certain ethical dilemma with this type of “witnessing.” Despite Forché’s admonitions that it “not to be mistaken for politicized confessionism” (confessionism being “the mode of the subjective” and therefore a kind of “martyrdom”),² her insistence on what Sandra Beasley calls “participatory authenticity”³ seems to prioritize the biographical poet over the “experience of the other.” And then there is the “ethically thorny” issue of witnessing-as-experience, or as Cathy Park Hong frames it in “Against Witness,” the strange desire that poetry of witness might “arouse our horror, simulating an elusive identification between us and the victim or ‘a fantasy of

witness' before we are conveniently deposited back into our lives so that someone else's trauma becomes our personalized catharsis."⁴

In contrast to the poetics of witness, documentary poetics might be seen as a way to avoid the charges of emotional appropriation—"the representational [the mode] of the objective," as Forché writes⁵—but documentarian poetics are also indebted to archives (source texts) and carry with them particular subject positions through the composition and taxonomies of those texts. And documentary poetics might also be charged with witnessing (in an experiential and cathartic way) "someone else's trauma," or, even worse, of aestheticizing individual trauma "to participate not only in the social field of contemporary Poetry but—as has been its historical trajectory—in the larger social movements of the day."⁶

The writer James Agee ran into just this sort of ethical dilemma as he tried to document the lives of tenant sharecroppers and their families in Alabama during the summer of 1936. As many have noted, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is fraught with these split authorial desires: on the one hand to document objectively (as a journalist), and on the other to witness (with empathy) the extreme conditions under which his subjects lived. In his preface Agee wrote:

[T]he effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity.

The immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera and the printed word. The governing instrument—which is also one of the centers of the subject—is individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness.⁷

Agee's attempt to "recognize" and "record" for the sake of human awareness is at the heart of both witness and documentary poetics. Formally, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* can be read as the forerunner of the contemporary documentary poetic (with its incorporation of visual elements and its mixed-form aesthetic).⁸ Both Agee's agonized self-awareness at his privileged location as observer (his socioeconomic and political distance from his subject) and the intense pressures he felt to accurately represent the conditions he described might also be characterized as documentarian in impulse—but wouldn't the book itself, as a record, bear a kind of witness to the "human divinity" of its subjects?

In terms of recent events (like the acts of violence that continue to be perpetrated against people of color by police), the documentarian might be said to *document*—create an artifact (a film, a photograph that carries the legal burden of proof)—and the witness to *bear*—carry the moment—not to validate it with the shape of their own presence but to try and relieve what burden they can from the backs of the others. Both are acts of preservation, meant to move us forward without erasure ("Create a language the unborn might be unashamed to speak"⁹). Perhaps one is the evolution of the other—perhaps in this time of intense documentation, where to "be documented" means to have subjectivity, the witness must become *activated* (more than just a seeing "I") by the things they see and hear and read.

Southern Witness

“It is a book brought to life, I see plainly now, by young questions that begged for sane answers, by un verbalized fears that claimed a right to be encapsulated in words, by a need to bridge fissures, to tie belief and fact and dream and act closer together.

—Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*¹⁰

“This is a *book* only by necessity. More seriously, it is an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell.”

—James Agee, preface to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*¹¹

“To witness” is to testify to the power of some force or moment. In the idiom of the evangelical, witnessing is to speak about the experience of one’s life in the hopes that others might also choose to make changes in their own. In 1949, Lillian Smith published *Killers of the Dream*, an autobiographical and often confessional social commentary that “effectively psychoanalyzed the South’s rigid commitment to racial segregation.”¹² *Killers of the Dream* was published five years after Smith’s debut novel, *Strange Fruit*, which had appreciated a high degree of critical and commercial success (despite the fact that it was banned in both Boston and Detroit).¹³ But *Strange Fruit*, regardless of the fact that the novel described instances of racism and interracial romance, had been fiction, and *Killers of the Dream* was unapologetically *nonfiction*, with Smith steadfastly insisting upon its “truth”:

I wrote [*Killers of the Dream*] because I had to find out what life in a segregated culture had done to me, one person; I had to put down on paper these experiences

so that I could see their meaning for me. It was a dialogue with myself as I wrote, as well as with my hometown and my childhood and history and the future, and the past. Writing is both horizontal and vertical exploration. It has to true itself with facts but also with feelings and symbols, and memories that are never quite facts but sometimes closer to the “truth” than is any fact.¹⁴

As a result, both the content and the form of the book (*Killers of the Dream* uses an innovative rhetorical strategy—combining what could be called “politicized confessionalism” with allegory, observational journalism, and social commentary—an early example of both witness and documentarian) was “met with hostility, or deliberate silence, by the literary establishment, the New Critics, and the general public of Cold War America.”¹⁵

Smith’s choice of rhetorical form was really key to the great perceived “affront” *Killers of the Dream* inflicted upon its Southern readers. Rather than presenting the sociopolitical issues of the region in thinly-veiled metaphor or otherwise incorporating literary device for psychic distance (and therefore faux objectivity), Smith implicates herself in a “we” complicit in a culture of systemic racism:

The mother who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their ‘place.’ The father who rebuked me for an air of superiority toward schoolmates from the mill and rounded out his rebuke by gravely reminding me that ‘all men are brother,’ trained me in the steel-rigid decorums I must demand of every colored male. . . . We were given no formal instruction in these difficult matters but we learned our lessons well.¹⁶

The power of this strategy is that it illustrates how systemic racism is perpetuated within a particular culture and at the same time, by including herself as a member of that culture who directly benefits from those systems, Smith accepts personal accountability. The reader is thus confronted by different messages based on their own location within the system. *Killers of the Dream* makes other white, Southern readers culpable through identification—once they recognize themselves and their cultural environment in Smith’s work they become responsible for social change. The “we” is specific and marks the reader who is in a position to understand a dichotomous South—and this location “within” makes withdrawal an impossibility.

Apart of / A Part Of

“If you are so afraid of ending up with an opinion, afraid it will color your work, you might ask yourself how transparent is your refusal to make choices, how disinterested can any work be and still stand. How obvious is your withdrawal. What is the artistic advantage of neutrality, allowing such a condition even existed. How would it be distinguished from indifference or mere self-interest.”

—C.D. Wright, *Cooling Time*¹⁷

Like Smith, Wright has always claimed Arkansas and the South as her home. Also like Agee, Wright’s work bears witness to the social injustices she has found there and speaks to inform an audience that primarily inhabits a position of privilege (both socioeconomic and linguistic privilege):

Opportunity is so bound to choice. The opportunity to fall into the pages of a book and have one's eye's peeled by words; the opportunity to listen, learn, discern; the opportunity to move freely and deeply inside one's subject. . . Such options are hardly birthright for the majority. They barely register as options for the minority of the minority. Those with no shirt—no white, no blue, no black, no uniform—have no say.¹⁸

Wright saw herself much as both Smith and Agee did—in a social position that allowed for (and, in fact, demanded) an awareness of others without succumbing to the temptation to “aestheticize immeasurable levels of pain.”¹⁹ For Wright, poetry was in a strange position because it was insular (it spoke primarily to other poets—and the majority of these ensconced in academia²⁰) but because of that was also ideally located to speak to those particularly interested in language, those who had studied the ways in which language undergirded systems of power in America and wanted to interrogate those systems by challenging the structures of language (“We keep the language machine going—often in different directions at once”²¹).

For Smith and Agee, reaching the hegemonic demography of which they were (ostensibly) members was the key to social change.²² As Smith had written about her work with the girls at Laurel Falls Camp, she saw “[s]o much of our effort here is spent in trying to wake up these little sleeping beauties that our Anglo-American culture has anesthetized.”²³ Smith understood that white, heterosexual Southerners would be necessary participants in any successful social movement, and that one of the primary

obstacles to that participation was a system of racial inequities constructed to be unseen and unrecognized by those it profited most. Her writing, much like the curriculum she encouraged at Laurel Falls, was intended to “wake” through identification first, documentation second. The “we” in Wright’s work is the result of the “we” in Smith’s, but both labor equally to shake the same anesthetic.

For Agee, and for the photographer with whom he worked, Walker Evans, the goal of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was to humanize the socio-economic conditions of the Depression-Era South so that his readers might be moved towards action:

[T]his is a book about “sharecroppers,” and is written for all those who have a soft place in their hearts for the laughter and tears inherent in poverty viewed at a distance, and especially for those who can afford the retail price; in the hope that the reader will be edified, and may feel kindly disposed toward any well-thought-out liberal efforts to rectify the unpleasant situation down South²⁴

Evans, on leave from his position with the Farm Security Administration (FSA) to document American (mostly Southern) farmers during the Great Depression, employed compositional elements in his images specifically designed to encourage identification between his subjects and his viewers (readers who, like Evans and Agee, experienced this “poverty . . . at a distance”) (Figs. 1–3).

One Big Self: An Investigation

*“I am looking for a way to vocalize, perform, act out, address the commonly felt crises of my time. These are spiritual exercises.”*²⁵

Smith’s writing came at a point in American literary history where pathos, memoir, and allegory were common elements in any form of social commentary.²⁶ As a strategy to

“speak truth to power,” *Killers of the Dream* was designed to challenge apathy with empathy—to show readers their place in existent systems of oppression and encourage their desires to dismantle them from within—exactly as Smith had tried to do with her campers (“We have tried to help them feel deeply, fully, and to do something interesting with these feelings and fantasies. At the same time we have tried to give insight and understanding”²⁷).

In American poetry, too, there had been trend toward the “personal in the political,” particularly in work that used a centralized tragic event to illustrate a larger, social issue (like, for example, Muriel Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead*, published in 1938, which focused on the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster in West Virginia). Rukeyser and other modernist poets had prioritized innovative (“non-traditional”) aesthetic forms as the most representational of modernity’s fractured ethos, and in keeping with their formal experimentation they incorporated outside texts into their own (as a way to both physically ground their work in the world-at-large and also to further “open” the text—creating fissures and slippages between poetry and other genres). Jahan Ramazani writes:

Early in the twentieth century, the congress between poetic and other artistic and nonartistic discourses is part of what many landmark poems are about. In the drive for reinvention at a time when generic boundaries and hierarchies were increasingly unstable, when incipient globalization was relativizing aesthetic and spiritual paradigms, when poetry had grown increasingly specialized and its cultural prestige was imperiled, poets drew strength by hybridizing their verse with the formal and linguistic possibilities of the novel, journalism, song, religious discourse, the visual arts, commerce, science, and so forth.²⁸

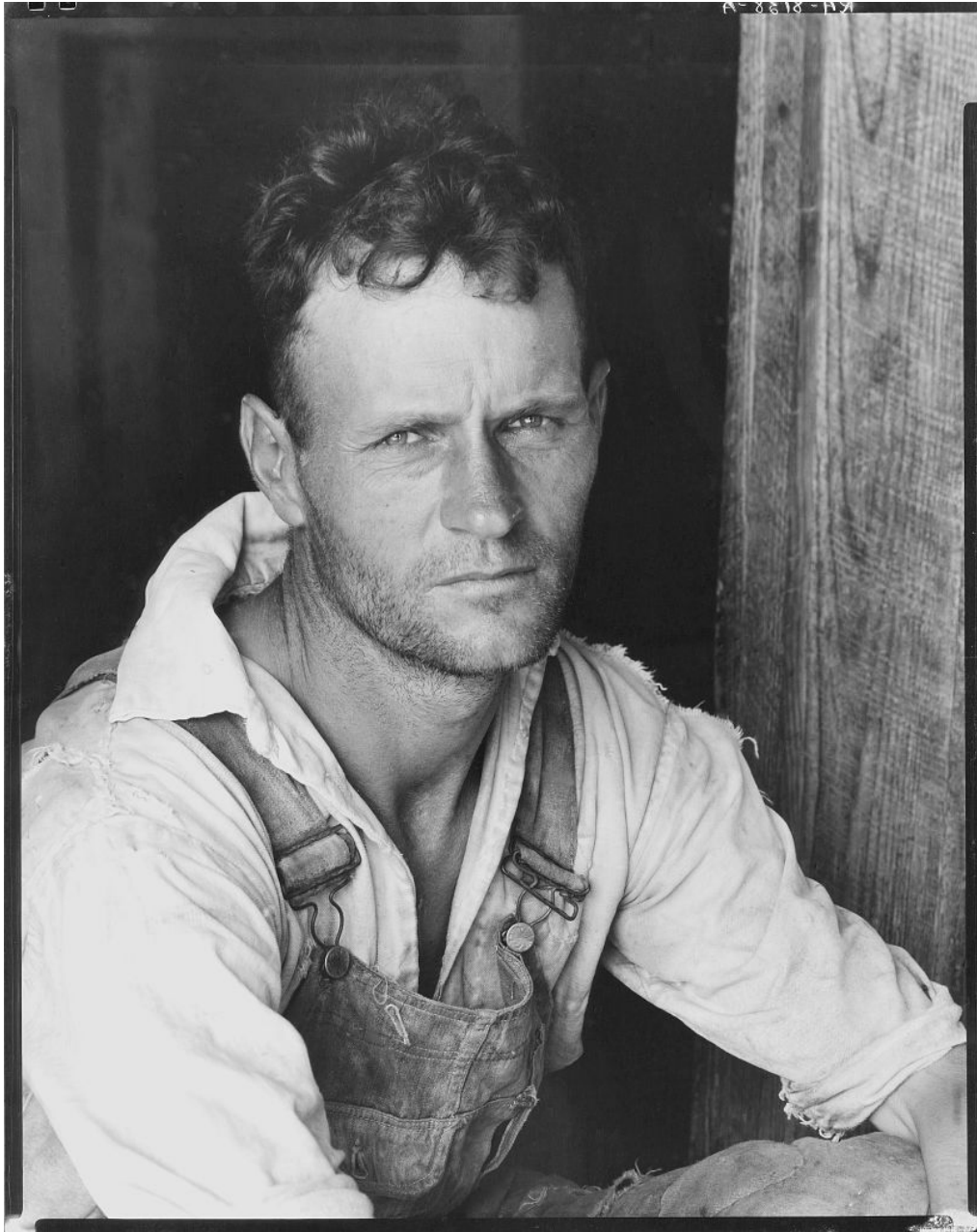


Figure 5.1. Walker Evans, "Floyd Burroughs, Cotton Sharecropper," June 1936

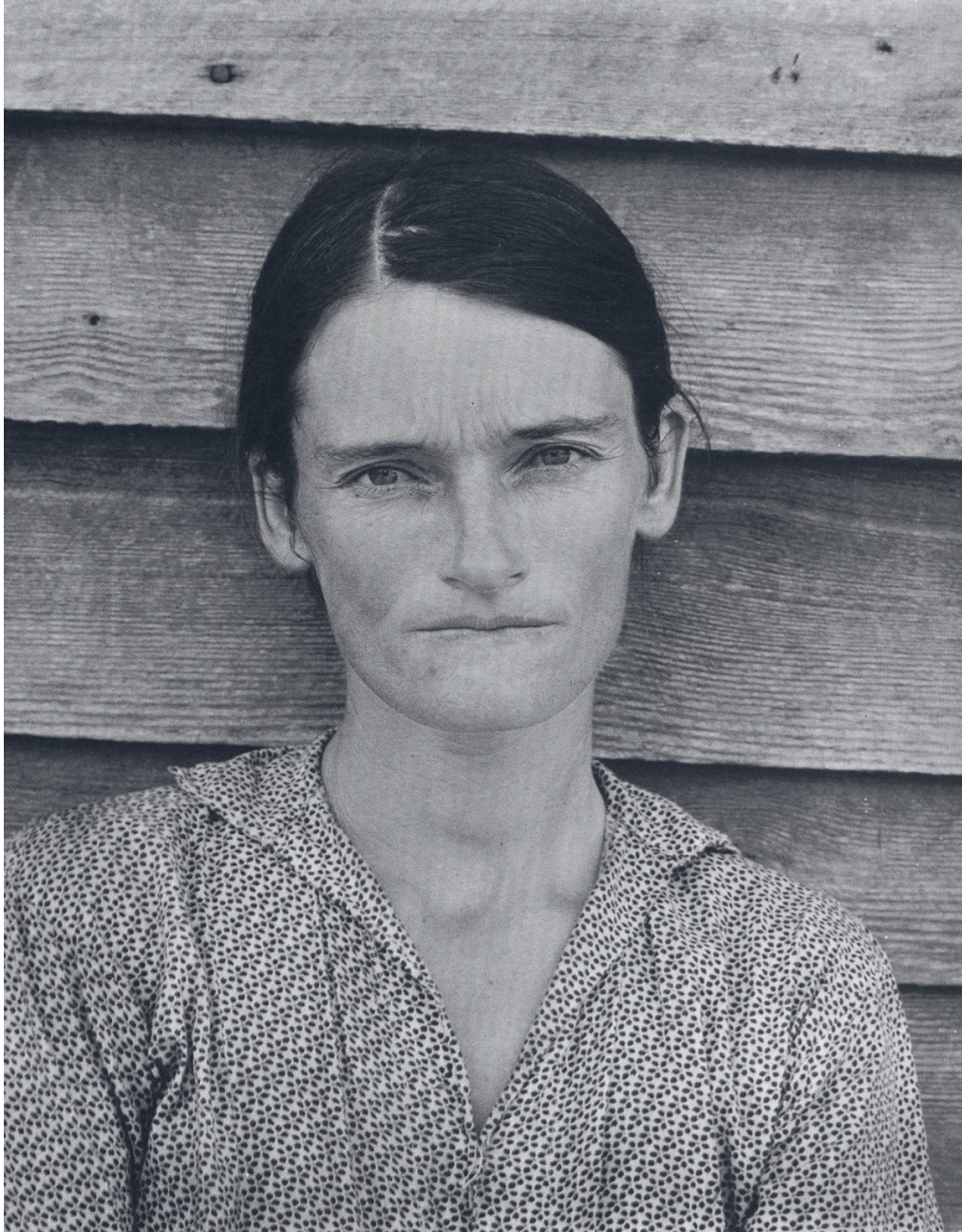


Figure 5.2. Walker Evans, "Allie Mae Burroughs," June 1936



Figure 5.3. Walker Evans, “Charles Burroughs and Floyd Burroughs”

In American poetics, this creative “drive for reinvention” was directly impacted by state-funded socioeconomic projects arising from the Great Depression in the 1930s, and from this matrix of New-Deal-era programs and “centerless” aesthetics was born documentary poetics.

While the term “documentary poetics” is often used to describe the work of contemporary poets who mix form and incorporate the language of source texts verbatim, it is also directly linked to what Mark Nowak calls “social poetics”—Rukeyser is often held up as the prime example of both these camps—poetry which engages readily available cultural materials/texts in support of (often times, socialist) political movements:

Social poetics, I believe, must activate more than a collection of metaphors of militancy, refrains of rebellion, and rhymes of resistance in poems of the current

neoliberal era. Social poetics seeks the transition of the pen or the laptop from the “committed author” (be they journalist, academic poet, novelist, playwright, or other writing professional) to working people themselves in a new conjunction of aesthetic practice and political action. Social poetics, in its current conception here as a space and practice of political and cultural as well as aesthetic action, is composed of, but not limited to, a wide array of tactics that I borrow from, mash up into, remix with, and create (or recreate) out of resistance practices in contemporary global social movements.²⁹

The “transition of the pen” from poet to “working people” is slippery, however, since the move is based in aesthetics which are, as Wright noted, more elite in practice than most poets would like to admit (“The poetry of the white shirt does not gladly speak to the poetry of the blue. The audience, the constituency, or if you will, the allegiance of the cultural elite belongs to the cultural elite. One would show little thought to expect otherwise”³⁰).

To circumnavigate this (from the top down, as it were, since Wright was never naive about who comprised the bulk of her audience), Wright turned to the materiality of the artifact—in linguistic terms the language of other, more *public* genres of writing. She would often record overheard snatches of dialogue, fragments of interviews, scraps of public record or other more commercially-viable instances of language. For example, *One Big Self*, Wright’s 2003 collaboration with the photographer Deborah Luster that examines the lives of inmates in four Louisiana state prisons, includes quotations from “The Mansion of Happiness . . . the first board game published in America,”³¹ which are

taken out of their original context and juxtaposed within the prison-industrial environment:

Whoever possesses CRUELTY

Must be sent back to JUSTICE

Whoever gets into IDLENESS

Must come to POVERTY

Whoever becomes a SABBATHBREAKER

Must be taken to the Pillory and there remain until he loses 2 turns ³²

The language of the game thus isolated from its intended meaning takes on new significance as an illustration of national ideologies surrounding morality and crime. In the greater context of the poetic project as a whole, the recurrent connection between poverty, perceived idleness, and criminality expose larger social issue about race, economic class, and incarceration.

One Big Self, as an instance of social poetics, successfully maneuvers through the tricky “space and practice of political and cultural as well as aesthetic action.” As an example of documentary poetics, *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (the complete title of the book that includes both Luster’s photographs and Wright’s text—published separately by Twin Palms Publishers in 2003) has been lauded for its capacity to reflect its subject through aesthetic form (in 2001 it was awarded the “Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize” from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University³³). Like Evans (whose ties to the FSA place his portraiture in close proximity to the work of Dorothea Lange), Luster’s photographs (Figs. 4–6) use compositional elements to



Figure 5.4. Deborah Luster, from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*.



Figure 5.5. Deborah Luster, from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*.



Figure 5.6. Deborah Luster, from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*.

enhance the relatability of her subjects—granting them a dignity and value that their role as inmates in the prison system would have society deny them.

While the use of visual image in the collaborative book was important for its wider reception (and, it could be argued, wider reception was the goal of the whole project), the separate, simultaneous release of *One Big Self: An Investigation* (Wright’s text only, published by Coffee House Press) is interesting in that Wright’s personal goal may have been, much like Smith, to awaken those “little sleeping beauties” in academia, or as she puts it in *Cooling Time*:

Allowing for collective effort and reliable human error, one can depend upon brief and abrupt breaks in any high-security environment. The struggle for legitimacy is as unrelenting as the vigilance required to contain it. But it is usually less systematic. And those who advance with a brilliant methodology do so at the risk of taking on the traits of the very breed they would depose. One notices for instance that the changes against the opposition-identified “academic poets” dropped off as the self-identified opponents began to take up gainful employment therein.³⁴

So who, exactly, is *One Big Self: An Investigation* meant to persuade? Aesthetically, the book³⁵ performs in all the ways documentary poetics should, even without the images.

But challenging aesthetics are not (traditionally) the most accessible poetics—and while

Wright's work is, one can and should argue, highly accessible it is not capable of being accessed by readers who don't exist.

And yet, the imperative address remains. From the very beginning, Wright calls her reader to attention:

Driving through this part of Louisiana you can pass four prisons in less than an hour. "The spirit of every age," writes Eric Schlosser, "is manifest in its public works." So this is who we are, the jailers, the jailed. This is the spirit of our age.³⁶

The general "you" is contingent here both because it is embedded in conditional syntax "you *can* pass" but also because it presents the choice: you might not pass, you might choose not to pass, you might choose to reject the knowledge of what you're passing or you might reject that you are the "you" here at all. This contingency is further reflected in the "we"—at this point the reader can still approach the text objectively—the quote from Schlosser is safely contained in punctuation, safely tagged, safely academic.

Wright then switches to the imperative, however, and completely eliminates the distance between speaker and reader: "Try to remember it the way it was. Try to remember what I wore when I visited the prisons." Not only is this a direct address, but it also includes the reader "inside," intimating the "we" from the previous passage was, in fact, directly at *us*: the jailers, the jailed.

The remainder of "Stripe for Stripe," what many refer to as the poet's introduction to the book, is a characteristic collage of "high and low cultures": academic references, personal narrative, signage from inside the prison, jargon from the prison industry's marketing campaign. The piece contracts to vignettes of memory ("I remember an

afternoon at the iron pile at Transylvania watching the men plait each other's hair . . . “) and expands to sweeping social commentary on incarceration (“The world of the prison system springs up adjacent to the free world. As the towns decline, the prisons grow”). These passages, written in prose blocks, move from the inside to the outside freely, changing perspective but always withholding just enough to ensure readerly participation (regardless of readerly position).³⁷

One Big Self works in an accumulative fashion to build a cacophony of voices and registers, in some moments syntactically complete and in other instances refracted or broken, interrupted. Wright “wanted the banter, the idiom, the soft-spoken cadence of Louisiana speech to cut through the mass-media myopia . . . to convey the sense of normalcy for which humans strive under conditions that are anything but what we in the free world call normal.”³⁸ In large part she accomplishes this slanted “normalcy” by highlighting fragments of direct speech (capturing the “idiom”), and then juxtaposing those fragments (and registers—which are really the linguistic artifacts of different worlds) together in a way that intimates (or causes the reader to infer) a proximity to unknown violence:

About the thickness of a pair of panties, Your Honor

She was a slab of a woman

The radio calls it predatory selection,

as in white sharks' preference for seals

Her husband, he was a wonderful, wonderful man

That one, he should have never been born

Some run to type³⁹

The separate languages coexisting in close quarters is jarring here—regardless of the white space between them their connotations bleed into one another. Certain rhetorical structures, language of address specific to particular cultural settings, push the content from one meaning to the next, from innocuous to insidious (here, “Your Honor” infers a courtroom setting, which colors the fragments of language coming before and after as evidentiary of some crime).

In the larger visual/textual project, Luster’s photographs provide an absolute—conclusive evidence—which is immediately accessible and convincingly “irrefutable.”⁴⁰ Parallel to this in Wright’s text is the use of the declarative statement—a grammatical structure that, like a photograph, seems convincingly factual in its simplicity:

I am going to prison.

I am going to visit three prisons in Louisiana.

I am going on the heels of my longtime friend Deborah Luster, a
photographer.

It is a summons.

All roads are turning into prison roads.

I already feel guilty.

I haven’t done anything.⁴¹

Coming as these lines do after several pages of large prose blocks, these short, end-stopped lines seem precise and incontrovertible—factual. Because of their syntactical completeness they read, in and of themselves, like maxims. It is only when one considers each line as a separate unit of meaning that the certainty of each declaration becomes unstable (the line “I am going to prison,” reads very different when juxtaposed against “I

am going to visit three prisons”). Each of the lines in this section of “Stripe for Stripe” builds, one declarative upon the next, until the lines become complex sentences:

Kafka put it this way, “Guilt.is never to be doubted.”

Also: behind every anonymous number a very specific face.

Also: there are more than two billion individuals, in this country, whose sentences have rendered them more or less invisible. Many of them permanently.

The reader moves along this premises in what feels like a process of deductive reasoning. All of the lines become evidence in the justifications Wright’s speaker is laying out for the reader and for herself. “It is a summons” for both, yet this section is also a wavering, a vacillation on the threshold. It hesitates, just before we enter into the “interior” of the book, and enacts the same complicated emotion Agee must have felt when documenting the intense poverty of the sharecroppers. For the reader, this section also sets the tone for the project as a whole—it grants whatever follows journalistic legitimacy, and it makes clear the purpose of *One Big Self*: “an almost imperceptible gesture, a flick of the conscience, to go, to see, [to] be wakeful.”

Wright plays off her connection with the reader by using epistolary passages throughout the book. The epistolary form, however, functions in a different way here than in other literary texts. In the work of Natasha Trethewey, the epistolary missive collapsed psychic distance between the reader and the subject, but in Wright’s work the form reads in a number of different ways depending on the language it incorporates. “My Dear Affluent Reader,” reads almost satirically:

Welcome to Pecanland Mall. Sadly, the pecan grove had to
be dozed to build it. Home Depot razed another grove. There is just
the one grove left and the creeper and the ivy have blunted its sun.
The uglification of your landscape is all but concluded.⁴²

While “Dear Prisoner,” is intimate and sincere:

I too love. Faces. Hands. The circumference
Of the oaks. I confess. To nothing
You could use. In a court of law. I found.
That sickly sweet ambrosia of hope. Unmendable⁴³

Aside from the language in these two sections, the spacing and length of the sentencing controls the pacing and tone of the poems individually. The “affluent reader” is alienated from the content, denied entry by the commercial register of the address. Read together and in conversation with one another, the discrepancies between the two presented realities (or “normalities”) become obvious, and the inmate is the addressee who becomes humanized in the exchange.

The epistolary form is also completely appropriate to contain the various modes of address each of these “letters” pursues—since both the prisoner and the corporation communicate with those outside of their enclosed systems through mail. Both voices are distanced from their recipients, but their actual readers (Wright’s intended audience) receive the poems’ affective meaning due to their own location outside of the text.

The intended reader of this work, then, the one whom Wright means to spur into political action, is not the subject. Wright’s subjects don’t need to be humanized to themselves, they understand what Moten had called “a constant economy and mechanics

of fugitive making where the subject is hopelessly troubled by, in being emphatically detached from, the action whose agent it is supposed to be.”⁴⁴ Wright’s intended reader is one outside of the prison-industrial complex who has power to change policy—or at the very least the power to *witness*—and one who both required the experience of Wright’s literature and who was also positioned to receive it.

In this way, *One Big Self* participates in the same tradition of Southern witness from which James Agee and Lillian Smith operated. Work like *One Big Self*, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and *Killers of the Dream* functions within an aesthetic predicated upon the writers’ own socio-economic location of privilege—a documentarian impulse to gather evidence that might encourage activism. Southern witnesses like Agee, Smith, and Wright refused to appropriate for the sake of cathartic release—the voices they collected were used to create “a portion of unimagined existence” for those who were most suitably poised to change policy. Their goal was exposure—both of systems of injustice and of those damaged by such systems (to whom their documentary bore witness). Now more than ever we recognize the need for this type of change, a demand of action from those both in power and those without—a recognition *that there exists* those who are in power and those who are outside of it—and a greater capacity to understand those structures that make (and maintain) such separations in the first place.

Notes

¹ Carolyn Forché, “Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art,” in *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English, 1500–2001* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 17–26, 26.

² “Reading the Living Archives,” 26.

³ Sandra Beasley, “Flint and Tinder—Understanding the Difference Between ‘Poetry of Witness’ and ‘Documentary Poetics’,” *Poetry Northwest* 10.1 (2015), poetrynw.org/sandra-beasley-flint-and-tinder-understanding-the-difference-between-poetry-of-witness-and-documentary-poetics/.

⁴ Cathy Park Hong, “Against Witness: Paul Celan, Doris Salcedo, and Memory in the Internet Age,” *Poetry* (May 1, 2015), poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70218/against-witness.

⁵ “Reading the Living Archives,” 26.

⁶ Mark Nowak, “Documentary Poetics,” *Poetry* (April 17, 2010), poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/04/documentary-poetics.

⁷ James Agee, “Preface,” in James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; rpt. Boston, MA: Mariner, 2001), ix–xi, x.

⁸ See Nowak, “Documentary Poetics.”

⁹ *Cooling Time*, 62.

¹⁰ Lillian Smith, “Forward: A Letter to My Publisher,” *Killers of the Dream* (1949; New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 11–21, 13.

¹¹ James Agee, “Preface,” xi.

¹² Margaret Rose Gladney, “Introduction to the 1994 Edition,” *Killers of the Dream*, np.

¹³ See “Hub Head Cop Blackens City in Book Ban” (*The Billboard*, April 1, 1944), which notes, “As usual with such activities in Boston this has caused an enormous increase in interest in the book” (3).

¹⁴ “Forward,” 13.

¹⁵ Gladney, “Introduction,” np.

¹⁶ *Killers of the Dream*, 27.

¹⁷ *Cooling Time*, 28.

¹⁸ *Cooling Time*, 73.

¹⁹ C.D. Wright, *One Big Self: An Investigation* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2003), xiv.

²⁰ “It is all too fair to assume most of us are poets or we wouldn’t be reading this, not when we could be . . . communicating something tangibly effective that we could either sell or otherwise have the opportunity to make available to crowds” (“It is important to keep moving,” *Cooling Time*, 60–63, 60).

²¹ *Cooling Time*, 72.

²² While queerness is not specifically discussed as a form of marginality in this project, it is important to note that Lillian Smith was in a lifelong relationship with Paula Snelling, but that they kept relationship a secret until after Smith’s death. See Margaret Rose Gladney, “Personalizing the Political, Politicizing the Personal: Reflections on Editing the Letters of Lillian Smith,” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 93–103.

²³ Margaret Rose Gladney, “Lillian Smith’s Hope for Southern Women,” *Southern Studies* 22.3 (1983): 274–84, 283.

²⁴ Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 11–12.

²⁵ *Cooling Time*, 6. Emphasis in original.

²⁶ And books like *Killers of the Dream* would, in turn, encourage work like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), among others.

²⁷ Gladney, “Lillian Smith’s Hope,” 283–84.

²⁸ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others*, 9–10.

²⁹ Mark Nowak, *Social Poetics* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2020).

³⁰ *Cooling Time*, 68.

³¹ Wright cites this reference in a note (in full): “Note: The Mansion of Happiness was the first board game published in America, An Instructive, Moral, and Entertaining Amusement, invented by Miss Abbott, the daughter of a Beverly, Massachusetts, clergyman, and first published in Salem, Massachusetts, by the old book firm of W. & S.B. Ives, 1843, republished in its original form by Parker Brothers Inc. in response to many requests, 1894, 1926.”

³² *One Big Self*, 4.

³³ An award “intended to support artists, working alone or in teams, who are engaged in extended, ongoing fieldwork projects that fully exploit the relationship of words and images in the powerful, persuasive representation of a subject” (documentarystudies.duke.edu/awards/lange-taylor).

³⁴ *Cooling Time*, 68–69.

³⁵ I have tried to refrain from referring to *One Big Self* as a “collection” of separate poems, primarily because Wright was so deeply invested in the idea of the book-length poem *as a project*, and so I would be hesitant to approach the book in any way other than a single temporal experience.

³⁶ “Stripe for Stripe,” *One Big Self*, ix.

³⁷ And omission is one of Wright’s established strategies of identification. In *Cooling Time*, Wright notes, “[O]ne must maintain a vigilant sense of when to leave off. When to skip. When to depart. Abjure. Leap. When to let the inferences fly. Rarely should a writer

stop at a pre-destination. It is the quality of omission or suppression I believe which determines the quality and degree of a reader's participating in the telling—what inheres that the reader alone can render active and integral to it" (38–39).

³⁸ "Stripe for Stripe," *One Big Self*, xiv.

³⁹ *One Big Self*, 17.

⁴⁰ Visual rhetoric remains one of the most convincing modes of communication, regardless of the fact that images are, by nature, aestheticized to present a singular perspective or narrative. Photographs, like those by Lange and Evans, have a long history of being used to generate support for government programs like the FSA.

⁴¹ *One Big Self*, xv.

⁴² *One Big Self*, 24.

⁴³ *One Big Self*, 42.

⁴⁴ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), ix.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

How can you stay? The southern question of travel makes a joyful noise and
moves slowly in awareness. Now

we can speculate on the relay of our common activity, make a circle round our
errant roots.

—Fred Moten, *The Little Edges*

While connections between politics and poetics has been well-established at this point in literary criticism, the question remains: what is the benefit of including these four poets in the discourse of *Southern* literature? Might their contributions better serve the larger purpose of exposing these same systems of linguistic oppression in American literature, or English-language literature in general? The answer to the first is complicated—but one I find ultimately optimistic in its ambiguity. If the purpose of the kinds of aesthetic activism explored in this project is to break down the dichotomous walls language politics and inheritances erect, then the discomfort created by the works of these poets might be described as the sensation of disorientation as those linguistic buoys come unmoored. Such unmoorings require the release of a rope, the restraint that holds the subject unmovable against the dock, and the easier one can see the intricacies of the mooring knots the easier one can untie them (the rope here is a fabrication, formed by

the persistent outlines of a South that never was). Literary scholars gain so much by reading these works in the context of Southern literature because these materials carry with them a long history that can only be fully recognized in the light of particular cultural circumstances.

The commonalities that all four of these poets share are (1) an articulated disjunction between their own subjectivities and their textual encounters with “southern-ness,” (2) a desire to create a more expansive (inclusive) definition of Southern subjectivity, and (3) an objective (fueled by that disjunction and desire) to encourage insights and articulations of those new subjectivities through their work. This last might require a reading position that is not familiar with the marginalized experiences articulated in these texts: for example, a reader (admittedly like myself) who occupied a privileged subject position and required an “ah ha” moment of cultural recognition that located them accurately within a system of linguistic hierarchies.

Such a shift in world-view is dependent upon a reader who didn’t already occupy that marginalized subject position to begin with, however, and it would be yet another layer of exclusion to assume that the only objective of these poets was to educate such specific readers on the minoritarian experience of the South. Here, though, I would argue that by engaging the dominant modes of discourse surrounding southern-ness, these poets participate directly in what Mandy Bloomfield identifies as “a wider impulse in the humanities to seek the gaps and silences of history,”¹ and that projects such as these (particularly those that insist upon their own southern-ness) are recuperative—providing not only historical revision (enlightenment) but also creating points of identification and

acknowledgement for those readers who *already experience* this version of the South. As Eric Hunt wrote in “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics”:

Projects of historical reconstruction are common to all contemporary oppositional intellectuals in America. This follows from the erasure of “other” from dominant historical accounts; if it is said by those who deny us now that we have no past, then we have to insist that we have a past as deeply as we have a present. . . . The goal of these reconstructions, traditionally, is to find orientation, example and value with which to fuel present resistance.²

Re-orientation for a reader like me might mean the kinds of historical revisions Trethewey enacts that challenge the dominant narrative of a fabricated “Lost Cause” South. Her version of southern-ness insists upon a racialized past that she knows exists by her very present/presence, a past that includes African-American subjectivities. Erasure of this past is one manifestation of systemic racism, a system which inculcates undeniably white supremacist ideologies through institutionalized structures of language and history. But those who live within “the gaps and silences of history” have no need to seek them out—what they find in work like *Native Guard*, work that reiterates their own historical encounters, may be the “example and value” missing from the dominant record—but it may be also be decontextualized and coopted by its absorption into the dominant culture (“an autonomous [history] without a community”³). Trethewey’s use of traditional forms and “Southern” content was meant to combat erasure—to “inscribe and reinscribe”⁴ those names lost to “official” histories—but these materials were already so weighed down by the strata of cultural meaning that the familiarity of their form and language created new gaps, new obstructions. As Ron Silliman noted, “[I]n generalizing

(and, typically, dehistoricizing) aesthetic principles, public canonization subjects the reader to them and obliterates social difference.”⁵ As such, Trethewey’s accessibility may have widened the very linguistic absence she meant to fill—such is the historical dominion of the “Southern” mantle, and this is the lesson her work might ultimately reveal when read in conversation with a more resistant text like Moten’s.

Both Trethewey and Moten seek to capture the familial, satisfy the somewhat nostalgic compulsion for the past. For Moten, the question of Southern encounter can never be reproduced in the dominant language precisely because his past is made material through the communal vernacular of the diasporic. To be authentic to the social languages of *his* South, Moten eschews singular subjectivity in a way Trethewey never can because hers is a project of injecting subjectivity into its void. Here are two simultaneous Souths, both engaging the same questions of center through different aesthetic modes—Moten’s understanding of what it means to be Black and erased (fugitivity—“being together in homelessness”⁶) now read alongside Trethewey (the “new Fugitive”). Two different languages/texts of southern-ness, each navigating the burdens of collective meaning as they attempt to recuperate the past(s).

I agree with Bloomfield when she writes, “[a] focus on how poetry explores the pasts of the contemporary can offer valuable perspectives on its present moment.”⁷ To gain greater insight on this present moment is critical, and the only way to accomplish this (in my thinking) is to re-evaluate the ways in which the present moment has come to be framed. This is precisely what poetry from Moten, Trethewey, Hedge Coke, and Wright sets out to do. In 2016, Jay Watson’s contribution to *PMLA*’s special segment, “Adjust Your Maps: Manifestos from, for, and about United States Southern Studies,” opened

with the suggestion that “what haunts the field of Southern Studies is not the proverbial specter so much as an insistent materiality that troubles and illuminates the spaces, communities, and minds of the southern United States.”⁸ To engage in Southern languages and literatures is to take on the “insistent materialit[ies]” that frame the dominant narrative of the South, and by doing so refract some of the more exploitive national ideologies rooted here.

Watson’s solution to the dilemma that is Southern studies (and the difficulties of studying “the South,” and of consequently acknowledging multiple Souths—as I believe poetry allows us to do) is to promote interdisciplinary work, specifically with environmental studies, which he feels can offer new paradigms for understanding the nebulous region(s) ecologically. Maybe this kind of wholistic approach is what’s required—a supplement to the “political, social, and cultural geographies in which southern studies has traditionally sought to map and understand southern spaces.”⁹ Surely an approach to understanding Southern place that takes into consideration both the natural and capitalist topographies of the landscape might provide something generative. Work like Hedge Coke’s is undeniably the product of more cultural influences than an indigenous affiliation with the land here—she was brutalized by a system of racial and economic disparity which held her in a condition of poverty even as she labored in the fields of some of the largest (and wealthiest) tobacco companies in the world. What does a “Southern sense of place” mean to a sharecropper? Questions about the forces that shaped *Streaming* (and an understanding that those forces are as much economic as they are ecological) complicates what might otherwise play into traditional “romanticization

of preindustrial or subsistence-oriented peoples as ‘ecological’ in ways that place them beyond the pale of history, technology, and modernity.”¹⁰

Such romanticization too easily creates blind spots and fabricates dangerous dichotomies that encourage an idealized past while neglecting the violence agricultural labor inflicts on human communities and natural landscapes alike. It also creates a distance between certain readers and subjects that is somehow unethical—James Agee faced this same double-bind in his documentary work with the sharecroppers in *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*. The pastoral, idealized agrarianism that is central to the mythos of the South also hides deeply embedded systems of racism and classism, so how can those subjects most damaged by these systems be best “packaged” for “wider distribution” without further objectification? The empathy and humility that Agee and Wright both shared in pursuit of their subject—that kind of generosity—is compelling in the best way, particularly in a historical moment that desperately requires compassion.

What is fascinating about a literary (“historical”) environment like the U.S. South is that so much of what seems to be solid is actually groundless—there is no essential Southern past as surely as there is no one South. There remain, however, cultural features within these various communities of the South that are also entirely specific to the socio-historic and geographic pressures that exist only within this region. Artifacts, the cultural materialities of these concentrated pressures, mark the movements and behaviors of these communities—their world-view, their truths and their deepest values, their sense of shared past. The true danger that the South represents as a conceptual space is not the commodified and circulated meta-narrative (“Dixiefication”) by which the region is perhaps nationally recognized—but instead the threat to current nationalistic frameworks

that any challenge to this idea embodies. Poets like those included in this dissertation (and there are many, many more at work in this present moment) who use the linguistic artifacts of Southern encounter to question the prescribed histories and paradigms of the South strike at the root of all systems of national signification. They point to the locus of power—those left out and those let in. They highlight the prismatic and fracture the essential, and this in turn cuts deeply into nationalistic rhetoric.

What *does* it mean to include such poets in the discourse of Southern literature? Doing so affords their work a nexus of meaning, a powerful interrogation uniquely generative when held up against such a carefully maintained fantasy of singularity. It explodes the notion of a single anything and brings attention back to differentiation in a way that is productive and collaborative. “The South” is culturally positioned in such a way within the American imaginary that it has become the frontline in a battle for reconfiguring national narratives, and works like the ones discussed here are the textual manifestations of that reconfiguration. They chart their own engagement with the past, and in doing so offer a new perspective on this present moment and a new potential history for a reflective future.

Notes

¹ Mandy Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics: Word, Image, History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016), 5.

² Erica Hunt, “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics,” in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 2008), 197–212, 201.

³ Hunt, “Notes,” 202.

⁴ Quoted in Joan Wylie Hall, introduction to *Conversations with Natasha Trethewey*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), vii–xxv, xvii.

⁵ Ron Silliman, “Canons and Institutions: New Hope for the Disappeared,” in *Politics of Poetic Form*, 149–74, 153.

⁶ Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013), 96.

⁷ Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics*, 8.

⁸ Jay Watson, “The Other Matter of the South,” *PMLA* 131, no. 1 (2016): 157–61, 157.

⁹ Watson, “The Other Matter,” 157.

¹⁰ “The Other Matter,” 158.

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