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EXTENDED ESSAYS:  
THE ESSAYISTIC SPIRIT IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Extended Essays:

The Essayistic Spirit in Contemporary American Literature

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This dissertation theorizes the crucial role of the essay in contemporary American literary experimentalism. A genre of transitivity, the essay resists the ideals of totalization and closure. While this has historically relegated the essay to the margins of literature, it has also made it amenable to extensions and creative re-workings during the latter half of the twentieth century. Central to its resurgence is the way it invites generic exchanges and mixes of heterogeneous elements that put pressure on discursive boundaries between knowledge and art, art and criticism, the literary and the non-literary. The essay incites the active testing of limits. Within the national context of the United States, the extended essays by marginal writers critique enlightenment concepts of the nation-state sustained by closed orders of identity and signification. I focus on five writers who articulate the formal concerns of essayism and the ethical concerns of heterogeneity. Chapter One explores James Baldwin's use of breaks and cuts that merges the critical form of the essay with African diasporic expressive practices. Chapter Two examines the hybrid texts by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Gloria Anzaldúa written from the margins of the nation and embodying the difficulties of cultural and linguistic intersections. In Chapter Three, I

discuss the innovative serial prose work by Nathaniel Mackey through which he upholds improvisation as one of the oldest and newest strategies of living with heterogeneity. Chapter Four considers Susan Howe's aesthetics of the archive that experiments with new ways of reading and writing history, allowing the poet-essayist to pursue the nonconformist strain in American literature. Each text seeks to extend expressivity while reaffirming the new world possibilities. I argue that the essay and essayistic strategies assist these writers' search for greater openness in form and spirit.

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## Introduction

The essay is a paradoxical genre. Its form is literary, which has caused some theorists to grant it the status of a fourth literary genre alongside poetry, drama, and the novel.<sup>1</sup> Its content, on the other hand, assigns the genre to the realm of knowledge and exposition. Graham Good neatly summarizes the situation when he writes that the essay “usually goes unrecognized either as knowledge (because it is seen as too ‘artistic’) or as art (because it is ‘knowledgeable’ rather than creative)” as a result of the discrepancy between form and content (15). Within literary studies, essays by major writers tend to be consulted as supplementary material that enriches our understanding of their views on aesthetic or social matters. Occasionally, individual essays are admitted into the literary canon by virtue of being well written. In either case, the lack of a unified theory of the essay has led to a critical neglect of the genre.

As Claire de Obaldia points out, the most significant contributions to the study of the genre come from German theorists of the twentieth century (Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno), who established a link between the essay and the early German Romantic theory of the fragment. She also adds that “the most valuable German material on the essay—books and articles—dates back to the 1950s and the 1960s (and even to 1910 in the case of Lukács’s ‘On the Nature and Form of the Essay’) and has never been revised since” (61). Indeed, the most significant contribution to follow is Obaldia’s own *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay*, published in 1995.<sup>2</sup> Utilizing her strong historical and linguistic expertise in all the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Scholes and Carl Klaus in *Elements of Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> The collection *Essays on the Essay* (1989) and Graham Good’s monograph *The Observing Self* (1988) precede Obaldia’s study by a few years but do not offer a theory of the genre in part because of the pressing need to reclaim the essay as a valid object of literary analysis.



major European literary traditions, Obaldia plots the trajectory of the essay from Montaigne to Borges. Her contribution to the field of essay studies is still in the process of being digested by the community of literary critics. The 2005 collection of articles by British and French scholars, *The Modern Essay in French: Movement, Instability, Performance*, is an interesting document from this perspective. The editors Charles Forsdick and Andy Stafford explicitly acknowledge Obaldia's work as providing the condition for the collaborative, transnational effort to study the essay that the volume represents. The articles in the volume, however, incorporate Obaldia's insights rather unevenly, giving the overall impression that her work is just beginning to be registered and debated in the study of the genre. The resurgence of interest in the essay is nevertheless promising. Literary studies may indeed be on the verge of finally catching up with the essay.

One striking omission in the critical discussion conducted in *The Essayistic Spirit* and *The Modern Essay in French* is the under-representation of North American literature. This appears to be not so much the result of a deliberate dismissal as the result of a simple lack of interest. Peter France, whose contribution appears at the beginning of *The Modern Essay in French*, provides a comparative study of the British and French traditions of the essay. He concludes, "It might indeed be argued that while the British developed this humanistic invention to full generic status and then allowed it to decline, the essay has been triumphantly reinvented in the land and the language of Montaigne" (41). This is a premise largely shared by the writers contributing to the volume. It could be the case that the American tradition of the essay is seen as an offshoot of the British tradition, which would mean that France's conclusion extends to the American essay. Or

it could be that the resurgence of the essayistic spirit in the land of Montaigne has been so spectacular as to obscure any other similar bursts that could be taking place simultaneously elsewhere in the world. Whatever the case may be, this dissertation seeks to bring the newest developments in the study of the genre in conversation with contemporary American literature. This is an account of the essayistic spirit in America.

Before moving on to America, however, I would like to examine “the most valuable German material on the essay” as well as Obaldia’s own contribution, both of which are central to the conceptual framework of this dissertation. Lukács’s “On the Nature and Form of the Essay” (1910) and Adorno’s “The Essay as Form” (1958) are seminal works on the essay. They need to be read together not only because Adorno explicitly takes Lukács’s piece as his point of departure but also because the complete picture becomes visible only when the two are read together. Lukács begins by defining the essay as a genre of art; Adorno starts off by defining the essay as a genre of knowledge. The initial set-up allows Lukács to explore the ways in which the essay deviates from other forms of art. He concentrates on the essay’s intellectual bent, its status as writings that “most resolutely reject the image, which reach out most passionately for what lies behind the image” (6). In an inverse situation, Adorno devotes most of his discussion to the ways in which the essay deviates from other kinds of knowledge, especially modern science and philosophy. The crux of this difference is, of course, the essay’s “aesthetic autonomy that is easily accused of being simply derived from art” (5). In other words, the critic who defines the essay as art illuminates its intellectual impulse while the critic who defines it as knowledge then struggles heroically

to pin down its art. One could say that the essay's inner discrepancy is reiterated on a different, meta-level.

The essay as the nexus of knowledge and art is central to these early attempts at theorizing the genre. Lukács opens his essay by differentiating art and science: "Science affects us by its contents, art by its forms" (3). This binary is soon complicated by the fact that the same duality operates *within* literary expression, so that at one extreme "there exist only things" while at the other extreme "only concepts and values" (5). Lukács locates the essay at the latter extreme, so that it becomes the most conceptual of literary expressions without quite crossing over to science. In one of his many striking metaphors, Lukács writes, "Let me put it briefly: were one to compare the forms of literature with sunlight refracted in a prism, the writings of the essayists would be the ultra-violet rays" (7). Ultra-violet rays are not visible to the human eye but undeniably present. The essay attempts to give expression to "intellectuality, conceptuality as sensed experience" which, unlike physical phenomena studied in science, cannot be grasped by any human gesture (7). In fact, at the heart of the essay is an impossibility, an attempt to reach "destiny-relationships which are so exclusively relationships between destinies as such that anything human would merely disturb their abstract purity and grandeur" (6). The form that results from such an attempt is necessarily tentative and incomplete. It cannot represent what it seeks to represent for the simple reason that the great system has not yet arrived. Lukács notes, "Any gesture with which such a man might wish to express something of his experience would falsify that experience, unless it ironically emphasized its own inadequacy and thus cancelled itself out" (7). Although this particular remark has gone unnoticed by the readers of Lukács, this is one of the most condensed portrayals of

the essayistic principle.<sup>3</sup> The essay expresses while incorporating an acknowledgement of its own provisional nature; the essay takes that inadequacy as its formal principle.

This situation, interestingly, reverses the usual temporal relationship between what Lukács calls destiny and form. In all of literature, destiny precedes form, but in the essay alone form gestures towards destiny or, in his words, “form *becomes* destiny, it is the destiny-creating principle” (7). And with that statement, Lukács hints at the radical potential of the essay. Although for the most part Lukács argues that the essayist borrows authority from “the great value-definer of aesthetics, the one who is always about to arrive, the one who is never quite yet there, the only one who has been called to judge,” even in this formulation Lukács does not deny that we are on this side of history (16). The great system is *never* quite yet there. On this side of history, the essay is not simply a premonition of what will come; it actively sets the condition for the coming system. Lukács writes that “the existence of the longing is enough to decide the outcome. For it tears the mask off everything that is only apparently positive and immediate, reveals it as petty longing and cheap fulfillment” (17). Here, it is the longing that makes the coming possible. The essay is a destiny-creating principle, the expression and production of possibility. This definition of the essayist as a precursor is Lukács’s most valuable contribution to the conceptualization of the essay. The irony of Lukács’s approach to the essay, however, is that after defining the essay as an art form, he does not devote much space to the discussion of the concrete formal features of the essay. For example, he notes that the essay ironically emphasizes its own inadequacy but he does not mention any specific strategies that an essayist can employ to create that effect. It can be deduced from

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<sup>3</sup> For readings of Lukács’s “On the Nature and Form of the Essay,” see Geoffrey H. Hartman in *Criticism in the Wilderness* pp. 191-6, R. Lane Kauffmann in “The Skewed Path” pp. 227-9, and Obaldia pp. 102-12.

what he says that the essay is fragmentary and open-ended. But to see a critical mind fiercely coming to grips with the essay as form, we need to turn to Adorno.

Adorno's valorization of the essay as form is inextricable from his critique of science and philosophy, the dominant forms of knowledge in modernity. Although his critique is multi-faceted, it can be condensed into three major issues. First, the neat compartmentalization of culture into "a veritable philosophy versed in eternal values, an airtight and thoroughly organized science, and an aconceptual intuitive art" makes it increasingly difficult for thinkers and writers to cross these discursive boundaries (7-8). In fact, "those compartments represent institutional confirmation of the renunciation of the whole truth" (7). Adorno feels that under these conditions, other forms of knowledge, such as the epistemological dimension of aesthetic objects, go unacknowledged. Writings that belong to science and philosophy, on the other hand, have become indifferent to form. These writers operate under the misguided notion that objectivity "leaps forth when the subject has been removed" (5). Adorno's characteristically acerbic verdict is that such indifference leads not to objectivity but to "irresponsibly sloppy language" (5).

The second point in his critique concerns the method of science and philosophy. Because they attempt to impose a system onto the world, science and philosophy cannot avoid the charges of reductionism. A totalizing system "would be possible only if it were established in advance that the object to be dealt with was fully grasped by the concepts used to treat it, that nothing would be left over that could not be anticipated from the concepts" (15). In actuality, this is never the case. Objects cannot be fully apprehended by concepts because "every object, and certainly an intellectual one, encompasses an infinite number of aspects" (15). Science maintains its illusion by adopting a powerful

form of positivism. Philosophy's strategy includes privileging of the eternal over the historical, the universal over the particular. Even from a strictly epistemological point of view, these approaches fall short by betraying the complexity of the object, but equally disturbing is their political implications. Adorno describes "the illusion of a simple and fundamentally logical world" as "an illusion well suited to the defense of the status quo" (15). The emphasis placed on objectivity "does not permit reason to go beyond the realm of experience, which, in the mechanism of mere material and invariant categories, shrinks to what has always already existed" (21). That is, these institutionally respected forms of knowledge become "the mere administrative duplication and processing of what has always already existed" (20). They foreclose other possibilities, unable or unwilling to speak of the latent forces that are not immediately visible.

The first two issues—compartmentalization and the problem of method—are different ways in which thought becomes constrained and policed in modernity. Adorno's third point takes issue with the loss of intellectual freedom. The central characteristics of a truly liberated intellect, according to Adorno, are mobility and open-endedness. He writes, "Those who believe that they have to defend the mind against lack of solidity are its enemies: the mind itself, once emancipated, is mobile" (20). Emancipated thinking is inherently resistant to what has always already existed: "its tendency is always to liquidate opinion, including the opinion it takes as its point of departure" (18). If there is an inner formal law to such thought, it is heresy or "the violations of the orthodoxy of thought" (23). In contrast, both science and philosophy depend heavily on discursive logic that emphasizes continuity and linearity. Within the systems of science and philosophy, thinking unfolds almost automatically toward a known, inevitable

conclusion. There is certainly no room for chance or play, elements that Adorno deems essential to free thought.

The full significance of the essay emerges in this context: “In the realm of thought it is virtually the essay alone that has successfully raised doubts about the absolute privilege of method. The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character” (9). The essay provides a safe haven to intellectual freedom in its time of great danger. Science and philosophy continue to benefit from open intellectual experience but harness this energy to their enterprise: “While even traditional thought is fed by impulses from such experience, it eliminates the memory of the process by virtue of its form” (13). The crucial difference, therefore, has to do with the way the essay as form preserves the memory of the process of open intellectual experience or, better still, mediates the movements of the mind in action. Form suddenly becomes the critical element, the only element that can truly preserve intellectual freedom. Adorno gives the name “unmethodical method” to the essay’s manner of proceeding. Concepts are not defined in advance but allowed to become precise in their relation to one another as the essay proceeds. It “incorporates the antisystematic impulse into its own way of proceeding,” which should not be confused with the absence of conceptual organization (12). Rather, the seeming lack of control is a calculated strategy of writing and producing knowledge.

In the above summary, however, I have turned Adorno’s essay inside out. His essay does not move from an assessment of culture to the essay. It moves in the opposite direction. His main object of analysis is the essay as a pre-formed cultural object, and in

the process of his analysis he inserts various observations about other forms of knowledge and the state of culture in Germany and, more broadly, in the West. This allows him to devote most of his discussion to the essay as form, its concrete formal features and their effects. My summary of Adorno's critique of science and philosophy, therefore, works against Adorno's essayistic organization. What Adorno has scattered into a constellation, my reading rearranges into a logical structure. There are two points to be drawn from this reflection. First is the minor observation that Adorno performs the unmethodical method even as he speaks of it. The second is the more important point that the kind of thinking embedded in the essay and the essay as form cannot be detached without doing violence to both. In fact, the Adornoan essay hovers between a kind of thinking and a kind of writing, between process and product.

The specific details and suggestive observations in Lukács and Adorno's essays will be explored in the chapters that follow. For now, suffice it to point out that despite their disagreement, the two critics agree that the essay is a form that tends to work beyond itself, a form that is dissatisfied with the fatalism inherent in form. It is an expression of a longing (Lukács) or an intention groping its way (Adorno). Adorno is perhaps less optimistic about the eventual completion of the process of mediation. The impossibility at the heart of the essay, for Adorno, is not something that can be resolved: "What such concepts give the illusion of achieving, their method knows to be impossible and yet tries to accomplish. The word *Versuch*, attempt or essay, in which thought's utopian vision of hitting the bullseye is united with the consciousness of its own fallibility and provisional character, indicates, as do most historically surviving terminologies, something about the form" (16). Here is the same recognition of what is being essayed,



only the admission of fallibility is more pronounced. This could be the effect of the intervening years of European history that separate the two pieces. If Lukács in 1910, before the world wars, could be adamant in his “protest against the fragmentation of modern life,” then such a fragmentation had become an irreversible fact of life by 1958 (Kauffmann 228). This, however, is not to suggest that the younger philosopher somehow succumbed to despair. Adorno keeps writing essays, and writing, especially the essayistic kind, is always an expression of hope.

The essay is, according to Obaldia, “the typical response to a world which has become problematic” (39). The fragmented and fragmentary form of the essay both reflects the loss of cultural unity and protests against the ideal of a totalizing system. For this reason, “the genre is bound to rise and prosper in times of generic transitions and crises” (39). The essay emerged during one such moment (the Renaissance), prospered during early German Romanticism, and is currently witnessing resurgence. This restlessness, however, is a defining characteristic of the genre that troubles it even during times of relative generic stability. This spirit of the genre is embedded in the very etymology of the word “essay.” The French word “essayer” means to attempt, to experiment, to try out. Adorno mentions this in respect to the German equivalent, but perhaps this sense is the most pronounced in the Spanish word “ensayo,” a word that designates both the literary genre and theatrical rehearsal. When the latter meaning is taken into account, the essay “is linked to a search for perfection in acting, to a praxis to create a known object in the future (the real performance, first night etc.), and therefore is a form that is, like music, difficult to grasp” (Forsdick and Stafford 15). Obaldia theorizes this quality of the essay and gives it a name—the potentially literary. The perception is

not new; Lukács and Adorno both touch on the essay's transitivity as almost any scholar of the essay is compelled to do at some point in his or her discussion. Yet, Obaldia's landmark study distinguishes itself by providing a practical approach to and a sustained discussion of the aspect of the essay that is notoriously "difficult to grasp."

The secret of her success lies in a more dynamic notion of genericity. Instead of declaring like the other critics that the essay cannot be grasped, she first examines her theoretical "hands." If the notion of genre that has been employed up till that point had been too narrow for the proper understanding of the essay, then it makes sense to look for a more adequate model. She finds one in Alastair Fowler's distinction of kinds and modes. By kinds, Fowler means genres in the narrow sense. Modes, in contrast, "appear to be distillations, from those relatively evanescent forms, of the permanently valuable features. Thus, they have achieved independence of contingent embodiments and may continue to all ages, incorporated in almost any external form, long after the antecedent kind has passed away" (Fowler 111). Mode thus refers to the spirit of the genre, the permanently valuable impulse that can pass through multiple historically contingent embodiments. Then what would be the spirit of the essay, the essayistic spirit? Even the essay at times congeals into a predictable convention such as the Baconian essay. Still, the essay has been the most impatient with rigidified molds among the major genres. In the words of O.B. Hardison, there is "no genre that takes so many shapes and that refuses so successfully to resolve itself, finally, into its own shapes" (12). This is because the act of essaying inherent to the genre constantly asks for its own extension. The genre registers dissatisfaction with material achievements no matter how exquisite. This spirit "stretches the essay to its limits, beyond the province of its true nature" (Obaldia 15). The

essay is potentially literary because it is a genre always on its way; it points toward perfection and that very gesture of pointing undercuts any final or ultimate aspiration of the particular attempt. The essayistic gesture expresses a longing for completion and therefore vividly attests to its own incompleteness. Or one could argue that it is the other way round. By vividly attesting to its own incompleteness, its brokenness, the essay expresses a longing for wholeness, utopia, or Lukács's grand system.

This phenomenon, however, is not something that can be sectioned off from the other literary genres (in which case the essay would not haunt our literary categorizations so persistently). As Obaldia notes, the essayistic exceeds the generic boundaries of the essay: "There is little doubt, then, that the act of essaying which, because of its etymological credentials, passes off as the essence of the essay, as its irreducible core, is least definitional of genre itself. By definition, one might say, the act of essaying can be applied to any (other) genre" (22). It can be argued that every genre has an essayistic impulse, to regenerate and extend itself through innovation. The implication of Obaldia's words is that the act of essaying is the principle of difference that produces modes in the first place. When distended to this extent, the essayistic becomes almost synonymous with paratextuality. Paratext refers to writings that cluster in the margins of the literary work proper such as self-commentaries and drafts, but also footnotes, glosses, and prefaces that mediate the relationship between the book and the outside world. Their position is, once again, paradoxical. At one level, they are secondary to the work and therefore dispensable, but on another level, paratexts signal the need to continue writing about the work, to a certain inability to achieve closure or an inexhaustible plenitude at the heart of the work proper. Expanding the essay to the essayistic, therefore, is to

dissolve the genre while highlighting its pervasive presence in literary practice. It is to place “an emphasis on *litterarité* at the expense of *généricité*,” as Forsdick and Stafford comment (8). It is to suggest with Réda Bensmaïa that all genres are “the historically determined actualizations of what is potentially woven into the essay. The latter appears, then, as a moment of writing *before* the genre, before genericness—or as the matrix of all generic possibilities” (92). A more homely version of this idea would be Hardison’s analogy of the essay as the cockroach (11-12). Unfortunate analogies notwithstanding, the essay is bound to rise in popularity as more critics embrace a dynamic notion of the genres by taking into account their diachronic and synchronic mobility.

The dispersal of the essay, however, is only the theoretical conclusion. The practical result has been that the essay has constantly reinvented itself, putting pressure on adjacent generic boundaries, adapting to new conditions and rising to the specific challenges of particular historical moments. Here, it is important to remember that the essay’s vitality is the result of essayist’s art. As most commentators of the essay admit, “the sweet disorder of the essay often reveals a highly crafted work of art” (France 30). This dissertation is an attempt to read the difficult work and ingenuity involved in writing the essayistic essay. How does an essayist incorporate the antisystematic impulse into his or her manner of proceeding? How does the essayist negotiate between the process and the product? Lukács writes, “A question is thrown up and extended so far in depth that it becomes the question of all questions, but after that everything remains open” (14). How does one extend the essay to avoid closure? What are some of the techniques adopted to create an open form? Especially in the late twentieth-century development of essayism, the tension between the essay as art and the essay as criticism has taken the center stage.

Geoffrey H. Hartman comments, “What is happening is neither an inflation of criticism at the expense of creative writing nor a promiscuous intermingling of both. It is, rather, a creative testing and illumination of limits” (202). Testing of limits is perhaps the most obvious way in which the essayistic spirit manifests itself although one should not underrate the importance of promiscuous intermingling as an alternate and related strategy. It is not against criticism alone that the essay tests its limits. As will be examined in this dissertation, the essay has been placed next to music, the novel, lyric poetry, visual arts, and history writing as writers have sought to extend its expressive possibilities. The essay, in its ability to try out new forms that cut across genres, media, and disciplines, is “the chief prose-based experimental instrument of humanistic thought” in contemporary letters (Retallack 4).

This dissertation deals with a strand of experimental writing in America in the period that roughly begins around 1945 and continues to the present. I do not adopt the term postmodern to designate the period or the works I analyze for two main reasons. First is the term’s tendency to cut off the experimental writing from the years between 1945 and 1960 that includes objectivist poets, the early Beats, San Francisco poets, and the Black Mountain group. This period of experimental writing in the United States has been best represented by Donald Allen’s anthology *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. Allen’s anthology deals predominantly with poetry by white men, but the final section, “Statements on Poetics,” contains essays that foreshadow the content and form of later full-blown essayistic experiments. This dissertation does not deal with the mid-century avant-garde explicitly, but presupposes their contribution and influence, in

particular the search for an open form that they initiated.<sup>4</sup> The second reason why I resist the term postmodern has to do with the way the writers I examine tend to inhabit the margins or interstices even within postmodern literature. Although studies of postmodern aesthetics have expanded in certain directions (architecture and the visual arts), it is also true that in literary studies postmodern novelists such as Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo have received the lion's share of attention.<sup>5</sup> This dissertation focuses on poetics, the multi-generic and often anti-novelistic writing that parallels and contests mainstream postmodernism. The writers examined in this dissertation, James Baldwin, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Gloria Anzaldúa, Nathaniel Mackey, and Susan Howe, have rarely been grouped together with the possible exception of Mackey and Howe.<sup>6</sup> Some of them have been studied intensely, as in the case of Baldwin and Anzaldúa, but that is due to another postmodern trend of reading literary works through the author's ethnic identity. The particular constellation of writers that have been brought together here becomes visible only through the lens of the essayistic.

Some of the texts discussed in this dissertation are essays; some are not. Those texts that belong to the genre, however, strain to extend the possibilities of the essay while the ones that fall outside rely heavily on essayistic means. All of the texts provide a space for generic exchanges. My choice of the term essayistic over the neighboring concepts of generic mixing and experimentalism, however, does not go without saying. Compared to the essayistic, genre mixing is too specific while experimentalism is too broad for the purposes of this dissertation although both terms are intimately related to

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<sup>4</sup> I have in mind such cases as the striking resemblance between Charles Olson's "composition by field" and Adorno's characterization of the essay as a "force field."

<sup>5</sup> An exemplary study is Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

the essay. Genre mixing is constitutive of the essay as a genre. Claire de Obaldia points out that the essay is in itself “a literary hybrid” exhibiting “the ability to incorporate the qualities of any one of the three Aristotelian categories of the lyric, the dramatic, and the epic—or, even more typically, of all three together” (3). Historically, the essay has reinvented its form through further generic mixing. The “potential to facilitate generic exchanges” is one of the most fundamental and vital characteristics of the genre (Crowley 123). Yet, generic mixing alone fails to cover the entire field of the essayistic and furthermore elides the question of how generic mixings are undertaken. Which genre operates as the glue and what does the mixing aim to do? That is, the phenomenon of generic mixing is historically contingent, and part of my argument is that prose-based generic mixing in contemporary American literature is best understood by highlighting the essayistic as the dominant factor. Experimentalism, likewise, is a term intimately related to the essayistic. Joan Retallack, one of the spokesperson of the current trend of essayistic experiments, interprets experimentalism to be the essence of the genre (4). Yet the term tends to draw attention away from generic concerns. Genre is only one of the many targets of experimentalism. By holding on to the essayistic, I seek to look at a particular kind of experiment that occurs at the interstice of the essay and other genres, the essay and other artistic media, the essay and nonliterary forms of discourse.

To emphasize the essayistic is to speak of a certain kind of essay, one that is fiercely intellectual, highly self-reflexive in form, and generically adventurous. All of the writers discussed in this dissertation identify themselves as intellectuals either explicitly or implicitly. Baldwin, Anzaldúa, and Howe give remarkably similar accounts of growing

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<sup>6</sup> Mackey and Howe sometimes contribute to same journals and volumes when they are both categorized as language poets. Readers of Mackey, unfortunately, rarely read Howe and vice versa, reflecting the still very

up in the library (and the conditions that inhibited their free access to the archives) while Cha and Mackey let their prose style speak of their education. All of them are innovators of prose and have extended the possibilities of the essay, often by inventing texts that form a category of their own. They are writers who work in multiple genres: Baldwin wrote novels, plays, poetry, and children's literature in addition to essays; Anzaldúa "wrote the first poem, the first story, the first creative non-fiction and a rough draft for [her] first novel, all at the same time" and added children's books and her acclaimed anthologies over the course of her career (*Borderlands* 235); Cha was a visual artist, a film maker, a poet, and an academic; Mackey is a poet and a critic of jazz and literature; Howe is also a poet and a feminist critic, her book on Emily Dickinson being one of the most important contributions to Dickinson scholarship in the twentieth century. If the postmodern novel "crossed over into the popular modern" by shifting toward "refunctioned convention, subgeneric modes and forms of the popular," as Marianne DeKoven argues in *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*, then we see almost the inverse in the essayistic trend during the same period (185). Much of the high-literary avant-garde energy appears to have shifted to the essay that now harbors experiments by philosophers, critics, and creative writers alike. That is, the highly literary experimentalism makes a comeback through the backdoor of literature. In the 1998 anthology *Artifice & Indeterminacy: An Anthology of New Poetics*, for example, Christopher Beach gathers such oddities as "[Charles] Bernstein's essay-in-verse, [David] Antin's talk-poem, and James Sherry's prose-poem/essay along with experimentally hybrid pieces by Lyn Hejinian, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Susan Howe," giving us some sense of the creative energy that is currently being channeled through the essay (ix).



This is, however, the backdoor of literature in another sense. Each of the writers that I examine in this dissertation is a marginalized subject in the United States whether in terms of class, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. Often, they are doubly or triply marginalized, and in the case of Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana lesbian writer, all five categories converge. During the period that we call postmodern, “the general Other of modernity—of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, geographical location—everywhere emerges into subjectivity, audibility, agency if not yet, or unevenly, actual political, social, or cultural power” (DeKoven 16). That is, these texts owe their national circulation if not their existence to the material conditions of their historical moment. At the same time, these writers distance themselves from the concept of minority literature. Even as late as in 1988, Ron Silliman, himself an experimental writer, wrote, “These writers and readers—women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the ‘marginal’—have a manifest political need to *have their stories told*. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to whom is the subject of those conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience” (63). When Mackey wrote in response that there are “writers from socially marginalized groups who do both—tell their stories while calling such conventions into question, tell their stories *by* calling such conventions into question” in 1993, this was still an argument that needed to be voiced very loudly (Discrepant 19). Thanks to critics like Mackey himself, this may not be an argument that needs to be foregrounded any more, but it is necessary to bear in mind that all of the writers discussed in this dissertation were subjected to such expectations and had to circumvent them in one way or another. To trace how essayistic strategies assisted this purpose is one of the interests

of this project, which is another way of saying that high-literary avant-gardism can potentially aid the project of democracy, heterogeneity, and pluralism. This sentiment is most passionately expressed by Howe when an interviewer suggests that her work may be perceived to be too difficult: “And isn’t claiming that the work is too intellectually demanding also saying a majority of people are stupid?” (Interview by Lynn Keller 24).

I begin my study with James Baldwin’s essays from the fifties and the sixties. The chapter opens with a reading of a pun that appears in the title of Baldwin’s essay collections: *Notes*. Meaning informal pieces of writing as well as units of sound, the concept of notes provides a model for discussing the formal sophistication of Baldwin’s writing. A closer look at the way Baldwin juxtaposes his pieces, registers, and rhetorical strategies reveals his calculated use of gaps and breaks within the unit of the book; the aesthetic effect is reminiscent of music understood as an arrangement of gaps. The openness and non-identity of the essay as form ushers in Baldwin’s utopian politics and the ethical demand he makes to the nation. He articulates the potentiality of the essay with the potentiality of America, presenting heterogeneity not as a problem or a condition but as a challenge that demands a continuous, creative, and vigilant participation.

The second chapter examines Teresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Both authors seek to complicate the idea of a fixed national border, a pure national culture, even a clear-cut binary between the colonizer and the colonized. Korea was first colonized by Japan before it was violently split in two by the cold war superpowers; the Chicanos were first colonized by the Spanish and then forcefully incorporated into the U.S. In both cases, the history of a people exceeds the boundary of any one nation, resulting in experiences that fall outside

the framework of a single identity. Writing from the margins of the United States, both writers attempt to give form to these elusive histories by innovatively reworking grassroots essayistic materials. Both similarly juxtapose history with family lore, song with prose, English with other languages, articulation with silence. Adamant in their refusal to reduce one to the other, Anzaldúa's forked tongue and Cha's broken tongue figure the difficulties of inhabiting heterogeneity.

In the third chapter, I study the first volume of Nathaniel Mackey's serial prose work *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, entitled *Bedouin Hornbook*. Operating at the interface between the novel and the essay, literature and criticism, the enterprise is described by the author as "an alternate, fictional voice pursued by criticism and an alternate, critical voice pursued by fiction" (Paracritical 15). At one level, *Bedouin Hornbook* is a series of letters detailing the activities of the avant-garde jazz musician N. At another level, however, the letters read like commentary on various cultural artifacts, some of which really exist. This form allows Mackey to move between literary production and critical commentary, activities that traditionally have been relegated to separate spheres. I argue in this chapter that Mackey's text exploits to the full the essay's ambiguous status between philosophy and literature, gesturing toward the possibility of an alternative arrangement. The complexity of Mackey's work furthermore upholds the intellectual legacy of African diasporic music and points to improvisation as one of the oldest and newest strategies of living with heterogeneity.

My final chapter focuses on Susan Howe's 1993 study of American literature, *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*. *The Birth-Mark* provides an interesting closure to this project in two senses. First, it enables me to assess

the nonconformist strain in American literature as a force that persistently drove American literature to the margins from within. Howe's interest in a distinct American voice makes room for a discussion of the Americanness, or the new world condition, of the essayistic experimentation that erupted in the latter half of the twentieth century. Secondly, Howe's text performs an alternative literary criticism, one that is saturated by the historical documents that she examines. Although all the writers in this dissertation demonstrate their awareness of challenging pre-existing discursive formations, there is a gradual shift of focus over the five decades as writers turn their gaze more and more explicitly to the site of cultural valuation, that of cultural criticism itself. The final chapter discusses through Howe the ascending phenomenon of writers *qua* critics that is accommodated and abetted by the essayistic spirit.

The eruption of the essayistic spirit in America, in short, has produced new forms of writing. The marginal genre, furthermore, has been crucial to writers of the margins and has aided their search for greater openness in form and spirit. Its significance, however, has been largely neglected to date. My reading of these extended essays attempts to redress this critical neglect while seeking to expand our understanding of the genre.

## Chapter One

### James Baldwin's Notes: The Essay, the Cut, and the Eruption of the Ethical

James Baldwin being an overtly “political” writer, it is often the case that readers get caught up by his ideas. Then questions regarding genre and form may seem to be of secondary importance. Why linger on those when there are more pressing matters to discuss such as racial politics and national identity? His essays are well written, one admits, but does not Baldwin place a greater emphasis on the clear transmission of his messages? A closer look at Baldwin's writings, however, hardly justifies this assumption. From his early essays collected in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961), through his widely acclaimed *The Fire Next Time* (1963), to the late *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), Baldwin consistently experiments with the presentational aspect of his writing. Far from taking the genre for granted, he remolds the essay and tries out new strategies every time he takes it up. His essays, even the ones dealing with similar experiences and basically the same material, never take the same shape.<sup>7</sup> This is so much the case that a generalization of “the Baldwinian essay” comes across as an enormous if not impossible task. The uniqueness of each of his essays undermines the assumption that form is a neutral conduit in his writings and testifies to the fact that much of his creative energy was directed to the question of form. The following, therefore, is an investigation of Baldwin's long engagement with the essay.

Two critical tendencies converge to produce this inattention to form: the practice of reading Baldwin primarily through his race and the lack of a theory of the essay. The

former has been scrutinized by Baldwin himself. As early as in “Autobiographical Notes,” the preface to his first book of essays, he mentions race as a constraining factor he encountered as an artist coming of age at mid-century. Regarded primarily as a social issue, race has placed restrictions on the production and reception of minority writing. Baldwin remarks, “The difficulty then, for me, of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation” (8).<sup>8</sup> Not allowed any critical distance, the minority writer is more or less conflated with the social experience. Such a denial of interiority is stated nakedly in official studies of race relations of the period. An exemplary specimen would be Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* published in 1944, right around the time when Baldwin started writing. In the introduction to this massive study, Myrdal dismisses the African American perspective: “The Negro’s entire life, and consequently, also his opinions on the Negro problem, are in the main, to be considered as secondary reactions to more primary pressures from the side of the dominant white majority” (xlvii). That a group of people’s opinions and, more seriously, their life can be brushed aside in one sentence testifies to the scope of epistemological violence inherent in the sociological formula “the Negro problem.” *An American Dilemma* does not simply report a social condition; it participates in the production of that condition by framing African Americans as the object of study and the white majority as the subjects of knowledge and the agents of social change. Despite its stated purpose of offering a solution to the social

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<sup>7</sup> This is even more obvious when Baldwin crosses genres. In fact, his oeuvre is marked by a tension between his formal proteanism and his tendency to revisit a handful of key thematic concerns.

<sup>8</sup> All page numbers of Baldwin’s essays in this chapter refer to the Library of America edition, *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*.

issues arising from racism and segregation, Myrdal's study arguably does more to reinforce the ideological foundation of racial inequality.

Within this framework, African Americans are abstracted into a social phenomenon. African American writing then becomes an oxymoron, as incongruous as a speech made by air pollution. Baldwin writes, "It is quite possible to say that the price a Negro pays for becoming articulate is to find himself, at length, with nothing to be articulate about" (7). On the surface, this sentence does not make logical sense. Should not the acquisition of a voice resolve the issue? However, if we take Baldwin's words to mean that acquiring the ability to write is predicated on the acceptance or internalization of the rules that govern the production of discourse, then the same sentence turns into an astute assessment of the double bind faced by the minority writer. The minority writer is expected to give a verbal account of the effects of racism on the racial minority only. This account, furthermore, should take the most transparent form possible in order to qualify as objective data for sociological analysis. Any expressive impulse would jeopardize the authenticity of the object. It would be a sign of frivolity or even perversity, labels that have been attached to Baldwin by audiences both white and black.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, Baldwin's choice of the essay as his primary means of expression is significant. According to Theodor W. Adorno, the essay as form challenges the axiomatic rules of modern scientific positivism. "In positivist practice, the content, once fixed on the model of the protocol sentence, is supposed to be neutral with respect to its presentation," he writes (5). In contrast to this neutralization of form, the essay preserves a consciousness of the non-identity of presentation and subject matter. Scientific method

suppresses form by erecting systems while the essay “must reflect on itself at every moment” (22). To suppose that this is merely a difference in packaging, however, is to miss Adorno’s point. Depending on the form, the subject arrives at different kinds of knowledge. While systems tend to replace the order of things with the order of ideas, the essay as form makes manifest “the upsetting aspects of the object” (15). It is true to the process of an open intellectual experience that does not know in advance where the inquiry will end. The form of the essay, moreover, is productive. It does not passively record an intellectual process that has been completed in advance: “The essay, however, takes this experience as its model without, as reflected form, simply imitating it. The experience is mediated through the essay’s own conceptual organization; the essay proceeds, so to speak, methodically unmethodically” (13). This means that the essay is not the absence of a method; it is a method that incorporates an acknowledgement of the processural nature of thought. In this way, the form of the essay stands in opposition to scientific method.

Calling the essay “the critical form par excellence,” Adorno places a heavy emphasis on the critical work performed via form (18). Baldwin critics, on the other hand, have demonstrated a pronounced inability to elucidate the formal aspect of Baldwin’s essays. Readers have yet to move beyond the cursory observation that Baldwin’s essays are “complex.” Little work has been done to reckon with the significance of Baldwin’s choice of genre, his adaptation and extension of the essay’s formal possibilities, and the critical work he performs through essayistic means. This weakness, I would argue, reflects the more general tendency to regard the essay as less

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<sup>9</sup> Early white critics of Baldwin often measured him against Richard Wright’s “serious” naturalism, the most notorious example being Irving Howe’s “Black Boys and Native Sons.” The charge of perversity is



literary and closer to expository writing in disposition. The difficulty that literary critics have with the essay is not limited to the field of Baldwin criticism or even African American literary studies. It is widespread, and Claire de Obaldia points to the way critics “concentrate rather on individual essayists, with a marked emphasis on the biographical and socio-cultural context” as a symptom of the difficulty they have with the genre (1). Attempts to define the genre have been immobilized in particular by the essay’s ambiguousness—its tendency to occupy the grey area between knowledge and art, art and criticism, process and product. But once we distance ourselves from the compulsion to classify, what becomes clear is that on either side of the literary margin, essayistic texts share the common trait of fragmentation. Internally, the essay tends to be organized through self-differentiation and parataxis. Externally, the essay is an essay, an attempt in a direction, a preliminary attempt rather than the masterpiece. A more sensitive examination of Baldwin’s essays immediately reveals his self-conscious use of the essay’s antisystematic impulse precisely to battle the discursive constraints of race. Even within the brief “Autobiographical Notes,” numerous instances of breaks and turns occur to crinkle the texture of his prose.

Despite the promise in the title, “Autobiographical Notes” is at best a partial and fragmented self-narrative. Within the first few sentences, Baldwin establishes a subtle play between exposure and erasure. He writes of his childhood, “The story of my childhood is the usual bleak fantasy, and we can dismiss it with the restrained observation that I certainly would not consider living it again” (5). A few lines later, he comments on his early attempts at writing thus: “Also wrote plays, and songs, for one of which I received a letter of congratulations from Mayor La Guardia, and poetry, about which the

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voiced most explicitly by Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*, p. 87.

less said, the better” (5). In both sentences, Baldwin begins to relate an autobiographical detail only to retreat into silence. A closer look at the sentences, however, reveals a dynamic more complicated than a binary between articulation and silence. The first half of each sentence gives the impression of conveying some substantial information precisely because the second half is so clamorous in its reticence. “The story of my childhood is the usual bleak fantasy” does not really say much about Baldwin’s childhood. We know from the details provided in a later essay that the conditions of his childhood were indeed bleak, but those conditions are hardly explained by the universal ethos in the phrase “the usual bleak fantasy.” The second example works similarly. Baldwin’s mention of the letter from Mayor La Guardia does not tell us much about the play itself. At the end of the sentence, we know as little about the play as we do about the poetry concerning which he withholds all information. In both cases, what he offers often proves to be less revelatory while his silences ring with implicit assertions. If one may borrow an expression that has been attached to Miles Davis, Baldwin proceeds like a man walking on eggshells.

Baldwin’s introduction of the main topic—his race—is equally circumspect. The opening section of “Autobiographical Notes” focuses on Baldwin’s development as a writer. When his racial identity is revealed half way through the second paragraph, it is embedded in a subordinate clause: “I started waiting on tables in a Village restaurant and writing book reviews—mostly, as it turned out, about the Negro problem, concerning which the color of my skin made me automatically an expert” (5). The sentence begins with the familiar figure of the hungry artist, but then there is a brief break signaled by the dash. The dash visualizes a certain resistance to a smooth transition from the fact that this

author had to write book reviews to the fact that this author had to write mostly on race. This difficulty is resolved by the succeeding modifying clause that finally reveals the writer's race albeit as an indirection. Meantime, Baldwin's convoluted sentence has placed the fact with the greatest explanatory power (according to his society's standards) at the end of a chain of modifying clauses. The syntax, in other words, holds at bay the deterministic power attributed to race. In the sentence that follows, Baldwin veers away from the question of race once more to talk about another book project that never materialized. Only at the end of the third paragraph does he return to his racial identity. In short, the opening section does not begin with race but arrives at the concept of race: "the most difficult (and most rewarding) thing in my life has been the fact that I was born a Negro" (6). By deferring this announcement, Baldwin gains space, space for play.

An attentiveness to Baldwin's use of the essay as form rules out readings that depend on and merely seek to confirm pre-given concepts. This is because, as Adorno explains, the essay is opposed to the idea that "the object to be dealt with was fully grasped by the concepts used to treat it" (15). This does not mean that the essay shies away from concepts. On the contrary, the essay "wants to use concepts to pry open the aspect of its objects that cannot be accommodated by concepts" (23). This opening is brought about by setting off discrete elements against one another and pressing for "the reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience" (13). Adorno adopts various figures to better convey this manner of proceeding: unmethodical method, force field, constellation, configuration crystallized through motion, and conflict/tension brought to a standstill. Each of the figures attempts to convey the double sense of openness and rigor, movement and stasis. The essayist, Adorno emphasizes, is

not led by subjectivism but is driven by the responsibility to the object, which is always complex, mediated, and situated in secular time. The elasticity of form, therefore, calls for a greater intensity and reflexivity. Because the essay dispenses with the certainty of received concepts, it can only gain precision by proceeding further: “It is not so much that the essay neglects indubitable certainty as that it abrogates it as an ideal. The essay becomes true in its progress, which drives it beyond itself” (13). Concepts provide a point of departure for the essayist, and by the end of the essay’s progress, those concepts become troubled or liquidated just as Baldwin turns the abstraction of race into something infinitely more complex within the first few paragraphs of “Autobiographical Notes.”

What this suggests is that an attention to the essayistic dimension of Baldwin’s writings alone would help drive a wedge between Baldwin’s textual performance and the immediacy of his social situation. Such a reading, however, could also imply that Baldwin is a passive receiver of an established cultural practice, the essay. I hope instead to establish a stronger connection between the essay and African American expressive practices and the ways in which Baldwin merges the two traditions. This affinity concerns the way both deal with breaks and ruptures. Adorno writes of the essay, “It thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over” (16). This business of finding a “unity in and through the breaks” has been increasingly relegated to certain—usually marginal—practices in the Enlightenment West. Black culture, on the other hand, has a long tradition of embedding breaks into the texture of a cultural artifact. James A. Snead provides useful theorization and contextualization of this difference in “Repetition as a

Figure of Black Culture.” Snead defines culture as humanity’s response to the cyclicity that characterizes the physical plane upon which human life unfolds. Every culture manages the fact of repetition in nature to provide a sense of security, “a kind of ‘coverage’, both in the comforting sense of ‘insurance’ against accidental and sudden rupturing of a complicated and precious fabric, and in [the] less favorable sense of a ‘cover-up’” (60). Yet cultures differ in the degree to which they cover up the fact of repetition, European historicism being one of the most intolerant responses to the possibility of non-progressing temporal movement. Hayden White, a historian of Western historiography, passes a similar judgment in *The Content of the Form*. Modern historiography “strains for the effect of having filled in all the gaps, of having put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time” (11). Cultural forms reflect and cultivate the dominant conception of time; thus Enlightenment literature and music increasingly shaped themselves after the idea of progress and the linearity of time.

Black culture, by contrast, has tended to foreground repetition through its circular dances and rhythm. As important as repetition is the cut. The cut is “an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break (an accidental *da capo*) with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series” (Snead 67). The cut is also the moment when a new voice or beat enters and is allowed to become a part of the ongoing series. This practice tends to emphasize circulation and circularity while simultaneously seeking “to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over but by making room for them inside the system itself” (67). Examples would include the communal openness of African drumming,

improvisation in jazz performances, and the random insertions of “praise God” during African American sermons. More than a technique, the cut is an aesthetic strategy of deferral—deferral because, rather than progressing unerringly to its completion, the work suddenly draws attention to the moment of its emergence, the present tense of its making. It embeds an alternative model of time. As Walter Benjamin has written, “The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself” (261). The aesthetics of the cut initiates such a critique.

The purpose of drawing this parallel between the essay and the cut is to highlight their shared interest—to critique the concept of progress defined as linear growth. Baldwin inhabits the space where the two traditions converge, and his essays are inflected by what Fred Moten has called “black radicalism as experimental black performance” that demands a radical revaluation of value and our theories of value (18). Baldwin’s remark that his race was as much an asset as a liability in his development as a writer, for once, needs to be taken at face value. “I hazard that the King James Bible, the rhetoric of the store-front church, something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech . . . have something to do with me today,” he writes (6). This statement acknowledges these influences as essential to his formation as an essayist, and it is my contention that more attention needs to be brought to that confluence in Baldwin’s aesthetics not least because he exploits the aesthetic and critical potential of that convergence to counter and question the objectifying force of race.

One last look at “Autobiographical Notes” will close this introductory section. Cuts are liberally employed in the piece precisely to disrupt the strictures of race. The fourth paragraph opens, “One of the difficulties about being a Negro writer (and this is not special pleading, since I don’t mean to suggest that he has it any worse than anybody else) is that the Negro problem is written about so widely” (6). Baldwin appears to be elaborating on the preceding statement that one of the most difficult and rewarding challenges in his life was the fact of his race. This reading naturally aligns Baldwin with “a Negro writer.” The alignment, however, is soon disrupted by the parenthetical statement where suddenly there are two pronouns—an “I” and a “he.” Baldwin pries open a distance between “a Negro writer” and himself. If, as Baldwin criticizes, the discourse on race of the mid-century tended to collapse the individual into his or her race, then the splitting of the pronouns and the parenthetical insertion resist that drive. This move is repeated at the end of “Autobiographical Notes” when Baldwin jerks his essay back to the starting point with the following *da capo*: “About my interests: I don’t know if I have any, unless the morbid desire to own a sixteen-millimeter camera and make experimental movies can be so classified” (9). The closing section swerves away from race and turns back to the individual and writer James Baldwin. He gives a list of his personal preferences and desires of such intimate nature that the essay goes below the threshold of racialization. One does not have to be any particular color to want to own a sixteen-millimeter camera although being a particular color could potentially enhance or minimize one’s chances of attaining one. The preface ends by focusing on what he wants rather than what he is: “I want to be an honest man and a good writer” (9).

“Autobiographical Notes” can be read as an essayistic cut through which Baldwin wrests that space for reflection and analysis necessary for him to be both.

The following is an exploration of Baldwin’s aesthetic of the cut. It seeks to draw attention to both Baldwin’s message and how the message is conveyed. Ultimately, I hope to show how the calculated use of breaks and spaces adds strength to his utopian politics.

### The Space between the Notes from which the Dynamic Tension Comes

For Adorno, the radical potential of the essay as form lies in its ability to produce cross-connections between elements. In this respect, “the essay approaches the logic of music, that stringent and yet aconceptual art of transition, in order to appropriate for verbal language something it forfeited under the domination of discursive logic” (22). To examine “the logic of music” that the essay approaches I will take the example of African drumming. This may have been the last example on Adorno’s mind, yet the resemblance between the Adornoan essay and polyrhythmic drumming turns out to be unexpectedly strong and enriches our thinking about the essay. In his study *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetic and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*, the ethnomusicologist John Miller Chernoff chronicles his apprenticeship as a drummer in West Africa. This enables him to give an accurate analysis of the Westerner’s confusion as well as the practitioner’s perspective on this long-misunderstood aesthetic practice. The ethnographic approach also enables Chernoff to speculate on music as someone newly acquainted with the phenomenon, leading to an insightful account of music in general and not just African drumming. Because there are always more than two beats



running in African music, the listener trained in Western musical conventions can only be at loss. In traditional Western music, the beat always falls on the main meter, marking time at an even pace. When two or more rhythms are played simultaneously, the Westerner interprets it as an absence of the main beat. “The situation is uncomfortable,” writes Chernoff, “because if the basic meter is not evident, we cannot understand how two or more people can play together or, even more uncomfortably, how anyone can play at all” (42). The disorientation caused by drumbeats registers as utter chaos and impinges on one’s sense of security, but such an effect is to be expected in the realm of culture.

Chernoff begins the education of his readers by gently pointing out that Africans dance to polyrhythm. It would be very difficult to dance in 7/4 or 5/4 time that many Westerners thought they heard in African drumming. The mystery is resolved when the musicologist explains that the main beat is implied rather than supplied by the drummers. “In African music, it is the listener or dancer who has to supply the beat: the listener must be *actively engaged* in making sense of the music,” he writes (50). Does this mean that we are back in familiar territory? This comforting possibility is immediately denied, since the question still remains concerning the way individual drummers interact to produce the implied meter that they are not allowed to sound. Neither does the existence of the main beat guarantee that we will be able to locate it. The ability to find the beat “depends particularly on resisting the tendency to fuse the parts” (96). That is, synthesis is not the solution in this case. Holding multiple elements in tension is the only way in which the listener will be able to identify the beat.

Moreover, because the beat emerges from the tension between the multiple rhythms, the relationship between individual drummers cannot be fixed in advance. As

long as the rhythms fit to imply the basic meter, the individual drummers are free to shift the accent or introduce new interpretations. In fact, it is inevitable that a music made from “the dynamic clash and interplay of cross-rhythms” would find particular pleasure in the complication introduced by new elements that shift the overall dynamic between the participants right in the middle of the performance (95). Cuts and improvisation are unavoidable components of this music:

The drummer keeps the music moving forward fluidly, and by continually changing his accents and his beating, he thus relies on the multiplicity of possible ways to cut and combine the rhythms. Westerners trying to appreciate African music must always keep in mind the fact that the music is organized to be open to the rhythmic interpretation a drummer, a listener, or a dancer wishes to contribute. *The music is perhaps best considered as an arrangement of gaps where one may add a rhythm, rather than as a dense pattern of sound.* In the conflict of the rhythms, it is the space between the notes from which the dynamic tension comes, and it is the silence which constitutes the musical form as much as does the sound. (113-4)

Chernoff’s description reveals above all that this art is open, a form that can be equally understood as an arrangement of gaps. Polyrythmic drumming is the aesthetic of the cut par excellence. The final sentence of the passage, in particular, resonates with Adorno’s characterization of the essay as a configuration crystallized through motion (13). If anything, Adorno’s best attempts to verbalize the form of the essay sound overly conceptual in comparison to Chernoff’s description of African drumming. Chernoff’s work provides a concrete example of a unity achieved “in and through the breaks.”

“The space between the notes” is one aspect of Baldwin’s essays that I hope to examine in this section by borrowing from Chernoff’s characterization of music and Adorno’s speculation on the essayistic organization. In the 1984 introduction to *Notes of a Native Son*, written nearly three decades after the first publication of the book, Baldwin reminisces about its genesis. A close friend, Sol Stein, first suggested and then pressed on

him the idea of an essay collection. Baldwin, in contrast, “had never thought of these essays as a possible book” (808). When Baldwin originally wrote these essays for magazines ranging from *Partisan Review* to *Harper’s*, therefore, he wrote less with a preconceived design than with openness to what could emerge. Each essay was cast into a space that was yet only potential. The making of the book must have provided an opportunity to materialize that space. By the time Baldwin published a second collection of essays six years later, he had become willing to foreground his engagement with the possibilities offered by a collection of essays. The subtitle of *Nobody Knows My Name*, “More Notes of a Native Son,” suggests that the essays exist in at least three networks of meaning—the essay as an article published in a magazine, the essay as one in a collection of essays, and the essay as a single note among a series of notes that overflows the unit of the book. In fact, the subtitle of the second volume asks the readers to hold simultaneously two things in mind—the productive boundaries of the books *and* their provisional nature, provisional because of the emphasis Baldwin places on writing as an on-going process. “More notes” introduces the possibility of “even more” and “more and more” notes of a native son.

Although “productive boundaries” may be a somewhat counterintuitive idea, the act of assemblage generates a force field that did not exist before the essays were consciously taken out of their original context and put into a collection. Adorno writes that the essay “corrects what is contingent and isolated in its insights in that they multiply, confirm, and qualify themselves, whether in the further course of the essay itself or in a mosaiclike relationship to other essays” (16-7). Baldwin appears to have been especially fascinated by this aspect of essay writing. By virtue of being bound into a

volume, the essays can be read in relation to one another. When read in sequence, preceding essays shed light on the essays that follow, coloring their meaning in ways that would not have been possible in the original context. This, however, is not to imply that the essays in *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name* have to be read sequentially. Yet another characteristic of an essay collection lies in its failure to dictate the order in which the essays are read. Every single essay provides a possible point of entry, and the reader is free to skip back and forth and create his or her own “play list,” as we would say nowadays. Even when the essays are not read sequentially, the boundaries set by the book have the effect of putting each element into an intense conversation with the other elements. In short, the boundaries are productive because they draw attention to that “space between the notes from which the dynamic tension comes.”

Baldwin seems to have been drawn to the idea of notes at the point when the book became a possibility. “Autobiographical Notes” and “Notes of a Native Son” are the only pieces he wrote specifically for *Notes of a Native Son*. Both of the new pieces are entitled “notes,” and one of them provides the title of the collection. This idea of notes oscillates between writing and music; it refers to both informal pieces of writing and basic units of music. Baldwin has certainly not been shy about acknowledging music as an inspiration for his writing. His titles repeatedly gesture toward music. “Many Thousands Gone,” *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and *The Fire Next Time* evoke African American spirituals. The title of Baldwin’s fourth novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, comes from the “How Long Blues.” His fifth novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, refers to both the geographical origin of the popular blues and a specific song, “Beale Street Blues.” His dramatic rendering of the pivotal Emmett Till case is titled *Blues for Mr. Charlie*; his

most widely read short story, “Sonny’s Blues.” Baldwin’s only volume of poetry, published four years before his death, testifies to the lasting significance of the musical form for the writer through the poignant title *Jimmy’s Blues*. One of the difficulties of exploring the conjunction of music and writing in Baldwin, however, has to do with the fact that Baldwin abstains from a straightforward mimesis. In his review of the *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Baldwin makes the following distinction between copying and exploiting the blues: “I don’t like all of ‘The Weary Blues,’ which copies, rather than exploits, the cadence of the blues” (615). Although there is room for debate concerning his assessment of Hughes’ poem, what matters for the purposes of this discussion is the distinction he makes between mimesis and aesthetic exploitation as a creative recycling of received cultural forms. To read his notes in the double sense is to start thinking about the ways in which Baldwin exploits black music through the expressive medium of the essay.

The final cluster of essays in *Notes of a Native Son* provides an opportunity to observe the dynamic Baldwin creates between his notes. This cluster comprises four essays dealing with Baldwin’s experience in Europe: “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown,” “A Question of Identity,” “Equal in Paris,” and “Stranger in the Village.” What makes them intriguing is the fact that they are written from different identity positions. The juxtaposition of the first two, “Encounter on the Seine” and “A Question of Identity” results in a striking counterpoint, the first being written from the perspective of an African American student residing in Paris and the second being written from the perspective of an American student residing in Paris. The former explores the almost total isolation an African American experiences and often actively seeks in a European city;

the latter explores the confusion at the heart of American expatriation in Europe.

“Encounter on the Seine” gives rise to incisive if not caustic observations concerning racism in America such as the following remark on segregation: “Their [the African American students’] isolation from each other is not difficult to understand if one bears in mind the axiom, unquestioned by American landlords, that Negroes are happy only when they are kept together” (86). In contrast, race is conspicuously absent in “The Question of Identity.” It is absent to the extent that a reader encountering this piece in *Partisan Review* in 1954 could not have guessed the author’s skin color. The essay, in other words, would have passed. The adoption of the “generic” American position gives Baldwin the opportunity to exhibit a tightly woven prose reminiscent of Henry James, full of wry and dry observations about Americans in Europe. Standing alone, the piece could be read as an exercise in abstract equivalence and color-blind objectivity. However, Baldwin’s decision to place “The Question of Identity” *after* “Encounter on the Seine” in the collection allows for a different kind of effect. Read sequentially, the absence of race in the latter essay becomes, as I have already noted, conspicuous. Neither do the readers lose sight of the fact that the author of one essay is also the author of the other. Writing as an American and writing as an African American are revealed to be matters of code switching.

“Equal in Paris” introduces a third voice. The two earlier essays create a counterpoint by the difference in perspective but “Equal in Paris” introduces a tonal difference by starting off with an intimately personal voice: “On the 19<sup>th</sup> of December, in 1949, when I had been living in Paris for a little over a year, I was arrested as a receiver of stolen goods and spent eight days in prison” (101). Although the subject matter

justifies the intimacy—how impersonal can you get when talking about your own imprisonment in a foreign country—the personal voice is also adopted strategically. Baldwin pitches descriptions of his bafflement against his observations about the impersonality of the French penal system that, ironically, treats him as it would any other American regardless of skin color. Thus he finds himself equal in Paris—equally incarcerated in Paris. Kafkaesque in its narration of a string of postponements of his release, “Equal in Paris” slowly unfolds to uncover the universality of human cruelty. On the day of the trial and the eighth day of his arrest, the story of the stolen bed sheet elicits laughter in the courtroom and the case is dismissed, effectively making a joke out of the affair. The resolution of the essay takes a single paragraph in stark contrast to the preceding sixteen pages of prose devoted to Baldwin’s detainment. The lopsided structure, along with the intimate first person narrative, works to implicitly critique the trivializing impulse of that laughter.

If “Equal in Paris” appears to conclude on a universal note—racism as one but not the only form of oppression—then “Stranger in the Village,” the concluding essay of the volume, interjects a cautionary note. Baldwin in a remote Swiss village finds himself thrust into a symbolic position, as opposed to the excruciatingly individualizing experience of his imprisonment. The ingenuity of “Stranger in the Village” lies in the way Baldwin sets up of an inverse tableau of the white man’s first entrance into an African village. The Swiss villagers are electrified to see a black man for the first time. Baldwin takes pains to capture the genuine shock caused by his appearance: “If I sat in the sun for more than five minutes some daring creature was certain to come along and gingerly put his fingers on my hair, as though he were afraid of an electric shock, or put

his hand on my hand, astonished that the color did not rub off” (119). Yet the illusion of a racial encounter untainted by the intervening centuries of European colonialism proves to be untenable. The villager’s reaction to Baldwin is based on a misrecognition: “Everyone in the village knows my name, though they scarcely ever use it, knows that I come from America—though this, apparently, they will never really believe: black men come from Africa” (118). Both Baldwin’s name and nationality are the results of the history of colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Only by failing or refusing to recognize the centrality of the black experience to modernity, by collapsing this African American into a “*Neger*,” can the villagers maintain the illusion of a primal encounter between the races. In contrast to the more or less linear narrative of “Equal in Paris,” “Stranger in the Village” incorporates several cuts. Half way into the essay, Baldwin writes, “I have said, for example, that I am as much a stranger in this village today as I was the first summer I arrived, but this is not quite true” (123). Baldwin interrupts the flow of his essay, backtracks and revises a previous statement. At this point, the readers learn that “Stranger in the Village” was written not during the first but during the second visit. The break in the essay allows the dimension of time and history to reenter, and the force of that history enables Baldwin to conclude, “This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again” (129). Far from a stranger in the village, he claims the status of a native son of the West in general and of the American soil in particular.

As the Paris essays reveal, Baldwin works not only with the discursive content of his notes but the space between them. The order in which he arranges the pieces “says” something; the tension arising from the difference in voice, tone, style, and mode “says” something. Yet, these elements say in a way that is different from the ways of linguistic



signification. This play between notes and gaps, progression and the cut, articulation and implication is an ever-present aspect of his essays. Clearly, Baldwin the person exists somewhere between the essays, but this perception is predicated on the reader's ability to hold the four essays in tension just as a listener of polyrhythmic drumming is expected to listen to at least two rhythms at once. To read Baldwin's essays is to be compelled to accept oppositions such as the memorable conclusion to "Notes of a Native Son."

It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. (84)

One must accept injustice as commonplace and one must never accept injustice as commonplace. And if, as Adorno points out, the essay thrives on relationships of tension and tends to form a "mosaiclike relationship to other essays," then Baldwin's practice distinguishes itself in the way he foregrounds and maximizes this effect.<sup>10</sup>

An exploration of the discrepancy between African drumming as a communal aesthetic practice and the essay as a modern form of writing serves to deepen our understanding of Baldwin's strategy. Strictly speaking, African polyrhythmic drumming assumes the physical presence of multiple participants. It is a social action as well as an aesthetic one as Chernoff announces in the subtitle of his study. The essay, on the other hand, carries the signature of the author even when he or she overlays different tones, modes, and textures. Produced by an individual, essays are also consumed alone through the private act of reading. The emergence of the genre, according to Obaldia, was typical

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<sup>10</sup> It has been suggested that this particular rhetoric chimes with the discourse of cold war liberalism associated with anti-Stalinist intellectuals such as Lionel Trilling (see Geraldine Murphy and Michael

of the Renaissance “transition from a collective tradition to the focus on individuality and originality” (14). That is, the two aesthetic practices belong to radically different worlds if not to different historical moments. To say that Europe turned away from a collective tradition implies that it is a thing of the past, a stage from which all cultures (should) move on.

This way of understanding the difference between the two forms, however, is immediately challenged by the fact that African polyrhythmic drumming has survived the contact with Western modernity. In the conclusion of his study, Chernoff argues, “The sensibility we have found in [African] musical expression more accurately appears to represent a method of actively tolerating, interpreting, and even using the multiple and fragmented aspects of everyday events to build a richer and more diversified personal experience” (156). That is, it is a cultural form that has allowed its practitioners to incorporate and survive fragmentation. He goes on to suggest that it is a cultural form that may prove to be extremely instructive, since the world we live in shows very few signs of reverting back to uniformity. “As such,” he continues, “the values in an African musical event represent not an integrity from which we are moving away but rather an integrity which, with understanding, we might approach. It is a felicitous orientation in a world of many forms” (156). African drumming exemplifies a certain cultural orientation that is not necessarily restricted to specific geographical zones or historical times.

To return to the problem of the individual nature of the essay’s production and consumption, it can also be argued that being a lone performer never stopped the black musician from cultivating an alternate voice. Nathaniel Mackey writes,

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Nowlin). I would argue instead that Baldwin places greater emphasis on social action even in his earliest essays while much of the emphasis on tension arises from the formal logic of the essay.

There is a dialogical aspect to African American and African music that is very strong. It comes across in call and response, the antiphonal relationship between lead singer and chorus, preacher and congregation. It comes across in the playing of musicians like John Coltrane, who use the upper and lower registers of the instrument as though they were two different voices in dialogue with one another, in a sometimes quarrelsome conversation with one another, competition with one another. (Paracritical 193)

As exemplified in Mackey's discussion of Coltrane, the number of musicians does not determine the music's social orientation. An orchestra playing a Beethoven may require the participation of many more musicians than a typical jazz ensemble and still play an intensely goal-oriented and rigidly predetermined piece of music. Neither has the adoption of mechanical recording and reproduction of the blues and then later jazz determined their orientation despite the possibility of now listening to such music in the privacy of one's bedroom. In fact, it has been argued that technology and culture industry have been crucial to the development of modern black music and its cross-cultural reach.<sup>11</sup> The real issue, therefore, is whether a piece of music or writing makes space for "the multiple and fragmented aspects of everyday events" and for further participation.

After all, the essay is fragmented and fragmentary. Its form is "the typical response to a world which has become problematic" (Obaldia 39). Can the essay's fragmented nature be put to social use? This question, I would argue, forces Baldwin's essays to unremitting efforts. By employing the form, Baldwin makes a call to a community that is not yet there. Even polyrhythmic drumming has to start somewhere; someone has to start beating and start beating in a certain way. The beat should create a certain emptiness that gives the opening to future participants. Snead writes, "That the beat is there to pick up does not mean that it must have been metronomic, but merely that

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<sup>11</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey in *Race Music*, especially Chapter 5, and Susan McClary in *Conventional Wisdom*, pp. 37-8.

it must have been at one point begun and that it must be at any point “social”—i.e. amenable to restarting, interruption or entry by a second or third player or to response by an additional musician” (68). Snead’s description not only points out that the beat needs to be initiated but also radically expands the definition of social. By “social,” Snead refers to the music’s orientation or potential rather than to the actual product that results from the participation of multiple musicians, dancers, and the audience. Of course, a printed piece of writing cannot be amenable to restarting, interruption or entry in the same way that a live performance or a delivered speech can be. But perhaps that provides and occasion where an essayist can test the limits of the essayistic medium.

### The Eruption of the Ethical

Surprisingly for someone who has written so extensively on race, Baldwin refrains from offering a program or a course of action for improving race relations in the United States. In this respect, the opening of “In Search of a Majority: An Address” is typical: “I am supposed to speak this evening on the goals of American society as they involve minority rights, but what I am really going to do is to invite you to join me in a series of speculations” (215). Goals divert our attention away from the issue while a series of speculations, hopefully, will channel that attention back to the present. Most of his essays aim at such a re-channeling of attention. For this purpose, the essay provides an adequate vehicle. Adorno writes, “Its concepts receive their light from a *terminus ad quem* hidden from the essay itself, not from any obvious *terminus a quo*, and in this the method itself expresses its utopian intention” (13). That the essay proceeds to an end that is hidden from itself makes it vulnerable to error. At the same time, this manner of

proceeding is related to the form's utopian impulse. It signals a refusal to reconcile with what has always already existed; its openness makes palpable the possibility of possibility.

For Baldwin at least, this was an ethical principle as much as an aesthetic one. Towards the end of "In Search of a Majority," Baldwin makes the following statement: "I conceive of my own life as a journey toward something I do not understand, which in the going toward, makes me better" (220). This life resembles an essay. He makes this comment while critiquing our love of received notions. The dehumanization of peoples of color is "simply the most obvious and perhaps the simplest example" of false conceptions that stand in the way of an honest examination of one's life (229). An uncritical acceptance and mirroring of social norms uphold the status quo and all of its attendant structures of injustice. As Baldwin's characterization of life underscores, the ethical life is not intimidated by change towards the unknown. In Baldwin's terminology, therefore, "safety" and "innocence" stand for the unexamined life while "love" and "maturity" are some of the necessary traits of a responsible existence. Although it is tempting to think of inaction as the avoidance of wrongdoing, inaction is participation without awareness.

The society that Baldwin imagines and attempts to call forth is one in which alert and self-aware individuals embark on a journey toward something they do not understand, which in the going toward, makes them better. Baldwin does not give us a blueprint of this future society partly because he has no desire to but also because it by definition remains beyond his ken. Racism is one of the many injustices that need to be eliminated on the way, but even this is not a goal in itself. *The Fire Next Time*, his most sustained effort to think of an alternate social organization, devotes most of the

discussion to the failure of Christianity as an ethical principle and a critique the Nation of Islam that was quickly gaining African American support in the early sixties. The good society makes its presence felt negatively, as the other to both options.

His critique of the Nation of Islam, for example, is ultimately based on the belief that a “nation” should make room for individual freedom, responsibility, and creativity. A close analysis of Baldwin’s report of his meeting with Elijah Muhammad, the leader and prophet, can be illuminating from this perspective. He gives a fairly detailed account of the visit, starting with the wait for Muhammad’s entrance, the conversation over dinner, and his departure. Granted, Baldwin’s description of the waiting room or the meal is not unequivocally affirmative. Some details are troubling such as the segregation of men and women before and during the meal or Baldwin’s cryptic comment that the dinner was so sound and simple that he “therefore” drank two glasses of milk. For the most part, however, Baldwin admires the peaceful atmosphere and the genuine joy shared by the religious community. The description takes a downward turn precisely when he starts to give his readers a sense of how the conversation went at the table:

Whenever Elijah spoke, a kind of chorus arose from the table, saying “Yes, that’s right.” This began to set my teeth on edge. And Elijah himself had a further, unnerving habit, which was to ricochet his questions and comments off someone else on their way to you. Now, turning to the man on his right, he began to speak of the white devils with whom I had last appeared on TV: What had they made *him* (me) feel? (324)

The conversation between the prophet and his disciples is not really a dialogue. The disciples only affirm the words of Muhammad. They mirror his image faithfully back to him, and whichever way he turns he sees his own image endlessly reiterated. The structure of the self-same is so perfect that he does not need to direct his questions; they are ricocheted. Neither is the question a real question. It is crafted in such a way that it

interpellates Baldwin as a subject of the Nation of Islam. To answer that question is to agree that white people are devils. Here Baldwin interjects his reflection on the appeal of Muhammad's theology for his African American followers. According to Baldwin's analysis, African Americans have for a long time occupied the position of the subaltern in this society. They are both the oppressed and the historically muted: "For the horrors of the American Negro's life there has been almost no language. The privacy of his experience, which is only beginning to be recognized in language, and which is denied or ignored in official and popular speech—hence the Negro idiom—lends credibility to any system that pretends to clarify it" (326). Those that have joined the movement, that is, have subscribed to the positivity of the doctrine.

Baldwin recognizes that need for safety, for he himself has been down the line. Baldwin's examination of the Nation of Islam is preceded by an account of his religious conversion at fourteen and his preaching career. It protected him for a while, mostly, he realized, from the burden of self-examination and the responsibility to the other. When the essay returns to the dinner table, it is to finally introduce a rupture to the relentless cycle of affirmation:

I said, at last, in answer to other ricocheted questions, "I left the church twenty years ago and I haven't joined anything since." It was my way of saying that I did not intend to join their movement, either.

"And what are you now?" Elijah asked.

I was in something of a bind, for I really could not say—could not allow myself to be stampeded into saying—that I was a Christian. "I? Now? Nothing." This was not enough. "I'm a writer. I like doing things alone." I heard myself saying this. (327)

Baldwin's initial response to Muhammad's question introduces a radically different relation to being. If Muhammad's conversation was an example of the drive for self-identity so intense as to induce claustrophobia, then Baldwin's initial response to the

question “What are you?” is “Nothing.” He feels that the answer is not enough because people are not used to conceiving themselves negatively. Being a writer, at least, refers to an occupation, so he lets it replace his initial answer, but “nothing” nevertheless takes hold of Baldwin. “I heard myself say this” prolongs the discomfiting sense of a self that is not one. Joan Retallack, another essayist who senses a strong link between the essay and the ethical, writes, “My implied ‘I am’ as I write is as other to myself as any other that is an I whom I/we can never fully know” (5). The ethical wager is on when the essayist performs this sense of the self as an other.

“Nothing” is a profound way of describing the poetic act, the moment when language takes over and the poet works beyond him or herself. Baldwin’s essays testify to the fact that he was not unfamiliar with this mode of writing or the experience of carrying the Word. Interestingly, the final sentence “I like doing things alone” implies that this negative capability is not limited to writers. For Baldwin, it is what characterizes the individual. To be an individual in the Baldwinian sense is to be comfortable with that nothing. “From this void—ourselves—it is the function of society to protect us; but it is only this void, our unknown selves, demanding, forever, a new act of creation, which can save us—‘from the evil that is in the world,’” Baldwin wrote in an earlier text (16-7). The void is not the absence of everything; it is a potentiality that is unexhausted by any particular manner of being, reminiscent of the unsounded beat in African drumming. It is what enables us to imagine an otherwise, the possibility of casting aside the known symbols of power and value systems.

“Nothing,” therefore, is where the epistemological is suspended and the ethical erupts. The ethical demand surpasses what we have known. At the end of *The Fire Next*



*Time*, for example, Baldwin asks for the total transcendence of color. He writes, “I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand” (346). Something happens between the two sentences. The first sentence is still within the empirical world; Baldwin admits that color has never been transcended in the history of humanity. It is doubtful whether it ever can be. Yet, the following sentence breaks away from the world as we know it. Regardless of what he knows, Baldwin “demands” the impossible. This demand, furthermore, is “the least one can demand,” the ground on which political work can be carried out. Somewhere between the two sentences, what we can only imagine overpowers what we know. The literary text provides what Gayatri Spivak has called “the experience of the impossible” (“Ethics” 23).

Baldwin imagines, one could say, a nation based on an ethical commonality instead of a shared identity. This hope is complicated if not compromised by his belief, equally strong, that America will be that nation. The coexistence of these two ideas is partly explained by the distinction Baldwin makes between what America has become and what it can become. He has in mind not the political entity but the new and unrealized possibilities that arose when Europeans and Africans (and others) were displaced and set on the American continent. Such a violent and large-scale shift in demographics that included the utter devastation of the native population was unprecedented, and the people who then started calling themselves Americans were left with the task of creating a common culture. The social fabric that has been woven up till the mid-twentieth century, Baldwin points out, is not exactly common: “What it comes to is that if we, who can scarcely be considered a white nation, persist in thinking of

ourselves as one, we condemn ourselves, with the truly white nations, to sterility and decay” (340). Although couched in inflammatory language, Baldwin’s condemnation of “white nations” to sterility and decay appears to be a way of cautioning his audience against cultural models that strive toward extreme identity. *The Fire Next Time*, after all, was written under the shadow of the World War II and the Holocaust. The model of a single, pure national identity is dangerous and, more importantly, inadequate to the realities of America. America is not white. This, however, does not mean that it is black either.

Mid-way through *The Fire Next Time*, there is a striking map of the world that Baldwin pictures in his head. It occurs while he is still engaged in discussion at Elijah Muhammad’s table. Baldwin starts musing about the Nation of Islam’s ambition to form a separate nation here on earth. He knows that the Muslims are claiming six or seven states as back payment for slave labor.

If the states were Southern states—and the Muslims seem to favor this—then the borders of a hostile Latin America would be raised, in effect, to, say, Maryland. Of the American borders on the sea, one would face toward a powerless Europe and the other toward an untrustworthy and non-white East, and on the North, after Canada, there would be only Alaska, which is a Russian border. (329)

What is most remarkable is the fate of the Nation of Islam in Baldwin’s map. It melts into Latin America like a drop of water in the ocean. We have not the birth of a new nation but the raising of the borders of a hostile Latin America to Maryland. Other nations fare no better. They are all conceived as blocks: the non-white East, Russia, and Europe. Through a strange cartographical calculus, Africa has completely disappeared. And at the center of the map is the mysterious, unknowable, America. That is how America always will be for Baldwin, indefinable. At the end of “In Search of a Majority,” Baldwin gives

one of his clearest (non)definitions of the American identity: “The one thing that all Americans have in common is that they have no other identity apart from the identity which is being achieved on this continent” (221). It is an identity perpetually in the making, an identity in the present tense and marked by incompleteness.

Baldwin further justifies his rejection of separatism with the following reasoning: “the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or for worse, and does not belong to any other—not to Africa, and certainly not to Islam” (333). This could be interpreted as a serious case of wounded attachment. Wounded attachment is a term coined by the political theorist Wendy Brown in her analysis of the pitfalls of identity politics. Because political resistance based on identities such as race, gender, and sexuality seek to redress the exclusion from liberal political membership, it becomes “attached” to the state as the redresser as well as to the injury itself. In her words, “politicized identities generated out of liberal, disciplinary societies, insofar as they are premised on exclusion from a universal ideal, require that ideal, as well as their exclusion from it, for their own continuing existence as identities” (65). Baldwin’s insistence that African Americans belong to America as if in marriage (for better or worse) does indeed testify to a very strong sense of attachment. Yet, I would argue that Baldwin’s America is never solely the actualized polity that goes by that name. It is always also the promise of America. His writings alert the readers to the discrepancy between the two Americas, the known and the unknowable. An attachment to things not seen often goes by a different name: faith.

It is not my intention here to defend or castigate some of the troubling political implications of Baldwin’s faith in America which every reader of Baldwin knows he maintained with increasing difficulty and at higher emotional cost as the sixties and

seventies unfolded before his eyes. Instead, I would like to return to the literary dimension of his essay as a way of drawing the attention to what the text does in addition to what the text says. The formal suppleness of the essay is well suited to Baldwin's subject—the self that is nothing, the nation that is unknowable, the community that is yet to come. The ending of *The Fire Next Time* is a case in point. Baldwin ends with an urgent call to arms based on a self-conscious borrowing from doomsday rhetoric:

And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!* (346-7)

As Marianne DeKoven argues in *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*, the passage reflects the historical moment when “identity politics were at once the vanguard of modern, universal utopian revolutionary change and also the emergent locus of postmodern, anti-universal particularity” (237). Baldwin glides from race to nation to the world without the least hesitation. The perception of being “at the center of the arc,” the conviction that the interracial vanguard can initiate a universal revolution, even that particular conception of political agency would seem dated in the twenty-first century. Another way of saying this is that the doomsday rhetoric, as all doomsday rhetoric, is a time-sensitive gesture. It tends to lose much of its appeal once the moment passes.

If the urgency of Baldwin's tone grounds the passage firmly to its historical moment, then the final sentence moves in a different direction. At the very last moment,

Baldwin crosses over to song. The warning, “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!” can be read as words on paper or they can be heard as a spiritual. Rather than closing the text, the final italicized lines mark the entry of a different artistic medium, a different sensibility, and even a different possibility. In fact, the interpretation of the whole passage turns on the line. A reader who hears only the words is left with a threat of destruction and retribution, not very different from the emotional blackmail Baldwin could not help noticing in the religious tracts and leaflets he distributed during his preaching days. A reader who hears the song is left with the promise of survival and even transcendence. The spirituals are a legacy of the slaves, something beautiful that emerged from a deep familiarity with loss. “Song is both a complaint and a consolation dialectically tied to [an] ordeal,” writes Mackey (Discrepant 232). It expresses the pain or, in this case, the anger, but it also suggests recovery. Mackey has repeatedly compared music and especially black music to the phantom limb. The phantom limb is “a felt recovery, a felt advance beyond severance and limitation that contends with and questions conventional reality” (Discrepant 235). That is why the song at the end of *The Fire Next Time* intensifies the urgency of Baldwin’s social critique while turning it into something other than a threat, something that feels strangely like an assurance or a promise if only one has the ears to hear it.

To end in song, however, is to risk going unheard or being misunderstood. Baldwin wrote perceptively of the conundrum in “Many Thousands Gone”: “It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear”

(19). The ending of *The Fire Next Time* hangs somewhere between the telling of the story in words and the telling of the story in music. In a way, the entire book can be interpreted as Baldwin's attempt to teach the national public how to listen to the story. Observe, for example, the two essays that compose *The Fire Next Time*. The second letter, addressed to the nation, is about ten times in length in comparison to the first letter, addressed to his nephew. They carry very similar messages about love, but it takes Baldwin much longer to deliver the message to an audience that is not prepared to listen. There is an anecdote inserted in the middle of the second essay that figures this very audience. He had appeared on a TV show with Malcolm X where he refused to deny the truth of Malcolm X's statements simply because he disagreed with the conclusions. Baldwin reports that the following incident occurred after the show: "In the hall, as I was waiting for the elevator, someone shook my hand and said, 'Goodbye, Mr. James Baldwin. We'll soon be addressing you as Mr. James X.'" And I thought, for an awful moment, My God, if this goes on much longer, you probably will" (321). This anecdote is the entire text of *The Fire Next Time* in a nutshell.

Spivak has written that there must be "a presumed collectivity of listening and countersigning subjects and agents in the public sphere for the subaltern to 'speak'" ("Ethics" 24). The literary text can activate and call on a listener, but the audience can only be secured through the production of an infrastructure that depends on a sustained effort in the political sphere. Baldwin breaks off precisely at the limit of literature. To assume that Baldwin thinks lightly of the tremendous labor that goes into political struggles toward systemic changes is to misunderstand him. In *No Name in the Street* (1972), Baldwin gives one of the most vivid descriptions of the kind of terror faced by

men and women who worked for civil rights in the South. The first time he met Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham, Baldwin noticed that the man kept going back and forth to look out the window as they talked. Shuttlesworth was checking his car in the parking lot to make sure nobody was putting a bomb in the car. “Only, when I made my halting observation concerning his safety, a shade of sorrow crossed his face, deep, impatient, dark; then it was gone. It was the most impersonal anguish I had ever seen on a man’s face” (394). The impersonality of the reverend’s response testifies to spiritual strength and heroism. By commemorating the heroism of the men and women he encountered on the road during the late fifties, Baldwin acknowledges the immense human costs of such work. The stuttering form of *No Name in the Street* threatens to break down under the weight of loss, “so many of us, cut down, so soon” (449). Baldwin never presumes to replace that work with his writings. The task he sets for himself is different.

The literary text can remember and even re-member as in the phantom limb. It can help the reader attune his or her ears to the voice of the other. Baldwin’s essays, as I have examined, counts on the reader’s active participation in making sense. And through its curious openness and non-identity, the essay assists Baldwin’s life-long call to America. The readers of Baldwin’s essays find themselves brought over and over to the same place, the now-time or the zero degree of political action. “You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon,” writes Baldwin (295). This is an initiating beat. Where one takes the beat, however, is another story.

## Chapter Two

### The Essayistic Spirit in the Borderlands: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*

In this chapter, I examine texts that question national boundaries through generic innovation. I suggest that the experience of geographical and psychic borderlands in the case of Gloria Anzaldúa and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha is linked to a discontent with conventional generic boundaries. Just as there are times of generic transitions and crises, these texts testify to *sites* of generic instability. If we accept Claire de Obaldia's contention that the essay "is bound to rise and prosper in times of generic transitions and crises" (39), then it is not surprising that a similar flourishing can be found in Cha's *Dictée* (1982) and Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). The following discussion attempts to draw attention to the essayistic dimension of these texts, where by essayistic I mean the experimentalism inherent in these attempts to invent texts that are generically singular but also to the qualities of the essay that facilitate such generic exchanges. Juxtaposing the recognizably essayistic *Borderlands* and the radically avant-garde *Dictée*, besides pointing to a shared condition of writing, makes visible the avant-gardism in the former and the essayism in the latter. Together they contribute to a broader understanding of the essay as a genre, especially the ways in which the genre works beyond itself.

One of the difficulties of studying the essay, interestingly, has been attributed to "the fact that the genre varies greatly from one country to the next" (Obaldia 1). For example, its double origin—Montaigne and Bacon—is frequently acknowledged but seldom sustained within a single study of the essay. Writing a coherent history of the genre while attending to two national strains has proved to be too daunting a task. Critics



have typically responded to this critical difficulty by adhering to a single tradition.<sup>12</sup> This maneuver, even when it is not the critic's intention, has the effect of privileging one national tradition over the other because the reasons justifying the critic's choice transform into what he or she considers to be the essence of the genre. The other tradition is not quite the essay; it is an anomaly, an embarrassing and, thankfully, distant relative that one can afford to forget. I am of course not suggesting that critics are not entitled to whatever focus they choose for their studies. Instead, this is to observe that the study of the essay has been marked by the problem of the nation.

To understand what exactly is causing this critical impasse, a further interrogation of how critics have phrased the problem would be revealing. The phrasing "from one country to the next" implies a model of the nation as an isolated and sealed off unit. Although Obaldia is paraphrasing a common complaint when she writes "from one country to the next" and therefore should not be the primary target of this interrogation, her comparative study puzzlingly leaves that solid-block model intact. *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* spans the entire timeline of the essay and examines essayists from an impressive array of Western nations, beginning with Montaigne and ending with Borges. Yet, each essayist is treated as an isolated instance of the essayistic spirit flaring up from within pigeonholes spread out in time and space. This organization of material has the advantage of shedding light on the essay as a tenacious and live genre, yet it is perhaps time to insert the essayistic spirit back into secular time and space where nations are not solid blocks of homogeneity, where in fact the placement of nations "next" to each other occasions subtle and not so subtle discrepancies.

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<sup>12</sup> Obaldia "chooses" Montaigne (28). Peter France and Graham Good, on the other hand, privilege the English tradition.

This also raises the question concerning the essay's relation to that other nonfictional discursive phenomenon—the newspaper. The newspaper, as examined by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, was central to the formation of the nation-state as we have learned to conceive it, as the community of readers of the same newspaper published in a common print-language and consumed simultaneously. The essay, in contrast, makes space for multilingualism and a different sense of time, both of which are crucial to subjects trying to make sense of their experiences at the margins of the nation. The essay as a marginal genre houses other voices and other memories. It provides a space for inventing other forms that supplement and contest the more official forms of discourse.

Both Anzaldúa and Cha record sudden and arbitrary impositions of nationhood, experiences that expose the artificiality of national boundaries and the inadequacy of homogeneity as a national ideal. *Borderlands* deals primarily with the Chicanos, former Mexican citizens incorporated into the U.S. by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Anzaldúa writes, “The border fence that divides the Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. It left 100,000 Mexican citizens on this side, annexed by conquest along with the land” (29). This is modern magic that changes the nationality of land and people with a flourish of the pen. It is based on the conception of land as an empty homogeneous space, an abstraction that erases the physical, historical, and cultural reality of the inhabitants. Anzaldúa inserts in her text William H. Wharton's poetic formulation of Texas as “a howling wilderness / trod only by savages” which nakedly expresses the kind of thinking that justified the takeover. Wharton's “savages” are of course Anzaldúa's “100,000 Mexican citizens.”

*Dictée* records the curious case of Korea, a nation that was split into two separate nations at the end of World War II. Cha chooses to present a map of Korea thus divided into North and South, the DMZ drawn firmly across the middle of the peninsula (78). The map marks a textual aporia, for it replaces a verbal account of the turbulent period between 1945 and 1953. Preceding the map is a reconstruction of her mother's exile in Manchuria during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), and following the map is a letter written to her mother recording the decades of military dictatorship in South Korea that succeeded the Korean War. Although neither of those accounts is conventional life writing, they are nevertheless sustained verbal performances that perhaps gain greater expressivity for being experimental. The map, in contrast, is silent and replicates, or should we say exposes, the logic of abstraction and epistemological dominance that maps tend to be expressions of. Both Anzaldúa and Cha effectively present the rough passage into modern nationhood experienced by the Chicano and Korean peoples. They do this not by attempting to fill in the gaps of official historical narratives but by taking a different approach. Both writers creatively rework grassroots essayistic materials; journals, personal memories, letters, historical documents, folk songs, poems, myths, and images are gathered as fragments left from violently broken and erased histories.

Such changes of nationality sensitize the writer to the precariousness of all assumptions. In *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Derrida gives his own innovative yet resonant account of the experience of being deprived of French citizenship only to have it reinstated a few years later. He writes that the experience left a permanent mark on him and that it has taught him the following: "In essence, a citizenship does not sprout up just like that. It is not natural. But, as in the flash of a

privileged revelation, *the artifice and precariousness* of citizenship appear better when it is inscribed in memory as a recent acquisition” (16 emphasis added). In other words, the experience of the interface, the edge, or the margins makes one skeptical concerning the permanence of the structures erected by humanity. It should thus come as little surprise that both *Borderlands* and *Dictée* begin with figures of dissolution. Anzaldúa opens the first section with a poem: “Wind tugging at my sleeve / feet sinking into the sand / I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean” (23). Here at the edge where firm ground meets the sea, earth’s solidity is eroded by an alternative materiality and disintegrates into granular particles. The evidence lies under Anzaldúa’s feet as the sand that barely holds her weight, allowing her feet to sink in. Similarly, *Dictée* opens with a photograph of ancient monuments standing in the desert, eroded by the wind and heat. In the background we see a pyramid-like structure, but the erosion of the monuments in the foreground has progressed so far that one cannot really tell what their original shapes would have been. They now look more like large stones. Adjacent to the stones, chips and pebbles of different sizes pile down in a gentle slope. It is only the slope that hints at the possibility of these chips having broken off the monument; once detached, the pieces cannot really be distinguished from the desert sand and debris. It is an image of human effort gone partially to dust, and the sense of desolation is compounded by Cha’s decision to present the image without a caption. The photograph is unanchored from its origin; the monuments could have been raised by any ancient civilization. Already in their openings, *Borderlands* and *Dictée* present the tension between structures and their erosion, solidity and granularity, permanence and decay.

The following is therefore a study of the essayistic spirit in the borderlands. After all, what is remarkable in “the fact that the genre varies greatly from one country to the next” is not the phenomenon of a literary form taking on national color. That is common enough. What is interesting is the phenomenon in which a genre shifts shape so drastically that it comes close to being disqualified as the object of genre study. The essay wavers between this fate of “the dissolution of the genre” and its continued relevance as “the genre of dissolution.”

### The Forking Text of Gloria Anzaldúa

Commentators of *Borderlands* often forget that the book has two parts, the prose section “Atravesando Fronteras/Crossing Borders” and the collection of poems “Un Agitado Viento/Ehécatl, The Wind.” The two parts occupy approximately equal space in the book, demanding qualitatively different but quantitatively similar amounts of attention from the readers. In Anzaldúa criticism, however, the second section marks its presence negatively; that is, by virtue of receiving almost no mention. Even when a critic remembers to comment on the poems, the second section is indulged rather than given serious treatment. For example, Silvia Spitta finishes off her glowing encomium of *Borderlands* with the phrase “even the collection of mediocre poems at the end” (293). The rhetorical effect of the addendum is to emphasize how deeply Spitta is attached to the book rather than to elevate Anzaldúa’s poetry to the level of such innovations as “the rewriting of Aztec history and mythology in feminist terms,” “the glorification of *mestizaje* as ideology and aesthetic of rebellious mixing and recycling,” and “the queering of the borderlands” (292-3). Even more puzzling is the distortion involved in

Spitta's representation; in her memory, the poetry section comes "at the end," somewhat like the reprise in music. The reprise in music is the repetition of the main theme that closes a musical piece. It prepares the listener for the closure but it is also dispensable in the sense that it merely recapitulates without further elaboration. Such a representation does not do justice to the poetry in *Borderlands*, but it is nevertheless how most critics remember the section if they remember it at all. The purpose of my discussion, however, is not to fault the critics but to read the collective forgetting and/or belittling (in the sense of "to cause to seem little") as symptoms of a "voracious" logic operative in Anzaldúa's essay.

A look at the genesis of the book helps explain the complex force field generated by the two sections. In "Spirit, Culture, Sex: Elements of the Creative Process in Anzaldúa's Poetry," Linda Garber attempts to focus exclusively on the second section of *Borderlands*. One feels that an article devoted entirely to the poems has been long overdue, Garber's analysis arriving almost twenty years after the publication of the book. Garber makes an important contribution by unearthing the process of the book's making: "Setting out to write a ten-page introduction to the poems, Anzaldúa instead produced ninety-eight pages, 'Atravesando Fronteras/Crossing Borders,' the 'poetic prose' masterpiece that is meant when reference is made to *Borderlands*" (216). Garber's argument is that the second section was originally a "self-sustaining volume of poetry" (217). The circumstances surrounding its production show that the prose section owes its existence to the critical impulse, much like the genesis of N.'s letters to the Angel of Dust that grew into Nathaniel Mackey's *Bedouin Hornbook*. "Atravesando Fronteras/Crossing Borders" started out as a reflection on the already finished work of poetry and, had the

writing taken the expected course, it would have been the preface, a paratext. We are thus in the presence of a paratext that threatens to overwhelm the host-text, its paratextual origins discernible in the placement of the prose section *before* the collection of poems.

The essay's paratextual status as well as the paratext's tendency to shuttle between marginality and self-sufficiency has been well documented.<sup>13</sup> It is not unusual for the paratext to turn into an essay (for example, Henry James) or for an essay to be written as a paratext (for example, Jacques Derrida). The morphing of Anzaldúa's introduction into a full-blown chapter is not, therefore, in itself extraordinary. What ignites critical interest is the incorporation of poetry into what started out as an introduction to poetry. Poetry seeps in through the cracks of Anzaldúa's prose, not only poems composed by Anzaldúa herself but poems by other people, snatches of song, *corridos* (Mexican border ballads), bits of sayings, and Native American invocations that exhibit poetic cadences. Mackey once wrote a beautiful description of the prose-poetic mix in Jean Toomer's *Cane*: "Toomer's formal innovations in *Cane* boldly ventilate the novel . . . by acknowledging fissures and allowing them in, bringing in verse and dramatic dialogue, putting poetry before reportage" (Discrepant 240). What I see happening in the prose section of *Borderlands* is a similar kind of mix where poetry and song "ventilate" the prose. Is it just a coincidence that Anzaldúa refers to her own poetry as "Ehécatl, The Wind"?

It is the presence of poetry in "Atravesando Fronteras/Crossing Borders" that is transgressive. Anzaldúa allows statement and meta-statement to occupy the same space, creating an uncomfortable generic mix. That is, the supplement has incorporated what it

was to supplement, and threatens to make the ensuing section redundant. The collective forgetting or belittling of the second section is thus in part induced by the text itself. Garber's attempt to concentrate her discussion on the poetry likewise gravitates toward the prose section; the two reasons she gives for studying Anzaldúa's poetry is that "many of Anzaldúa's great, recognized themes are present in the poems as well" and that "some of Anzaldúa's themes, given short shrift or merely implied in the prose chapters, are only fully visible in the poetry" (214). The first reason appeals to the critical impact of Anzaldúa's prose to justify the poetry and therefore fails to establish the independent value of the latter. The second reason, which is really an argument, is difficult to sustain. Much of Garber's argument hinges on the claim that the bodily dimension of Anzaldúa's writing process is only hinted at in the prose. This may be true in the passages she analyzes, but the prose section in general is deeply concerned with the bodily dimension of writing, as will be discussed later in this chapter. More troubling is the reversal of generic characteristics in her suggestion that poetry is somehow more explicit and expository. In fact, the harder Garber attempts to resist the unvoiced logic of *Borderlands*, the more strained the argument becomes. Her heroic struggle testifies all the more vividly to the gravitational pull of the prose section.

To examine how Anzaldúa's essay creates a verbal quicksand, the following passage would serve as an example:

Indigenous like corn, like corn, the *mestiza* is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions. Like an ear of corn—a female seed-bearing organ—the *mestiza* is tenacious, tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture. Like kernels she clings to the cob; with thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth—she will survive the crossroads.

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<sup>13</sup> For an in-depth study of the paratext, see Gérard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Obaldia makes extensive connections between the essay and the paratext (20). Other scholars imply a similar connection when they refer to the essay as a "parasitic" genre (France 30).



*Lavando y remojando el maíz en agua de cal, despojando el pellejo. Moliendo, mixteando, amasando, haciendo tortillas de masa.* She steeps the corn in lime, it swells, softens. With stone roller on *metate*, she grinds the corn, then grinds again. She kneads and moulds the dough, pats the round balls into *tortillas*.

We are the porous rock in the stone *metate*  
 Squatting on the ground.  
 We are the rolling pin, *el maíz y agua*,  
*La masa harina. Somos el amasijo.*  
*Somos lo molido en el metate.*  
 We are the *comal* sizzling hot,  
 The hot *tortilla*, the hungry mouth.  
 We are the coarse rock.  
 We are the grinding motion,  
 The mixed potion, *somos el molcajete*.  
 We are the pestle, the *comino*, *ajo*, *pimienta*,  
 We are the *chile colorado*,  
 The green shoot that cracks the rock.  
 We will abide. (103-4)

The passage begins with corn as the metaphor of *mestizaje*, Anzaldúa's term for cross-cultural processes. Corn is a fitting metaphor since its survival has depended on crossbreeding; diversity is the condition of its indigenusness. The metaphor flies in the face of ideologies of racial purity and national identity, yet Anzaldúa does not dwell on this point. She lets the metaphor of the corn take over as she realizes that it provides multiple metaphors, not just one. The ear of the corn, the kernels, the stalks and roots evoke different kinds of tenaciousness that go into survival. The gravitational pull of Anzaldúa's writing is abetted by this metaphor that increasingly takes on more and more significance.

The break between the first two paragraphs is characteristic of Anzaldúa's prose. It is one of the multiple strategies she employs to create visible fissures in her text. She uses additional line spacing, section breaks, justified alignment, and at times indents whole blocks of prose or poetry to create a jagged text-scape on the page. Here, the

additional line spacing prepares the reader for a shift in the metaphor, as the corn of the second paragraph becomes the subject of physical and chemical metamorphosis. The shift, I feel, is slightly humorous due to the ease with which Anzaldúa moves from the organic sturdiness of corn stalks to the corn's transformation into emollient dough. Yet more is involved in the switch. The move from corn stalks to corn dough is also the move from nature to culture. Cooking is cultural; human labor meets natural ingredients and causes material transformation. This interface is reflected in the second paragraph when Anzaldúa pays close attention to what is being done—lavando, remojoando, moliendo, mixteando, amasando, haciendo. The participle form of the Spanish verbs has the effect of emphasizing the *process* of corn's transformation through human labor. The switch to Spanish is another forceful reminder that we are entering the realm of culture—cuisines have histories, are socioculturally specific. In this case, the wisdom of turning corn into tortillas was handed down by Native Americans, adopted by the Mexicans, commercialized by the US, and have been since disseminated internationally by global franchises such as TGIF, among many.

Having crossed into the realm of culture in the second paragraph, Anzaldúa leaps into a total meltdown of the subject and object in the third variation on the theme of corn—the poem. By switching from “she” to “we,” Anzaldúa casts an inclusive net over the readers. This “we,” we realize, is not just the corn but everything—the grinding stone, the corn that is being ground, the grinding motion, the finished dish of *chile colorado*, the hungry mouth. Not even the rock remains solid in this general breakdown of boundaries—the rock in the stone grinder is “porous” and “coarse,” and in the final lines of the poem, green shoots of corn make an unexpected comeback to “crack” the rock.

The repetition of “We are” holds the poem as the metaphor is progressively burdened by too much meaning. When the metaphor finally disintegrates, the poem closes with what remains: “We will abide.” That is what *mestizaje* does; abide through its many material manifestations. Likewise, Anzaldúa allows the metaphor to shift into different shapes. Metaphors are by nature slippery; corn can figure rootedness as well as pliability. Instead of attempting to constrain the slippage, Anzaldúa works the metaphor beyond unequivocal control.

Anzaldúa’s writing likewise shifts through the course of the three “paragraphs.” Starting off with a more detached tone, it moves into the intimacy of the second, and then crosses over to the chant. She layers different textures that rub against each other, creating a discrepant mix of materials. For example, a lyrical “I” after the second paragraph would have prolonged or even intensified the intimacy introduced by the female space of cooking. Yet Anzaldúa shuns this predictable progression by introducing a different tone. The chant sounds discordant, especially if one takes seriously the distant echo of T.S. Eliot’s modernist poem “The Hollow Men.” The purpose of such layering, however, goes beyond that of making noise. The breaks between the paragraphs and the shifts in tone and genre ease the transition between the corn’s many manifestations. They enable her prose to incorporate so much and to give the impression that it can go on incorporating additional elements into this syncretic mix. The breaks are the source of the text’s gravitational pull.

That capaciousness of the prose section arises in part from the essay’s generic resistance to totality, its proneness to fragmentation. Theodor W. Adorno writes of the essay, “Its self-relativization is inherent in its form: it has to be constructed as though it

could always break off at any point. It thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over” (16). It is, in other words, a form that acknowledges fissures and the nonidentity inherent in all signifying practices. Or at least, that is its formal tendency. Whether a writer opens herself/himself up to such demands of the genre is a different issue. The essayist’s dilemma is that the form of his/her choice demands a near dissolution of the author’s need to be in control. Adorno’s analysis is revealing; the actor in his analysis is “the essay” and not “the essayist.” In fact, he makes it sound as if the form has a mind of its own; the essay self-relativizes, the essay breaks off, the essay thinks in fragments. A similar sensibility can be found in Anzaldúa’s reflection on the experience of writing the prose section: “The whole thing has had a mind of its own, escaping me and insisting on putting together the pieces of its own puzzle with minimal direction from my will” (88). Anzaldúa clearly belongs to the group of essayists who have learned to open themselves to the demands of the essay.

This sense of writing as being possessed, being driven by something beyond one’s control comes in strongly at various moments in *Borderlands*. Anzaldúa devotes the sixth chapter of the prose section, “*Tlilli, Tlapalli*: The Path of the Red and Black Ink,” to the physical and psychic sensations involved in her writing process. She describes it unmistakably as being taken over by a goddess who has several names—*musa bruja* (the witch muse), *Tlazolteotl*, *diosa de la cara negra* (goddess of the black face), *hija negra de la noche* (black daughter of the night). When the witch muse takes over, Anzaldúa feels as if she is plunging down an abyss, being devoured, or disintegrating physically. The poet’s consciousness resists but stands little chance against the onrush: “She wants to

install ‘stop’ and ‘go’ signal lights, instigate a curfew, police Poetry. But something wants to come out” (96). The concept of the poet as a medium is ancient, yet Anzaldúa makes the idea fresh by conflating it with witch riding.

These images of violent destruction of the self are strewn all over *Borderlands* and reflect the radicalism of her aesthetic. Anzaldúa’s experimentalism lies in the extreme degree to which she allows the writing to overrun. This textual effect, however, is also carefully orchestrated by the formal means available to her as an essayist. When Adorno writes that the essay needs to be “constructed as though it could always break off at any point,” he singles out the essay’s construction as the grounds for experimental aesthetics. In a similar vein, Fui Lee Luk argues, “The only truly invented part of the essay is its structure, for essentially, the writer manipulates facts to express a particular position: it is through the architecture of the work that a personal truth is conveyed” (253). Although I would not go so far as to argue that the *only* invented part of the essay is its architecture, Luk articulates a similar concern as the one that is driving my reading of *Borderlands*. It does not require the highest critical powers to notice that Anzaldúa builds fissures into her prose; the more difficult question touches on this issue of construction or architecture. What formal innovations does Anzaldúa introduce there? How does she construct her essay in and through the breaks?

Anzaldúa’s formal technology is forking, a radical splitting into two or more branches that is sustained rather than synthesized. *Borderlands* is a forking text. Here, I would like to give two examples of forking, a macro-forking and a micro-forking to emphasize its pervasive presence in *Borderlands*. To begin with, it matters that the original collection of poetry survives the voraciousness of the first section that would

have been its introduction. I wrote earlier that the essay “threatens” to render poetry redundant, but in fact poetry holds its ground. The title of the second section, “Un Agitado Viento/Ehécatl, The Wind,” resonates symbolically by pointing to something that slips through even the most inclusive net. Poetry eludes Anzaldúa’s innovative prose, functioning as a salutary reminder of an elsewhere. Mackey writes of such ghostly reminders, “It is a spiritual discontent with the very nature of material achievement, no matter how exquisite” (Paracritical 293). This is not to suggest that the poems of the second section somehow manage to transcend materiality altogether—such a transcendence would not belong to the realm of linguistic expression. On the contrary, it is the poetry section’s material presence that forks *Borderlands*. The book joins two sections that are visually and aesthetically different and refuses to subordinate one to the other.

More is at stake in the preservation of poetry in *Borderlands*. Consider the following passages, the first from the prose section and the second a poem titled “We Call Them Greasers.”

The land established by the treaty [of Guadalupe-Hidalgo] as belonging to Mexicans was soon swindled away from its owners. The treaty was never honored and restitution, to this day, has never been made. (29)

I found them here when I came.  
 They were growing corn in their small *ranchos*  
 raising cattle, horses  
 smelling of woodsmoke and sweat.  
 They knew their betters:  
 took off their hats  
 placed them over their hearts,  
 lowered their eyes in my presence.

Weren’t interested in bettering themselves,  
 why they didn’t even own the land but shared it.  
 Wasn’t hard to drive them off,

cowards, they were, no backbone.  
 I showed ‘em a piece of paper with some writing  
 tole ‘em they owed taxes  
 had to pay right away or be gone by *mañana*.  
 By the time me and my men had waved  
 that same piece of paper to all the families  
 it was all frayed at the ends.

.....  
 Oh, there were a few troublemakers  
 who claimed we were the intruders.  
 Some even had land grants  
 and appealed to the courts.  
 It was a laughing stock  
 them not even knowing English.  
 Still some refused to budge,  
 even after we burned them out.  
 And the women—well I remember one in particular.

She lay under me whimpering.  
 I plowed into her hard  
 kept thrusting and thrusting  
 felt him watching from the mesquite tree  
 heard him keening like a wild animal  
 in that instant I felt such contempt for her  
 round face and beady black eyes like an Indian’s.  
 Afterwards I sat on her face until  
 her arms stopped flailing,  
 didn’t want to waste a bullet on her.  
 The boys wouldn’t look me in the eyes.  
 I walked up to where I had tied her man to the tree  
 and spat in his face. Lynch him, I told the boys. (156-7)

Both passages deal with similar information—the illegal appropriation of land belonging to the original inhabitants. If anything, the prose appears more efficient, delivering more information in less space. The part about no restitution having been made to this day, for example, could not fit into the poem if Anzaldúa is to maintain her focalization.

“Focalization” is the term Gayatri Spivak privileges over “point of view” in her discussion of the ethical dimension of literary writing. It is one of the central ways in which a literary text activates the readerly imagination: “The literary text gives rhetorical

signals to the reader, which lead to activating the readerly imagination. Literature advocates in this special way. These are not the ways of expository prose” (22). The difference laid out by Spivak is evident in the passages. The poem provokes a different kind of activity in comparison to the historical summary of the prose passage. Anzaldúa provokes by keeping the focalization confined to the poetic persona while the Mexican farmers are resolutely denied focalization. In fact, the poem begins with the failure of reading; the American misinterprets the lowered eyes of the Mexicans as a sign of deference. What Spivak says of *Disgrace* applies equally to this occasion: “No reader is content with acting out the failure of reading. This is the rhetorical signal to the active reader, to counterfocalize” (22). Within the first few lines of her poem, Anzaldúa activates the reader’s imaginative response. The poem may convey less in terms of historical detail but it nevertheless engages the readers, the seemingly inefficient spilling of ink indispensable for doing the work that is peculiar to the literary text.

The politics of languages enters the poem to entwine with the dynamics of focalization. There are two italicized Spanish words in the poem: *ranchos* and *mañana*. *Mañana* is the Spanish word for tomorrow and is used by the invader to make himself more readily understood. But *ranchos* performs a different function. Its English equivalent—ranches—sounds similar enough to make the retention unnecessary. But the word is retained because as bad a reader as he is, the persona has registered the difference in economic structures that support *ranchos* and ranches. He interprets the difference as an inferiority: “Weren’t interested in bettering themselves, / why they didn’t even own the land but shared it.” The only way in which the persona can picture “bettering” is through private ownership and economic advancement. The communal ownership that



sustained the *ranchos* and the alternative forms of social organization were among the many institutions damaged by the arrival of the Americans. In fact, the word's survival in this poem contrasts with the way English is used as a weapon of oppression throughout the rest of the poem. The piece of paper that the Americans wave at the Mexicans yields so much power because it is written in English. Even the Mexicans who have land grants are denied legal protection because the courts refuse to hear cases in any language other than English. Cut off from political or public protection, the Mexicans are denied even basic human dignity in the final stanza of the poem. The wife and the husband's words, whatever they were, are recorded as "whimpering" and "keening like a wild animal." Were they words or sounds? We would never know. What we do know is that the persona's race-gender illiteracy is undergirded by his linguistic incompetence. Anzaldúa thus exposes the cultural base of the physical and political violence depicted in the poem.

By causing her readers to counterfocalize, Anzaldúa initiates a more ethical response to the other, makes it happen in the process of reading. The crucial difference between the prose passage and the poem is that the literary text allows us "to produce the probable rather than account for that which has been possible" (Spivak "Ethics" 23). Because we as the counterfocalizing readers struggle to imagine the other, in that act we are producing the probable that had not been possible. This production of the probable, the probability of an ethical relation to the other, is the work of the literary text. I do not wish to make the distinction between the two sections of *Borderlands* unnecessarily rigid, just as it is not Spivak's intention to establish an absolute binary between literary and expository writings. Anzaldúa's prose constantly crosses over to the literary, and her poems at times privilege epistemological work. Nevertheless, the forked structure of

*Borderlands* insists that the two modes are not the same and that one cannot completely assimilate the other. This structure preserves the difference, and as a result, the two sections qualify each other, demanding to be read in relation to each other. Anzaldúa thereby stays true to the essayistic spirit by subjecting even the open aesthetic of the prose section to qualification.

The second example of forking is a more recognizably essayistic moment in the text. In the second chapter of the prose section, “Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan,” Anzaldúa engages in a delicate balancing act as she tells the story of multiple oppressions *within* Chicano culture. Even though Anzaldúa devoted the preceding chapter to exposing the economic and political oppression experienced by Chicanos and Mexicans, she does not buy into an easy nationalism. She finds it necessary to examine the sexism and homophobia of her native culture. She begins with sexism, how her culture prescribes rigid roles to women. The subsection dealing with sexism ends with this curious textual moment:

*Respeto* carries with it a set of rules so that social categories and hierarchies will be kept in order: respect is reserved for *la abuela, papá, el patrón*, those with power in the community. Women are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants. The Chicano, *mexicano*, and some Indian cultures have no tolerance for deviance. Deviance is whatever is condemned by the community. Most societies try to get rid of their deviants. Most cultures have burned and beaten their homosexuals and others who deviate from the sexual common. The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe’s fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human. (40)

The passage hinges on the word “deviants.” In the sentence where the word is introduced, Anzaldúa is still discussing the status of women in Chicano society. After the word appears, however, the discussion suddenly turns as if a door has been flung open. Now the text goes down a different road, the road of deviance. Chicano and Mexican cultures,

we learn, have no tolerance for deviance. Anzaldúa surges on to announce that most cultures, not just Chicano and Mexican, mistreat deviants. By the end of the paragraph, Anzaldúa divides up the world into new tribes: the heterosexual tribe and the deviants. This sudden expansion of the theme of deviance draws attention to the word that served as the point of departure. One keeps expecting Anzaldúa to slow down or loop back to the original topic, but Anzaldúa runs away with it. The subsection ends there, and the following subsection deals with homophobia in Chicano culture.

“Parataxis” does not fully describe what is happening in this passage. Anzaldúa draws too much attention to that moment of divergence, the fulcrum or the hinge that makes the divergence possible. In parataxis, disparate things are placed next to each other by eliminating connectives. Here, the connective is made visible if not all too prominent. Once again, I propose “forking” as the best description. It is Anzaldúa’s twist on the essay’s widely recognized paratactic bent. Reading the above passage as a fork also underscores the equal weight Anzaldúa gives to sexism and homophobia as topics for discussion. She is wary of neglecting one in the interest of addressing the other, a common problem in single-issue alliances. Throughout *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa displays an almost uncanny ability to negotiate between multiple systems of difference such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexuality.

Forking, that is, is a thematically central image as well as a formal device. In the final chapter of “Atravesando Fronteras/Crossing Borders,” Anzaldúa elaborates on the juncture as the site of *mestiza* consciousness:

That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the *mestiza* stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposite powers. In attempting to work out a

synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. (101-2)

Anzaldúa is above all interested in that place where forking roads meet—the crossroads. She does not deny that provisional syntheses will occur from time to time, moments when the fragments form a whole. Yet she knows that those unities will break down, again and again. Indeed, she proceeds haltingly in this passage as if to reflect the referential content of her words. The first sentence notes that the juncture is where phenomena collide. The following sentence immediately introduces the possibility of unity. The third sentence, however, quickly qualifies what she means by unity, so on and so forth. It is as if each sentence breaks against adjacent sentences, just as each new paradigm produced at the juncture would keep breaking down. Forking in *Borderlands* is an aesthetic practice that arises from a theoretical need. Anzaldúa draws on the potential of the essay as a genre and adapts the form to the needs of the borderlands.

*Mestiza* consciousness brings us back to the borderlands. “It is,” writes Anzaldúa, “a consciousness of the Borderlands” (99). Her acclaimed theoretical contribution is a sensitivity she developed as an inhabitant of that space between Mexico and the U.S. To fully appreciate the significance of the forking text, I will devote the rest of this section to the cultural space of the borderlands. In the borderlands, multiple cultures meet. Anzaldúa describes it as a visceral experience: “The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision” (100). This formulation is more complex than what meets the casual eye. Anzaldúa is not exactly utilizing the model of colonizer/colonized, oppressor/oppressed.

The border situation is far too complex for such binary oppositions. Although the U.S. took over the land belonging to Mexico, for example, Mexico herself is far from innocent when it comes to colonialism. A product of the Spanish invasion of Central America, Mexico was and is a colonizing power in relation to native peoples and cultures. Anzaldúa's phrasing "two self-consistent but habitually incompatible" resolutely refuses to privilege any one of the colliding cultures. They are equally consistent, equally valid forms of cultural coverage when left to themselves.<sup>14</sup> The word "habitually" is an especially striking word-choice. While underscoring the conventional nature of cultural identities, the word simultaneously points to the sedimented history of competition between the colonizing nations—England and Spain. English and Spanish cultures have indeed been "habitually" incompatible, so much so that the two nations have not hesitated to demonize each other.<sup>15</sup> In the light of such history, the U.S.-Mexico conflict can be read as the new world incarnation of an old world rivalry.

From this perspective, Anzaldúa does not wish to revert to Mexican nationalism and participate in the unsavory circle of ethnic hatred; rather, she validates the perspective itself. Living in the borderlands teaches one to relativize and historicize all cultures, which entails perceiving them as alternative forms of coverage rather than absolute truths. *Mestiza* consciousness is not a set of tenets; it is the mind in constant motion. In "White Mythology," Derrida traces this desire for absolutes as being at the heart of Western metaphysics. Western thought has been especially insistent and systematic in its pursuit of "a firm and ultimate ground, a terrain to build on, the earth as

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<sup>14</sup> I am borrowing the word "coverage" from James Snead. In "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," Snead defines culture as a form of coverage: "Cultures, then, are virtually all varieties of 'long-term' coverage against both external and internal threats" (61).

the support of an artificial structure” (224). Anzaldúa’s perspective works against the kind of desire for a firm and ultimate ground that Derrida speaks of. Living in San Francisco has obviously done little to alleviate her sense of standing on shaky ground.

You boil water, sweep up the broken cups and plates. Just when you think the ground beneath your feet is stable, the two plates again grind together along the San Andreas Fault. The seismic rupture moves the Monterey Peninsula three inches north. It shifts you into the crack between the worlds, shattering the mythology that grounds you. You strive for leverage in the fissures, but Tonan, la madre tierra, keeps stirring beneath you. In the midst of this physical crisis, an emotional bottom falls out from under you, forcing you to confront your fear of others breaching the emotional walls you’ve built around yourself. If you don’t work through your fear, playing it safe could bury you. (“now let us” 544)

In San Francisco she finds herself on a literally insecure ground, living over the San Andreas Fault. One of the delights of the passage has to do with the shift in scale that Anzaldúa executes deftly between the first two sentences. There had been a major earthquake earlier that day. After refusing to evacuate, Anzaldúa cleans up her house, picking up the broken pieces of plates from the floor. It takes a while for the reader to realize that she is no longer talking about flatware in the second sentence. The “plates” doing the grinding, all of a sudden, are plates floating on magma. Earthquakes are startling reminder that the ground we stand on is in reality plates floating on a sea of molten rock. Anzaldúa links that recognition to a shattering of mythology, that moment when one has to diverge from accustomed routes, the moment when one finds oneself at the fork of the road.

La Virgen de Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexicans, is the guardian of the crossroads. In *Borderlands*, Guadalupe is the historical evidence of and an inspiration for syncretism. As Anzaldúa explains in “Entering into the Serpent,” Guadalupe’s shrine was

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<sup>15</sup> I am thinking of such salient examples as Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* and, more recently, the films *Amistad* (1997) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007).

erected at the site of an Azteca goddess, Coatlicue. The two names are homophonous, and the cult of Guadalupe has absorbed pagan elements, allowing the figure to accommodate both religions. She is the mediator par excellence:

*Guadalupe* unites people of different races, religions, languages: Chicano protestants, American Indians and whites. “*Nuestra abogada siempre serás/Our mediatrix* you will always be.” She mediates between the Spanish and the Indian cultures (or three cultures as in the case of *mexicanos* of African or other ancestry) and between Chicanos and the white world. She mediates between humans and the divine, between this reality and the reality of spirit entities. (52)

She mediates between races, between cultures, and between the world of humans and the divine. She represents a radical political potential as well; Anzaldúa records how disparate political movements have utilized her image to mobilize a wide range of people. She was the symbol of the socialist, agrarian movement of the Mexican Revolution as well as the 1965 grape strike and subsequent farmworkers’ protests within the U.S. Even after a change in the political climate, she re-appears as tattoos on the bodies of zoot suiters (51). Through it all, she stands as the symbol of coalitions that cut across class and race lines, the possibility of an alternative social arrangement.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Guadalupe is her gender. Guardians of crossroads have traditionally been male. Esu as theorized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. or Legba as theorized by Mackey is a prominent example.<sup>16</sup> Prometheus and Hermes are other such intermediary male figures. Even Tiresias of the ambiguous gender is in the final analysis male. Thus Guadalupe provides Anzaldúa with the occasion for a feminist rereading of her native culture in general. Such recovery of goddess figures was popular feminist project in the eighties. What is unique about Anzaldúa’s rereading, however, is

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<sup>16</sup> See Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey*. Mackey elaborates on Legba as a prominent figure in African diasporic literature in two separate essays: “Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol” (Discrepant 243-6) and “Cante Moro” (Paracritical 192-3).

the way she “fails” to uncover an original. Instead of engaging in an archaeological disinterment or reconstruction of the snake goddess, Anzaldúa proliferates her snake goddesses. Her text is full of them: la Vibora, Coatlatlopeuh, Coatlique, Tonantsi, Tlazolteotl, Cihuacoatl, La Llorona, La Jila. While this reflects the history of violent mutilation, distortion, and erasure that the serpent goddess was subjected to, it also testifies to her multiformity. She is a shape-shifter and will revisit in many shapes. If anything, the multiple manifestations of the goddess are a confirmation of her compelling cultural presence. Anzaldúa makes no attempt to write a genealogy of the goddesses; they have always been the multiple aspects of a single force. Much like Mackey’s Legba, she is “an emblem of heterogeneous wholeness” or a spiritual fork (Discrepant 244).

The fork is the implied model of cultural *mestizaje*, but the metaphor emerges explicitly in Anzaldúa’s discussion of the border tongue: “We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages” (77). This forked tongue is in tension with the standards of both English and Spanish. Disowned, censured, and oppressed, it is also “an orphan tongue” (80). Anzaldúa’s own mother tells her: “I want you to speak English. *Pa’ hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un ‘accent’*” (76). To get a good job you need to speak English well. What good is all your education if you still speak English with an accent? Yet she herself delivers most of this speech in the border tongue. The switching between languages is not as random as it may seem. The initial request that Anzaldúa speak English is made in English so that Anzaldúa is placed within the target language by the very act of listening. It is the same logic by which an English speaker in a foreign country would say “Do you speak English?” to call forth an answer in the desired language.



Immediately after that, the mother switches to Chicano Spanish, marked by “pa” which is their variation of the standard “para.” She gives an insider’s explanation for her advice—you get better jobs. It is not out of any infatuation with the language but an imposed necessity. A brief motherly scolding ensues as she reminds her daughter of all the investment she made toward her education. The final word, accent, is in English. This is partly because the word refuses to cross over—its denotation might but not its socio-cultural baggage. But it is also because Anzaldúa’s mother, out of concern for her daughter, reproduces the oppression imposed on the border tongue, a reproduction that leaves a linguistic mark in her speech.

Anzaldúa’s answer to such censure is that Chicano Spanish is a living language: “Change, *evolución, enriquecimiento de palabras nuevas por invención o adopción* have created variants of Chicano Spanish, *un nuevo lenguaje. Un lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir*. Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language” (77). After all, all languages change over time and change is the proof of its continued usage. Only dead languages remain fixed. What causes the resistance to patois is the violence with which languages get broken into in border situations. Both languages are made foreign, unnatural, and therefore open to alteration. The forked tongue shifts the stresses of words, adds or drops syllables, changes the way words are pronounced, plays around with word particles. In other words, it exposes the vulnerability of languages. This is a reality that the ideal of standard language would rather cover over. “Standard,” as examined by Michael North in *The Dialect of Modernism* is yet another modern development, a technology of constricting language use that was consolidated only towards the end of the nineteenth century. The Society for Pure English, one of the leading British organizations

of this movement was conceived in 1913. Its American equivalent, The American Academy of Arts and Letters was launched in 1916. Both organizations served to link linguistic purity to national identity and cultural health (13-4). Although such disciplining of language use gained cultural and institutional power, North points out that standard English is a chimera: “the truth is that no one speaks standard English because that language is simply whatever shapeless thing that is left when all the most common errors are removed” (15). The forked tongue of the borderlands is the standard’s nightmare as well as the point of its dissolution.

Perhaps it comes as little surprise that a writer of the forked tongue has produced the forked text that is *Borderlands*. The essay proves to be the most expedient form for embodying the cultural forms and language that emerge from that inter-national state. Yet, Anzaldúa’s borderland is one of many possible borderlands. In the following section, I will explore another text from the margins of the nation, a text suspended between its point of departure and its destination. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* revisits many of the issues covered by Anzaldúa such as the problem of multilingualism, fragmentation, and the difficult work of making (new) sense out of the broken pieces of history. The differences between the two books at the same time serve as a reminder that these experiences cannot be neatly folded under a single rubric of marginality. Fortunately, the essay provides ample space for different expressive needs and essays.

#### The Broken Text of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

In comparison to the recognizably essayistic *Borderlands*, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* has long frustrated the critic’s will to categorization. Any critical consensus

that exists has to do with the text's multiformity rather than its conformity to a single genre. *Dictée* has been referred to as a "genre-bending text" (Park 214), "a mixed-genre and mixed-voice text" (Wong 126), and "a multi-generic nondevelopmental text" (Sue Kim 169), to give just a few examples. Commentators tend to segue into a list of generic elements that catch their attention. Lisa Lowe and Eun Kyung Min, two of the most nuanced readers of the text, mention "autobiographical and biographical fragments, photographs, historical narrative, calligraphy, and lyric and prose poems" (Lowe 36-7) and "French language exercises, handwritten drafts, cinematic scripts, letters, verse, prose, short narratives, and quotations from history books and religious texts" (Min 310). It is therefore not my intention to argue that *Dictée* is an essay, for such a reading would reduce the play of differences operative among the disparate generic elements in the text. Nevertheless, the following discussion seeks to draw attention to the pronounced presence of essayistic passages in *Dictée* and, more importantly, to the essayistic impulse as that which propels the project of *Dictée*.

Among the most prominent generic elements in *Dictée* are the autobiographical, the biographical, the hagiographical, and the historiographical. A large number of the visual images are calligraphic, photographic, and cinematographic. The proliferation of "graphic" in my list is not a coincidence. *Dictée* is first and foremost a graphic text, a text that seeks to re-present through visual and linguistic means the singular and collective experiences that are already in the past and forever lost to the immediate present. This is one of the many points where I sense *Dictée*'s affinity to the essay. It is Georg Lukács's argument that among the literary genres, the essay is the most matter-of-fact concerning its representational status. In "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," Lukács writes,

the essay always speaks of something that has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at some time in the past; hence it is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive. And because it orders them anew and does not form something new out of formlessness, it is bound to them and must always speak “the truth” about them. (10)

The essay is *about* something—usually an art object—that exists outside the text. The essay is therefore under a certain “truth” obligation. To elaborate on this point, Lukács employs the analogy of portrait-painting, a metaphor that underscores the essay’s graphic impulse.

This graphic impulse, on the other hand, needs to be differentiated from the concept of nonfiction. The latter concept tends to posit the absolute ontological status of the object on the one hand and its transparent documentation on the other. For the essayist, the situation is more complex on both sides. The thing pursued—form—was never a positive presence to begin with, and the final product—the essay—is irretrievably tangled in the question of form. The eye of the essayist sees in a special way. Lukács does not limit the presence of form to art; he starts out by saying “something that has already been given form” but quickly rephrases it to “at least something that has already been there at some time in the past.” This concession has the interesting effect of disseminating the presence of form between the two poles of nature and culture provided that it satisfies the one condition of temporal precedence. Form, in short, is not readily available to the senses; it needs to be drawn out by the essayist’s powerful form-vision. The essay is the product of that labor.

*Dictée*’s graphic impulse is in this sense an essayistic impulse, the desire to speak of things that have been there at some point in the past, with an eye to their form. Cha’s use of captionless photographic images, noted by many of her commentators, perhaps

demonstrates the difference between the nonfictional and the essayistic more than any other element in the text. The photo on page 39 shows a Japanese firing squad getting ready for the execution of three Korean civilians. A caption would have drawn attention to the content of the image, the event that it visually records. The photo would then be a demonstration of whatever the caption says, and a casual reader would move on once she or he has extracted the information designated by the caption. What happens on page 39 is different. True, the reader is first and foremost struck by the event in the image. But because Cha does not “explain” what the photo is about or what she wants us to extract from the photo, most readers will linger on the page. It is at this moment that the photo itself is appreciated as an object, a re-presentation of the event. The photographer’s distance from the event enables the frame to encompass the landscape behind the actors. What we see is a hill with numerous smaller hill-shaped mounds. Koreans would immediately recognize these mounds as tombs. These hills used as burial grounds record the history of a family, as the placement of tombs are not arbitrary but is decided in relation to the kinship between the deceased. The hill itself is a historical text, gently sloping down to the “present” of the photo where an execution is about to take place. The scene of execution itself is haunted by an eerie sense of *déjà vu*—the three Korean civilians are bound to wooden crosses, their arms spread out and their legs tied together, replicating the scene of biblical crucifixion. Because they are dressed in white, as Korean civilians of the time customarily wore, and because they are facing the sun, they stand out in the photo, reminiscent of the way sunrays fall on saints and biblical figures in Renaissance paintings. In contrast, the Japanese soldiers clothed in recognizable uniforms of the imperial army stand with their backs to the sun and look like figures of darkness

getting ready for the role they are about to play. Cha uses the image not exactly to “report” the event, for we get no dates, no place, no names concerning the execution. In a way, such a report would be redundant, for we already “know” about colonial violence. Cha’s strategy is, I would argue, essayistic in the Lukácsian sense; in addition to performing reportage, Cha draws equal attention the photo as a cultural object and the unconscious forms of lived experience present in the event.

Given *Dictée*’s essayistic bent, it should therefore come as little surprise that *Dictée* makes use of recognizably essayistic elements and does so by incorporating autobiographical, biographical, hagiographical, and historiographical fragments. Cha often neglects to give the credentials of these life materials just as she deprives her images of explanatory captions. Nevertheless, some of the fragments are traceable to their origins. For example, there is the opening section that depicts “les enfants de Mon Sacre Coeur” at mass receiving the blood and body of Christ, after their morning dictation lesson. According to Moira Roth’s chronology of Cha’s life, Cha attended the Convent of the Sacred Heart in San Francisco, a piece of information that makes the passage at least in part autobiographical (151). Roth kindly adds that Cha started learning French at the convent—thus the dictation exercises. The section titled “CALLIOPE EPIC POETRY” is a biographical account of Cha’s mother as a young woman and a rewriting of the mother’s journal. There are also brief hagiographical accounts of the Korean woman patriot Yu Guan Soon and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux interspersed throughout *Dictée*. The parts on Saint Thérèse make use of excerpts from her autobiography, which is one of the very few texts that Cha herself cites as a source. Cha also inserts letters that range from a

formal petition by the Korean people of Hawaii to the president of the United States to Cha's own personal and intimate letter to her mother.

Journals, letters, biographies and autobiographies, all of these are widely recognized "essay-relatives" (Obaldia 7). Alastair Fowler refers to these forms as literature *in potentia*. If established literary genres form a core, then "[r]ound this nucleus spreads a looser plasma of neighboring forms: essay, biography, dialogue, history, and others. They are, so to say, literature *in potentia*" (5). Obaldia adds that these sub-literary forms tend to mesh and crossbreed with greater ease, a situation that Fowler also seems to imply with his word-choice "plasma." Cha extends their tendency to mesh by further meshing her source material with her own writing. Cha's reworking of her mother's journal is highly unconventional in the way Cha fails to maintain any objective distance from the biographical subject: "Mother, you are a child still. At eighteen" (45). A similar dynamics is at work when Cha excerpts from Saint Thérèse's autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, as the boundary between biography and autobiography is blurred by the fact that Saint Thérèse is Cha's namesake. An additional example would be Cha's letter to her mother, written upon her trip back to Korea in 1979, that records pieces of family history, national history and also reports on the ongoing demonstrations against military dictatorship and her own response to those demonstrations. All these strands are intricately weaved together in the letter. Adding to Fowler's model, Obaldia makes the important observation that "as well as being one member of the group [the essay] seems mostly to function as a generic term for the group as a whole" (6). The passages that I've examined are, in short, essayistic passages. Not only is *Dictée* driven by an essayistic impulse but essayistic forms pervade the text. This also explains why *Dictée* and

*Borderlands* resemble each other despite their very different aesthetics. Both texts make extensive uses of grassroots essayistic materials as the primary source of their own textual work. They are doubly essayistic: essayistic reordering of essayistic materials.

The question then becomes, why does *Dictée* fail or refuse to be (only) an essay? Earlier I noted that *Dictée* is a graphic text, a text that seeks to re-present. There is a second part to that statement. *Dictée* is a graphic text not simply because it attempts to re-present but also because it accepts the impossibility of re-presentation. Derrida writes of this built-in failure thus: “This structural possibility of being severed from its referent or signified (and therefore from communication and its context) seems to me to make of every mark, even if oral, a grapheme in general, that is, as we have seen, the non-present remaining of a differential mark cut off from its alleged ‘production’ or origin” (“Signature” 318). It is the fate of the grapheme to be cut off from its origin and the context that surround its inscription. This severance allows the mark to travel, to be iterated, while also making it vulnerable to decay and deterioration. This applies equally to photographic images that give the false hope of referential stability. Gerhard Richter writes of images as Derrida writes of graphemes: “Because an image can never fully re-present, that is, present once again exactly the same way, the vast network of traces and meanings that it first set out to arrest, it performs an *Aufhebung* that simultaneously preserves and cancels the event that once was its subject” (108). At the heart of every image is the melancholic knowledge of inevitable loss. It is the radical extent to which Cha embraces this condition that makes *Dictée* uncharacteristic for an essay.

To understand what makes or does not make *Dictée* an essay, let us return to Lukács’s theorization of the essay’s representational nature. It still remains to be



determined whether Lukács believes that the essay can fully re-present its object. While elaborating on his metaphor of the portrait, Lukács makes the following declaration:

there is no one in the world whom the portrait could be like. For even if we know the person represented, whose portrait we may call “like” or “unlike”—is it not an abstraction to say of an arbitrarily chosen moment or expression that this is that person’s likeness? And even if we know thousands of such moments or expressions, what do we know of the immeasurably large part of his life when we do not see him, what do we know of the inner light which burns within this “known” person, what of the way this inner light is reflected in others? (11)

Indeed, even for Lukács, the impossibility of fully re-presenting a man, an epoch, or a form holds true. Because representations freeze a moment, it is abstract. Even when the frozen moment is “representative,” the representation always leaves out the whole person and the person’s life within the network of social, cultural, historical meaning. All this is rolled up in his opening remark that “there is no one in the world whom the portrait could be like,” which could be just another way of phrasing Richter’s observation that the image “cancels the event that once was its subject.”

Despite this acknowledgement, Lukács writes of the “truth” of the essay that arises from “the intensity of the work and its vision” (11). Graham Good opts to highlight the importance of the essayist’s voice in his interpretation of “On the Nature and Form of the Essay.” Good writes, “But the portraitist, we might add, also represents his *own* likeness in his painting, in the sense that we can recognize a family resemblance in the different portraits by the same artist” (21). We therefore speak of a Velazquez, rather than referring to the person who is portrayed. And portraits by the same artist exhibit a family resemblance even when the persons portrayed are completely unrelated. All this is to say that the essay is “a half-mimetic, half-creative experience” (Obaldia 9), where the “the felt personal presence of the essayist” is a central feature of the genre (France 28). Critics

who approach the essay as an established genre point to the essayist's voice as a generic hallmark. This tendency is more pronounced in those critics who, because of the essay's elusiveness, decide to go back to its originator in search of some generic essence. Thus Sonia Lee, after admitting the essay's "protean nature" and its status as "a lawless genre" (77), suggests the following guideline: "Montaigne characterizes his writing as self-referential and it is clear that the narrator's voice is that of the author expressing his subjective vision of reality and his readiness to be accountable for it" (78). It is precisely this expectation that is questioned and radically shattered in *Dictée*. The text refuses to install a unifying subject, the nakedly authentic presence of the author that many would posit as the essential attribute of the essay.

Before we conclude that *Dictée* falls short, however, we need to examine the presuppositions behind this assertion that the essay is a genre of individual expressivity. Extracting the essay's essence from Montaigne is a critical decision of convenience more than anything else. The position is founded on the historically inaccurate assumptions that the essay was invented by one writer and that the ur-essay somehow determines the developmental course of the form. The position erases the long tradition of antecedent and precursor forms of the genre while ossifying the object of study. The desire to stipulate an essential characteristic of the essay arises from certain critics' positivist need to establish it as a graspable entity, a set of identifiable conventions. However, it was clear as early as in Aristotle's *Poetics* that generic definition happens retrospectively and can never serve as a prescription for generic production. In reality, each new text is written in tension with the genre it participates in. Literary genres stay alive by virtue of being extended and questioned. From this perspective, *Dictée* sets forth an interesting

challenge: when the essayistic subject is radically disintegrated and refracted, is the text still an essay?

After all, the grapheme's fate as the remnant of an absent referent has been a central problematic for the essayist. Although the break away from the anonymity of the medieval *commentatio* was a historical necessity for the emergence of the essay during the Renaissance (Obaldia 65-7), the textual subject of the essay is already, or should one say exemplarily, ambiguous in Montaigne. It is an ambiguity that threatens to erupt even in Lee's brief formulation. The two concepts that Lee conflates—self-referentiality and authorial accountability—are in fact the two poles of an ever-present tension in the essay. According to Obaldia, “the genre foregrounds, perhaps as no other genre does, the relationship between imagination and writing, between the person of the essayist made of flesh and blood and the essayist as defined or created out of words alone” (15-6). *Dictée*'s dissolution of the subject therefore remains within the realm of a very essayistic problematic.

Writing in words of flesh and blood is a recurring theme in Cha's text. After the frontispiece and the dedication, the readers encounter an epigraph: “May I write words more naked than flesh, / stronger than bone, more resilient than / sinew, sensitive than nerve.” The “I” initially creates the impression that these are Cha's words, whispered to herself before she embarks on the writing of *Dictée*. The poem, however, is attributed to Sappho. The attribution attached at the end of the poem belies the initial impression of authorial resolution. Cha is and is not there, the words of resolution are maybe hers too, or they could be just another citation among many collected in the text. The difficulty of determining the authorial presence begins here and continues throughout the book. A

comparison of *Borderlands* and *Dictée* would clarify what I mean by the difficulty of determining the authorial presence.

I look at my fingers, see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink drips across the page. *Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre*. I write in red. Ink. Intimately knowing the smooth touch of paper, its speechlessness before I spill myself on the insides of trees. Daily, I battle the silence and the red. Daily, I take my throat in my hands and squeeze until the cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from the constant struggle. (*Borderlands* 94-5)

It takes her seconds less to break the needle off its body in attempt to collect the loss directly from the wound.

*Stain begins to absorb the material spilled on.*

She pushes hard the cotton square against the mark.

*Stain begins to absorb the material spilled on.*

Something of the ink that resembles the stain from the interior emptied onto emptied into emptied upon this boundary this surface. More. Others. When possible ever possible to puncture to scratch to imprint. Expel. Ne te cache pas. Révèle toi. Sang. Encre. Of its body's extension of its containment. (*Dictée* 65)

In both passages, blood and ink overlap as Anzaldúa and Cha metaphorize the act of writing as the spilling of blood on the page. There is a similar longing for correspondence between “the person of the essayist made of flesh and blood and the essayist as defined or created out of words alone.” Only, the direction of the liquid’s flow seems more confused in Cha’s passage. As exquisite as Anzaldúa’s version is, the liquid flows unequivocally from the author’s body onto the “speechless” page. The metaphor of the blood serves to emphasize expression or the “squeezing out” of life and its transformation into linguistic marks. The grammatical subject of almost every sentence is Anzaldúa, establishing her as the author of this passage and the person who squeezes out blood. Cha’s passage begins with the nurse or the writer breaking off the needle of the syringe to prevent the blood from flowing in the wrong direction. Cha’s blood, if allowed, would even flow back into Cha’s veins. When a cotton square is pushed against the puncture made by the needle,

“*Stain begins to absorb the material spilled on.*” Again, the description reverses the relationship between the blood and the cotton square. Instead of the cotton square absorbing the blood, here the blood—the stain—absorbs the cotton square—the material spilled on. In fact, there is something aggressive about this blood that appears to have a will of its own. The expelling of liquid is also the “body’s extension,” as if the body takes over the surface. Emptying is extension; extension is containment; blood runs and stalls and flows backwards. That is, Cha refuses to posit a direction of expressivity. Meanwhile, the textual subject has absented herself from the passage. She is just another vessel, like the syringe, for containing blood. This dissolution of the textual “I” results in a disembodied voice that haunts the pages of *Dictée*. My provisional conclusion would be that *Dictée* is essayistic among other things; it participates in the genre but does not limit itself to the genre. For the rest of my reading, I will trace the problem of *Dictée*’s textual subject in order to better understand Cha’s discontent with generic givens.

Even when they make an appearance, the “I”s of *Dictée* are ambiguous and elusive, sometimes authorial, at other times a citation of other voices, and at times eerily overlapping. There is, for example, the “I” locked in the language exercises. Between the two invocations of the Muse, Cha inserts three sets of language exercises. One of them is a translation exercise:

Traduire en français:

1. I want you to speak.
2. I wanted him to speak.
3. I shall want you to speak.
4. Are you afraid he will speak?
5. Were you afraid they would speak?
6. It will be better for him to speak to us.
7. Was it necessary for you to write?
8. Wait till I write.
9. Why didn’t you wait so that I could write you? (8-9)

The exercise begins innocently enough. As the sentences roll on, however, the repetition of an “I” addressing “you” incrementally creates the aura of an address. The repetition of the verb “want” furthermore generates a sense of urgency. After being “upbraided” for six consecutive sentences by the speaking voice, one begins to feel an urge to say something in one’s defense. It is at this moment that the verb switches from “speak” to “write” and the voice appears to be addressing us for real. A student who had been dutifully “writing down” the translations would encounter the question “Was it necessary for you to write?” as a real question. The next sentence places the student in a greater dilemma: “Wait till I write.” The voice now contradicts the opening injunction “Traduire en français.” If the student ignores the injunction by writing down the translation, she or he faces an accusation. The voice asks, “Why didn’t you wait?” and falls silent. There is a feeling of an irrevocable finality as the accusatory statement is also the last in the exercise.

The language exercise is atypical, this voice not the kind one expects from the genre. By provoking a response, the voice exposes the strictures of these forms devised for linguistic apprenticeship such as dictations, translations, and grammar exercises. The form creates a boundary across which the student can hear the voice but cannot respond because the student is doomed to repeat the communicative content of the exercises. The two voices draw parallel trajectories that cannot ever cross. Min writes, “There are no self-representing subjects in dictation as it is practiced in schools: the reader only cites, and the writer only copies, all in the name of a correct collectivity of linguistic norms” (312). *Dictée* is a text that works around this idea that wherever linguistic norms reign—and that is almost everywhere—there also lingers the possibility of automated reiteration

and the subject's alienation. In fact, *Dictée* suggests that all linguistic activities fall under, to a greater and lesser degree, the condition of dictation.

This is an awareness intensified by Cha's personal history as an immigrant whose mother tongue is Korean but who writes in English, even to her own mother. The experience of acquiring a new language in late childhood (Cha was eleven when her family moved to Hawaii) makes the painful process of acquiring a new language too fresh in memory, and together with the experience of losing touch with one's mother tongue, causes a permanent rupture to any simplistic relation to language. Cha inhabits the linguistic and psychic borderlands, a space that is like and unlike Anzaldúa's borderlands. In Anzaldúa, a whole linguistic community has been incorporated into the United States and subjected to the pressures of the dominant language for over seven generations. For Cha, the transition occurred within her lifetime, in the form of a violent dislocation of individuals. In her family, the history of dislocation is compounded many times over. Her parents left Korea during Japanese colonialism and lived in China. They could not completely escape the Japanese presence in their exile either, and found themselves forced to speak the language of the colonizer: "Still, you speak the tongue the mandatory language like the others. It is not your own. Even if it is not you know you must. You are Bi-lingual. You are Tri-lingual. The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue" (45). And even though Cha's voice promises survival and change, coming from the future of the narrated present, the daughter's writing is in English. After Korea's liberation, Cha's family returned to Korea only to emigrate once more in 1962. In the previous year, General Park Chung Hee took power by military coup and initiated decades of South Korean military dictatorship.

*Dictée*'s distrust of language is visualized as a "broken tongue" that contrasts with Anzaldúa's "forked tongue." Chicano Spanish involves code switching, by which Anzaldúa is referring to a grafting of two languages: "I may switch back and forth from English to Spanish in the same sentence or in the same word" (78). It involves a certain volubility coming from an expanded cache of vocabulary and expressions; the speaker of Spanglish draws from both languages and even plays with the difference. *Borderlands*'s vibrancy owes much to Anzaldúa's confident performance of bilingualism. *Dictée*, on the other hand, proffers a radically different texture. The broken tongue translates into a persistent linguistic dysfunction. Immediately before the first invocation of the Muse, we encounter the disease, *Dictée*'s equivalent of the poet: "She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words" (3). Nothing could be further away from the definition of the disease as "a highly skilled professional woman reciter" (Kang 76). It is not simply that the disease is unskilled; she is unfamiliar with linguistic utterance in general. She is mimicking speech, starting with the distinction between phonemes and noise—sounds that belong and do not belong to linguistic systems. And knowing what we do about language acquisition, we can reasonably predict that the disease, if she is an adult, will never fully enter the realm of linguistic expression.

Tellingly, the disease exhibits a profound difficulty with the grammatical components of language. She would grab onto whole words and phrases with passion, but verb conjugation eludes her: "She call she believe she calling to she has calling because there no response she believe she calling and the other end must hear" (15). She leaves the first two verbs unconjugated. In the third "sentence" she has managed to



conjugate the verb “to call” but the conjugation leads to the discovery of another noun—calling as in vocation. The next sentence begins, “She has calling.” However, the second “calling” wavers uncertainly between noun and verb. If “she has calling” appears to be referring to religious vocation, the clause that follows “because there no response” tugs the sentence in a different direction. Maybe the disease meant to say that she [is] calling because there [is] no response? As if to corroborate her linguistic dysfunction, the disease returns to her habit of using the infinitive: “she believe.” Verbal inflections, auxiliary verbs, punctuation marks, these are some of the most grammatical components of writing. They involve a principle of economy, as they function to smooth the joints by themselves becoming unobtrusive. They are not meant to draw attention to themselves as in this dictation: “Open paragraph It was the first day period She had come from a far period” (1). Because the disease’s inadequate use of grammatical components, the text of *Dictée* exhibits a “halting, stuttering, unpropositional, and ungrammatical English” (Min 314). The words that the disease assembles almost greedily are thus inadequately held together, threatening to break apart again: “Particles bits of sound and noise gathered pick up lint, dust. They might scatter and become invisible. Speech morsels. Broken chips of stones” (56). The tongue is broken because the nuts and bolts are out of order.

Both forked and broken tongues are subjected to discipline. These are the sites where language is exposed as a dictating power that transcends the individual subjects. Dictation and translation, as linguistic exercises that enforce repetition, provide an apt metaphor for the power dynamics inherent in language. Shelley Sunn Wong notes, “The term ‘dictation’ itself makes manifest the element of coercion behind the desire for equivalence, as well as pointing up the trajectory of authority and power that marks an act

of translation” (119). Thus in *Dictée*, power operates at a level that transcends the individual self, as an enforced logic of equivalence. Repetition, however, presupposes a disjuncture. Dictation involves a crossing from the written to the spoken back to the written; translation involves a crossing between languages. And all this needs to be performed through human bodies. It is precisely in that break that difference can potentially enter. By depending on repetition, language becomes vulnerable to change. In contact situations, such as those depicted by Anzaldúa and Cha, this vulnerability becomes more pronounced. Anzaldúa concentrates on the change of words; Cha focuses on the erosion of grammatical rules. Syntax, like lexicon, changes in contact situations. In fact, verbal inflections are the first to go in extreme contact situations.<sup>17</sup> One does not have to look far for an example. It is a widely accepted theory that Old English lost most of its verbal conjugations because of the extensive contact between Germanic languages, especially between English and Norse.<sup>18</sup>

Through *Dictée*, Cha searches for those moments when circuits of identity are broken. What, she asks, are the factors that trigger change? To elaborate on the tension between repetition and difference, I will make a detour through Ovid and Spivak’s Echo. In Ovid, Echo is doomed to repeating only the last few words spoken by others as a punishment for the unruliness of her tongue. Echo used to engage Juno in lengthy conversations to prevent her from finding Jupiter in the company of the nymphs. Juno tells her, “That tongue of thine, by which I have been tricked, shall have its power

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<sup>17</sup> John A. Holm makes a connection between creoles and second-language acquisition in his study of contact languages: “With few exceptions, the creoles rely on free rather than inflectional morphemes to convey grammatical information; this seems like to have resulted from a universal tendency in adult second-language acquisition to isolate such information through lexicalization” (144).

<sup>18</sup> See Matthew Townend’s “Contacts and Conflicts: Latin, Norse, and French,” especially pp. 82-4 for a concise summary.

curtailed” (151). From then, her speech is governed by Juno’s punishment. The forest scene where Echo first meets Narcissus occasions the following semblance of dialog:

By chance the boy, separated from his faithful companions, had cried: “Is anyone here?” and “Here!” cried Echo back. Amazed, he looks around in all directions and with loud voice cries “Come!”; and “Come!” she calls him calling. He looks behind him and, seeing no one coming, calls again: “Why do you run from me?” and hears in answer his own words again. (Ovid 151)

Doomed to repetition, Echo cannot woo Narcissus using her own words to represent her desire. The structure of Echo’s response resembles the translation exercise from *Dictée* that placed the student in the position of Echo. Even if the student desired to somehow answer the call “I want you to speak,” the structure of the exercise prevents the occurrence of any real intersubjective conversation.

Spivak’s ingenious reading of the passage from Ovid, however, opens the doors to an alternative circuit.

Throughout the reported exchange between Narcissus and Echo, she behaves according to her punishment and gives back the end of each statement. Ovid “quotes” her, except when Narcissus asks, *Quid . . . me fugis* (Why do you fly from me)? Caught in the discrepancy between second person interrogative (*fugis*) and the imperative (*fugi*), Ovid cannot allow her to be, even Echo, so that Narcissus, flying from her, could have made of the ethical structure of response a fulfilled antiphone. He reports her speech in the name of Narcissus: *quot dixit, verba recipit*—he receives back the words he says. The discrepancy is effaced in the discrepancy of translation. In English, Echo could have echoed “Fly from me” and remained echo. (Spivak “Echo” 24-5)

Spivak sees in Echo the possibility of the ethical. Had Echo succeeded in saying “Fly from me,” this could have saved Narcissus from the death of self-identity. It would have also short-circuited the cycle of punishment that frames the story of Echo and Narcissus. Narcissus suffers a slow and painful death because he has been cursed by a spurned lover: “So may he himself love, and not gain the thing he loves!” (153). Let him suffer in the exact manner as I have suffered. Spivak’s “radical interruption of ethical hope” hinges on Echo being able to return Narcissus’s question as a command (25). Because

Latin grammar does not allow this, Ovid intervenes in the original; he tells rather than shows Echo's words. What I want to underline here is Spivak's passing observation that this would not have been an issue in English. Because the second person interrogative and the imperative coincide in English, Echo would have echoed without a narrator's help, "Fly from me." Broken tongue (English) realizes a hope that the Latin text preserves with difficulty.

I put this analysis next to *Dictée* not to argue for some intrinsic ethical superiority inherent in broken tongues but to highlight the principle of ethical interruption cultivated in these products of defective repetition. *Dictée* is, as Lowe argues, insistently "unfaithful to the original"(39), and "repetition more often marks the incommensurability of forms to their referents" (37). *Dictée* reveals how hospitable the essay can be to such imperfect repetitions and the stammering of the broken tongue. Deterioration is an active principle within the text and reflects Cha's fascination with its unpredictable effects. The sets of language exercises that I analyzed earlier appear between two versions of the (same) invocation. The first version reads, "O Muse, tell me the story / Of all these things, O Goddess, daughter of Zeus / Beginning wherever you wish, tell even us" (7). The second version that appears just four pages later reads, "Tell me the story / Of all these things. / Beginning wherever you wish, tell even us" (11). Except for the omission of "O Muse" and "O Goddess, daughter of Zeus," the two versions are exactly the same. The second invocation, therefore, reads more like a faulty repetition than a different invocation. Yet the omissions dislocate the invocation; the second version no longer invokes anyone. The plea is the same—tell me the story—but the second plea emerges from a profoundly secular world. A careful reading reveals the first version to be already corroded. Wong

writes of the first invocation, “In asking the Muse to begin ‘whenever’ she wishes rather than ‘from the beginning’ as charged by Hesiod, Cha interferes with a historical practice which privileges origins and the idea of orderly patriarchal succession” (113). *Dictée* proposes to give us not a story of origins and lineage but a text that works with what it has on hand, “making do.” Her invocations, by being inaccurate copies of the real thing and then by undergoing further erosion, make space for a different kind of writing. The dissolution of the self, I would argue, is an indispensable part of this process.

Because oppression operates at a level that transcends individual subjects, the “solution” for both Cha and Spivak necessarily comes from elsewhere, from outside the self. The ethical instantiation figured by Echo, writes Spivak, is one “uncoupled from intention” (28). Echo herself does not desire Narcissus to run away. Yet articulating that injunction would have initiated a different economy, would have effected change. The disease likewise seeks to play the role of Echo: “When the amplification stops there might be an echo. She might make the attempt then. The echo part. At the pause” (4). To make room for echo, Cha breaks the form of the essay. A passage from Cha’s letter to her mother perhaps will serve better to highlight the extreme degree to which Cha breaks forms. In this letter she reports her experience of being caught up in a demonstration, one of the many that were happening in protest of the second military dictatorship. She writes,

In tears the air stagnant continues to sting I am crying the sky remnant the gas smoke absorbed the sky I am crying. The streets covered with chipped bricks and debris. Because. I see the frequent pairs of shoes thrown sometimes a single pair among the rocks they had carried. Because. I cry wail torn shirt lying I step among them. No trace of them. Except for the blood. Because. Step among them the blood that will not erase with the rain on the pavement that was walked upon like the stones where they fell had fallen. Because. Remain dark the stains not wash away. (82)

For readers familiar with modern Korean history, this passage may well be the most emotionally resonant passage in the work. In her characteristic inversion, it is the tear gas that absorbs the sky. Cha cannot properly perform the role of the witness because her vision is blurred. What she records are fragmentary images that she managed to glean in the confusion—the chipped bricks and debris, shoes flung everywhere, torn clothing and blood. Most strikingly, human forms elude her vision. There are no individual subjects, not to mention agents, in Cha’s report. Instead, Cha’s text wraps itself around material remains.

Elaine H. Kim, the critic who almost single-handedly “unearthed” *Dictée* in the early nineties, censures the erasure of Cha’s Korean American identity in early criticism. In her pivotal essay “Poised on the In-between,” Kim writes, “I am far less tolerant of readers who, in their eagerness to explore the affinities between *Dictée* and other ‘postmodern’ texts, have found it possible to discuss Cha’s work without alluding in a significant way to her Korean heritage” (22). Kim’s division of literature into postmodern texts—her blanket term for formally innovative texts—and heritage texts sounds startlingly dated at this point. *Dictée* not only evinces affinities to postmodern texts but tells of Korean heritage by extending inherited forms and techniques. The passage quoted above is about the damage done to life under what Koreans call “modernization.” Cha’s form both reflects that state of brokenness and creates a new text out of that state of fragmentation. Its implicit critique of modernity along with its extension of modernist techniques clearly positions *Dictée* within a postmodern sensibility.

The more important question would be, to what effect does Cha employ postmodern techniques? In Cha’s description of the demonstration, punctuations are

malfunctioning once again. Except for the single-word sentences “Because,” most of the sentences in the passage are undivided by punctuation, making it difficult for the readers to easily locate the grammatical components. In the sentence “Step among them the blood that will not erase with the rain on the pavement that was walked upon like the stones where they fell had fallen,” it is unclear who is doing the stepping among and the walking upon. Neither is it clear what the phrase “like the stones” is supposed to modify. In a strange way, this broken form remains faithful to the anonymity of the demonstrators. Giving them a name or names—a subjective mold—would diminish their radical nonconformity by locking them in language and grammar. For Cha, it is necessary that they remain unnamed. She cannot proceed without questioning the hegemonic forms of language and genre. Thus, the experimental form cannot be separated from what Cha wishes to record.

Kim’s insistence on *Dictée*’s specific history and context, on the other hand, is the text’s insistence as well. *Dictée* holds on tenaciously to those remains of history, the blood that will not wash away. Always something remains. In Ovid’s story of Echo and Narcissus, the voice remains: *vox manet* (152). In *Dictée*, the spirit remains. Cha movingly addresses her mother of eighteen, “You suffer the knowledge of having to leave. Of having left. But your MAH-UHM, spirit has not left. Never shall have and never shall will. Not now. Not even now. It is burned into your ever-present memory. Memory less. Because it is not in the past. It cannot be. Not in the least of all pasts” (45). The present tense of the address is the present of her mother’s past. However, in this particular passage, the ever-present condition of her mother’s MAH-UHM warps the linearity of the temporal continuum. When Cha writes, “your MAH-UHM, spirit has not

left,” she is still within the past of her mother’s young adulthood. In the following sentence, we get the awkward tense of the past future anterior: “Never shall have and never shall will.” By the time Cha writes “Not now. Not even now,” the “now” refers to the narrated present and the writerly present as well as the readerly present, aligning the three presents. It remains. MAH-UHM remains, across continents, across time.

MAH-UHM is the closest Cha comes to naming the spirit of resistance. It is fitting that Cha picks a Korean word that refuses translation. MAH-UHM means the mind when paired with the Korean word for the body, MOHM. When used by itself, however, it means the heart as opposed to the intellect. It is a word that wavers between the heart and the spirit. While Cha preserves the Korean word, she nevertheless gives the Romanized transcription instead of using Hangul, the Korean phonetic alphabet. In fact, Hangul appears only once in *Dictée*—in the image of words carved on a tunnel in Japan that Cha uses as the frontispiece. Since the frontispiece marks the border between the text and the world outside, it may be *of* the text but is not quite *in* the text. Hangul remains on the threshold concerning which Josephine Nock-Hee Park writes, “the Korean language itself is a ghostly underground presence, never voiced” (227). So yes, Elaine Kim is correct in emphasizing the text’s “Korean heritage,” but *Dictée* does not seek the originary or the original. Cha records the traces of MAH-UHM while giving it a new form for the diasporic space in which she finds herself. Like a soul resisting reincarnation, MAH-UHM invites further signification.

That is, *Dictée* is not a text of origins but a scrapbook. Min points out that this text “embodies a kind of scrapbook of an individual history—a history not as ‘total vision’ but in fragments and citations, a history that in its very form depicts its



profoundly mediated and material nature as fragmentary reconstruction from found and received materials” (321). Anne Anlin Cheng similarly emphasizes *Dictée*’s status as a collection: “acts of recollection (in the sense of memory recall) are frequently indistinguishable from acts of collection (in the sense of gathering bits of objects)” (119). These collected fragments are, as Min notes, “found and received materials” that have been poorly integrated into any official history, whether Korean, American, or Korean American. Most, such as the blood of the demonstrator on the pavement, were glossed over in the name of homogeneous totality and abstract equivalence or international relations. *Dictée* resists the absolute ascendancy of the one through its broken tongue, its broken form. The disease stammers in her defense,

Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relieve the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion. (33)

She collects them to keep history from repeating, to extract a reply that will break the circle of punishment and retribution. She awaits the interruption of the ethical. In that hope, she defers closure and upholds the hope of a different future. Not death by drowning, but voice, however broken, that remains.

She of the broken tongue will allow other voices to speak for themselves. Cha and the disease allow alien documents to enter the text and stand alone—photographs, images, letters, monologs, eyewitness accounts. At those moments both Cha and the disease will recede from the text and empty themselves so that they become echo chambers: “She allows others. In place of her” (3). The dissolution of the textual subject, therefore, is necessary for *Dictée* to do its work. Through such a radical dissolution, *Dictée* extends itself beyond the boundaries of the essay. Or, has it extended the

boundaries of the essay? L. Hyun Yi Kang closes her reading of *Dictée* with this beautifully description:

Trying and missing. Missing and trying, not louder this time but differently: rearrange the text on the page, leave a blank space, insert a photograph, one that is barely decipherable and then too another that is recognizable to a few, employ a second language, and then a third and fourth, if words would be inadequate in describing a nation severed, illustrate with a simple map. Trying and missing, yet again. (97)

To essay is to attempt, to experiment, to try out. Trying and missing, missing and trying.

Try a different genre, switch to a different medium, and discard generic elements that stand in the way. *Dictée* knocks on the foundations of the essay but remains true to the essayistic spirit through that gesture. As experimental developments of the essay, *Dictée* and *Borderlands* compellingly demonstrate how the essayistic spirit flourishes in these contact zones, in these states between the states.

### Chapter Three

#### An Extended Essay, An Impromptu Etude: Nathaniel Mackey's Experimental Prose

Nathaniel Mackey's *Bedouin Hornbook* (1986) is an innovative mix of criticism and fiction. It consists of a series of letters written by an avant-garde jazz musician who signs his letters N. Most of his letters focus on the musical activities of his band, the Mystic Horn Society. There are five members in the band. Lambert, Penguin, and N. play different kinds of horns; Aunt Nancy plays the violin and congas; Djamilaa is the singer of the band. N. also happens to be a prolific letter-writer prone to making extensive commentary on music in a distinctively academic register. *Bedouin Hornbook*, in short, is a series of letters written by a fictional artist-critic. Mackey describes it as "an alternate, fictional voice pursued by criticism and an alternate, critical voice pursued by fiction" (*PH* 15).<sup>19</sup> The chiasmic structure of the statement insists on the text's double status.

This mix raises an interesting problem and new possibilities for the essay as a genre. Criticism, critics admit, is bound to the object under study. Georg Lukács, in his influential study of the essay, refers to this bind as the essay's "truthfulness." He famously adopts the analogy of portrait painting to illustrate this idea: "In front of a landscape we never ask ourselves whether this mountain or that river really is as it is painted there; but in front of every portrait the question of likeness always forces itself willy-nilly upon us" (10). With this comparison Lukács distinguishes representations that cannot avoid the issue of likeness from those that create an illusion of life. The essay, like the portrait, falls under the former category. After giving an elaborate account of the painter's struggle to capture the inner light that is burning in his model, Lukács

concludes, “And that, you see, is more or less how I imagine the truth of the essay to be. Here too there is a struggle for truth, for the incarnation of a life which someone has seen in a man, an epoch or a form” (11). Viewed from this perspective, the one defining feature of criticism is its secondary status; it comes *after* its object, owes its existence to the object, and truth is the criterion we use to evaluate its success at expressing the complexity of an (aesthetic) experience. *Bedouin Hornbook* obliquely challenges this fundamental condition of criticism.

The following is an excerpt from one of N.’s letters. The passage appears towards the end of the letter dated May 28, 1980 in which N. gives an account of the band’s response to the debut performance of his original composition “Opposable Thumb at the Water’s Edge.” Upon hearing the piece, Penguin gives a solo performance on the oboe. His performance is nothing short of a full scholarly article, footnotes and all, tracing the genealogical line between an ancient Egyptian phallic god and Opposable Thumb. Lambert then responds on the tenor saxophone by telling a boyhood joke about masturbation. Just as the male members burst into laughter at Lambert’s story, Aunt Nancy breaks in, on the violin:

Aunt Nancy quickly made it known that she resented the phallocentricity of what had been played up to that point, that we seemed to have either ignored or forgotten the fact that the hands of men have no monopoly on thumbs. Setting aside the bow and playing pizzicato to underscore this point, she went on to admit that on a more subtle, paradoxical level she’d heard in all our solos something she termed “an opportune, albeit unconscious owning-up to the self-servicing hollowness of masculine assumptions.” What one might have otherwise dismissed as rhetoric was so intimately the issue of certain technical resolutions that we all (the three of us—that is, me, Lambert and Penguin) stood stunned at the digital precision of her approach to the strings. She plucked with the fingers and thumbs of both hands, not only near the top of the fingerboard but down by the bridge as

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<sup>19</sup> In this chapter, I use the following abbreviations for three of Mackey’s books: *BH* for *Bedouin Hornbook*, *DE* for *Discrepant Engagement*, and *PH* for *Paracritical Hinge*.

well, in what amounted to an extended essay, an impromptu etude on the question or quandary she involved us in: “Opportune for whom?” (57)

This passage gives an account of “an extended essay” played on the violin. While Aunt Nancy involves her audience in the quandary “Opportune for whom?” Mackey involves his audience in the quandary of a discursive representation of instrumental music. How does one, for example, play “an opportune, albeit unconscious owning-up to the self-servicing hollowness of masculine assumptions” on a string instrument? A closer look at the passage reveals that N. is not interpreting (supplying his own words) or even paraphrasing Aunt Nancy’s essay. He is citing her exact expression, word for word.

Although music critics and musicians have often claimed that musical instruments express thoughts and sentiments as speech does, Mackey’s literal approach goes beyond the bounds of realism. As if anticipating the reader’s incredulity, N. adds the following remark a day later: “In the past you’ve accused me of attributing ‘rather unlikely verbal powers’ to strictly instrumental music (yesterday’s letter will no doubt annoy you no end), but the fact is that instruments actually do speak. Anyone who’s heard Mingus and Dolphy’s exchanges on Mingus’s tune ‘What Love’ (*Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*, America 30 AM 6082) has no doubts about this at all” (63). Instead of dispelling the reader’s incredulity once and for all, this addendum further complicates the matter at hand. “What Love,” like so many other compositions discussed in these letters, exists outside the text of *Bedouin Hornbook*. It is a real musical cut by a flesh-and-blood musician. The passages discussing musicians who exist in the world external to the representation could easily pass as genuine jazz criticism. At such moments *Bedouin Hornbook* is criticism *in potentia*, and Mackey has on several occasions taken advantage of that potential. The most prominent example, “Blue in Green: Black Interiority,” is a

paper on Miles Davis presented at a conference on the said musician. Mackey ends “Blue in Green” by quoting three excerpts from *Bedouin Hornbook* that touch on Davis’ aesthetic. In the passage under discussion, however, N.’s insistence that musical instruments actually speak is curiously undermined by his reference to “What Love.” To the readers of *Bedouin Hornbook*, it is a forcible reminder that “Opposable Thumb” is fictional in a way that “What Love” clearly is not. Neither does the word “actually” alleviate the reader’s discomfort. When the word is used to stabilize the relationship between language and reality, it usually has the opposite effect. Why does N. need to assure the Angel that instruments “actually” do speak? Was his yesterday’s letter an example of instruments not “actually” speaking? Is he, then, admitting that there is a difference between “What Love” and “Opposable Thumb” as objects of critical appraisal? The word “actually” introduces the idea of degrees of actuality and, by implication, the near presence of fiction.

Although some of the passages in *Bedouin Hornbook* could easily pass as criticism and although Mackey could have reframed this material to meet the requirements of academic criticism, he has obviously chosen not to. Mackey devotes most of *Bedouin Hornbook* to fictional compositions, asking in the process what it means for criticism to pursue “an alternate, fictional voice.” To be fair, the possibility of this development is already hinted at in Lukács’s essay on the essay. In the middle of his discussion of the portrait and the criterion of likeness, Lukács inserts the following remark: “Likeness? Of whom? Of no one, of course. You have no idea whom it represents, perhaps you can never find out; and if you could, you would care very little” (11). Upon the first reading, this appears to be a sacrilege. It annihilates the very *raison*

d'être of criticism. But Lukács risks sounding flippant in order to point out the performative dimension of criticism. As a kind of writing, criticism is itself a form of expression. In fact, this is the only way one can even begin to justify Lukács's analogy—portrait painting is as much an art form as landscape painting and could never serve as an analogy for criticism if we were to deprive criticism of all performative elements. Mackey takes Lukács's observation to its logical conclusion by freeing criticism from its referential moorings altogether (or almost altogether as will be discussed later on). Even if we could acquire a recording of "Opposable Thumb" by the Mystic Horn Society, Mackey suggests, we would care very little. What is to be appreciated here is jazz criticism as a kind of performance or a literary method in itself.

The possibility of a cohabitation of art and criticism has intrigued and horrified artists and critics alike. In 1923, T.S. Eliot wrote, "I have assumed as axiomatic that a creation, a work of art, is autotelic; and that criticism, by definition, is *about* something other than itself. Hence you cannot fuse creation with criticism as you can fuse criticism with creation" (30-1). Thirty-five years later, Theodor W. Adorno expressed his distaste for the "washed-out cultural babble" resulting from premature attempts at reconciling art and criticism (6). Lukács's essay on the essay is an anomaly. He begins by similarly upholding a radical separation of art and criticism only to note in the middle of his discussion that pure art and pure criticism are abstractions. They are useful abstractions but abstractions nonetheless because "significance is always wrapped in images and the reflection of a glow from beyond the image shines through every image" (5). Lukács's admission explains why the boundary between art and criticism needs to be established again and again; the pure types are hard to come by in actual texts. In practice, not only

does the creative process incorporate criticism but critical writing can also give form while commenting on form. A final look at Lukács' portrait-painting analogy will clarify what I mean. If we take the analogy backwards, it sheds an interesting light on portrait painting as a kind of criticism. In Lukács' analysis, portrait-painting turns out to be a two-fold process: there is the moment when things become forms and then a passionate reaching out for what lies behind such forms. The earlier moment occurs before the actual painting, in the painter's head. Form is imposed on life when the painter decides on which "arbitrarily chosen moment or expression" of the subject to paint (11). The actual act of painting, like criticism, pursues that moment in order to express "the soul-content which forms indirectly and unconsciously conceal within themselves" (8). This opens up the possibility of criticism taking non-verbal media such as painting and music. It also opens the possibility of an expression (such as a portrait) doubling up on both roles. Either way, a neat separation of the two becomes a thorny issue. Although Lukács's analogy initially comes across as a self-evident explanation of the essay's adherence to truth, it opens other possibilities as perhaps all analogies do.

That is, art stretches toward criticism and vice versa, and certain kinds of art and criticism do so more than others. They distinguish themselves by an intensified and overt self-reflexivity and an intellectual bent no matter which side of the aesthetic/non-aesthetic divide they start from. This is a productive nexus inviting the ingenuity of artists *and* critics. One form of art that has risen to that challenge, according to Mackey, is the avant-garde jazz of the sixties. It comes as little surprise, therefore, that *Bedouin Hornbook* as a verbal representation of and a critical homage to avant-garde jazz engages in a similar kind of mix. The straining of genres that I am examining here is, from a



broader perspective, yet another way in which Mackey exerts pressure on the limits of expressivity. In his poetry, criticism, and the serial prose work, Mackey performs, figures, and discusses music that aspire to the condition of speech and speech that crosses over to song and inarticulate sound.<sup>20</sup> This insistent testing of limits arises from Mackey's admission that "endowments are always only partial, that the endowments of particular genres and artistic media call out, in their partiality, for supplementation, collaboration" (*PH* 15). One such collaboration is between criticism and fiction.

When Eliot wrote against the fusion of criticism with creation, his greatest fear was the situation where "[i]nstead of insight, you get a fiction" (31). For Mackey, the more pressing concern is furthering the reach of criticism with the aid of fiction to precisely provide greater insight; that is, how can critical writing do justice to the avant-gardism in jazz or the spiritual vocation of music? Fiction is his way of pressing criticism to its limits, testing its potential as a form of expression. The passages describing the band's performances tend to be the most fantastic, the most discursive, and the most overwrought moments in the book. Fiction *enables* these passages of fraught discursivity, and there lies its central function in *Bedouin Hornbook*. It incites writing to go beyond itself. It serves a purpose much like the one served by the falsetto as discussed by the correspondents of these letters. According to N., "the deliberately forced, deliberately 'false' voice we get from someone like Al Green creatively hallucinates a 'new world,' indicts the more insidious falseness of the world as we know it" (62). The element of falsity/fiction infuses discontent into the present, provoking utopian desire. In turn, this desire drives the composition (both song and writing) to go on and go beyond. It is no

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<sup>20</sup> *Bedouin Hornbook* is the first volume of a serial work entitled *From a Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. More volumes have followed: *Djbot Baghostus's Run* in 1993, *Atet A.D.* in 2001, and *Bass*

accident that the referential content of Aunt Nancy's performance is a complaint at exclusion—gendered in this case. Her complaint opens up “Opposable Thumb,” allowing it to go on and go beyond what it was previous to her intervention.

This perhaps explains why fiction shifts in *Bedouin Hornbook*, placing the readers on a shaky hermeneutic ground. This shifting of fiction eggs on the readers to keep trying different positions in relation to the text. Certain letters sound very much like typical music criticism, others sound like N.'s reading of music as a semiotic text, and still others literalize music's status as language. Every letter, that is, tests the relationship between music and language anew, trying out different approaches not in the interest of any ultimate representation of the music (hardly a possibility when the compositions are fictional) but in the interest of furthering the text's critical reach. In this sense, *Bedouin Hornbook* is both less and more than a work of fiction, less because it is impure, more because fiction is only a partial component of the text. I wish to argue in this chapter that the book, similar to Aunt Nancy's performance, demands to be read as “an extended essay, an impromptu etude.” Through the unconventional mix of fiction and criticism, Mackey extends the possibilities of the essay while approximating the music he is drawn to. Through this reading, I hope to touch on the aspects of the essay that lend themselves to the kind of experimentation we witness in *Bedouin Hornbook*.

#### “Kunk Ain't Got No Bone”: Self-Reflexivity, Para-Criticism, and the Essay

The first two letters addressed to the Angel of Dust were a part of Mackey's on-going serial poem *Song of the Andoumboulou*. In an interview conducted by Peter O'Leary, Mackey gives a generous description of how the letters began:

O'LEARY: So there was a "real" Angel of Dust.

MACKEY: I'm trying to remember if I actually—it was sent to a friend—but it wasn't addressing the friend as Angel of Dust. I wrote the Angel of Dust and I sent a copy to the friend. I was allowing the friend to overhear this conversation with the Angel of Dust, which was prompted by questions raised by the friend, who had written me about a poem. Anyway, it started there. One of the impulses was—because it came out of questions about my poetry raised in correspondence with this friend—one of the impulses was to unpack the poetry in some ways but not do it in verse. To unpack; not to explain. To speak at greater discursive length about the content, the perspectives, the different dispositions that inform the poetry. Those first two were statements of poetics, kind of flirting with being prose poems, but delivered in an epistolary form which was invoking a certain audience, a rather spectral audience. (*PH* 298)

His answer to the interviewer's question reveals that Mackey was in a way responding to a real letter sent to him by his friend commenting on one of the poems belonging to *Song of the Andoumboulou*. Mackey was also in a way not responding to his friend since the letter is addressed to the Angel of Dust, which, Mackey explains, was *not* his friend's nickname. Even the first person to lay his eyes on this letter, Mackey's friend, overheard the conversation as all subsequent readers of the letters were destined to do. The only advantage he had over the readers of Mackey's published works was temporal.

The intended audience, as Mackey notes, is spectral. The first letter, *Song of the Andoumboulou: 6* is addressed to the Angel of Dust and cc'ed to Jack Spicer and García Lorca, both dead poets one of whom once wrote a book of poetry that claimed to transcribe poems dictated by the ghost of the other. Both Spicer and Lorca were in their own ways versed in the poetics of absence and form an audience doubly spectral. But perhaps the most enigmatic of them all is the Angel of Dust.

Dear Angel of Dust,

In one of your earlier letters, the one you wrote in response to *Song of the Andoumboulou: 3*, you spoke of sorting out "what speaks of speaking of something, and what (more valuably) speaks *from* something, i.e., where the source is available, becomes a re-source rather than something evasive, elusive,

sought after.” Well, what I wanted to say then was this: We not only can but should speak of “loss” or, to avoid, quotation marks notwithstanding, any such inkling of self-pity, speak of absence as unavoidably an inherence in the texture of things (dreamseed, habitual cloth). You really do seem to believe in, to hold out for some first or final gist underlying it all, but my preoccupation with origins and ends is exactly that: a pre- (equally post-, I suppose) occupation. (*Eroding Witness* 50)

Angel of Dust is N.’s absent other. The Angel could be a real friend, a dead love-object, or an alter ego of the letter writer. The ambiguity of the Angel’s ontological status is registered in both of the nouns angel and dust, words that point to an immaterial materiality. Whichever way one takes the Angel, one factor remains constant—he or she is absent. This absence is made palpable by the fact that we only get a partial archive of the dialogue. Angel’s letters and critical essays are registered only in N.’s responses whether in the form of direct quotation, summary, or paraphrase. Yet the Angel’s textual presence forces N. to elaborate his own position, to revisit and revise his previous statements. Whether imaginary, dead, or real, the Angel sets off the mechanism of self-reflexivity in the voice we do hear—that of N. To make matters even more interesting, the relationship between Nathaniel and N. mirrors the one between N. and the Angel of Dust, which is corroborated by Mackey’s practice of referring to N. as “my friend N.” Mackey’s works form a hall of mirrors where we are liable to encounter our own images as ghosts and strangers.

The mechanism of self-reflexivity is contingent on the kind of acknowledgement of absence that N. writes of. This letter, blending form and content, practices what it preaches: my dear absent friend, I am writing to you about the inherence of absence in all things. What sparks this argument about origins and foundation is Angel of Dust’s privileging of cultural expressions that are firmly grounded on a secure foundation of shared assumptions and truths, an episteme. There is of course humor involved in this

situation where the “Angel of Dust” believes in the possibility of “speaking *from* a source.” N., in contrast, reminds the Angel that absence is inherent in things, especially in linguistic articulation: “We not only can but should speak of ‘loss.’” The movement from “can” to “should” underscores N.’s point that loss is inherent if not constitutive and therefore inevitable. That is, there can be no “speaking *from* a source,” only the delusion of such a ground of articulation. The word “should” furthermore introduces a note of ethical insistence, hinting at the ethics involved in *not* glossing over the cracks of a wished-for totality. N. opts for the margins (pre/post) of occupation instead of some uncomplicated occupation of a location, a status, or a condition of being.

Such self-reflexivity is amplified by this letter’s position in relation to *Song of the Andoumboulou*. This particular letter is included in the serial poem; it is in fact the sixth song, *Song of the Andoumboulou: 6*. In the O’Leary interview, Mackey explains that the letters were attempts at “unpacking” the poetry, an interesting word that hovers somewhere between criticism and an alternative take on the material that the poetry deals with. It hints at an activity that is similar to commentary but not quite, for the interruption becomes a part of the thing it interrupts. Even as Mackey welcomes the critical impulse, he refuses to establish an extra-textual position from which to speak about the poem. Paratext is the theoretical name for these moments when a part of the text detaches itself to represent the whole. Traditionally, paratexts attempt to modulate the difference between the text and its reception: “the function of the paratext is to reduce the potential difference between the invariable work and any reading of it at any one period and at different periods in history” (Obaldia 127-8). Yet this need for the literary text to represent itself amounts to an admission of an internal lack, its inability to attain a closed

system. The paratext is, as Claire de Obaldia aptly phrases it, “the concrete embodiment or manifestation of an internal, textual lack” (139). So these letters are the concrete embodiment or manifestation of the absence that drives and produces *Song of the Andoumboulou*.

In one of later letters, N. mentions a song that he used to sing as a child. The song is called “Kunk Ain’t Got No Bone.” Kunk, he explains, was the way they used to pronounce conch in Florida, and the song is about “the shell-as-outer-bone’s concealment of nothing if not an esoteric absence of bone” (BH 71). Mackey’s rephrasing of the song’s title is especially striking—instead of referring to the conch’s insides as flesh or meat, he calls it “an esoteric absence of bone,” as if we are not dealing with a thing and its other but a thing and its displacement. It is the perfect figure for “the concrete embodiment or manifestation of an internal, textual lack.” The figure gives us a lesson on reading literary texts. The search for an inner core or a solid essence is doomed to a failure. The literary text keeps asking to be unpacked but there is no extra-textual meaning to be extracted. Its form, its presentation, the language, in short, its beautiful surface is the conch. Reflexivity is the literary text’s response to an esoteric absence of bone; Mackey utilizes that inner dynamics to produce text and more text.

What makes Mackey’s writing distinctive is the sense of being at home in a possibly endless web of textuality and an open-ended series of signification. Mackey gives the impression of luxuriating in the endless possibilities opened up by the principle of reflexivity. *Song of the Andoumboulou* allows the letter to interrupt a poetic series, which gives rise to an alternate (and soon-to-be independent) series. This trend continues within the epistolary serial work. *Bedouin Hornbook* is interrupted by yet another

discursive form—the lecture/libretti that N. occasionally attaches for Angel of Dust’s perusal. Written as verbal accompaniments to the musical performances of the band, these libretti are closer to a purely fictional spin on the same material that is covered by the letters. *The Creaking of the Word*, as this series is titled, is as close as we get to fiction in the conventional sense. This is quite ironical in the light of the fact that N. originally writes the first version of *The Creaking of the Word* as an academic lecture. His friend Derek who teaches at Cal Arts invites him to give a talk at the conference “Locus and Locomotivity in Postcontemporary Music.” In place of an academic lecture, we get something that sounds like fiction; the talk opens, “Jarred Bottle approached the podium” (169). The piece gives an account of Jarred Bottle’s journey to the podium after being introduced by *his* friend Derek at a conference. The moment that takes a person to walk from one point of the room to the podium is stretched almost intolerably as we are caught up in the stream of Jarred Bottle’s consciousness—especially his misgivings about giving the lecture. Given that this would have been presented at a conference where indeed N. would have been introduced by his friend Derek, *The Creaking of the Word* is not unlike J.M. Coetzee’s infamous talks. Invited to talk at conferences, Coetzee would start reading a piece of fiction about Elizabeth Costello on her way to give a lecture on the topic at hand. In both cases, the talk gives the talk as a fictional account. Or, more accurately, the talk fails to give a talk by giving a fictional account about the failure to give a talk. N. calls his work “metalecture.”

Instead of dying out after a few tries, this series also spills over into the following volumes. N. develops a knack for versioning *The Creaking of the Word*. This tendency tees off in *Bedouin Hornbook* where a rewrite, “an after-the-fact lecture/libretto,” is

attached to the last letter of the volume. In fact, the last thing we get in *Bedouin Hornbook* is the rewritten lecture/libretto, not “Sincerely, N,” which becomes something of a pattern in the later volumes. More versions appear in the subsequent volumes: “APRIL IN PARIS or, The Creaking of the Word: After-the-Fact Lecture/Libretto (Aunt Nancy Version)” and “AX ME NOW or, The Creaking of the Word: After-the Fact Lecture/Libretto (Lambert Version),” to mention a few. Although *The Creaking of the Word* never separates out from the letters, they do gain an increasing prominence as the serial work progresses. One could conceivably read them separately as literary creations by the musician N. whom we first encounter as a commentator on literature anyway.<sup>21</sup>

The proliferation of series is made possible by taking advantage of the breaks in the texture of the writing. One could argue that any one series in Mackey’s writing is a calling forth of series that are there *in potentia*. Much of his creative work is about pulling out more from what is already implicit. As Brent Hayes Edwards has written of Mackey’s poetry, his works are “overrun with echoes and premonitions, revisitations and retractions” (575). So, *Song of the Andoumboulou* calls forth *Traces from a Broken Bottle*. *Still Emanate* calls forth *The Creaking of the Word*. There is not “first or final gist underlying it all,” Mackey appears to be saying.

As a way of returning to the text of *Bedouin Hornbook*, I will examine how Djamila’s voice figures Mackey’s aesthetic. During the impromptu composition of “Bottomed Out” at the Scarab, Djamila is the last member of the band to join in. When she finally does, no sound emerges from her mouth despite the laborious movements of her mouth and the strenuous grimaces. N. writes, “Djamila’s ‘loss’ had become the

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<sup>21</sup> Mackey hinted in an interview that the lecture/libretti “could take on a certain life of their own and could exist without letters” in the future (*PH* 300).



audience's 'gain,' but even more worth noting was the fact that the mixed-metaphorical page which had entered our book was not so much a page as a precarious advance held together by stark, semiotic stitches, an awkward, unwieldy, endless piece of parchment, an endlessly unwinding scroll" (201). The metaphor of the book perfectly describes the proliferation of series in Mackey's writing. The epistolary series is one such unexpected scroll that has advanced precariously out of the book of *Song of the Andoumboulou*. The lecture/libretti would be another such unexpected scroll that has advanced precariously out of the series of letters. Also referred to as Djamila's *envoi*, this unexpected unfolding has utopic implications that N. goes to lengths to examine: "One understood that what she was up to was a dry run—futuristic, tortuously utopic, a not yet articulable address, an *envoi*. She sent her song into the world, but did so with the understanding that the conditions which would truly bring it into being had yet to be met" (200). The unfolding of the scroll may seem awkward or even unwieldy, but this may be due to our unfamiliarity with the new song. It is not that the song fails to measure up to our aesthetic standards. We are the wanting party, and the song recasts us into an audience by virtue of its precarious advance.

Neither is the potential of the *envoi* exhausted in a single performance. During the much-anticipated lecture at Cal Arts, Djamila's *envoi* becomes literally disembodied. In one of those more supernatural episodes of *Bedouin Hornbook*, we get an account of a ventriloquist phenomenon. For the lecture, Djamila is positioned in the inner circle of musicians that circulate around N. who stands at the center, reading *The Creaking of the Word*. However, as N. gives his lecture, he hears Djamila's voice emerging from another point. He has a second group of performers move around him in the shape of an

ellipse, and that particular geometric shape happens has two loci. The phantom voice he hears comes from that second, unoccupied locus of the ellipse. This is how he narrates the experience to the Angel:

You may, however, notice me distractedly glancing to my left from time to time. What was happening was that the sand-anointed *envoi* Djamilaa'd introduced during our closing set a few weeks ago at the Scarab resurfaced and reasserted itself. Like a gremlin, a grain of salt or a ghost in the machine, it not only reneged on its own mixed-metaphorical promise but renounced or at best renegotiated the highstrung harvest one hears in "Dog-Eared Anacrusis." The latter's "marriage made in Heaven" between aim and object came under fire not only as opiate but, even worse, opportunistic. It was an eerie, ventriloquistic intervention whose point of origin (which is what I was glancing towards to my left) seemed to be the second focus of Precipitous Halo's ellipse. (214)

It is as if Djamilaa literally managed to split her voice in two and occupy two different physical locations at once. As a part of the inner circle, she plays the clarinet; from the second locus of the ellipse, she sings in her sand-anointed voice. The latter is a kind of haunting, "a ghost in the machine," as N. puts it. The weaving together of the musical fabric of N.'s lecture had provided a loose sort of *telos* for the second half of the book. Ever since N. was invited to give the lecture, much of his thinking and composing revolved around the upcoming event. It made him bring several pieces of his composition into conversation—"Dog-Eared Anacrusis," as mentioned in the above passage, "Opposable Thumb," N.'s version of a Toupouri harvest music, and the verbal accompaniment *The Creaking of the Word*. Each of the pieces had received intense musical elaboration and verbal scrutiny at different moments in the book, so the final performance smacks of a grand synthesis with almost a climactic satisfaction. Only, N. has to silence "Opposable Thumb" by having performers walk around listening to a recorded version on walkmans. Only, Djamilaa's voice comes to haunt the orchestra.

Much like Aunt Nancy's performance that opened my discussion of *Bedouin Hornbook*, Djamilaa's *envoi* reintroduces the question, "Opportune for whom?"

However, what I want to highlight in this instance is not so much the recurrence of a theme but the difference between the two occasions of Djamilaa's intervention. If her *envoi* was a page-turned-scroll in the earlier performance, it arrives from outside, as a warning, in the later performance. If the first appearance highlights a sense of emergence, the latter accentuates a break. N. describes the experience as a dance: "This dance, the mimed ingestion of separation we enacted, made for a thrown, dislocated intervention (infiltration on the one hand, preemptive enticement on the other), a punning sense of far-flung investiture" (215). The two voices of the two loci spur each other (enticement) without quite merging (separation). Although I do not wish to pose a schematic opposition between the conjunctive and disjunctive instances of the *envoi*, the distinction is a useful one for furthering my discussion of Mackey's opus. If the page-turned-scroll is the perfect metaphor for the relationship between Mackey's serial works, then the loci metaphor captures the complex relationship between *Bedouin Hornbook* and Mackey's academic writing, such as the 1993 collection of critical essays *Discrepant Engagement*. The literary calls forth the critical: "The writing of *From a Broken Bottle*, I want to emphasize, played a large part in what led me to [the critical formulation discrepant engagement]" (PH 208). Mackey goes so far as to call *From a Broken Bottle* the discrepant foundation of his critical writings.

The formal differences between the literary and the critical do not need much elaboration. Early in the letters, N. writes about a dream that he has repeatedly in which he weeps at his brother's arrival from overseas.

The odd thing is that my brother in fact came home a year ago, yet I've continued to have these dreams of his return. It's as though the gap between fact and idea filled the heart to the point of flooding, as though grief were a liningless womb turned inside out. Words don't go to where this sadness welled up from a deepening throb I felt as a sorrow set free of all cause, a sorrow previous to situation. I wept not for Richard nor myself nor anyone else but for the notion of kin, as though the very idea were an occasion for tears, a pitiful claim to connection . . . Well, isn't the pathos, the ache we hear in certain music a longing for kin? (21)

Much of the material digested in this passage is ruminated in his later critical piece titled "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol" that appears in *Discrepant Engagement*. In the latter essay, Mackey elaborates on the idea of wounded kinship or orphanhood as being at the heart of both musical expression and linguistic utterance. Much as we would like to tether the realm of the symbolic to the real, Mackey argues, it is more accurate to say that we arrive as orphans to these orders of signification. In Mackey's words,

Music encourages us to see that the symbolic is the orphic, that the symbolic realm is the realm of the orphan. Music is prod and precedent for a recognition that the linguistic realm is also the realm of the orphan, as in Octavio Paz's characterization of language as an orphan severed from the presence to which it refers and which presumably gave it birth. This recognition troubles, complicates, and contends with the unequivocal referentiality taken for granted in ordinary language . . . (DE 233)

When he chooses to, Mackey writes proficiently in the language of literary criticism, abiding by the codes of the discipline. Language in the second excerpt is streamlined for a clear transmission, which allows it to circulate in a different discursive space. Even as the passage advocates poetry, the vehicle of its transmission has clearly undergone a process of tailoring or containment.

The use of different registers is especially understandable in the light of the topic. The condition under discussion eludes linguistic rendering, or, as N. writes, words don't go there. Being "previous to situation," it is a sorrow unredressed by the return of a

brother, a linguistic condition unredeemed by moments of coherence or even impositions of systems. The different modes—the literary and the critical—are partial truths pointing to that loss previous to situation. Elsewhere in “Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol,” Mackey writes positively of this kind of concomitance: “Wholeness admitted to be beyond reach, the best to be attained is a concomitance of partial weaknesses, partial strengths, a conjunction of partial endowments” (*DE* 254). The two passages above reveal the partial strengths and weaknesses of the literary and the critical modes. The literary is lush in its affective resonance, striking in its metaphorical reach (a liningless womb turned inside out), and more spacious, allowing N. to explore the sorrow at greater lengths in search of the most satisfying take. The critical insight is attached at the end, in the form of a question: “Well, isn’t the pathos, the ache we hear in certain music a longing for kin?” The critical passage, on the other hand, is pruned for greater intellectual leverage and elaborates on that critical observation. There is less fumbling around for the right expression, although the chain of verbs “troubles, complicates, and contends” stirs the surface calm of the passage.<sup>22</sup> The conjunction of the two modes, I would argue, furthers our understanding of that condition of loss by revealing its multiple layers— affective, social, symbolic.

Whether in the form of series bleeding into each other or different modes rubbing up against each other, Mackey’s writing refuses to sit comfortably in one genre. *Bedouin Hornbook* is a particularly rich intersection, capable of giving rise to *The Creaking of the Word* as well as *Discrepant Engagement*, the exponentially fictional as well as the strictly

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<sup>22</sup> In fact, Mackey admits in an interview that he has not been as square as he should have been in his criticism: “One of the things that’s been a source of some annoyance to people within the academic community has been a tendency I have in essays to introduce, or to try to introduce, an informality in an otherwise very formal tone . . . I don’t think I necessarily pulled off any great marriage of the formal and

critical. Such openness is possible because the text refuses to resolve into a single register. *Bedouin Hornbook* is like Djamila's *envoi* "futuristic, tortuously utopic" in that it does not pretend to be the last word. Although the letters were born out of a critical impulse to comment on *Song of the Andoumboulou*, the criticism in *Bedouin Hornbook* is not the conventional type we see in *Discrepant Engagement*. What we get instead is a staging of the critical impulse through the multiple instances of self-differentiation operative throughout the text. "It wants to be what I call a paracritical hinge, permitting flow between statement and metastatement, analysis and expressivity, criticism and performance, music and literature, and so forth," writes Mackey (*PH* 211). It is almost criticism but not quite, the prefix "para" implying "an activity supplemental to more firmly established disciplines and dispositions, an activity that hinges on a near but divergent identity with given disciplines and dispositions" (*PH* 212). It designates an activity on the margins. In this sense, *Bedouin Hornbook* inhabits the margins of both literature and criticism.

In genre studies, this is the essay's domain. The names para-criticism and the essay designate a similar attitude. Both hint at attempts made in a direction. In fact, both imply a profound reluctance to pursue an activity to its full realization. They find meaning in an auxiliary and supplementary status. Mackey's choice of the word "activity" is crucial in this context. It privileges the process over the finished product. This radical refusal to resolve into an established shape is a way in which a text can preserve that verbal sense. The term "para-criticism" is not Mackey's expression; he only uses the adjectival form of the word. By drawing this connection between para-criticism

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the informal, but what you find in that is an unrest, discontent with any easy dwelling in the one or the other" (*PH* 278).

and the essay, however, I am less interested in replacing one with the other. What interests me is the possibility of reading *Bedouin Hornbook* as a specimen of the experimental essay, as Mackey's way of trying out the inner logic of the genre.

For the essay invites both the "para" and the "critical" of para-criticism. Inherent in the essay is impatience with totalizing systems and a privileging of operations best characterized by the prefix "para." Within the realm of literature, the essay's supplementary status becomes the most visible in its relationship to the novel. Literary historians tend to view the eighteenth-century periodical writing such as *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* as preparing the way for the rise of the novel and dying out when that purpose was accomplished.<sup>23</sup> This model turns "the essay into a supplement or residue which can be discarded once the intended goal has been reached" (Obaldia 17). The essayist is often urged to move on to "literature proper" represented by the novel. The novel endows an unequivocal literary status to a text "by presenting the idea(s) in the form of a continuous plot and substantial characters ready to act them out, and by replacing the total or partial fusion of essayist and author with the proper aesthetic distance of a fully-fledged narrator" (Obaldia 19). The hallmark of the novel, then, is narrative continuity and a clean-cut separation between the narrator and the author.

Predictably, *Bedouin Hornbook* refuses to abide by both. There is an interesting exchange in the interview already mentioned when Mackey responds to O'Leary's question regarding N.

MACKEY: But, N. as a more fully-formed character? I don't know.

O'LEARY: You never had cowrie shells in your forehead.

MACKEY: [Laughing] I did have bits of glass in my forehead.

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<sup>23</sup> See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, pp. 56-7. Also, Bonamy Dobrée, *English Essayists*, p. 21.

O'LEARY: Oh, you did?

MACKEY: From my head hitting the windshield of a car in a car accident, which is evoked in one of the letters in *Bedouin Hornbook*. N. and I have some things in common. We overlap. (PH 299)

O'Leary, as a trained literary critic, assumes that N. is not Mackey once he has decided to read the book as a novel. In this he is following the protocol, as all conscientious scholars should. Mackey's trickster-like responses reveal that O'Leary's reading was certainly not what he had aimed for although he never quite rules it out either. If anything, Mackey is unapologetic about the fact that he and N. overlap. As for narrative continuity, the form of *Bedouin Hornbook* works against it. Although the epistolary form has often and successfully served the purpose of advancing the novelistic plot over several centuries, Mackey exploits the essayistic potential of the form in his own prose work. By the essayistic potential of letter writing, I am referring to the rather common phenomenon of letters being truthful to the moment of composition. A series of letters, especially in real life, fail to function as a coordinated narrative of a unified self. *Bedouin Hornbook* begins with a threat of discontinuity. The first letter of the book ends, "I'm not at all sure this won't be the last letter you'll receive from me. . . . I'll send tapes of the band, of course, but please don't expect anything more in the way of words" (9). This, on page nine with more than two hundred pages to go. There is no mention of this proposed severance in the next letter, dated approximately two weeks later. Neither does Mackey take advantage of the wisps of story elements—most notably N.'s romantic interest in Djamila—to advance a plot. The letters instead focus on N.'s readings of art works, responses to books and articles on relevant myths and music, and, most prominently, discussions of the band's music. Even on that front, the readers are consistently made aware of the fact that they are missing the tape recordings that N. keeps referring to. Mackey's "para-critical



hinge” statement is preceded by his admission that the work “doesn’t entirely reside within the genre of fiction” either (*PH* 211).

*Bedouin Hornbook* engages in a similar battle on yet another front. Obaldia focuses mainly on the essay’s supplementary status within literature. Mackey goes a step further to demonstrate that the essay’s supplementary status is not limited to its relationship to the novel. The dynamic is activated whenever the essay is placed next to a textual practice that aspires to institutional canonization. Even more so than the novel, academic criticism has been subject to rigid discipline and progressive systematization in the twentieth century, to the point where it turned into a form of professional expertise. Edward Said, around the time when Mackey was composing these letters, cautioned his readers against the dangers of institutionalized criticism: “For the intellectual class, expertise has usually been a service rendered, and sold, to the central authority of society” (2). The para-critical, in this context, troubles criticism as a “given discipline.” It is not a lesser version of criticism; it is a way in which criticism guards itself against instrumentalization. The idea of “the para-critical hinge” was introduced by Mackey when he was invited to speak at a colloquium on “Collaborative Dissonances: Jazz, Discrepancy, and Cultural Theory.” He opens his talk by wittily retelling the experience of reading the call for papers that mentioned his critical essay as one of its inspirations. Mackey’s response to such a moment of institutional legitimation of his thinking is to do what he can to dispel any sense of complacency on his or the audience’s part. He reads from his fiction: “I’d like to try, in line with the colloquium’s theme of collaboration, to get fiction to ‘sit in’ with the kinds of critical and analytic discourse characteristic of colloquia” (211). What matters is criticism as an activity, as a verb, rather than criticism

as a set of reified ideas, or a noun. Thus para-criticism is criticism infused with a healthy dose of self-examination.

This vigilance, Adorno argues, is at the heart of the essay as criticism. Adorno's 1958 essay on the essay "The Essay as Form," anticipates much of the problematic raised by Mackey in his writings. According to Adorno, the essay maintains its critical power by fighting *against* the positivism that dominates the institutionalized forms of knowledge. The discrediting of the essay as a form of knowledge is a symptom of the degenerated state of knowledge: "Out of fear of negativity, the subject's efforts to penetrate what hides behind the façade under the name of objectivity are branded as irrelevant" (4). The ideological function of positivism is all too clear from Adorno's perspective. It passes off cultural constructs as natural, preventing the critique of ideology from progressing beyond a certain point (the here and now). For the essay, cultural artifacts and intellectual phenomena, even the very idea of primordality, need to be investigated: "It does not glorify concern with the original as more primordial than concern with what is mediated, because for it primordality is itself an object of reflection, something negative" (19). In the realm of thought, the essay wages a lonely battle against the dominance of positivism. Adorno concludes, "The essay is what it was from the beginning, the critical form par excellence; as immanent critique of intellectual constructions, as a confrontation of what they are with their concept, it is critique of ideology" (18). Rather than taking cultural artifacts at face value, the essayist pries open the object under his/her critical gaze.

*Bedouin Hornbook* partakes in this Adornoan sense of the essay on two levels. On the level of content, it engages in a rereading or a reassessment of black music that challenges the prevalent (mis)understanding. In an interview conducted by Edward

Foster, Mackey talks about his own rather fierce intellectual commitment as one of the foremost generative forces driving the entire project. This is Mackey on the avant-garde jazz of the sixties:

You really did have a channeling of an intellectual impulse and energy into music which ironically got understood by the dominant culture, and even to a great extent by black culture itself, as prioritizing immediacy, feeling, emotion, etcetera—which music does in fact tend to do, but with the emergence of musicians like Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Marion Brown, Bill Dixon, and later Anthony Braxton and others, you had a much more upfront acknowledgment of the intellectual component that had been driving the music. The kind of intellectuality that the formal character of the writing in *Bedouin Hornbook* conjures is in part an outgrowth of that, a very deliberate impulse on my part to foreground that intellectuality in a writing which does not try to shed its reflectiveness in the service of a presumed immediacy, instantaneity, or emotionality that black music has in too many instances and for too long been burdened with being the embodiment of or seen as the embodiment of. (PH 279)

That is, Mackey is consciously writing against the dominant culture's interpretation of jazz as an expression of immediacy and spontaneous feeling. The critic-essayist is intent on prying open that accepted formula, questioning the ideological nature of the way this particular knowledge has been organized. One could hardly ask for a more classic instance of criticism as advocated by Adorno. The aggressively intellectual and cerebral voice of the letters, not unlike Adorno's, makes Mackey's point rather difficult to miss. Every musician of the Mystic Horn Society is intelligently articulate, bordering on nerdy. They are the kind of people who can launch into a full-blown piece of cultural criticism at a moment's notice as exemplified by Penguin's reading of a piece of graffiti: "Penguin said he was struck by what he termed 'its enabling confusion concerning the singular and the plural,' that he saw its vacillation between the claims of the one and the counterclaims of the other . . ." (33). Penguin is not the only one to give a reading, and the entire band stands in the middle of the street giving contesting interpretations of the graffiti and

debating among themselves. At such moments, they are the very antithesis of the intuitive musician.

Yet the most important point of rapport (and departure) between the Adornoan essay and para-criticism is presentation. Adorno writes, “The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character” (9). The passage chimes with Mackey’s discussion of the para-critical hinge. Writing’s refusal to sit comfortably in any disposition or discipline is its radicalism. It is not so much that para-criticism fails to attain the mastery of academic criticism; it abrogates mastery as an ideal. Adorno, furthermore, embeds a curious requirement in his characterization of the essay. The essay performs nonidentity and makes it available to the consciousness of the readers “without expressing it directly.” Elsewhere in the text, Adorno writes that the essay is “more dialectical than the dialectic is when the latter discourses on itself” (19). Obviously, he thinks that something is lost when a writer discourses on the critical impulse while neglecting the form. The manner in which Mackey tackles this task is also the point where *Bedouin Hornbook* departs from the essay. Mackey gives voice to the intellectual component of jazz with the aid of fiction. Through an aestheticization of discursivity, Mackey plays the language of intellectuality like a horn. But because fiction and criticism make such strange bedfellows, *Bedouin Hornbook* is best understood as an example of “reworkings of the essay form” (Bernstein 615). It is certainly not a strategy that Adorno had in mind. I would argue that Mackey stays true to Adorno’s thinking by departing from his practice.

Both Obaldia and Adorno further our understanding of the essay by shifting the emphasis away from what the essay is to what the essay does. Obaldia highlights its tendency to reside in the margins of established forms of discourse. Adorno analyzes its critical thrust and the ways in which fragmentation formally manifests the nonidentity of a truly dialectic thinking. Mackey's para-criticism joins the two central concerns of the essay, allowing for the consciousness of the essayistic spirit, without expressing it directly.

### Improvisation and the Essay

This section examines the importance of jazz as a source of inspiration and model for Mackey's prose experiment. Although N. makes references to a wide range of African American and African diasporic music, the artists that he returns to again and again belong to that moment in jazz history located in the mid-sixties. Called by some as free jazz and by others as the new thing, this moment is represented by innovators such as John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor, among others. At the time of its emergence, free jazz "was simply a continuation of the perpetual avant-garde tradition of the music and was no more self-consciously revolutionary than bebop of 'modern music' movement" (Washington 33). The early experimenters of free jazz simply targeted the constraints that had become the most noticeable: functional harmony. The improvisational possibilities of the functional harmonic models were exhausted when Coltrane started experimenting with modal playing (Jost 18-9). Yet, this also signaled a qualitative change; free jazz eventually distinguished itself by the way its practitioners experimented with the background elements of traditional Western music. People who

could hear the radicalism perceived this music as revolutionary. Here it would help to examine an eyewitness account from the boiling center of sixties jazz. Amiri Baraka:

“Oleo” [performed by Sonny Rollins] becomes not merely a set of chords fixed under a set of changes, but a growing and constantly changing work based on the total musical shape of the piece. In a sense the music depends for its form on the same references as primitive blues forms. It considers the *total area* of its existence as a means to evolve, i.e., to move, as an intelligently shaped musical concept, from its beginning to its end. This total area is not merely constantly stated chords, but the *more* musical considerations of rhythm, pitch, timbre and melody. . . . What Rollins (and Coltrane and Coleman and Cecil Taylor, and some others) have done is to reestablish the absolute hegemony of improvisation in jazz and to propose jazz again as the freest of Western music. What Busoni meant when he said, “Music was born free; and to win its freedom is its destiny.” (53-4)

In the hands of the improvising jazz artist, the musical piece becomes a “growing and constantly changing thing.” What dictates its unfolding is not a set of prescribed rules but the musical concept that drives the composition. As Baraka puts it, the musical piece should be considered as a total area rather than a line of pre-established chordal progression. If there is any destiny to this music, it is freedom and not the need to finish a piece on a certain note. This, however, does not mean that the artist is now in a vacuum. Music becomes “an intelligently shaped musical concept, from its beginning to its end.” Every sound and rest has to be an intelligent decision guided by the concept. Improvisation requires the artist’s attentive presence at every moment. Not a single musical component can be put on autopilot, and the price of freedom is, counter-intuitively, the most heightened kind of artistic alertness.

According to the musicologist Susan McClary, convention in music is “a procedure that has ossified into a formula that needs no further explanation,” and up till quite recently—up till the innovations of African Americans, in fact—Western music was dominated by practices that can only be called conventional (2-3). Such conventions, McClary argues, are intensely ideological. Tonality, for example, “constructed musical

analogous to such emergent ideals as rationality, individualism, progress and centered subjectivity” during the Enlightenment (65). Far from passively reflecting the key concepts of the times, music shaped “the habits of thought on which the modern era depended” (65). The conventions of classical music, in short, made the ideals of modernity sensorially available to the listener. The background of a tonal composition begins with the tonic key, moves into a few other keys, and finally returns to the tonic. “This background thereby traces a trajectory something like a quest narrative, with return to and affirmation of original identity guaranteed in advance,” she writes (66). This music is intensely goal-oriented, and the delay of gratification makes the end all the more rewarding. In fact, every moment of the composition serves to affirm the tonic, and “[e]ven the most remote departure can be related logically back to the central core” (67). McClary’s interpretation shows that musical conventions indeed carry in them “nothing less than the premises of an age” (6). The Baraka passage brings the same kind of understanding to the experience of listening to “Oleo,” which enables him to report the performance as a demolition of conventions that it was.

The word that should not be bypassed in Baraka’s passage is “intelligently.” The activity of questioning musical conventions is necessarily preceded by critical labor, the work of questioning and making visible the ideological stakes of cultural givens. What Baraka calls “the absolute hegemony of improvisation” entails the critical capacity of the highest order. This might explain why jazz improvisation, like the essay, “starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about” (Adorno 4). It is almost as if a new composition is less interesting than a good improvisation on a jazz standard, a Tin Pan

Alley song, or even one's own composition.<sup>24</sup> To put it more accurately, a new composition is not by default more exciting than improvisations of existing tunes. In jazz, originality is not limited to the creation of new melodies but includes innovations to any part of the total area. This artistic intelligence that propels improvisation deserves to be emphasized because it has been neglected all too often in writings about jazz. Albert Murray in *Stomping the Blues* firmly insists that African American music involves more than raw emotion:

Such is the stuff of which blues musicianship is made. It is not a matter of having the blues and giving direct personal release to the raw emotion brought on by suffering. It is a matter of mastering the elements of craft required by the idiom. . . . It is thus also far more a matter of imitation and variation and counterstatement than of originality. It is not so much what blues musicians bring out of themselves on the spur of the moment as what they do with existing conventions. (126)

One finds a strikingly similar insistence in Mackey:

All the practicing that you do, all the internalization of a repertoire that your time in the woodshed is meant to leave you with—when somebody is standing up there improvising, the last thing they're doing is creating stuff that's just happening as they create it. They have recourse to a process of selection and combination that draws on a repertoire that they have developed through repetition, that they have developed through going over the same stuff over and over and over again and working things out. There's quite a reflective and, I would insist, intellectual process that goes on in the music. . . . (PH 280)

Both heavily emphasize the artist's familiarity with what already exists—jazz standards and repertoire—that can be achieved only through repetition and practice. Improvisation happens through the processes of “selection and combination” or “variation and counterstatement” that are spontaneous in the sense that they are events and not in the sense that they just happen *ex nihilo*.

As McClary notes, however, this adherence to the repertoire “is rarely held to be incompatible with creativity in blues-based music” (34). The relationship between the

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<sup>24</sup> I have in mind the interesting practice of recording multiple takes of a single composition that came to



different versions is more congenial than would be possible in cultures that idolize progress. Each version is an actualization of the potentially infinite number of improvisations. When Jacques Derrida interviewed Ornette Coleman in 1997, he was understandably drawn to that complex inter-relationship:

JD: Perhaps you will agree with me on the fact that the very concept of improvisation verges upon reading, since what we often understand by improvisation is the creation of something new, yet something which doesn't exclude the pre-written framework that makes it possible.

OC: That's true.

JD: I am not an "Ornette Coleman expert," but if I translate what you are doing into a domain that I know better, that of written language, the unique event that is produced only one time is nevertheless repeated in its very structure. Thus there is a repetition, in the work, that is intrinsic to the initial creation—that which compromises or complicates the concept of improvisation. Repetition is already in improvisation: thus when people want to trap you between improvisation and the pre-written, they are wrong.

OC: Repetition is as natural as the fact that the earth rotates. (322-3)

The interview is quite interesting in the way the two participants appear to be quite self-conscious about attempting a conversation from different "domains," to borrow Derrida's word. Coleman's down-to-earth response to the recognizably Derridean moment—his little spiel on the event, repetition, and the original—is almost comic in effect.

Nevertheless, the interaction gives the impression that the two find themselves agreeing with each other to the greatest possible extent. That point of agreement is the connection I am trying to make here between improvisation and critical reading and by extension the essay. Whatever the medium, both activities evince a deliberate and reflective intellectuality that revisits compositions in order to open them up again and again in search for their as yet unarticulated potential. The model presupposes a democratic relationship between the antecedent and improvisation both literary and musical. The

antecedent is validated by its power to keep generating new interpretations while an interpretation is validated by its ability to add something new, its ability to extend the original and shift the shape of the entire constellation.

This is a quality that Mackey carefully cultivates in his writings both at the level of content and the level of style. It is what he takes from jazz but translates into the linguistic medium. The complex dynamics between music and language—language as the prod to musical improvisation and music as the prod to linguistic improvisation—gets played out in the verbal accounts N. gives of his compositional processes. A representative moment would be N.'s letters on the two versions of "Meat of My Brother's Thigh." "Meat," as the title indicates, is based on an African myth about two brothers. In the story, two brothers are on their way back to their village when the younger brother stops, exhausted by hunger. He tells his elder brother to keep traveling by himself. The elder brother pretends to agree, but when he is out of his brother's sight, cuts a piece of his thigh and takes it back to the starving brother. Thanks to the sacrifice, they both complete the trip home. Only upon safely returning to the village does the younger brother learn the truth of the meat that saved his life. In the letter dated November 6, 1980, N. gives an account of the stylistic characteristics of "Meat" as it stands at the time. Six days later, another letter is dispatched with the recording of a new version of the same composition. In the interim, N. ran into a Yoruba proverb: "Kinship does not mean that, because we are entwined, we thereby rip off each other's thigh." Even on the surface level, it is easy to see that the proverb casts an ominous shadow on the theme of brotherly love and sacrifice in the original story.

This is how N. describes the proverb's impact on the compositional process:

I found myself, as you can well imagine, seductively addressed by the contentious rapport between [the proverb] and “Meat of My Brother’s Thigh.” It seemed I’d entered a cloud of lightly salted perfume, an effusive aura thick with offhand implication. Another way to put it would be to say that I’d again waded into waters in which one forever runs the risk of going under, waters deep with irreducibly primal concerns. The proverb seemed to be the tacit, contradictory motor which in its cautionary way, though unbeknown to us, had oddly kept us all afloat throughout the first version of the piece. It seemed to demand, in retrospect, that we not only do what we do but also *know* what we’re doing—which is what gave rise to this new version I’m sending. (106)

The passage is typical of *Bedouin Hornbook* in the way that N. assumes a continuum between word and music. Music and language work symbiotically in the compositional process of “Meat.” A story moves N. to musical composition; a proverb then pushes him to further composition. His and the band’s responses to cultural texts are “played out” in music. In fact, the more subtexts N. embeds in a single piece, the more multi-layered and complex the piece becomes both thematically and musically. Prodded by the Yoruba proverb, “Meat” now incorporates misgivings about violence that could potentially be perpetrated in the name of fraternal love. The piece becomes more capacious, at once extended and heterospecific (both N.’s words). Stylistically too, “Meat” becomes multivalent, now incorporating references to Archie Shepp’s “Hambone” because hambone is a children’s song in which participants slap their thighs to create rhythm. This musical citation of Shepp in a piece inspired by African myth points to the diasporic poetics at work in this cut. N. proposes an unabashed mix of heterogeneous cultural components.

Despite the smooth crossing between media, N. knows them to be different kinds of articulacy. In fact, a closer look at the above passage reveals the dynamic between word and song to be more complicated, involving issues of temporality and manifestation. Initially, it sounds as if the proverb is the cause of the new version.

However, the binary crumbles when N. notes that the “contradictory motor” was already present in the first version of the piece. Now the proverb functions more like the external manifestation of something that is inherent in the musical text. This complex temporality is at the heart of Mackey’s interpretation of improvisation. Improvisation is a manifestation of possibilities already extant in a composition, “working out the suggestions that reside within a previous statement, a musical line” (*PH* 260). A version is never the last word. The Yoruba proverb is not the end of the story either. There is an after, the second version of “Meat” that arranges in musical terms the intervention of the proverb. The proverb does not make its presence felt through any transparent or nonmusical means. It does not enter in the form of lyrics, and neither does the piece utilize Yoruba musical elements. The tension between the myth and the proverb needs to be digested and worked out in purely musical terms.

The new version marks a transition from latency to knowledge in compliance with the demand “that we not only do what we do but also *know* what we’re doing.” Music is a form of knowing; neither Mackey nor N. ever harbors doubt on that score. But this observation brings us to the final layer of “knowing” in the text—the verbal/critical commentary on “Meat.” As hesitant as N. is about writing about his compositions, he compulsively engages in the activity. This creates a rather complex chain of statement and meta-statement. If “Meat” is a critical response to the original myth, then N.’s letters become a meta-statement on a meta-statement (which would make this discussion of *Bedouin Hornbook* meta-meta-meta-statement). What I wish to highlight in this instance, besides the dizzying compound of criticism, is how these orders of statement do not stack up in such a neat manner. For example, the language of N.’s letters is contaminated by its

contiguity to music. N.'s writes that he felt as if he had entered "a cloud of lightly salted perfume, an effusive aura thick with offhand implication" upon hearing the Yoruba proverb. His language is an uneasy marriage of poetry and abstraction that attempts to speak of an intellectual experience as a sensed experience. As if bothered by its unsatisfactory grasp on whatever it is he is attempting to communicate, he gives it one more try: "Another way to put it would be to say that I'd again waded into waters in which one forever runs the risk of going under." Both attempts fail to pinpoint the impact of the proverb. If anything, the multiplication of attempts diffuses the precision of the metaphors, making his meaning more remote as it becomes increasingly enmeshed in figurative language. The contamination thus works both ways: artistic production incorporates commentary while commentary is given a poetic turn. If music talks, then writing sings and knowing becomes a form of doing.

Throughout *Bedouin Hornbook*, Mackey subjects the language of intellect to a poetic turn through N.'s voice. Not quite poetry but poetic, it is a language of resonance rather than resolution. The prose of *Bedouin Hornbook* has a distinct quality, and Mackey unfalteringly maintains that tone and syntax throughout the entire series that currently spans four volumes. Among the several interviewers of Mackey, Edward Foster is the only one to dwell on the issue of Mackey's prose style although almost every interviewer had questions about Mackey's poetry. Foster astutely observes that "the prose itself becomes almost Jamesian—highly convoluted, syntactically complex." Mackey immediately responds, "It's a language of reflection" (*PH* 278). Indeed, if we once again follow the last two sentences of the above passage, it becomes clear that they become syntactically complex due to N.'s tendency to qualify each and every thought that crosses

his mind: “The proverb seemed to be the tacit, contradictory motor which in its cautionary way, though unbeknown to us, had oddly kept us all afloat throughout the first version of the piece. It seemed to demand, in retrospect, that we not only do what we do but also *know* what we’re doing.” The statement that the contradictory motor was present in the first version is qualified by the fact that its presence was not known. The presence demanded a reckoning, but this realization came in retrospect. N. is in the habit of embedding qualifications in mid-sentence, not hesitating to interrupt the flow of whatever thought that he is putting forth. For this letter-writer, incorporating such qualifications is the purpose of the letter-writing enterprise to begin with. The letters allow him to return to his compositions or ideas for compositions. They prompt him to think through and rethink what is on tape. As Mackey notes, this is the language of reflection, a way of breaking open closed orders of signification, an alternate form of improvisation for the musician N. In that process, *Bedouin Hornbook*, which is composed solely out of the linguistic fabric, turns on itself.

N. often expresses discomfort about “explaining” his compositions in words, and it is possible to imagine “Meat” as a musical piece that can stand alone, apart from the letters. *Bedouin Hornbook*, on the other hand, is a different story; it clearly could not go on without those words. That is, N. might be just writing letters, but the author cultivates that language deliberately. The difference is once again one between “doing what we do” and “knowing what we are doing,” to recycle Mackey’s expressions. However, this is perhaps too coy a way of reading *Bedouin Hornbook*. Of course N.’s status as Mackey’s creation and “Meat”’s status as Mackey’s verbal performance cannot be suspended so conveniently. The character or alter-ego N. creates folds in Mackey’s text, an illusion of

subjectivity, dialog, depth, and levels of statement. Being an effect of such a fold, the different levels cannot be thought of in isolation. In fact, the innovation of *Bedouin Hornbook* as an essayistic text has to do with this inseparability of “doing what we do,” “knowing what we are doing” and “doing what we know.” Mackey has created a text that fuses literary production and critical commentary in a Meobius loop. It is, one might add, a phenomenon that already exists in jazz improvisation.

The difference between music and prose is an enabling gap. Responding to a question from one of his interviewers who sees the difference as a problem, Mackey responds, “I tend to view the differences not as difficulties or problems of an especially pressing sort but simply as features or facts which come with the territory. . . . one understands, in the world of correspondences, that one isn’t dealing with reproductions or even congruent mappings” (*PH* 329). The difference is the occasion for extending the possibilities of prose, for technical experimentation that would stay faithful to the difference that initiated the experiment. If improvisation has always been a fact of black music, why is it harder to imagine it in a linguistic text? What would such a text look like? It is in the process of this testing of the limitations the medium of his choice that Mackey opts for the kind of prose that defies an easy categorization and avails itself of “aspects of conventional as well as experimental narrative, essayistic analysis and reflection, diaristic and anecdotal elements, literary-critical techniques and a variety of influences ranging from mythology to anthropology to album liner notes” (*PH* 210). *Bedouin Hornbook* is, in short, improvisation in prose. Mackey writes, “It’s a work in which, while not a musician, I write as a musician” (*PH* 212).

The improvisational aesthetic of *Bedouin Hornbook*, therefore, seeks to extend the possibilities of prose without claiming to ever attain the ultimate expression. Every occasion of writing is situated on an arc of a continuous effort and is open to further elaboration, qualification, and revision. As N. sends out the second version of his meta-lecture at the end of the book, he writes, “It’s not meant to erase the earlier version so much as extend it” (217). The different versions are extensions that do not cancel each other out. They are extended essays, impromptu etudes. After all, Mackey reveals his intention in the title *Bedouin Hornbook* although its meaning is better appreciated in retrospect. The first word of the title hints at a restlessness, a discontent with the status quo. The second word assigns the status of a primer to the entire enterprise. A primer is designated to teach us the basics of an activity. It is not meant to dictate or replace future performances. This radical openness to the future explains in part the serial form of the letters. The letters could keep going, and the series *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* is indeed ongoing. We might get a fifth volume. Then again, we might not. The series could also easily break off at any moment. And that is the condition of the essay. Lukács gives an almost poetic description of that essayistic fate:

A question is thrown up and extended so far in depth that it becomes the question of all questions, but after that everything remains open; something comes from outside—from a reality which has no connection with the question nor with that which, as the possibility of an answer, brings forth a new question to meet it—and interrupts everything. This interruption is not an end, because it does not come from within, and yet it is the most profound ending because a conclusion from within would have been impossible. (14)

The essay invites its own extension. Any ending is provisional, almost accidental. So someone can always take up the questions again. But after all that, everything remains open.



The question remains, extensions for whom? What is the cultural significance and potential of improvisation? Mackey notes that improvisation has become “a metaphor for all kinds of processes of cultural and social revaluation, cultural and social critique, cultural and social change” (*PH* 290). It promotes cross-cultural mixes of the sort we encounter in N.’s music. Experimentalism in this context refers to the willingness to depart from cultural givens that often attempt to reinforce cultural and political boundaries. Take, for example, the idea of an African diasporic culture. When the rubric of the African diaspora is adopted in the academy, what is most often evoked is the dispersal of populations and cultures initiated by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Mackey’s interest in the African diaspora looks different partly because his historical framework is much broader. He goes centuries back to include the times when African and Islamic cultures mingled and traveled in North Africa; thus the reference to the Bedouins. In fact, he responds in one of the interviews that he has “a very specific moment in Bedouin culture” in mind—the Udhrite school of poets from the seventh century (*PH* 291). It is a subtle (or maybe not so subtle) reminder that cross-cultural mixes have a much longer history and involved more than the African and European civilizations. Like musical notes, cultures also refuse to sit in isolation.

One of the inevitable consequences of cross-cultural mixing is the production of noise. A pervasive and everyday example would be English spoken as a foreign/second/third/nth language. The traces of a different phonetic system result in what is most frequently referred to as an accent. This phoneme in one language does not quite match up with that phoneme in another language, resulting in an imperfect fit between the systems. Accents are the remainders and reminders of that imprecision. In contrast to

xenophobic responses to foreign language and accentual traces, Mackey embraces that discrepance in his own writing. He approaches English as if “there’s no such thing as a native language, no such thing as a native speaker” (*DE* 263). Part of what is involved in this approach is listening to language as if it were a collection of sounds: “I listen to a lot of vocal music from other countries, in languages that I don’t understand. I don’t get the lyrics at the denotative level, but I respond nonetheless, learning to listen to language without the amenities of its denotative content” (*PH* 314). This kind of training would impact his poetry more directly, but he carries the same relationship to language into his prose.

Not surprisingly, Mackey utilizes the concept of accentuation to describe aesthetic crossings as well. Early in *Bedouin Hornbook*, N. speaks of a pastel work by Irving Petlin (this is a reconstruction of Mackey’s own experience of encountered a Petlin piece at Robert Duncan’s home) and how he is truck by its visual effect of powdery erosion. N. decides to create a similar effect in a new musical work and describes the effort as “less to translate than to accent” (23). To accent is to accentuate the act of crossings between languages, media, and systems. Preserving the accent is by no means the easiest or the most intuitive choice. There are ways in which differences can be eliminated even as two incongruent things are put next to each other. Translation, for one, divests the original of its sonic elements if not most of its material aspects. Even the referential content is never delivered in whole due to words and phrases that resist translation. In this vein, N. objects to “the widespread tactic of presuming to explain by way of analogizing” (13). N.’s discussion of Petlin’s work follows hard on the heels of a letter in which N. chastises his correspondent for analogizing. The Angel, we learn, had sent copies of Mondrian and

Picasso, sensing a similarity between N.'s music and the modernist painters. N. writes back, "I might as well come right out and tell you that you won't find an ear for this music in art history classes" (14). What N. sees happening in the analogy is the erasure of difference—in this case, the materiality of sound. N. adds a rather cryptic remark that he considers "the ear as a kind of womb in which the word is made flesh, a vaginal . . . condition" (13). He recasts the ear as more than a passive receptor of sensory stimuli; the ear is like a womb in which sound is made flesh. Initially, the difference between N.'s attempt to accent what he sees in Petlin and the Angel's attempt to translate N.'s music into Mondrian and Picasso might appear to be slight. However, erasure of difference is the first step to assimilation, the antithesis of discrepant engagement.

Discrepant engagement is the critical term Mackey coins to theorize the kind of artistic and cultural practices he is interested in. It draws on the etymology of the term discrepant, which in Latin means "to creak." Discrepant engagement embraces "the creaking of categorization, the noise categorization suppresses and the noise, not admitting doing so, it makes" (*PH* 209). Because categorizations tend to obliterate the axiomatic exclusions on which they stand, discrepant engagement resists by bringing heterogeneous things together. Although Mackey hesitates to impose political meaning on his writing, the political resonances of his poetics are all too evident. "There's a challenge in heterogeneity," says Mackey, and the questions raised by this challenge "resonate with all of the political and social urgencies that have to do with how do you get different people to live together in society in some kind of positive and productive way" (*PH* 254). How do you get different people to live together in a positive and productive way? That is the problem of democracy. The juggling of differences we see in

Mackey's works are, to say the very least, reminders of such political and social urgencies. Improvisation is therefore one the oldest and always the newest strategies of working with difference.

Mackey's band of musicians, likewise, pursues discrepance. In the sixth letter in *Bedouin Hornbook*, N. includes a subtle kind of manifesto concerning the band's artistic aspiration. He proposes "a scratchiness of voice, a self-seeding smudge with overtones of erasure as a possible arc along which our music might pass." N. means this quite literally. Dirty, buzzing sound is what the band is after. On one occasion, the band has Djamila sing with a piece of waxed paper in front of her lips "to give the thrust of her singing a dispersed, ventriloquistic edge" (83). In another episode, the horns are played with toilet plungers covering the bells and mikes attached to each of these plungers. This results in a paradoxical mix of mutedness and amplification. As usual, it is difficult to exceed N.'s description of the sound: "The result was a sound somewhat like a cross between a yawn and a sigh, though not without aspects of an arrested sob" (98). N.'s pursuit of dispersed sounds becomes so much of a regular feature in these letters that at least on one occasion the Angel of Dust overreacts. In response to the Angel's over-reading, N. writes, "The 'angularity' you remarked on in my solo—the 'indirectness of address,' the bent notes and all—probably has to do with the fact that my fingers were slippery, still a bit greasy from the food we'd had at The Barn" (11). Greasy fingers or self-seeding smudge, *Bedouin Hornbook* is a veritable catalog or an ongoing variation on the theme of *the* sound.

It is befitting to end this discussion by returning to the band's sound. To speak of the sound is to be reminded of music's radical difference. It remains other to language.

From first to last, it eludes our best attempt to render it in linguistic terms. It continues to beckon from beyond, providing the occasion for radical experiments. It simultaneously reduces our efforts to just that—essays no matter how exquisite.

## Chapter Four

### “The Form, Often Called Formlessness”: The Essay and the Archive in Susan Howe’s *The Birth-mark*

A discussion of Howe’s second volume of essays should begin with the remarkable absence of criticism on this one of the most innovative volumes of essays to emerge in the 1990s. Howe critics have yet to explore the complexity of Howe’s *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*. Although a handful of critics have commented on the work, none has devoted an entire article to this book.<sup>25</sup> Part of the reason may have to do with the fact that Howe has been primarily identified as an avant-garde poet whose “obscure” poetry awaits the critic’s exegesis. One critic opens her study with the remark that *The Birth-mark* “overflows with a series of questions that beg to be turned back on Howe’s own poetry” (Williams 106). She is probably right, but I am concerned with what this critical move does not allow us to do—read *The Birth-mark* as an aesthetic object in its own right. This critical situation is perhaps ironic in the light of Howe’s own statement concerning the book: “If I looked at all my work and said what it is I cared the most about, that I felt the most proud of, or that I felt was true—it would be *The Birth-mark*” (TG 164).<sup>26</sup> The interviewer Thomas Gardner predictably responds, “Really?”

This critical neglect of *The Birth-mark* is reflective of a larger issue, the hierarchy among literary genres. Howe critics are in one sense merely reenacting (and inadvertently

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Gardner examines *The Birth-mark* as an extension of *My Emily Dickinson* in *A Door Ajar*, Stephen Collis quotes extensively from *The Birth-mark* in his study of Howe’s “anarcho-scholasticism” without quite focusing on the book, and Peter Nicholls devotes an entire article to Howe’s essays but focuses on their content. Except for these three, commentators have treated *The Birth-mark* as supplementary material for discussions of Howe’s poetry.

<sup>26</sup> Howe gave several interviews over the period of three decades. In this chapter, I use the following initials to identify her interviews: B for the interview appended to *The Birth-mark*, conducted by Ed Foster, D for

reinforcing) the essay's marginal status in relation to other established genres of literature. Because *The Birth-mark* is a collection of essays, it is automatically perceived to be supplemental and accessory to Howe's poetry. Stephen Collis, who takes an unconventional approach to Howe by focusing on her method rather than any specific genre, is a case in point. His approach is useful precisely because it does not presuppose a hierarchy between Howe's poetry and prose. Oddly enough, Collis forecloses this possibility as soon as it has been suggested: "Howe's scholarship begins in fine fashion with *My Emily Dickinson*, but it finds its full expression—its anarchic unfolding within and without institutions and hierarchies—in a poem, 'Melville's Marginalia'" (Collis *Through Words* 5). He feels the need to impose a linear trajectory of development on the complex field of Howe's oeuvre. The rationale for this elevation of "Melville's Marginalia" is not based on any qualitative difference since *My Emily Dickinson* is by Collis's own admission a "fine" work. The elevation, rather, has to do with the phrase he uses to describe the poem—full expression.

We are back in the conundrum of the essay as a marginal genre. Collis's term "full expression" implies that the thing that fully manifests itself in the poem existed in the essay as a potential. This characterization of the genre is a familiar story. In the process of acknowledging the indispensable contribution of periodical essays such as *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* to the birth of the novel, literary historians have often voiced the opinion that the novel "makes the (literary) essay redundant precisely because it develops the latter's imaginative or fictional techniques to their full potential" (Obaldia 17). Howe criticism reveals that this assessment of the essay as only potentially literary does not

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"The Difficulties Interview," JRF for the one conducted by Janet Ruth Falcon, LK for the interview conducted by Lynn Keller, and TG for the interview by Thomas Gardner.

change even when the essay is placed next to poetry. The implication is the same: the essay does not deserve an independent discussion because the poems develop the same material “to their full potential.” Howe’s essays contain the ideas that will be creatively processed in her poetry. The essays contain the raw material; the poems are the creative embodiments. This is such a persistent critical position that a closer look at the unstated assumptions is in order.

The essay is clearly straddling the divide between the literary and the extra-literary in these discussions. When critics imply that the essay is not yet literature, they are guarding an idea of literature whether deliberately or not. In the concept of “full expression,” two interrelated requirements are being voiced: a qualitative and a quantitative requirement. First is the qualitative requirement of creative embodiment. This is the demand that the artist’s abstract ideas be subjected to a process of aesthetic treatment. This process seems to incorporate the traditional ideals of aesthetic distance or fictionalization and aesthetic autonomy. In short, it is the valorization of a sealing off and breaking away from what I will refer to as reality for the lack of a better word. Related to and derived from the first requirement is a quantitative requirement, that of “fullness.” Implied in this term are the criteria of completion, totalization, mastery, and virtuosity in performance. The essays’ proximity to the draft—it is after all just a trying out—makes it a lesser relative of the established genres. Claire de Obaldia demonstrates at length how the essay is measured against the novel, a genre that arose around the same time as the essay, and found wanting. When measured against poetry, that old and venerable tradition, the essay obviously stands no chance.



The qualitative and quantitative requirements in tandem are enough to make a critic indifferent to the workings of the essay. As long as the critic insists on the “smoothing over of the essay’s disorderly fragmentariness and the working of the non-fictional into the fictional and of the abstract into the concrete,” the essay will be held at the door (Obaldia 20-1). The day the essay overcomes its inner fragmentation and its status as a fragment as well as its predilection for philosophy, perhaps it would be received as literature but it would no longer be an essay. The more one examines this crossover to literature, the more it sounds like a process of resolution, a closing down of plurality, a conforming to the law of genre in order to participate in the economy of generic distribution. The persistence of this attitude comes as something of a surprise, for American and British literary critics have for the past three decades interrogated the ideological mystification of literature.<sup>27</sup> It is as if genre is the last bastion of traditional ideas concerning literature and the literary, as if generic demarcations have been the hardest to loosen up. This model of literature is particularly ill suited to the study of the essay. It does not allow for the possibility of a different kind of creative embodiment, one that does not seal itself off or manifest itself in virtuosic fluency. Why does it go without saying that there is no creative embodiment in the essay? Why does fullness alone signal the presence of the aesthetic? What definitions of creativity could possibly give rise to this conclusion?

Ever since its emergence, the essay has been considered an impure art form because of what Obaldia calls its “mimetic constraints” (11). As a commentary on preexisting cultural forms, the essay is bound to its object. According to Georg Lukács,

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<sup>27</sup> Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction* comes to mind as a pioneering and classic work in this vein.

“it is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive. And because it orders them anew and does not form something new out of formlessness, it is bound to them and must always speak ‘the truth’ about them” (10). The activity of creating “new things from an empty nothingness” would be the idea of creativity that relegates the essay to the margins of literature. Yet even within the excerpt from Lukács, this definition of creativity is disrupted by the second sentence. The word “new” creeps back in; although the essay may not create something new, it orders them “anew.” The difference between “new” and “anew” could be, depending on one’s stance, all the difference that counts. From an alternative standpoint, however, it is doubtful if newness is the sort of quality that can be measured in degrees. Are there degrees of newness? Does not the essential quality of being new preclude that? Why is “anew” considered to be some degraded version of “new”? The destabilizing potential of “anew” is further registered in Lukács’s passage when he places quotation marks around “the truth.” With quotation marks around truth, what we mean by the essay’s “mimetic constraints” becomes an infinitely complicated matter. It can no longer designate the kind of documentary obligation that would rule out the possibility of creative engagement. The moment one steps into the region of the essay, one needs to confront the phenomenon of all things solid melting into air. That is, the essay as a marginal genre takes on these questions of inside/outside, truth/“truth,” new/anew and makes them unavoidable.

To accommodate the essay, we need a more flexible and capacious definition of creativity. One way to do this is to recast the essay’s “mimetic constraints” as mimetic commitment. The essay’s attachment to the already-formed should be understood as the

creative writer's active engagement with something—usually texts—external to the text. It is, from the artist's point of view, a form of risk-taking since the artist has to relinquish a part of his/her autonomy when handling preexisting items of discourse.<sup>28</sup> Restraint should not be automatically perceived as incompetence. Because of the aura of finality that often surrounds dusty books and crumbling documents, bringing them back to life is a task that demands the kind of creative energy that encompasses more than originality. It requires that you dirty your hands by touching artifacts from history that are often contaminated by discursive constraints of the time, a lack of imagination, narrow-minded provincialism, and willful blindness. To revisit them means to encounter their failures as much as their accomplishments. Such documents are often literally dust-covered, molding, crumbling and deteriorating. Sometimes the originals are maddeningly lost, misplaced, or intentionally mutilated. In short, the essayist looks on "a pile of debris" much as Walter Benjamin's angel of history does; the experience can be paralyzing, crippling even, due to the sheer scale of damage. It would perhaps be easier to turn one's back, but the essayist, like the angel, is unable to turn his or her gaze from the past: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (257). Essayists being no angels, they risk being swept into the storm for having ventured too close to the center of the catastrophe. Still they stay, wishing to awaken the dead, daring to dream of possibilities.

Howe is frank in admitting that the work involved in writing essays can be more demanding because the writer submits to certain constraints. "Writing poetry, I feel completely free. . . . I'm just free, at peace. Writing an essay, I want to say something

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<sup>28</sup> From a broader perspective, this is the condition of any text whether literary or not. The essay, however, distinguishes itself by refusing to cover this over.

specific. I can't figure out how to say it" (LK 26). A few lines later she concludes, "So the essays are acoustically charged just as poems are, but they originate more from fear, from a feeling of needing to write or say something but having no idea *how* to say it. They are stutters" (LK 27). At least in Howe's case, there is an intense struggle over the problem of "how" in writing essays. The essayist looks around for models in vain and has to push into new expressivity driven by a compelling need or an ethical obligation to say. Literary stutters may not be a creative embodiment that we recognize but they nonetheless need to be understood as an embodiment that deserves serious study. For those who advocate artistic fluency, stutters are suspicious because they cling too closely to the primordial limits of language. They remind us of the moment when noise turns into linguistic utterance; they remind us of the materiality of language that can never be absolutely dispelled. They are, in other words, the sonic equivalent of the birth-mark. In "The Birth-mark," Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story and *The Birth-mark*'s namesake, the husband-scientist attempts to remove the blemish on Georgiana's cheek. For Aylmer, the splotch stands for "the visible mark of earthly imperfection" (B 7).<sup>29</sup> The story ends with Georgiana dead on the operating table, confirming the essential connection between life and the mark, visible or aural. What Howe notices is that the closer writing gets to that state of perfection minus marks and noise and the more it distances itself from its earthly condition, the more it erases. As a woman, "the gaps and silences are where you find yourself" (B 158). Howe's writing, furthermore, goes beyond the feminist cause by insisting that "however marginalized women have been in American culture and however

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<sup>29</sup> Citations from *The Birth-mark* are indicated with the initial B. Because Howe weaves the words of others intimately into her text and also because some of her citations come from handwritten manuscripts, I have decided to indicate their place in *The Birth-mark* rather than tracing them back to their bibliographical

much men have been the purveyors of power, those who have suffered the loss of the Word are by no means only women” (Perloff 310). This vigilance prevents Howe from settling down too comfortably in any given form.

Her formal strategy in both poetry and prose is to employ the stutter artistically for its disruptive effect. “It involves a fracturing of discourse, a stammering even. Interruption and hesitation used as a force. A recognition that there is an other voice, an attempt to hear and speak it. It’s this brokenness that interests me” (“Encloser” 192). While affirming the brokenness, Howe simultaneously emphasizes that this is an effect that she self-consciously aims for. Interruption and hesitation are “used as a force.” It is therefore possible for an artist to intend and produce at the textual level a failure of fluency, a reminder of fluency’s failings as well as a refusal to reenact that fluency. As Peter Nicholls points out, Howe’s writing demands “an attention not only to these myriad ‘other voices’ but also to the hegemonic forms of language in which, customarily, we invite them to speak” (600). To return to the essay’s status as a marginal genre, my exploration here reveals that the two “shortcomings” of the essay as a literary genre—its refusal to seal off and its stutter—are interrelated. The ethics and the aesthetics complement each other to produce an object that is unfamiliar precisely because the essayist’s primary goal is to test other possibilities.

The essay is the genre of possibility, not of plausibility. Obaldia writes that the essay is by definition “always the expression of a possibility” (64). To speak of possibility one needs to confront hegemonic forms of discourse that have muffled other possibilities. The essayist engages with such forms without submitting to their lure.

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origins. For a full appraisal of Howe’s aesthetic, her citations need to be understood as inextricable parts of *The Birth-mark*.

Kuisma Korhonen puts it compellingly when he writes, “The poetic essay has formed a critical space of experimental thought where different ideas and sensualities are created and communicated, where existing forms of cultural production are criticized and deconstructed, and where new forms of art and writing are dreamed of” (245). This essayistic space of experimental thought is therefore a marginal space that belongs both inside and outside. It cannot sever its ties to the existing, real, historical forms of cultural production yet it refuses to stay there. It dreams of new forms and stutters in that direction. The stutter signals the proximity of other possibilities. Howe would say, “This space is the poet’s space. Its demand is her method” (B 139).

This long excursion into the spirit of the essay genre, its desires and tendencies, supports my argument that Howe’s *The Birth-mark* deserves to be taken seriously as an artistic product. Her essays are not, or not only, finger drills for Howe’s poetic performances. Collis’s study deserves one more mention because his is the most extensive treatment of Howe’s prose to date. Although Collis considers “Melville’s Marginalia” to be the full expression of Howe’s anarcho-scholasticism, he nevertheless devotes a great deal of attention to the essays and especially to their aesthetic, which is more than other critics have done. Interestingly, though, Collis is adamant in his refusal of the essay as a meaningful category for the study of Howe’s prose. In his eagerness to differentiate Howe’s prose from conventional academic criticism, an understandable desire, Collis creates a new category of writing, that of “poets’ prose” (“Archival Tactics” 60). The poet’s prose, according to Collis, is distinguished by its “reliance on parataxis rather than hypotaxis—a juxtapositional and fragmented style that does away with the normal essay conventions of transitions and narrative connections” (63). The

misrepresentation of the essay in this formulation is quite striking. One of the salient characteristics of the genre, scholars of the essay agree, is parataxis. Conventions of transitions and narrative connections probably can be spotted in any genre to varying degrees, but much less in the essay than Collis assumes to be the case. Indeed, he has to qualify his statement with a rather ambiguous term, “normal.” All this is to point out that his study would have benefited from a more nuanced understanding of the genre and an active utilization of the category of the essay in his analysis of Howe’s work. “Poet’s prose,” I would argue, is a redundant category. The essay *is* poets’ prose. Obaldia confirms this when she notes that the essay’s “connection with the category of the lyric or the ‘poetic’ is usually seen to underlie . . . its fragmentary or ‘paratactic’ structure” (3). *The Birth-mark* provides an excellent opportunity to examine this particular interface between the essay and lyric poetry.

One caveat needs to be mentioned before I proceed with my reading of Howe’s essays. I emphasize the essayistic in reading *The Birth-mark* not to confine her prose to a single genre. Indeed, Howe notes in an interview, “For me, they are a kind of poetry. I have the same problem with meaning and sound when I write them that I do when I write a poem. I don’t like separating things into categories” (JRF 32). Approaching her prose from the vantage point of the essay, nevertheless, enables us to appreciate how Howe bends her chosen genre; it enables us to examine more concretely the ways in which the essay does and does not approximate poetry. Howe says that her essays are “a kind of poetry,” not “poetry.” To begin with the essay is to explore the implications of that “kind of,” a generic quiver or smudge that is the effect of an aesthetic effort no less strenuous for aiming at imperfection. If one starts from poetry by calling her essay “prose poetry,”

then that effort will be elided or undervalued. The same can be said of readings that consider her essays to be some sort of preliminary sketches for her poetry. To sum up my rather lengthy defense of the essay on the threshold of my chapter, there is a difference between an aesthetic endeavor that aims at perfection and falls short and an aesthetic endeavor that aims at imperfection and achieves brilliant results. On multiple levels, Howe's work belongs to the latter category and the essay provides the most apt field for the trying out of her aesthetic. It is, to borrow Howe's expression, "the form, often called formlessness" (B 1).

### Essaying the Archive

The introduction to *The Birth-mark* has a curious structure. It consists of two parts and a rupture at the center. The break in Howe's prose is marked by the photographic reproduction of four pages from *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts: A Facsimile Edition, with Full Transcriptions and Scholarly Apparatus*. Howe momentarily suspends her book's pagination as if to say that we are now in a different space, a different book. I am fascinated by all that Howe manages to say in the break by relying (mostly) on visual means. Then there is the fact of the two sections, "Introduction" and "*Submarginalia*," both of which belong to the introduction of the book. I begin with a reading of the way Howe has put together her introduction, examining the complex inner dynamics between the different components. That complex interplay recalls and explicitly addresses the question of inside and outside. Howe's introduction, I argue, interrogates and performs the concept of the archive. This section is a reflection on how a writer essays the archive.



Right before the break, Howe had indeed been discussing the journals that Shelley took with him on his final journey. In the pages leading up to the break, Howe gives a detailed account of how three of his notebooks were pulled out of the boat after it was raised from the sea, how heavily damaged they are by water, mildew, and restoration, how one of them has been rechristened as “Bodleian Manuscript Shelley adds. e. 20.” Despite this richly detailed discussion, she does little to prepare the reader for the photographic reproduction that follows the closure of “Introduction.” The scholarly convention of introducing the insertion of alien material is dispensed with. Howe even does the opposite by placing three asterisks at the end of page 21, as if to indicate that she is wrapping up this particular topic. When the unsuspecting reader flips over that page, he or she is suddenly immersed in a different space: a page from Shelley’s notebook containing scrawls in the poet’s unfamiliar hand. Confronted with a radically different object, the reader flounders for a while, re-orienting to the page. The eyes dart between the facsimile and the transcription, slowly matching up the two, realizing that what looked like an illegible cluster of spikes was “Milton,” for example. Slowly, the suspicion dawns on the reader that this image might be from adds. e. 20. The eyes seek out the information provided in the caption at the bottom: “Page from Shelley’s Manuscript Book (Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 20: Quire II Folio 2 Recto = 2 Recto).” These scrawls and molding pages are some of Shelley’s last remains.

Howe’s juxtaposition of the manuscript and the state of the art transcription from Donald H. Rieman et al. raises questions through visual means concerning the way we read historical documents. The very fact that most readers will have to rely on the printed transcription, use it as a crutch to decipher Shelley’s handwriting silently sensitizes us to

the dominance of print in our culture. As much as the facsimile stands for the immediate and the original, our visual relation to Shelley's handwriting is awkward if not inadequate. Our eyes have been conditioned otherwise. We are no longer trained to decipher the elaborate handwritings of the past—we now have experts who specialize in that activity. The eye, even before the mind, balks at Shelley's idiosyncratic scrawls, refusing to exert itself in the activity of deciphering such singularity. In short, we are shockingly removed from the facsimile by our readerly incompetence. Matching the transcription with the handwriting is a painfully slow process, resembling the act of reading a passage written in a foreign language of which one has only rudimentary knowledge.

The transcription, in turn, raises further questions. Although our eyes traverse the print with ease, the transcription is almost aseptic in comparison to the facsimile. A great deal of information has been left out. There is no mildew or stains left by the sea. The font size has been regularized whereas Shelley sometimes wrote in different sizes. "Shakespeare," for example, often flourishes across the page, in one instance taking up as much as half the page. The regularized font fails to capture the ornamental (almost graphic) effect of Shelley's hand. Places where ink faded are marked with empty brackets in the transcription. Shelley's little drawings also go in brackets: [SKETCHES OF TREES]. The transcription refuses to cross the line into visual art. The editors, nonetheless, faithfully reproduce anything that belongs to the realm of writing. They painstakingly read and write even the words that Shelley crossed out. To indicate the crossing out, they strike a hyphen through the letters. Here again, the transcription is more ideational in effect. Sometimes Shelley uses two horizontal lines to cross out

something; the editors consistently use a single line. Despite these discrepancies, this is probably as close as we can get to a “facsimile edition, with full transcription and scholarly apparatus.” The limits I am pointing out concern the inherent limits of print.

Like a swimming instructor who begins by shoving the student into water, Howe immerses the reader into the intricacies and complications of the archive when she places the facsimile in her introduction. Howe allows the readers to explore the difficulties and experience the awe that approaches a physical shock occasioned by adds. e. 20. Howe’s account of the circumstances surrounding its recovery was dramatic enough, yet she seems to be saying that her account cannot replace the experience of seeing the document. The scholarly transcription in its own way affirms this by deferring to the manuscript. The transcription does not aspire to become the thing it transcribes but is there to aid the reader. The facsimile resists the encroachment of print on both sides while also resisting our desire to look beyond or through it. The longer one stares at Shelley’s remains, the stronger becomes the sense of loss. The loss it represents accumulates—the death of the poet, the severance that writing represents, and the inability of language to retrieve what it represents. The manuscript “holds the trace of that touch” but only the trace of the touch and not the moment of contact (TG 162). Uncannily, Shelley appears to have anticipated this moment and the pages chosen by Howe seem to comment on these concerns. “~~Emblem~~,” Shelley writes. And below that, “Emblems these of love & health / Fading like the.” What is fading? Is it love and health or emblems? Either way, the manuscript physically enacts the fading of both. The manuscript is an ~~emblem~~, an eroding image that blocks as much as it reveals. Howe cannot continue beyond this point

but has to start over. The archive is a paradoxical space, the site of preservation as well as erasure.

In the first part of her introduction, the twenty pages leading up to Shelley's manuscript, Howe interrogates the exclusionary practices in textual and archival scholarship. In a very small space, Howe manages to touch on multiple instances of exclusion. The "authoritative" editions of Emily Dickinson's poems and letters are a striking example of editorial cleanup verging on distortion. Alongside such editorial practices, Howe mentions the letters written by Elizabeth Hawthorne about her brother Nathaniel. Elizabeth Hawthorne wrote the letters upon a biographer's request. "Then he didn't use them," Howe adds tersely (15). Howe pays attention to the subterranean channels between nineteenth-century writers, noting Melville's marginal marks on his copies of Hawthorne and Shelley, Emily Dickinson's commentary on Poe and Hawthorne in her letter to T.W. Higginson, Coleridge's marginal comments on Walter Birch's sermon on enthusiasm. Most strikingly, however, Howe devotes at least half of her discussion to F.O. Matthiessen, a twentieth-century commentator on Melville and Hawthorne and the author of "the classic text for American studies until the revisionary 1960s and 1970s" (10). The fact that Howe spends so much time on a critic rather than a writer in this initial section further confirms my reading that Howe takes issue with scholarship *per se*. In Howe's depiction, however, Matthiessen, the would-be archon, turns out to be a more complex and contradictory figure than expected. Howe quotes several passages from Matthiessen's letters to his lover Russell Cheney, especially the letters written when Matthiessen was a young man. In these letters, he expresses his admiration of Shelley and Whitman and admits frankly to the "[e]nchantment of the

other” (15). We also read Matthiessen’s words of uncertainty written while he was being treated for suicidal tendencies: “For even though it should turn out that I am an enthusiast trying to be a critic, a Platonic rhapsode trying to be an Aristotelian, that means a fairly hard period of readjustment, but scarcely grounds for death for a man of thirty-six” (10-11). Despite all his youthful enthusiasm and inner doubt, in *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, Matthiessen disparaged Shelley’s neo-Platonic aesthetics, “downplayed his influence on Melville and deplored it in Hawthorne” (14). There are no women in his *American Renaissance*.

This panorama of exclusions ends with Howe physically barred from the archive:

During the 1950s, although I was only a high school student, I was already a library cormorant. I needed out-of-the-way volumes from Widener Library. My father said it would be trespassing if I went into the stacks to find them. I could come with him only as far as the second-floor entrance. There I waited while he entered the guarded territory to hunt for books. At the margin of the stacks of Widener there are three small dioramas built into the wall. Conceived in 1936, these simulations were meant to celebrate the tricentennial of Harvard College. Each one holds a bird’s-eye view of Cambridge then and before. These miniature versions of a past that wasn’t and a present that isn’t are locked in place behind glass in the entrance hall to Widener Library. . . . What is forbidden is wild. The stacks of Widener Library and of all great libraries in the world are still the wild to me. Thoreau went to the woods because he wished to live deliberately in order to give a true account in his next excursion. I go to libraries because they are the ocean. (18)

This is an emblematic scene that occurs again and again in Howe’s writing. A similar scene appears, for example, in *The Midnight* published ten years after *The Birth-mark* in which Howe is thwarted from viewing Emily Dickinson’s manuscripts housed in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. At the same time, the passage quoted above deftly situates itself within the network of images and symbols of this particular text. The paragraph begins with Howe’s self-designation as a library-cormorant, an expression she borrows from Coleridge. Cormorants are sea birds that dive into the ocean and hunt for

food. They are underwater swimmers. Young Howe being told to wait at the entrance of the stacks is like a cormorant being withheld from the sea, and it is no coincidence that the guardian of the stacks is her father, a Professor of Law at the said university.

The passage then reveals that she is not the only one with avian aspirations. What at first appears to be a casual description of the tricentennial memorial—the three dioramas—turns out to be an apt representation of what the university stands for. The three dioramas attempt to freeze time and look down on Cambridge from an observation-point up in the air. It comes as little surprise that the images commemorating the tricentennial of Harvard depict not the institution but the city. They capture the spirit of the university, its will to knowledge, the will to master the world that surrounds it. As Michel de Certeau writes, “[T]he fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more” (92). The fictional aspect of this desire is not lost on Howe. Far from being seduced by the dioramas, she characterizes them as “versions of a past that wasn’t and a present that isn’t.” The image of Cambridge of 1936 is no longer the present but more significantly, a reconstructed image of the past will always be “a version of a past that wasn’t.” This is the kind of scholarship that Howe resists, one that would “constitute the twofold projection of an opaque past and an uncertain future onto a surface that can be dealt with” (Certeau 93-4). She concludes by calling the library the wild, the ocean. One recalls at this point that the cormorant enters and lives off the sea. Howe is a library cormorant, poised to enter the archive that is as mysterious as the sea. She is not satisfied with a bird’s-eye view.

Immediately after the library episode, Howe moves on to a discussion of Shelley, his journals, and the Bodleian Shelley manuscripts editorial project, an alternative form

of scholarship that was just beginning to gain advocates at the time Howe was writing the introduction in the early nineties. Within this context, the pages from Shelley's journal are like the offerings of a cormorant, leaves quite literally pulled out of the sea. They mark a critical moment in the introduction, cleaving the introduction into two and preparing us for Howe's plunge into the archive. "*Submarginalia*" follows the break. The title is an odd neologism. Marginalia is by definition subsidiary; the prefix "sub" is in this respect redundant. On the other hand, the prefix recalls the word "submerge," intimating the diving motion of the cormorant. The prefix then celebrates the moment of release in Howe's prose.

The qualitative change in "*Submarginalia*" relates to the form. Most striking is what Howe's critics have often referred to as the collage-like aspect of her writing, the way she places citations from historical documents (sometimes a single sentence, sometimes a block of writing, but most frequently, three to five sentences) next to each other and also next to her own creative and/or critical response. Howe critics have indeed been quite inventive in their own attempts to describe this aspect of her prose. Some examples include "creative and scholarly collage" (Howard 82), "a vast collage or collagenic network" (Butterick 319), and "documentary collage" (Perloff 302). By far, collage is the most favored term, perhaps reflecting the visual effect that Howe's prose often creates with the spaces between chunks of prose, the different type she uses for certain insertions like Dickinson's poems, and the incorporation of alien materials such as the photo-facsimile of Shelley's manuscript that opened my discussion of the introduction. Another characteristic that has received much attention is the layering of tones that results in a very unconventional voice. Some critics have attempted to register

this aspect of her prose by calling her work “an innovative essay” (Naylor 335), “iconoclastic studies” (LK 2), and “a critical-poetic exploration” (Jenny White 246). Perhaps the most intriguing of these designations is the one from John Taggart: “prose” in scare quotes (266). There is no single voice or tone that Howe resorts to; some parts sound scholarly, others approach dream talk, and then there are moments of subdued monologues, passionate soliloquies, addresses, disjointed mumbles, and yes, poetry. “Prose” is probably the most economic way of putting it but perhaps overly so.

Here, I want to examine “*Submarginalia*” more closely in part to show that Howe’s art is more intricate than the dominant term “collage” implies. This close reading is at the same time the kind of scrutiny that the section actively solicits. It is in many ways a concentrated demonstration of Howe’s method, the significance of which I will discuss after the reading. Two central metaphors hold the section together: the cormorant and the strand. Both metaphors contain several layers of meaning that also get articulated in some unpredictable ways. The cormorant is a sea bird living on the strand, “the part of a shore lying between tidemarks” (27). However, both in the East and the West, cormorants were trained to fish for the owner. During the early stages of their training, a rope or cord would be tied to their necks. A strand “is a filament or fiber laid to form a unit for twisting or braiding into yarn, thread, rope, or cordage” (27). At the highest level of training, cormorants could fish for their owners with no ropes tied to them. Bondage never looked more like freedom. At the same time, Howe considers bondage to be more complex than a simple absence of freedom. She quotes from a letter Emily Dickinson wrote to her sister-in-law: “Emerging from an Abyss, and reentering it—that is Life, is it not, Dear? / The tie between us is very fine, but a Hair never dissolves” (29). A (strand



of) hair never dissolves and holds the connection between individuals, friends and family. In Dickinson's letter, strand suddenly stands for more than the loss of freedom. It becomes a complex figure, and so does the sea. Both the cormorant and the strand figure freedom and restriction at different moments in "*Submarginalia*," and these meanings are twined with citations from writers as diverse as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, his daughter Sara Coleridge, Cotton Mather, John Winthrop, Herman Melville, his wife Elizabeth Shaw Melville, Emily Dickinson, Lacan, and Foucault. The meanings of the strand and the cormorant are not explicated in a single paragraph; they come piecemeal in between the words of others, pulling those other words into the braid that is "*Submarginalia*." In fact, strand is also a figure for Howe's text. Howe brings diverse voices and layers of meaning together and braids each strand into the cordage that is her text. Self-reflexively she writes, "I will twine feathers, prickings, rulings, wampum beads, chance echoes, sprays of lace in the place of your name" (27). Heterogeneous materials go into the making of this cord: natural/artificial, Indian/European, sonic/tactile. Even here, the cormorant comes back in the form of feathers. Elsewhere in the text, Howe mentions that in Japan and China cormorant feathers were held by women giving birth because they were believed to ease delivery, the transition from mother's womb to the world outside. Cormorant feathers ease transition; the strand is also a transitional space, an intertidal zone, a place that twice a day belongs to land and twice a day is submerged under seawater. The marginal space is Howe's space. It is precisely where she situates her own commentary in relation to the writers she quotes and addresses, the "you" that she calls again and again.

Although similar to collage, the metaphor of the strand is more spacious. It draws attention to the braiding process and the not-so-straightforward dynamic between inside and outside visualized by the rising and falling of the tide. All the concerns that I touched on come together in the following passage:

lashed in a hammock, hemp around his neck, dragging cables, cordage,  
without volition under language, in a measure mysteriously woman, Billy drifts  
fathoms down dreaming *Obey* pinned to a clip now gone. What space to which to  
extend the arms; at that instant we are all like swimmers. "Fathoms down,  
fathoms down, how I'll dream fast asleep." Fathom understanding: fathom which  
wave to think. "O, 'tis me, not the sentence they'll suspend." The ballad is so  
mutinous without a known author. Fatherless in the same sentence that syllables  
will flood utterance. Warbling, warbling. Leaving no verb in their eyes  
our predestinated depths who fathoms. Strond strund stronde strand. The  
margin submerges phonic substance. A mother's thread or line is ringed about  
with silence so poems are  
Billy radically alone. (37)

In this passage, the cord that is lashed around Billy's neck turns out to be language itself, for Billy is "without volition under language." This condition soon expands to include not just Billy the character (whose verbal capacity fails him when he needs it the most) but every human being. Howe implicates us all into the same condition by switching to the pronoun "we." Like Billy, we extend our arms fathoms down in an unfamiliar element. Simultaneously, the hemp around Billy's neck is literal, since Billy is hanged for the crime of murder. Billy's lament, "O, 'tis me, not the sentence they'll suspend" confirms the inevitable, physical consequences of hanging by rope. Within the echoes and resonances of the passage, however, the word "sentence" refuses to carry the immediate meaning articulated by Billy. Since Howe already connected the rope around Billy's neck to language, "sentence" brings to mind the unit of syntax. Meaning once again wavers between the literal and the figural. A bitter sweet mixture of violence and music that follows (mutinous ballad, fatherless syllables, warbling with no verbs) heightens the issue

of this hemp around our necks. Language spells our doom and sustenance. We ward off death by drowning on the one hand and death by the rope on the other.

Howe elaborates on this further in the interview appended to *The Birth-mark*. She notes that “to be born would be to hear sound you couldn’t understand. And to die is to hear sound, then silence. So it’s the articulation that represents life” (172). Articulation and, more broadly, sound represent life. Words, however, are a trickier matter. In the same interview, she comments that words are used as “buoys” to hold us up against the sea that is an absolute silence or perfect absence. “If you answer the lure of the silence beyond the waves washing, you may enter the sea and drown. . . . If you follow the word to a certain extent, you may never come back,” she adds (178). But the words themselves are unreliable and even false, like masks. The word’s status as a replacement of something else prods the experimental writer to strike at the mask. “What is behind that mask? But you have to strike through it. The mask is the icon. The icon may be a mask. I hope there is something . . . I don’t know” (177). Emily Dickinson, according to Howe, “explored the implications of breaking the law just short of breaking off communication with a reader” (My Emily 11). The innovator of language stands on a precarious edge or strand between breaking and breaking off. In the interim, there is the pure pleasure of sound: “Strond, strund stronde strand.” This juxtaposition of variant and archaic spellings of strand has an unexpected musical effect.<sup>30</sup> In the background one also hears the verb “to strum,” resonating in the echo of those words. It is as if Howe is strumming on a string (strand?) instrument. At such moments, Howe’s “prose” approaches pure sound,

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<sup>30</sup> This is a standard feature in Howe’s poems. The effect of using archaic forms of words defamiliarizes those words while unearthing the archaeological layers that exist even in a single word. In her poetry, however, she does not string the variants as she does here. It is as if the same strategy brings different results in verse and prose.

for a moment luxuriating in the pleasures of music and forgetting the harrowing condition that is being described. It is a freedom *in* language that Howe gains only by breaking the rules of language.

In short, Howe's prose becomes overtly unconventional as she passes into "*Submarginalia*." The second part of the introduction does not necessarily move into a different set of questions but the voice becomes less recognizably academic. It performs what Howe calls an "undervoice," a voice that "keeps on speaking *against* the grain" ("Encloser" 192). This section creates a submerged space within the introduction and then fills that space with heterogeneous materials twined by Howe's hands. This is registered in the title "*Submarginalia*" that is, unlike any other section, italicized as if the letters were underwater. According to the page header, the section belongs to the introduction. Between pages 26 and 42, the top of the recto leaf says "*Submarginalia*" and the top of the verso leaf says "Introduction." (Between pages 1 and 21, we get mirror images "Introduction" on verso and "Introduction" on recto.) In the table of contents, on the other hand, Howe gives it an independent listing. Due to these contradictory signals, the section hovers somewhere inside and outside the introduction. It brings depth and resonance to the introduction alongside the facsimile from Shelley's sea-drenched manuscript. If "Introduction" demands a different kind of scholarship, then "*Submarginalia*" begins to imagine that different relationship to the archive. Together the two sections essay the archive thematically and aesthetically.

Howe's archival aesthetic differs from the will to knowledge discussed earlier in relation to Harvard. Certeau's theorization of walking in the city is useful in illuminating this difference. Certeau calls the panoptic, totalizing representation of the city the

“concept” of the city in opposition to walking, which is a “fact” of the city. Walking represents a different kind of relationship to the city. The walker does not necessarily see the semiotic text produced by his or her perambulation, yet the walker lives the city while the watcher has to detach him or herself from the object of the gaze. In the context of the archive, the “concept” would be the official interpretation of the archive’s key contents or the ideas these contents are supposed to uphold, while the “fact” would be the actual experience of finding books, reading them, and using them. The former is “the archive as a way of seeing, or a way of knowing; the archive as a symbol or form of power” (Steedman 2). The latter is in many ways in conflict with that power. As much as the archons of the archive would like to control those practices, they cannot control in an absolute manner the trajectory of one’s reading. Reading, like walking, is an everyday practice that occurs “below the threshold at which visibility begins” (Certeau 93).

Because Howe explicitly and consistently works with forgotten, wayward volumes, her interviewers have often asked her about this aspect of her writing. In response, Howe has given vivid accounts of the experience of diving into the archive. This following passage is an especially striking description of her chance encounter with Hope Atherton, a figure ignored by his contemporaries and forgotten by historians:

Sterling houses books that aren’t used often, so it has an aura of death. These books have lost their interest. Only a few professors or library workers or the odd student on the track of something eccentric come up to the sixth floor, where American history books are. It’s usually very, very quiet up there. The lights are off. In silence and semidarkness, it’s mysterious. I was turning the pages of a history of Hadley, and Hope’s name just caught me. It was an emblematical name. (B 167)

Instead of going into the stacks knowing what she wants, Howe wanders among the books. The archive resembles a tomb; it is dark, silent, and mysterious. In fact, the image

stands in striking contrast to what knowledge is supposed to produce: “transparency and visibility” and “a space of exact legibility” (Foucault 154). In this darkness and silence, a name that is an emblem “catches” her: Hope.

In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Derrida theorizes the archive as the site of an on-going struggle. The problematic of inside and outside is the central problem of the archive. A key distinction Derrida makes early in his book is the one between the archive and memory. If memory can be live or spontaneous, the archive is a “hypomnesic technique” that involves consigning documents to an external place (16). The Greek *arkheion*, he points out, designated the house of the magistrate, the physical location where documents were stored (2). The distinction between inside and outside is, therefore, the condition for the existence of the archive. The archontic principle attempts to minimize the risks of disruption by policing what belongs and what does not. It attempts to “coordinate a single corpus, in a system of synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret” (3). In other words, it operates much like the bird’s-eye view discussed earlier as the fiction and the ambition of the modern epistemic enterprise. Such principles define not only the making of the archive but also the permissible usage of the archive. Access to archival material is often limited. More importantly, the way one uses the material in the archive is dictated by the explicit and implicit rules of the discipline. Carolyn Steedman notes that “academic, professional, ‘scientific’ history inaugurated itself a century and a half ago,” shaping the way we think of archival research to date (x). It emphasizes a positivist approach to the contents of the archive as “evidence” for writing history.

The past, however, is only one aspect of the disjointed structure of the archive. The archive, Derrida points out, is a “movement of the promise and of the future no less than of recording the past” (29). One of the consequences and causes of this openness is the phenomenon of the growing archive. The archive is not a fixed, closed system. It never can be “a system of synchrony” dreamed of by the archons, and this is precisely the point where absolute authority breaks down: “By incorporating the knowledge deployed in reference to it, the archive augments itself, engrosses itself, it gains in *auctoritas*. But in the same stroke it loses the absolute and meta-textual authority it might claim to have” (69). The interpretation of the archive becomes a part of the archive and alters it. In fact, that is the dream of every interpretation, the dream of “opening [the archive] and by enriching it enough to have a rightful place in it” (67). Derrida points out that there is no meta-archive, only archive and an altered archive. It is worth emphasizing that the “future” that Derrida refers to is not a later point in the physical spatiotemporal continuum but an affirmation of the unknowable, an affirmation that is “the condition of all promises or of all hope” (68). Hope resides in the archives for both Derrida and Howe. Hope is another name for the possibility of a different relation to the archive.

The urgency that Howe repeatedly confesses to feel when working with the archive<sup>31</sup> is, I would argue, reflected in Derrida’s writing on the archive as well, especially in his insistence on “the ethico-political dimension of the problem” (19). If one thinks of the archive as a thing of the past, the object of the historian’s study, this urgency may make little sense. However, if one conceives of the archive as a pledge as Derrida does, then how one works in the archive makes a profound difference. He asks, “[D]oes one need a first archive in order to conceive of originary archivability? Or vice versa?

This is the whole question of the relation between the event of the religious revelation and a revealability, a possibility of manifestation, the prior thought of what opens toward the arrival or toward the coming of such an event” (80). Although the first option might initially make more intuitive sense—that the event precedes its archivization—it is also true that archivability determines what gets archived in fundamental and crucial ways. That is, “the prior thought” may incite the coming of the event or at least the archivability of the event without which the event would not enter the archive. Clearly, Derrida does not choose between the two possibilities he suggests. Instead, he throws another question that troubles the linear model of time: “Is it not true that the logic of the after-the-fact . . . turns out to disrupt, disturb, entangle forever the reassuring distinction between the two terms of this alternative, as between the past and the future, that is to say, between the three actual presents, which would be the past present, the present present, and the future present?” (80). This is a question that Howe throws back to her audience when one of them suggests that in her essays “the interpretation or the opinion is entirely separate from even the evidence of what happened.” She says, “Of course I can’t *really* bring back a particular time. That’s true. Or it’s true if you think of time as moving in a particular direction—forward you say. But what if then *is* now” (“Encloser” 194). Indeed, what if the reassuring distinction between the three presents were forever entangled? The archive, these writers seem to suggest, houses a different sense of time.

Derrida’s concept of the archive demands that we work differently with the archive. In fact, he wryly points out that Marcellus had a point when he implored Horatio to talk to the ghost of the king: “Thou art a Scholler, speake to it, Horatio.” Marcellus seems to have anticipated what Derrida calls “*a scholar of the future*, a scholar who, in

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, her comments on p. 167 in *The Birth-mark* and p. 195 of “Encloser.”



the future and so as to conceive of the future, would dare to speak to the phantom” (39). Expanding on this idea, Derrida introduces the concept of an unconscious archive, a concept that is particularly useful for reading *The Birth-mark*. Derrida introduces the concept in the process of criticizing the kind of positivity that supposes that things are “simply absent, *actually* absent, if they are not simply present, *actually* present” in the archive (64). This assumption lurks behind the comment that Howe’s essay “is entirely separate from even the evidence of what happened,” a comment that comes very close to accusing her of making things up. Undoubtedly, the commentator would accept only what is “simply present, *actually* present” as evidence. However, the orchestral effect of the introduction of *The Birth-mark* is to make visible and critique the exclusionary practices that result in an archival unconscious in the first place. As Derrida writes, there is no one process to the production of ghostly traces: repression, suppression, destruction, secrecy, and voluntary silences. Some of the absences can be so absolute so as to be “short of or beyond a suppression, on the other edge of repression, originary or secondary, without the least symptom, and without even an ash” (101). Howe’s introduction likewise points to the multiple instances of repression and suppression, burnt manuscripts, silences both voluntary and forced, and irrecoverable wisps that remain “short of or beyond suppression, on the edge of repression.” The untamed—like Dickinson’s calligraphic manuscripts—are domesticated. The marginal—such as Elizabeth Hawthorne’s letters or Matthiessen’s enthusiasm—are relegated to private correspondences. The ghostly—marginal comments and marks and things that never found material or discursive shape—go unacknowledged.

On the practical level, Howe's question concerns the way we edit and reprint documents in the archive for future use. Here, she has a very specific agenda concerning the way we transcribe and reprint manuscripts and drafts. If the positivist approach privileges the "authoritative" edition, Howe makes a case for facsimile editions and transcriptions that preserve all the alternatives and cancellations, even random marks and marginalia. To put her agenda in historical perspective, it concerns the way we think of the art work in general. Since the sixties, avant-garde artists have more and more explicitly emphasized the processual in aesthetic production.<sup>32</sup> Critics have gradually recognized this as an aesthetic and have started to perceive it as an object of study. But have they allowed the same knowledge to bear on their methodology? Have we learned to pay attention and respect the "halo of wilderness" that surrounds certain texts if not all texts (B 136)? This is the point where Howe introduces the then recent and innovative editorial project for the Bodleian Shelley manuscripts. The editors write, "The chief aim of the Bodleian Shelley manuscripts is neither textual nor critical, but archival" (19). This archival approach to Shelley's manuscripts involves a loosening up of critical authority. It is a complex form of authority because one could not say that no authority is involved. After all, only the most valorized poets and writers are deemed worthy of "a group of scholars from various disciplines who are working together with a variety of methodologies" (19). At the time of Howe's writing, she had heard of such projects being undertaken for Shelley and Hölderlin. Nevertheless, the actual work would be collaborative since it is a group of scholars working together rather than an individual

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<sup>32</sup> This, however, does not mean that this knowledge or practice was new. A larger number of artists became more self-conscious about the processual aspect of their work and there was a burst of creative exchange and influence between artists working in similar and different media starting from the sixties. For

making arbitrary judgments. No single intention is privileged, not even Shelley's for that matter. There is something profoundly unselfish about the job these scholars are undertaking; they perform a self-erasure in the interest of the archive. It is a work of translation.

While endorsing the shift in editing practices, Howe simultaneously points out the limits of this work of translation. She is fully aware of the fact that this is just one kind of translation with certain advantages but a translation nonetheless. She writes, "Thoughts delivered by love are predestined to distortion by words. If experience forges conception, can quick particularities of calligraphic expression ever be converted to type?" (4). As thoughts become words, and as calligraphy becomes type, something is lost. In the case of Emily Dickinson, the difficulties are further compounded by her refusal to publish her poems during her life and her habit of sending her letter-poems with things that are by default ephemeral—dead crickets, a bouquet, and other things now irretrievable. On this aspect of Dickinson's work, Howe says, "I often wake up in the night and think, No, I am wrong. She would not agree. She would be angry with me. It's something to do with her way of not publishing, of copying her work into packets she sewed together herself, with what she left out (numbers, titles), with what she left in (variant word listings, various marks). I think she may have chosen to enter the space of silence" (B 170). Derrida calls such silences "the inviolable secret" (100-1). It is the cause of archive fever, the burning for something that can never be recovered. Such a passion cannot be appeased once and for all with an authoritative edition or even a revisionist edition.

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an overview of this widespread change in the aesthetic atmosphere, see Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity* and Joan Retallack's *The Poethical Wager*.

Howe's *The Birth-mark* occupies the place between a revisionist edition and the undercutting of the said enterprise. Right in the middle of her discussion of Matthiessen, for example, Howe inserts the following comment: "Jonathan Arac points out that the American Civil war isn't even indexed in F.O. Matthiessen's book about mid-nineteenth-century rebirth. I have neglected to mention Matthiessen's many and varied leftist political affiliations during the 1930s and 1940s" (17). That is, we cannot allow ourselves the luxury of feeling scandalized by this omission in Matthiessen's work. Writing is by default a process of selection. Howe's writing omits an aspect of Matthiessen's work that one could hardly afford to leave out in a general assessment of a man's life. The only thing that perhaps distinguishes *The Birth-mark* from *American Renaissance* would be this precise moment when Howe interrupts her text and exposes with little ado the omission in her own textual reconstruction of a life. Comparing writing to a ladder, Howe writes, "Rungs between escape and enclosure are confusing and compelling" (46). By mentioning Matthiessen's politics, Howe has just pointed to a huge gap between two rungs of her text. Still, ladders would be unclimbable without some space between the rungs.

#### Our Lamps Are Out

I have not yet started the discussion of *The Birth-mark* proper. Thus far, my chapter has lingered on Howe's long introduction, the striated introduction that does more than simply introduce the subject matter of the book. It demonstrates and initiates the principle of glossing that will dominate the rest of the book. Howe states that the "*Submarginalia*" section is "a play with footnotes" (LK 28). Twelve pages make a very

long footnote indeed. By sustaining the footnote, Howe succeeds in splitting her voice, which presumably emerges from a single writing subject, into voice and undervoice. Her introduction is highly unconventional from a functional perspective as well. Obaldia writes that the usual foreword or preface “favours the abstract, the theoretical, or the critical: to give an ‘idea’ of the literary work in a preface or in a conclusion is to ‘tell’ rather than to ‘show’” (20). Howe’s introduction places a heavy emphasis on showing, on acting out and pushing to the extreme the principle of glossing that threatens to take the readers away from the main essays in a downward spiral.

Howe does little to conceal the faltering start of *The Birth-mark*. The opening pages of book are laid out in the following manner:

- i: a half-title, “The Birth-mark”
- ii: a facsimile page from Melville’s bible, Luke 13:34
- iii: full title page including the title and Howe’s name
- iv: copyright notice and related information
- v: three epigraphs from Hawthorne, Dickinson, and Melville
- vi: blank
- vii: table of contents
- viii: blank
- ix-xiii: Acknowledgements
- xiv: blank
- xv: a half-title, “The Birth-mark”
- xvi: blank
- 1 – 21: Introduction
- 22 – 25: facsimiles of Shelley’s manuscript
- 26 – 42: *Submarginalia*<sup>33</sup>

If we add up the roman and Arabic numerals, the book takes nearly sixty pages to get started. Especially in the early pages, Howe creates the sense of starting over and over with each flip of the page. Moments of intense affect are isolated or cut off violently by the functional pages of the book, the parts that carry the title or copyright information.

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<sup>33</sup> This list is inspired by a similar list done by Kent Lewis for another book by Howe, *A Bibliography of the King’s Book; or Eikon Basilike*.

The most puzzling aspect, however, is the extent to which each moment moves into the proper substance of the book before being cut off. Howe's "Acknowledgements," for example, is first and foremost a bibliography in the form of acknowledgement. Before she gets to her colleagues, editorial assistants, and family, she spends most of the space acknowledging the intellectual debt to other scholars such as Patricia Caldwell and Amy Shrager Lang, discussing their monographs at length. This is not a one-time gesture but a running theme in *The Birth-mark*. For example, a similar acknowledgement is echoed at the end of "*Submarginalia*" where she writes, "Sometimes I know you just from reading. It is the grace of scholarship. I am indebted to everyone" (39). Far from being dispensable, each moment—Melville's marginalia, the epigraphs, the bibliographical acknowledgement—has the feel of the opening of *The Birth-mark*. Their erasure is nevertheless palpable and reaches its height on page xv. Page xv is a half-title page that is identical to the very first page, page i. It is a visual cut to an earlier moment. The re-appearance of the same title page has the effect of assigning the intervening pages to a textual limbo. Locked in a fierce struggle over marking and erasing, these initial pages create the effect of a visual stutter.

The stutter contributes to the difficulty of telling where exactly *The Birth-mark* begins. After navigating the first sixty pages, we think we are immersed well enough. The realization that we have yet to begin *The Birth-mark* proper comes as a shock when we encounter the first page of "Incloser" that presents a parable about closure. This first of the three main essays begins with the parable of the ten virgins placed squarely in the middle of page 43. The biblical story is about ten virgins who went forth to meet the bridegroom with their lamps. The five wise virgins took oil with their lamps whereas the

foolish ones forgot to take oil with them. The bridegroom arrives at midnight, and only the wise ones are able to meet him. The foolish ones rush to buy oil but when they return with oil in their lamps, the door is closed. They are rejected for eternity with these words: “Verily I say unto you, I know you not.” Because the parable concerns ultimate closure and stands in such radical contrast to Howe’s aesthetics, the contrast cannot be missed. The parable, in fact, brings to the fore the resistance to such closure in Howe’s own writing, a principle that is immediately put into practice. A careful scrutiny of the parable on the page soon gives off information that brushes against the absolute authority of the biblical voice. Although the passage begins by indicating its source, “MATT.XXV.1-13,” the format is different from that of the Bible. The parable is given as a block of prose, ignoring the verse breaks in the original. This block of prose is then enclosed in quotation marks, an unnecessary and excessive reminder of its status as a citation. At the end of the passage, Howe provides a caption, “Epigraph to *The Parable of The Ten Virgins Opened and Applied, Being The Substance of Divers Sermons on MATT. 25:1-13. by Thomas Shepard . . .*” That is, this is a citation of Thomas Shepard citing the Bible. To complicate matters, she is citing not just any part of Shepard’s text but his epigraph, letting it serve as the epigraph of her own essay “Incloser.” The biblical passage is twice removed, once by Shepard and then again by Howe. Although such removal hardly diminishes the resounding finality of the door shut against the foolish virgins, it at least points to the impossibility of such closure in the archive.

This linguistic condition is then forcibly brought to our attention on the flip side of the same page. Howe includes a dictionary definition of the words “inclose” and “incloser” on page 44. The entries, Howe notes, comes from Noah Webster’s *An*

*American Dictionary of the English Language*. Webster openly admits the dictionary's historical and regional specificity by inscribing the break away from continental English in the title. Earlier in her "Acknowledgements," Howe provided a more detailed discussion of the Webster dictionary (again confirming my thesis that the material between the two identical title pages is not extraneous to the book). The dictionary, according to Howe, is "crucial when trying to understand what makes the literary expression of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Dickinson, and to a lesser extent Hawthorne singularly North American" (xi). Dickinson owned a copy of the first edition because Webster also happened to be a family friend. Howe's discussion of the dictionary is sparked in part by Webster's insistence that "enclosure" should begin with an i. Having written and published an earlier draft of "Incloser" with the title "Encloser," Howe revises her own title to reflect Webster's declaration of orthographic independence. The tension between incloser and encloser exposes the word's susceptibility to change. On the one hand, that possibility of historical and geographical variance is affirmed. On the other hand, we are also fully aware that Webster's idiosyncratic insistence and inscription of the alternative spelling into a dictionary were not enough to establish "incloser" as the dominant spelling in North America. Language is, after all, a collective phenomenon.

Webster enumerates five definitions for "inclose," all of which are faithfully transcribed by Howe.

1. To surround; to shut in; to confine on all sides; as, to *inclose* a field with a fence; to *inclose* a fort or an army with troops; to *inclose* a town with walls.
2. To separate from common grounds by a fence; as, to *inclose* lands.
3. To include; to shut or confine; as, to *inclose* trinkets in a box.
4. To environ; to encompass.
5. To cover with wrapper or envelope; to cover under seal; as, to *inclose* a letter or a bank note.



As is often the case, the definitions fail to lead us to the word that is being defined, the proliferation of and the overlap in definitions being a clear symptom of that impossibility. One definition stands out, however, by leading us to an event outside the linguistic web—the enclosure of common land in Britain during the seventeenth century. In one sense, the first definition makes the second redundant. There is no reason why the enclosure of common grounds should be given an independent listing from the enclosure of a field. It is a trace left in language by the trauma of history, one that is closely connected with the birth of the U.S. and therefore the linguistic break away from British English. The word sediments the memory of the event. “Remember,” says Howe, “that most of these peoples’ lives had been thrown into confusion by the chaotic changes in England while Feudalism was being crushed by commercialism and the new market economy. The Enclosure laws had thrown thousands and thousands off common land they had farmed for centuries. Many of the emigrants were traumatized before they got here. Massive economic forces swept them away. On some level the migration might have been seen as a vanishing” (“Encloser” 191). Webster’s definition of the word “inclose” preserves the scar left by the historical experience that was on one shore a kind of social death or vanishing and on the other side of the Atlantic, a emergence of a new social identity. For one of the things that these emigrants did the moment they set their foot on America was to enclose land. “Isn’t it bitterly ironic,” asks Howe, “that many of them were fleeing devastation caused by enclosure laws in Britain, and the first thing they did here was to put up fences?” (B 164). In another interview, she says, “Sometimes I think my poetry is only a search by an investigator for the point where the crime began” (D 21). Here she

finds trails in a dictionary that lead to enclosure as an activity with linguistic, cultural, economic, and political dimensions.

Yet it is by paying close attention to the linguistic traces that Howe is able to expose the unattainability of the perfect enclosure. Some of this is inscribed in Howe's subtitle for this book: "unsettling the wilderness in American literary history." This is a paradoxical formulation. That which has been settled is no longer the wilderness; therefore, that which needs to be unsettled could not be the wilderness. A more logical formulation would be "unsettling the settlement in American literary history." The paradox, however, is far from dissipated by this correction, for a similar paradox resides en abyme in the word "unsettle." The most logical formulation would read "wilderling the settlement in American literary history," but of course "wilder" is not a real word and Howe chooses "unsettle" instead. It is an interesting word, similar to "undo" and "deconstruct." A negative prefix is added to an existing verb, implying that the new verb signifies a reversal of a process (settling, doing, construction) that preceded it. The verb "unsettle" testifies to the near impossibility of extricating oneself from the prior process of "settling." The wilderness in "unsettling the wilderness" can only be the wilderness constructed in language, a wilderness that is already a cultural idea rather than pre-linguistic or nondiscursive *physis*. Howe reminds her audience that "it wasn't a wilderness to Native Americans." Immediately on the heels of that observation, she adds, "Still it's a resonant typological word. A necessary emblem" (B 161). That is, our relation to the wilderness, or an outside, is necessarily mediated by language—emblematic words and symbolical concepts. In language, unsettling can only come *after*

settling, and that which needs to be unsettled is wilderness that is always already within the domain of culture. In fact, it is the wilderness *in* American literary history.

This wilderness in language, is it therefore ineffectual? Or worse, is it a colonialist ideologeme that has aided the genocide of the native population? Howe's remark that wilderness is a necessary emblem is not meant to support the eradication of native populations and culture. The comment appears in the context of a stringent critique of the "bitterly ironic" enclosure of land that followed the migration. She endorses instead the concept of an outside that the word stands for and smuggles into language. "Language is a wild interiority," says Howe in *The Difficulties* interview (26). She closes the interview by stating, "A poet is a foreigner in her own language. I don't want to stay inside" (27). Wilderness, that is, stands for this inside/outside divide *in* language. It is in this sense that wilderness is a necessary emblem and a resonant typology—not because it can be wielded as a political weapon but because it stands for the principle of difference and deferral in language and culture. The subtitle evokes the whole problematic of linguistic wilderness, and it can be no accident that this rumbling is located in the *subtitle* rather than the title proper. If the title *The Birth-mark* celebrates the connection between life and sound, birth and mark, then the subtitle houses the undervoice reminding us of the difficulties, the potential violence, the potential freedom, and the utter inescapability of our linguistic condition.

In his review of *My Emily Dickinson*, Taggart writes, "The several sections of *My Emily Dickinson* which remind us of the historical American wilderness and of the dangers of living there—for a Jonathan Edwards, for a Mary Rowlandson—continue to be apt. Only now we must understand that the imperatives for staying alive in the

America of real frontiers remain in effect for our encounter with and in language” (272). Howe would argue that the linguistic wilderness was there from the start as a major part of the “historical American wilderness.” “Incloser” is a reading of two notebooks that belonged to the minister Thomas Shepard who arrived in Boston Harbor in 1635. Between 1637 and 1640, he recorded in his notebook the testimonies of faith given in his church in Newtowne (later Cambridge) by men and women applying for membership. Around 1646, he wrote a brief autobiography and confession of his faith in a separate notebook, titled “T·{*My Birth & Life*:}S:” One purpose of “Incloser” is to attend to the details in these two documents that have been brushed aside by historians. The different kind of attention that Howe brings to the documents reveals uncertainty rather than assurance, bewilderment rather than confidence in both the minister and his flock. Unlike what they wanted to say through these linguistic performances, they left traces that undercut the surface meaning of their narratives. In the second main essay, Howe writes of Mary Rowlandson that she “saw what she did not see said what she did not say” (128). The same can be said of these puritans, and in “Incloser” Howe performs a reading that “leads us to what was not said—to the other of what *was* said” (Gardner 136).

Howe herself is led by the physical aspect of language, the graphic and phonic elements. What strikes her the most about the testimonies recorded by Shepard is the way they sound and the way they have been recorded. The following is a remarkable specimen, an excerpt from Shepard’s transcription of Barbary Cutter’s testimony:

The Lord let me see my condition by nature out of the 16 of Ezekiel and by seeing the holiness of the carriage of others about, her friends, and the more she looked on them the more she thought ill of herself. She embraced the motion to New England. Though she went through with many miseries and stumbling blocks at last removed and sad passages by sea. And after I came hither I saw my condition more miserable than ever. (69)

Cutter's sentences are bare and stripped down. The most frequent means of connecting her sentences is "and," as if she has been overwhelmed by the series of external events and internal catastrophes that hit her like waves. Especially striking is her terse description of the sea travel: "and sad passages by sea," as if she does not need to provide the subject, the object, or the predicate of the sad passages by sea. When she finally emerges on this shore, it is not to the abundance of grace or the sure knowledge of salvation. After she "came hither," her condition was more miserable than ever. Howe notes, "These words are questions" (69). As striking as the way Cutter's testimony sounds is the oscillation between the third person pronoun "she" and the first person pronoun "I." This is the trace left by "the disorderly velocity of Mr. Shepard's evangelical enthusiasm" (69). Later editors have done their best to erase these moments that reveal so much about the condition under which these words were put down. Shepard, Howe suggests, probably wrote down these testimonies as they were being spoken. The notebook abounds in shorthand, mistakes, and the fusion of the speaker and the scribe that we witness in the above passage. Does Cutter's narration sound all the more choppy because it had to be jotted down at the speed of the spoken word? Then there are the other marks: "Often the minister surrounds a name with ink scrawls and flourishes" (68). Howe does not give us a facsimile this time. We can only imagine. What we know for sure is that historians would pay very little attention to those decorative marks that may or may not be a response to what both Shepard and Howe know: "Written representation of the Spirit is sometimes ineffectual" (68). Words, sounds, marks, and intended meaning fail to line up. The boundary between Barbary Cutter's and Thomas

Shepard's contributions to the final product is fuzzy, and taking them apart would be impossible.

Thomas Shepard's attempt at self-narration is subjected to a similar reading. Howe treats the journal itself as a self-consciously constructed product, discovering that the notebook can be read in two directions, starting at each end. Historians who have edited the manuscript have often ignored the second half of the notebook, relegating that material to the appendix or footnotes. Even the side privileged by historians, however, turns out to be stranger than expected.

When [Shepard's second wife] died, nine years and four male children later, "after 3 weekes lying in," two of her sons had predeceased her. On her deathbed this paragon of feminine piety and humility "continued praying vntil the last houre of her death: . . . Ld tho I vnwoorthy Ld on word on word & c. & so gaue vp the ghost, thus----  
god hath visited me & scourged me for my sins & sought to weane me fro this world, but I haue euer found it a difficult thing to pfit euer but a little by sorest & sharpest afflictions;" (CS 392-93, with spacing of original MS).

"T·{*My Birth & Life*:}S:" is littered with the deaths of mothers. The loss of his own mother when Shepard was a small child could never be settled.

Creation implies separation. The last word of "T·{*My Birth & Life*:}S:" is "afflictions."

Eighty-six blank manuscript pages emphasize this rupture in the pious vocabulary of order. The reader reads empty paper.

The absence of a definitive conclusion to Shepard's story of his life and struggles is a deviation from the familiar Augustinian pattern of self-revelation used by other English nonconformist Reformers.

*Allegoria* and *historia* should be united in "T·{*My Birth & Life*:}S:"  
Doubting Thomas should transcend the empirical events of his times to become the figura of the Good Shepard, but the repetitive irruptions of death into life is mightier than this notion of enclosure. (58)

Shepard's autobiography breaks off abruptly. He is unable to continue after recollecting the death of his second wife in childbed. As Howe points out, the narrative ends with "afflictions" rather than redemption. The empty paper that comes between the two ends of the notebook is not nothing but a material space that can be "read." It records

Shepard's internal agony caused by his orphaned and bereft condition that cannot be put in words. (The other side similarly breaks off as Shepard recollects his ministry in England and the confusion that ultimately led to his crossing the ocean.) In addition to what Howe manages to read, I want to point out the formal aspects of Howe's prose. First, in her quotation of Shepard's writing, Howe decides to preserve one particular line break, the one that comes right after "thus----" and before the minister's agonized confession of his inability to transcend earthly afflictions. Her decision to preserve that space is a reminder that her own transcription has been guilty of eliminating the spaces in Shepard's manuscript. Howe probably preserves this particular break because it is such a crucial moment of hesitation in the narrative. If ever Shepard is to construct himself as the figura of the good shepherd, this is his chance. At the moment of the greatest affliction, he is being requested to wean himself from the pleasures and happiness of this world. Instead, he admits he has profited very little from such afflictions. That hesitation is exactly what Howe hears and sees in the words left by the early puritans: "The syntax is choppy and nervous. . . . Many of these narratives are grief-stricken. Before Conversion the Soul is supposed to be in a state of doubt and pain—that *was* the tradition—but here, after the narrator has seen the light, the voice trails off" ("Encloser" 190). The hesitation is particularly well-preserved in this instance, not so much in the words as in that long dash and the line break. Following the citation, Howe's own prose becomes choppy, as if she has been affected by Shepard's line break. We get a series of short paragraphs consisting of one or two sentences. The sentences refuse to congeal into a solid and reassuring block of prose. They scatter and break around Shepard's trauma,

trying to make sense of the rupture between what “T· {*My Birth & Life*:} S:” should be and what it is.

Howe exerts even more pressure on the manuscript as she begins to read the other side. She calls the second side “An Inside Narrative,” an expression she borrows from Melville’s subtitle for *Billy Budd, a Sailor*. Similar to almost everything discussed in *The Birth-mark*, the manuscript has another side, an undervoice that frustrates any aspiration to a monologic text. The second side opens with the cryptic words, “A Roman, being asked how he liud / so long—answered—intus melle, foris / oleo: /” (62). The translation of the Latin would mean “on the inside, honey; on the outside, oil.” Oil in the seventeenth century meant a deceptive self-presentation as it still does today. It also had the added meaning of sanctity since the verb “to oil” was used as the synonym of “to anoint.” This meaning has probably faded in our present time of secularism, but may have been the first and dominant meaning in the seventeenth century. The cryptic epigraph or poem, Howe speculates, could be self-revelatory or accusatory of others. There is a list on the same side in which Thomas Shepard complains against his fellow saint John Cotton, “Mr Cotton: repents not: but is hid only.” Whether the epigraph applies to Shepard or others, the short insertion casts a new light on the status of the entire manuscript. In a quasi ethnographic gesture—a Roman being asked a question presumably by someone who is foreign to that culture—it opens the whole problematic of frames and framing. Howe writes, “Shepard’s epigraph, if it is an epigraph to side T, or ‘An Inside Narrative,’ is a dislocation and evocative contradiction in the structure of this two-sided book that may or may not be a literary work” (63). The para-epigraph suddenly opens the possibility of reading Shepard’s manuscript as a literary production rather than a journal. Even if one



does not go that far, the para-epigraph draws attention to the structural contradiction and the possibility of a discrepancy between inside and outside. After “*intus melle, foris oleo,*” a literalist reading can be pursued only at one’s peril.

Howe’s reading of Shepard’s notebooks performs a materialist reading that is different from the kind of reading practiced by scholars trained in the traditional method of historical research. In defense of the traditional method, it has been claimed that “it is not to these documents themselves, but to what they indicate concerning the past, that the historian’s statements actually refer” (Mandelbaum 53). Already evident in this formulation is the privileging of the referent—the past—over the documents. The documents themselves are of little interest; in search of the past, the historian bypasses some very material traces that are there to be read and interpreted, such as the double-sided nature of Shepard’s manuscript. None of his editors have taken pains to point out the structure of the notebook and have instead devoted much intellectual energy and time to reconstructing what the referential meaning of Shepard’s words indicate concerning the past. By refusing to limit herself to the referential content of these documents, Howe frees herself to pay a keener attention to the document’s extra- and sub-linguistic elements and to pursue the things that are *not* said but have left traces or imprints of some kind. The combination of the two techniques of reading historical documents results in the very idiosyncratic mix that is *The Birth-mark*. Some historians, no doubt, would have trouble accepting this text as history.

Is *The Birth-mark* history writing? Does it contend for that dubious honor? The first comment that Howe makes after presenting the earlier version of “Incloser” is, “The whole problem with writing this piece for me is to write it in a way that *is* the thing I am

talking about at the same time I am anchoring it down with certain facts” (“Encloser” 189). What does it mean to write it in a way that *is* the thing? Since the “thing” here, the object of Howe’s writing, is the historical document, Howe is saying that her essay attempts to *be* one more historical document and thereby abolish the subject-object partition that is the condition for epistemic domination. She wants her text to enter into a web of intertextuality, become one of the many texts in the archive of American literary history. The archive, as noted earlier, has no meta-archive. At the same time, she does not let go of the responsibilities of someone handling historical documents. There are neglected and forgotten facts that she feels the urgent need to bring to our attention, especially forgotten books and overlooked aspects of books gathering dust in the archive because not even “the odd student on the track of something eccentric” has laid hands on them (B 167). Howe’s essays advance a historical argument while seeking a different relationship to the documents she discusses. Love, passion, and enthusiasm are some of the names she gives this alternative relationship. She says that she searches “for some trace of love’s infolding through all the paper in all the libraries” (B 4). At the end of “Incloser” she writes, “I am pulling representation from the irrational dimension love and knowledge must reach” (83).

The greatest point of interest from the perspective of the essay is the testing that results from Howe’s reaching. It is the difficulty that keeps Howe trying. In the words of Nicholls, it is the “impossibility which redefines the hermeneutic drive as a search” (588). This is a fundamentally different enterprise from history writing as an epistemic drive. Compare this “pulling representation from the irrational dimension love and knowledge must reach” to Carolyn Steedman’s defense of history and the historian’s

method. In the process of explaining “the absence of meaning that deconstruction has for history,” Steedman argues that historians cannot go wrong because history is not finished (153). According to Steedman, the writing of history “moves forward through the implicit understanding that *things are not over*, that the story isn’t finished, can’t ever be completed” (147). There is something disingenuous in this defense. Modern historians have relied heavily on narrative forms that imply closure, a state of scholarship that Steedman admits when she notes on the next page that “historians have as their stated objective exhaustiveness” (148). The gap between what Steedman calls “the implicit understanding” and “the stated objective” is not a small one. Can we separate form from the content of form so easily? If history is narrativized using forms that imply closure and strive for completion, are the forms dispensable husks or do they become a part of what the historian is saying? Steedman is probably right in noting that deconstruction makes no difference to the drudgery of archival research conducted by the everyday historian. It “makes absolutely no difference at all to your dogged and daily performance of positivism,” she writes (153). The fact that scholarly practice has lagged behind theoretical developments, however, does not constitute an argument against the questions raised by thinkers such as Derrida and Hayden White.

Steedman also offers an interesting comparison between history writing and literature in relation to the problem of closure:

The practice of historical inquiry and historical writing acknowledges its own contingency (it will not last), and in this way is a quite different literary form from that of the life-story in both its modes—the fictional and the biographical—which presents momentarily a completeness, a completeness which lies in the figure of the writer or the teller, in the here and now, saying: that’s how it was; or, that’s how I believe it to have been. At the centre of the written history, on the other hand, lies a recognition of temporariness and impermanence. (148)

Steedman argues that historiography is inherently aware of its contingency while fictional and biographical writings fabricate a sense of closure. She nevertheless has to qualify her characterization of literature by the adverb “momentarily.” The sense of closure provided by art is clearly provisional. If anything, I would argue that a work of literature imposes an aesthetic or fictional coherence based on the mutual understanding between the writer and the reader that they are participating in the imaginary. The writing of history in narrative form, in contrast, can be manipulative and is unavoidably political because history writing stakes out a higher claim to truth. Literature is in this respect more self-conscious. And this self-consciousness raised to a higher power enables writers like Howe to experiment in form.

Earlier in this chapter, I quoted Kuisma Korhonen’s discussion of the poetic essay: “The poetic essay has formed a critical space of experimental thought where different ideas and sensualities are created and communicated, where existing forms of cultural production are criticized and deconstructed, and where new forms of art and writing are dreamed of” (245). Howe’s *The Birth-mark* is one such text. It makes space for experimental thought and form. Howe shows just how far one can go in dispensing with narrative form and yet write history. The heuristic aspect of this text springs from that testing of limits. In other words, the primary purpose of *The Birth-mark* relates to this aesthetic of testing possibilities of writing history and reading historical documents. Howe’s historiographical argument is as pressing if not more pressing than her historical argument. The historiographical argument, however, is not stated so much as given form. A formal experimentation, Howe seems to be saying, is best expressed when performed rather than when theorized.

In the end, Howe would agree with Steedman's suggestion that history "turns what possesses a narrative coherence into something without an end, possessing only an ending" (149). That, however, is a potential that needs to be actively translated into the practice of writing. It is a challenge that not many historians have taken up. Howe, as a matter of fact, assesses historians in a diametrically opposite manner from Steedman's: "Words are slippery. Questions of audience, signature, self and other will be answered later by historians, genealogists, graphologists, handwriting experts, who need to produce a certain rationalism for this unstable I-witnessing" (66). As shown in "Incloser," the biographical and literary life-story is far from complete. They are unstable, susceptible to fusions of all kinds and hesitations of graphic and phonic sorts. Coherence is produced later, in the hands of historians, genealogists, and graphologists.

Closures and enclosures often result in violence and the yielding of political power. Thomas Shepard, Howe points out, was one of the prominent prosecutors of Anne Hutchinson. Howe quotes in "Incloser" comments from Shepard's peers in which they praise the minister for his role in the banishment of the antinomians. He "most happily crushed them all" (52). In one of the most resonant passages of her essay, Howe cuts and pastes words that are recorded as having been spoken during and around Hutchinson's trial. Howe creates a ghostly conversation from the received materials:

THOMAS SHEPARD: I confes I am wholly unsatisfied in her Expressions to some of the Errors. Any Hereticke may bring a slye Interpretation, upon any of thease Errors and yet hould them to thear Death: therfor I am unsatisfied.

ANNE HUTCHINSON: My Judgment is not altered though my Expression alters.

BROTHER WILLSON: Your Expressions, whan your Expressions are soe contrary to the Truth.

NOAH WEBSTER:

EX-PRES'SION, (eks-presh'un,) n. The act of expressing; the act of forcing out by pressure, as juices and oils from plants.  
2. The act of uttering, declaring, or representing; utterance; declaration; representation; as, an *expression* of the public will.

MRS. HUTCHINSON: I do not acknowledge it to be an Error but a Mistake. *I do acknowledge my Expression to be Ironious but my Judgment was not Ironious*, for I held befor as you did but could not express it soe. (54)

At the center of the antinomian controversy was the problem of expression. Here, Shepard plays the role of the examiner, holding the change in Hutchinson's expressions to be the very evidence of her heresy. Hutchinson, in contrast, appears to accept the slipperiness of language as a fact, insisting that her expressions do not fully embody her judgment. History tells that she paid with her life for her "mistake."

Howe shows us in "Incloser" that in the privacy of his journal Shepard was no stranger to the slipperiness of expression. Howe inserts in the above passage the definition of the word "expression" from Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* in which the primary definition concerns not verbal representation but the exuding of internal substance such as, most prominently, oil. The inversion of the primary meaning of the word "expression" in history is a forceful reminder that words are indeed slippery. "Intus melle, foris oleo" was the opening remark of the other side of Shepard's notebook. Then again, oil was featured from the very start of "Incloser" in the parable of the ten virgins with their lamps. The virgins who took care to take oil with them were able to meet with the bridegroom at midnight. The foolish ones were twice betrayed by oil, once from the lack of it and then from its plenitude. On the final page of "Incloser," Howe returns to the parable and comments, "Our lamps are out. For what should we watch? 'All adrift to go?'" (83). In fact, the essay drifts to that moment when

Howe's readers are made to recognize that "we" are not the wise virgins. "We" are the foolish virgins, still wandering outside the closed door. That is what she hears in the testimonies of faith of the puritans, in the strangeness of Shepard's notebook, in the barely discernible words of Anne Hutchinson. Howe's essay does not complete that enclosure promised by Shepard's epigraph. Far from it, Howe's essay opens spaces, destabilizes the stories told about the nation's origin, and experiments with new ways of reading and writing history.

To return to my question concerning the book's status, this conclusion suggests that her book is history writing, among other things. A highly experimental mixture of history, reflection on historiography, literary analysis, and literature, these essays take advantage of the flexibility of the essay. A true essayist, Howe remarks, "I don't like separating things into categories," and her essays imagine new forms of writing and new textual, archival spaces (JRF 32). They beckon to us, inviting us to follow to "an outside state outside of States" (B 46).

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