EXTENDING THE DOCUMENT: THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LONG POEM

AND THE ARCHIVE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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"Extending the Document" investigates the twenty-first century long poem in the context of the "archival turn" within the humanities. I argue that writers of what I call "archival long poems" are powerfully responding to a common cultural condition—to the disorienting fact that we have both too much and not enough archive. Such diverse writers as Amiri Baraka, Kenneth Goldsmith, Mark Nowak, Brenda Coultas, C.D. Wright, Anna Rabinowitz, and M. NourbeSe Philip are locating new representational values within the textual excess of proliferating documentation as well as within archival omissions that represent undocumented heritages. If the ultimate horizon of the modernist long poem was the breadth of the comprehensive collection, then the contemporary archival long poem aspires to the depth of the specialized monograph. Such monographic long poems detail accounts of marginalized subjects—from industrial laborers to incarcerated prisoners to the victims of hegemonic violence and genocide. In this way, poets become not just fabricators of aesthetically-pleasing language but also instigators of conceptual interventions; they become historians, archaeologists, data managers, sociologists, ethicists, and advocates. "Extending the Document" refutes poetry's alleged isolation and inwardness by studying contemporary poets who are

pushing poetry beyond its disciplinary bounds in order to interrogate the politics of

memory and historical knowledge in an age of digital reproduction.

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Preface

The Long Poem and the Archive

> If, at any time, any very long poem *were* popular in reality, which I doubt, it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again.
> —Edgar Allan Poe, "The Poetic Principle" (1850)

> There are many long poems, however, which seem to have been very readable when they first appeared, but which no one now reads—though I suspect that nowadays…few people read a very long poem even when it is new from the press...We don't feel that a long poem is worth the trouble unless it is, in its kind, as good as *The Faery Queen*, or *Paradise Lost*, or *The Prelude*, or *Don Juan*, or *Hyperion*, and the other long poems which are in the first rank.
> —T.S. Eliot, "What is Minor Poetry?" (1944)

If Eliot's observation that "few people read a very long poem" still holds correct, we nevertheless have to confront the overwhelming fact that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, poets are very much taking the trouble to write and publish them. In her 1997 study *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women*, Lynn Keller observed that "[e]xtended poetic forms have enjoyed tremendous popularity among writers across the spectrum of contemporary poetries in the last thirty years" (1). Now, 15 years later, such "popularity among writers" has continued, if not accelerated, even though—as Poe and Eliot had articulated— extended forms risk unpopularity among both present and future readers.[1]

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[1] It is tempting to construe the discrepancy between the popularity of the long poem among writers and the unpopularity of long poems among readers as an entrenchment of poetry within its own professionalized confines. Christopher MacGowan has noted that throughout the twentieth-century "the long poem retained for many poets its traditional status as 'important' for a poet to write" (287). Even though a long poem may be important in bestowing prestige and status on a poet's career (we can consider the Virgilian trajectory of the *Eclogues* to the *Georgics* to the *Aeneid* as the classical model *par excellence*), it might not necessarily be important in making a connection with a wider audience (as was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*). In an 1817 letter to Benjamin Bailey, John Keats interestingly tries to have it both ways. He calls the long poem "a test of Invention" and imagines that when the "great task" of composing *Endymion* was complete, he would be propelled "a dozen paces towards the temple of fame." But Keats also suggests that a long poem would provide "lovers of poetry" with "a little region to wander in, where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second reading,--which may be food for a week's stroll in the summer" (Forman 38). Keats, in short, imagines the long poem as a kind of archive of beauty. The reception of the long poem in

We can get a quick glimpse of the ubiquitousness of the Anglophone long poem by considering a somewhat improvisatory (and necessarily partial) list of long poems (or serial installments of long poems) that have been published (or reissued) in the twenty-first century by well-established poets born in the 30s and 40s: Kamau Brathwaite's *Ancestors* (2001), Susan Howe's *The Midnight* (2003), Lyn Hejinian's *My Life in the Nineties* (2003), Marilyn Nelson's *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (2005), Nathaniel Mackey's *Splay Anthem* (2006), Alice Notley's *Alma, or The Dead Women* (2006), Beverly Dahlen's *A Reading 18-20* (2006), Martha Collins' *Blue Front* (2006), Paul Hoover's *Edge and Fold* (2006), Jay Wright's "The Ambiguous Archive" (2007), Stephanie Strickland's *slippingglimpse* (2007), Ron Silliman's *The Alphabet* (2008), Edward Sanders' *America: A History in Verse, Volumes 1-5, 1900-2000* (2008), Will Alexander's "The Sri Lankan Loxodrome" (2009) and *On the Substance of Disorder* (2010), Anne Waldman's *Manatee/Humanity* (2009) and *The Iovis Trilogy: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment* (2011), C.D. Wright's *One with Others: [a little book of her days]* (2010), Clark Coolidge's *The Act of Providence* (2010), Leslie Scalapino's *Zither & Autobiography* (2003), *Floats Horse-Floats or Horse-Flows* (2010), and *The Dihedrons Gazelle-Dihedrals Zoom* (2010), Clayton Eshleman's *An Anatomy of the Night* (2011), and Rachel Blau Duplessis' *Drafts 1-38, Toll* (2001), *Drafts 39-57, Pledge,*

the post-Romantic era is surely a complex issue and goes well beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, I argue that if twenty-first century long poems are not popular among current readers, it is because of a reason entirely different from the career-authenticating function of the long poem. The writers that I will treat here are not interested in creating long works, in Eliot's words, "as good as *The Faery Queen*, or *Paradise Lost*, or *The Prelude*, or *Don Juan*, or *Hyperion*"; they, in fact, depart significantly from post-Romantic and modernist aesthetics. Because of this, such poems may not be legible or appreciable to readers who have inherited the New Critical privileging of the short lyric poem (or the "well-wrought urn"). But in risking the loss of this specialized and traditionalist readership, the writers in my corpus hope to gain a new, interdisciplinary one: readers who are not so much interested in being connoisseurs of "first rank" writing but in thinking through an array of socio-cultural problems.

with Draft, Unnumbered: Précis (2004)*, Torques: Drafts 58-76* (2007) and *Pitch: Drafts 77-95* (2010). If we were to extend this list to include long works by poets born in the 50s, we might consider such diverse and important projects as Myung Mi Kim's *Commons* (2002), Carolyn Forché's "On Earth" (2003), Robert Fitterman's *Metropolis XXX: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (2004), Susan Schultz's *Dementia Blog* (2008), Dionne Brand's *Ossuaries* (2010), Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010), Charles Alexander's *Pushing Water* (2011), Joseph Donahue's *Dissolves: Terra Lucida IV-VIII* (2012), and John Yau's "Genghis Chan: Private Eye I-XLIV" (2012). This little thought experiment should certainly make clear that creating an exhaustive account of recent long poems is a Herculean, and perhaps Sisyphean, task. Moreover, it should demonstrate the radical imprecision of the term "long poem" as a discursive category that can meaningfully unify and order the heterogeneity of these texts. Indeed, Michael André Bernstein declared the "long poem" to be a "largely uninformative label" (10).[2] In a similar vein, Jed Rasula has questioned the practical value of the category "long poem," when he says, in a discussion of Ronald Johnson's underappreciated *Ark* (1980, 1984), that it is "an inept and compromised term" (248).

It is no wonder then that some of the most important studies of the long poem in the past twenty years have sought to create more "informative" labels—to parse and make legible the myriad sub-genres that are archived within the elastic and capacious term "long poem." In *Forms of Expansion*, for example, Keller establishes "broad heuristic groupings" (5) so that she can understand "individual poems in the intertextual context of particular traditions…and specified precursor texts" (2-3). Her "heuristic" categories include: 1) poems that "draw heavily on epic models," 2) "lyric sequences,"

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[2] In the context of modernism, Bernstein prefers the term *modern verse epic*.

and 3) "radically experimental, less representationally based texts" (5). Joseph Conte's

groundbreaking book *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (1991)

ambitiously establishes "a systematic typology of postmodern poetic forms" in its

identification of particular strains of "serial" and "procedural" long poems (1). In a more

recent paper, "Considering the Long Poem: Genre Problems" (2009), Rachel Blau

Duplessis proposes six rubrics in order to broaden Conte's taxonomy: "1. Narrative/

Musical/ Mythic Works 2. Hyperspace Encyclopedic 'Epics' 3. Works of Seriality 4.

Odic Logbooks of Continuance 5. New Realist Procedurals 6. Long Poem as Essay or

Conceptual Text." The categories above surely provide us with a usable if partial road

map with which to make sense of the dizzying diversity of long poems that are currently

being produced by Anglophone writers. For example, we can begin now to organize the

list that I invoked above and productively understand Waldman's *The Iovis Trilogy* as a

mythic work, Brand's *Ossuaries* as a lyric sequence, Yau's "Genghis Chan: Private Eye"

as a work of seriality, and Schultz's *Dementia Blog* as an essayistic long poem or

conceptual text. However, the splintering of long poems into discrete categories has

obvious limitations. Duplessis is careful to explain that any taxonomic or typological

approach might be valuable only as "a pedagogic instrument" and that "even as a

heuristic critical act" genre rubrics can never be definitively fixed or "pinned down"

("Considering the Long Poem"). We might ask, for example, what exactly separates a

work of seriality from an odic logbook of continuance—is Mackey's *Splay Anthem* one

or the other or both? It should be clear by now that because the contemporary long poem

is inherently a hybrid genre, the critical task of differentiating between one and another

type of long poem can potentially go on *ad infinitum*. As Duplessis observes, "there are

as many generic traces in a long poem as there are genres one might consider"

("Considering the Long Poem"). Why not create the category "loco-descriptive long

poem" that can bring together modernist and late-modernist works such as William

Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems,* Langston Hughes's

Montage of a Dream Deferred, and Melvin Tolson's *Harlem Gallery* with more recent

long poems such as C.D. Wright's *Deepstep Come Shining*, Eleni Sikelianos' *The*

California Poem, and Clark Coolidge's *The Act of Providence*?

     Even if what exactly constitutes a long poem is contested (Poe famously called it

a "flat contradiction in terms") and even if "long poem" is a slippery and imprecise

designation, I agree with Duplessis that it is, nevertheless, "enormously clear how much

work there is to discuss under the rubric of the modern and contemporary Anglophone

long poem" ("Considering the Long Poem"). According to Brian Reed, "the work of

mapping the field has only really just begun" (345). This dissertation is meant to be a

contribution to such work and intends to "map the field" of the contemporary long poem

in a previously unexplored way.

     "Extending the Document" departs from earlier studies of the long poem in that it

strategically side-steps the intractable problem of genre and forgoes a heuristic

categorization based on solely formal characteristics. Rather than taking a generic,

formalist, or taxonomic approach, which might differentiate between possible types of

long poems (either in the interest of forming a "systematic typology" (Conte) or a looser

assemblage of "heuristic groupings" (Keller)), I wish to identify a common cultural

problem to which diverse contemporary long poems are responding. In this way, I follow

Duplessis' somewhat counter-intuitive approach in treating the length of a long poem as

"extraneous" or "epiphenomenal." In discussing Ron Silliman's approach to what he

calls "the American Longpoem" (Silliman's contraction of "long poem" into the

compound "longpoem" seems to interestingly gesture toward the institution of another

subgenre), Duplessis says, "Working out a problem…is the trigger; some length is

needed to make the point. Thus length is a simple measure of and statement of ambition

in relation to a problem." Through this lens, we can see how the lengthening of Walt

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, from his first 1855 edition to his 1892 "deathbed" edition,

was a protracted response to the problem of national unity. Similarly, the problem of

Ezra Pound's *Cantos* was to form a coherent and pedagogical guidebook in response to

the cultural decline of Western civilization. Certainly the "problem" of the long poem

can be formal, technical, or aesthetic: in *Ketjak*, Silliman's ostensible problem is the

sentence (or what he has famously called "the new sentence."[3]) Similarly, Christopher

MacGowan understands Williams' *Paterson* to "represent…his particular solution to the

problem of how to write a long poem that is still rooted in the imagist principle of

immediacy" (289). It is my aim in "Extending the Document" to connect the specific

technical problems of composing long poems—which may stem from new technologies

of reproduction or from particular procedural constraints—with a much broader problem

that continues to impinge upon our culture at large. The long poems that I will treat in

this study surely engage with problems that are socially, culturally, historically, and

geographically specific. However, I wish to collate all of such problems—the continuing

effects of a historical trauma, the local ruptures caused by deindustrialization, or the

superabundance of text in the digital age, for example—through the overarching term

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[3] See Ron Silliman's *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1987).

"archive," which represents and reflects one of the most pressing problems of our moment.

The end of the twentieth century has witnessed a crisis in collective and cultural memory and a shift, or a series of shifts, in the way we understand the formation, storage, selection, interpretation, transmission, and politics of historical knowledge—all of this is indicative of, in French historian Pierre Nora's words, "the obsession with the archive that marks our age" (13). Although Jacques Derrida's slim but influential treatise *Archive Fever* (1995) branded this crisis in the context of Freudian psychoanalysis with a memorable, theoretical catch-phrase, there has been a more general "archival turn" within the humanities since the 80s and 90s; notable contributions to this "archival turn" include Gayatri Spivak's "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives" (1985), Allan Sekula's "The Body and the Archive" (1986), Roberto González Echevarría's *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (1990), Thomas Richards' *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (1993), and Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1999). The twentieth century has seen an even greater explosion of studies about the archive across such diverse fields as art history, performance studies, literary studies, library science, film studies, women's and gender studies, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and history.[4]

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[4] Such studies include Suzanne Keen's *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fictions* (2001), Carolyn Steedman's *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (2002), Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (2002), Arjun Appadurai's "Archive and Aspiration" (2003), Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003), Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003), Hal Foster's "An Archival Impulse" (2004), Antoinette Burton's *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (2005), Charles Merewether's *The Archive* (2006), Sven Spieker's *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (2008), Okwui Enwezor's *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (2008), Ann Stoler's *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial*

This interdisciplinary questioning of what the archive is—and, just as importantly, of what it isn't—has injected the word "archive" with new and competing layers of polyvalence. This is to say that, in contemporary usage, the term "archive" is equally if not more problematic than the term "long poem" and, like "long poem," it can't be defined in a singular or simple manner. A dramatic example of the way in which the meaning of the term "archive" has migrated away from simply referring to a "place in which public records or other important historic documents are kept" (or a "historical record or document so preserved") is Michel Foucault's famous revision of the term in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1968), perhaps the first book to subject the archive to sustained philosophical reflection ("Archive, n."). Foucault, whom Gilles Deleuze has playfully called "a new archivist" (3), explicitly redefines the archive as not what we might assume it to be: it is neither "the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past …nor…the institutions, which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation." Rather, the archive is "the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events" (145). Foucault takes the archive to mean not a place, the *arkeion*, nor a physical object, the documents themselves, but an intangible "practice" (146). Foucault's appropriation of the term archive has since been taken up, extended, and modified, and more recent accounts of the archive have, in accounting for the shaping power of new media, expanded the term's

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Common Sense (2009), David Galston's *Archives and the Event of God: The Impact of Michel Foucault on Philosophical Theology* (2010), Paula Amad's *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète* (2010), and Jonathan Boulter's *Melancholy and the Archive: Trauma, History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel* (2011). It is interesting that studies of poetry, in comparison, have been relatively uninfluenced by the archival turn. Exceptions include Anita Helle's *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath* (2007) and Thomas John Nelson's dissertation "'A' is for 'archive': A Case Study in the American Long Poem" (The University of Texas at Austin, 2007).

semantic reach to an even greater degree. For instance, in a 2012 introduction to a special issue of *E-misférica* called "On the Subject of Archives," Marianne Hirsch and Diana Taylor say,

> More than a repository of objects or texts, the archive is also the process of selecting, ordering and preserving the past. It is simultaneously any accessible collection that potentially yields data, and a site for critical reflection and contestation of its social, political, and historical construction. The archive is also a widespread social practice. We archive ourselves in action, in our files, and on our shelves, as well as on Facebook, YouTube, blogs, and in photos and videos, through every available medium.

There is certainly a Foucauldian slant in Hirsch and Taylor's emphasis on "the process of selecting…[and] ordering" in contradistinction to the institutional housing of physical documents. And their inclusion of "any accessible collection that potentially yields data" corroborates archivist Lesley Hall's somewhat chagrined observation that "[p]eople seem increasingly to be using 'archive' to mean any research resource, sometimes not even with the meaning of primary materials, when these are not, by this definition, 'archival'" (qtd. in Burton 22). Yet Hirsch and Taylor go further in stretching the definition of "archive" in describing not so much a Foucauldian discursive practice but popular practices made possible by new forms of social media. This focus on what we might call "the digital everyday" is shared by conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith, whom I will discuss in chapter two: "The advent of digital culture has turned each one of us into an

unwitting archivist. From the moment we used the 'save as' command when composing electronic documents, our archival impulses began" ("Archiving is the New Folk Art").

In the chapters to come, I will not strive to define the term "archive" (nor the term "long poem") in a narrow or rigid way; nor will I favor one theoretical approach towards the archive over another. Rather, I will treat "archive" as a cross-disciplinary, constellational term that invokes related concerns about the politics of memory, the nature and efficacy of documentary evidence, the ideological structuration of collections, and the limits and uses of historical knowledge. Moreover, the term "archive" will allow me to interrogate what I call the archive's others—such as what Diana Taylor calls the "repertoire" and what Giorgio Agamben has suggestively called "testimony." Situating some of the most fascinating contemporary long poems of the last decade within the archival turn will allow me to connect poetry—a discipline which is often considered isolationist and esoteric—with current conversations that are taking place across various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. This will, in turn, allow me to demonstrate poetry's increasing move toward interdisciplinary issues.

According to Ann Stoler's important article "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," "[the] move from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject gains its contemporary currency from a range of different analytic shifts, practical concerns, and political projects" (93). "Extending the Document" intends to explore a variety of these shifts, concerns, and projects, and I will draw on fields outside of literary study such as art history and political philosophy to provide new paradigms to the study of poetry. And just as an examination of the linguistic turn of the early twentieth century—we could, for example, look to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein or the poetry of Gertrude

Stein—can powerfully contextualize our understanding of the work of the so-called

"L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" poets, so too can an investigation of the archival turn shed light

on the most recent poetic production in North America.

The political and cultural ambitions of archival long poems are predicated upon

the reframing of found materials and documentary evidence through non-literary and

interdisciplinary skills. As Derrida reminds us, political power depends upon "control of

the archive, if not of memory" (*Archive Fever* 4). I argue that many unorthodox practices

of the contemporary long poem represent a profound critique of archival control and form

the basis for a new oppositional politics. The ambition of the contemporary archival long

poem is not to "include history" in the totalizing manner of Pound's *Cantos* but to

recover micro-histories that require either focused, documentary research or non-archival

sources of remembering.[5] If the ultimate horizon of the modernist and late-modernist

long poem—from Zukofsky's *"A"* to Johnson's *Ark*—was the breadth of the

comprehensive collection, then the contemporary archival long poem aspires to the depth

of the specialized monograph (in Lyotardian terms, they are micro-narrative not meta-

narrative).[6] Such monographic long poems detail accounts of marginalized subjects—

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[5] The totalizing, encyclopedic impulse of the twentieth century long poem can also be understood through what Robert Duncan calls a "world-poem," what Karl Shapiro calls a "culture poem," or even the Mallarméan dream that Louis Zukofsky describes in his massive long poem *"A"* (1959-1975) of "[a] book…entire enough / perfect enough / to take / the place / of all / the books / and of / the world itself" (423).

[6] A detailed account of the archival long poem of the twentieth century lies outside of this study's purview, though, in addition to the texts mentioned above, such a project should surely include Eliot's mini-anthology *The Waste Land* (1922); Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" (1938), her pioneering work of docu-poetics that commemorates the Gauley Tunnel tragedy; David Jones' *The Anathémata* (1952), which Jones describes in his preface as a "heap" of "mixed data"; Langston Hughes' *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) and *Ask Your Mama* (1961), both of which make recourse to new inscription technologies (of film and sound recording) as organizing metaphors; Robert Duncan's *Passages* (1968-70), whose title evokes the tension between the fixity of a physical archive that has architectural "passages" and the iterability of textual "passages" within a fluid archival economy; Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony: The United States (1885-1915) Recitative* (1978) a two volume, 530-page work which draws on hundreds of

from industrial laborers to incarcerated prisoners to the victims of hegemonic violence

and genocide. Whereas modernism provided compositional strategies to consolidate a

cultural heritage in an age of textual excess (what art historian Sven Spieker calls the

"giant paper jam" of modernity), contemporary poetic practice locates new

representational values within such excess of proliferating documentation as well as

within archival omissions that represent undocumented heritages. This shift in ambition

has been accompanied by a concomitant shift in what constitutes poetic skill. Departing

from post-Romantic and modernist technique, these writers of contemporary long poems

embrace extreme, non-normative, or deliberately anti-poetic aesthetics. They aim not to

control the archive through aesthetic mastery but to relinquish control so as to highlight

the refractoriness and alterity of archival materials. Their poems daringly put poetry—as

a stable, recognizable category—at risk in a gamble for cultural meaningfulness. Such

poems, then, should not be evaluated solely by criteria based on rhetorical control,

figuration, lyric expressivity, and metrical ability. Rather, we should understand

responses such as copying, transcription, and appropriation as skills that engage the new

ways we are storing, managing, and accessing information in a digital age.

My first chapter discusses Amiri Baraka's inflammatory poem "Somebody Blew

Up America" (2001) and R.B. Kitaj's *Second Diasporist Manifesto: A New Kind of Long

Poem in 615 Free Verses* (2007), two texts that profoundly register the urgency of

writing after 9/11. If both Baraka and Kitaj exemplify a Derridean "archive fever," that

is, a burning search for historical causes, culprits, and explanations, they also expose the

limitations of the archive's explanatory and institutive powers. Rather than imagining

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volumes of legal reports; and Ronald Johnson's *Ark* (1980-1996), a monumental poem that Johnson has
called "a time-capsule of everything that I've seen and heard."

their poems *as archives*—in the manner of Melvin Tolson's *Harlem Gallery* or David Jones' *The Anathémata*—Baraka and Kitaj mimic the function of the *inventory* and *registry* respectively. An inventory is a list of what is held in an archive while a registry, which was a component in the tripartite structure of nineteenth-century administrative archives, is the place where files circulate before archivization. I posit that the anaphoric questioning of "Somebody Blew Up America" constitutes an inventory to an archive that doesn't yet exist in the way it insistently points to numerous gaps in the historical record. By performing the paranoia of conspiracy theory, Baraka's poem is a powerful, if at times repulsively polemical, critique of archival positivism. If Baraka highlights the lack and need for new documentary information, Kitaj wishes to keep the materials that he accumulates and commonplaces in perpetual process, to extend them *ad infinitum*. He imagines his loose and prosaic collection of quotations and images as a registry—a utopian locus in which knowledge and information constantly circulate in service of building a new Jewish art. Unlike their modernist precursors, Baraka's and Kitaj's long poems are not centripetal but oppositional to their culture. I argue that "Somebody Blew Up America" and *Second Diasporist Manifesto*—which have been dismissed and disparaged by critics on conventional literary grounds—should be evaluated as poetry by the way they challenge our management of collective memories and the way they propose the creation of new ones.

My second chapter analyzes the use of found materials in Kenneth Goldsmith's massive conceptual poem *Day* (2003) and Mark Nowak's photo-documentary series "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down" (2004). The imperative of the modernist long poem is to compress a heterogeneity of information into "a radiant gist" (Williams) and to separate

the "live books in our time" from "the mass of dead matter printed" (Pound); in contrast, Goldsmith and Nowak reuse and recycle the dead matter of old newspapers in order to redefine literary and writerly competence. *Day*, a transcription of an entire issue of the *New York Times*, perversely monumentalizes the ephemerality of yesterday's news. Goldsmith, who alternately retyped and scanned the obsolete document, provocatively links the work of the poet with the work of the journalist, copyist, and secretary. Nowak's "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down" (2004), on the other hand, records job loss and economic hardship throughout the Minnesota iron range due to the bankruptcy of LTV Steel. Through amateur photography and the appropriation of local newspaper articles, Nowak recovers the stories of "obsolete" workers whose words threaten to get swept aside by the meta-narrative thrust of deindustrialization. Goldsmith's uncreative plagiarism and Nowak's DJ-like sampling in the service of a new labor journalism offer alternatives to a poetry of fine art that has rigidified into a predictable professionalism.

While the poems I examine in chapter two are interested in reframing, parsing, and appropriating large swaths of textual material produced in our age of information overload, the long poems I study in chapter three explore the flipside of such archival superabundance. We are, in fact, living in an age when there is both too much and not enough archive, and poets Brenda Coultas and C.D. Wright employ field work to document historical and social issues that are in desperate need of archivization. Such field work, I argue, is performative as much as it is practical; for Coultas and Wright, on-site presence is equally as important as the writing itself. Coultas' "The Abolition Journal (or, Tracing the Earthworks of my County)" (2007) investigates that which eludes the physical archive: it is a poem based on explorations of remaining sites of

underground railroad activity in the poet's home state of Indiana. If the Earthworks of the late 1960s and early 70s that the title references are unprotected monuments falling into entropy, then the sites that Coultas seeks have already deteriorated beyond recognition. While not able to recover or record any physical evidence, Coultas documents her own fieldwork as a conceptual performance, transmitting cultural knowledge and identity through a non-object-based epistemology. Wright's *One Big Self: An Investigation* (2007)—part of a collaborative project with the portrait photographer Deborah Luster—documents the lives of men and women incarcerated in three Louisiana prisons: East Carroll Parish Prison Farm, Louisiana State Penitentiary, and Louisiana Correctional Institution for Women. Wright's text was originally published in a lavish art book, *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (2003), by Twin Palms Publishers as a companion piece to Luster's portraits. Together, the portraits and poetry form a counter-archive against the state's "bureaucratic-clerical-statistical system of 'intelligence'" whose main artifacts are—according to Allan Sekula's influential essay "The Body and the Archive"—the camera and the filing cabinet (17). But as a stand-alone long poem, the change of subtitle is significant: Wright reframes her text as an "investigation," as if the prisons, themselves, were crime scenes. Wright's poem is at once an effort to archive "the real feel of hard time" as well as to raise awareness about populations who have been filed away to lower hierarchies of social memory. *One Big Self* is also an archive of genre as it hybridizes sub-genres such as the travel narrative, epistolary writing, and prison writing—all of which have considerably less prestige than the epic. If Wright bids us to take seriously large segments of our population that have

been severed from free life, she is also suggesting that we take seriously supposedly "minor" or "inferior" genres.

My fourth chapter focuses on what Anna Rabinowitz calls "archival dwindle" as it examines Rabinowitz's *Darkling* (2001), a poetic engagement with the Holocaust, and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008), a tale "that can't be told" about the horrors of transatlantic slavery. Both poets employ unconventional formal constraints in bearing witness to what Giorgio Agamben calls "the unforgettable." *Darkling*, an 80-page acrostic poem which spells out Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" along its left-hand margin, draws on family letters and photographs to narrate the fragmented story of two families that suffered dire losses during World War II. Powerfully responding to Adorno's misunderstood dictum that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, Rabinowitz fills the interstices of Hardy's poem with lyric fragments of epic weight. Also a work based on radical constraint, Philip's *Zong!* is a nearly 200-page poem based on appropriations and rearrangements of a 500-word legal decision; the decision of the notorious *Zong* case determined who was financially liable for the cost of nearly 150 forcibly drowned slaves. Philip's poem dramatically brushes a document of barbarism against the grain in order to speak for those whose lives weren't deemed fit for archivization. Both long poems alter their found materials in ways that differ from modernist citation which highlights the authority and ontological stability of the original sources. In contradistinction, *Darkling* and *Zong!* extend and distend their source texts beyond recognition, stretching the brief documents of a nineteenth-century lyric and an eighteenth-century legal decision across a multitude of pages. Through procedural and

processual methods of composition, Rabinowitz and Philip stage the breakdown and transformation of form in an effort to honor unsayable testimony.

A decade ago, Cary Nelson called for "an aesthetic of the differential field"—that is, for an evaluation of a poem for "its contribution to a wider field of discourse" and for its "negotiations between aesthetics and history" (164). Ten years later, developments in contemporary poetry (such as the rise of conceptual poetry, a resurgent interest in both documentary poetry and proceduralism, and advancements in digital poetry) have intensified what I take to be a crisis in evaluation that had begun with modernism. In emphasizing new poetic competencies, I understand poetic method as the very site through which contemporary writers of long poems are negotiating aesthetics, politics, memory, and history as well as adding to a wide variety of fields including archaeology, journalism, and sociology. Indeed, if we accept Muriel Rukeyser's suggestive claim that "poetry can extend the document"—that is, that poems can both productively re-circulate existing cultural materials within their aesthetic structures and extend our awareness to undocumented subjects—then the long poems that I study also extend their documentary work across disciplinary lines (*U.S. 1*. 146). *Extending the Document* begins to answer crucial questions of how to evaluate poetry and contemporary art in an age when what exactly constitutes artisanal skill and competence is frustratingly but also refreshingly unsettled.

Chapter 1

Paranoia, Aspiration, and the Archival Impulse in Recent American Long Poems

> The Library / is sanctuary to our fears. So be it. So be it.
> —William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*

> [E]ven suppose we were sure of every element of a conspiracy: that the lives of Africans and African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that gay men and drug users are held cheap where they aren't actively hated; that the military deliberately researches ways to kill noncombatants whom it sees as enemies; that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes. Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things — what would we know then that we don't already know?
> —Cindy Patton, qtd. in Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, and Performativity*

> I was of people
> caught in deep trouble
> like I scribe you
> some deep trouble
> —Amiri Baraka, *Wise, Why's, Y's*

As if in response to the literary culture of the late 80s and early 90s, which expressed a *fin-de-siècle* pessimism about poetry's cultural relevance—evidenced in a bevy of widely discussed commentaries such as Joseph Epstein's "Who Killed Poetry?" (1988), Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?* (1992), and Vernon Shetley's *After the Death of Poetry* (1993)—there is now a striking trend in the new poems of the twenty-first century which are asserting poetry's cultural relevance with a vengeance.[7] We are seeing an enormous interest, a vogue, in fact, for long poems, for extended forms—whether they be lyric sequences, serial poems, heterogeneous scrapbook/collage poems, or massive

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[7] For a more recent example of a mainstream "defense of poetry," see Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

conceptual works of textual appropriation.[8] The very length of such poems indexes their

ambition and aspiration as they present themselves not so much as conveniently iterable

works that can be consumed *in toto* in a variety of contexts (such as the anthology or

magazine or journal), but as "major statements" of public import that require longer (or

serial) durations of readerly or auditory attention. More importantly, it is their

engagement with the archive, their treatment of documentary material, their interrogation

of the historical record, of the structure and politics of collective memory that is their

crucial bid for cultural meaningfulness.

     In this chapter, I will discuss Amiri Baraka's provocative and inflammatory poem

"Somebody Blew Up America" (2001) and the late painter R.B. Kitaj's *Second*

Diasporist Manifesto: A New Kind of Long Poem in 615 Free Verses (2007) in tandem in

order to show how archival concerns underwrite their poems' socio-cultural ambitions. It

is tempting to treat such texts, which catalog a wide variety of material, *as archives*—in

the same way Laura Mullen's recent collection of poetry *Dark Archive* (2011) self-

consciously presents the entire book as "an archive that serves as a fail-safe repository for

information during disaster recovery."[9] While the book's title surely suggests several

metaphorical layers of meaning (a "gloomy" archive, an "obscure" archive, etc.), a "dark

archive" is a specific term in library and information management ("Dark"). According

to The Society of American Archivists, it is "[a] collection of materials preserved for

future use but with no current access"; dark archives hold "materials [which] are kept in

escrow for future use in case they are no longer available from the publisher" (Pearce-

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[8] Just one very small indication of the twenty-first century vogue in long poems can be seen in *The Seattle Review*'s new editorial mission: "The editors of *The Seattle Review* are pleased to announce that, starting with our forthcoming Fall 2010 issue, *The Seattle Review* will publish, and will only publish, long poems and novellas." <http://depts.washington.edu/seaview/submission.html> (last accessed 9 May 2011).
[9] The back cover copy of the book also situates the text "in the hermetic realm of data storage."

Moses "Dark Archive"). Mullen cleverly appropriates the phrase "dark archive" in at least two ways. Firstly, she critiques the archive's restricted access, demonstrating quite dramatically Jacques Derrida's notion of the archive as that privileged and "uncommon place" (*Archive Fever* 3) that takes place under "house arrest" (2). Mullen has created a book of poetry that is, in actuality, "a light archive": "[a] collection of materials that is accessible to the public without restrictions" (Pearce-Moses "Light Archive"). Secondly, Mullen torques the term "disaster"—that is, the possibility of the materials being "no longer available"—and orients it toward personal loss (such as the death of her stepmother) as well as the massive natural/social disaster of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005 (Mullen teaches at Louisiana State University).

Indeed, Baraka's and Kitaj's poems are undeniably post-disaster works on a number of levels. Baraka wrote "Somebody Blew Up America" in direct response to the World Trade Center attacks while Kitaj's book was fueled by the urgency of what he calls "the Elevated Alert we live by." Moreover, both writers plumb deeper histories of disaster and register a *longue durée* of historical tragedy: Baraka links current-day terrorism to global histories of colonial oppression, racially motivated violence, and genocide while Kitaj explores the possibility of a new Jewish art after the Shoah. Indeed, both books can be read as repositories "during disaster recovery." While I will indentify in Baraka's and Kitaj's poetry what art historian Hal Foster has called "an archival impulse," I argue that their cultural ambitions can be better understood by examining two specific elements within archival apparatuses: the inventory and the registry.

"Somebody Blew Up America" as Long Poem

At 243 lines, "Somebody Blew Up America" is not nearly as long as the other poems that will be treated in this study, though its expansive historical and geographical scope—which ranges from biblical times to the Bush administration, from colonial America to the Belgian Congo—lends it the ambitious heft of a modern epic.[10] In fact, I read "Somebody Blew Up America" as an extension, a sequel, to his book-length poem *Wise, Why's, Y's* (1995) which Baraka calls "an ongoing-offcoming Tale [of the tribe]" in the tradition of the African griots as well as the American modernists Melvin Tolson, William Carlos Williams, Langston Hughes, and Charles Olson (Pound, along with his unsavory political baggage, is strategically omitted from this list).[11] While longer than a conventional lyric but much shorter than an epic-length poem, "Somebody Blew Up America" begs the crucial question of what exactly constitutes a "long poem." *Is* it a long poem? Or is it better considered a mid-length poem?[12] How is it that T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), which weighs in at a lean 433 lines, is constantly mentioned with Pound's heavy-weight, 800-page *Cantos* (1930-1968) as an exemplary modernist long poem? On the one hand, length *per se* as a sole criterion obscures the fact that the umbrella term "long poem," in current parlance, often refers to whatever isn't a brief, self-contained lyric—whether it be an epic, georgic, narrative, sonnet sequence, loco-descriptive, or novel-in-verse.[13] Thus the family resemblance between *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos* lies in issues of not length but technique (collage, literary allusion, what

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[10] On the modern epic, see Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez* (New York: Verso, 1996).

[11] The questioning of "why's" morphs into the question of "who"—which is also the sound of the supposedly "wise" owl.

[12] In "The Twentieth-Century American Long Poem," Christopher MacGowan considers Robert Frost poems such as "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home Burial," and "The Witch of Coös"—all of which are considerably shorter than "Somebody Blew Up America"—as long poems (287).

[13] In this sense, the term "long poem" is, as Michael Andre Bernstein says, a "largely uninformative label" (10).

Eliot calls "mythical method," etc.), genre (epic), and intended cultural use (as synoptic

guidebooks of literary history and civilization).[14] But on the other hand, length surely

matters. After all, the fact that "Somebody Blew Up America" gained national attention

because of a handful of lines taken out of context attests to the reading and interpretive

practices of the public in our information age of sensational headlines and sound bytes.

But because Baraka so forcefully connects questions of the archive with paranoia, I will

use "Somebody Blew Up America" as, if not a heuristic model for, at least an edifying

introduction to what I will be calling the archival long poem of the twenty-first century,

and I will treat length as epiphenomenal to the poem's socio-cultural ambitions.

Generically, Baraka's poem is an *anti-epic*—a text not about the formation of a

nation, as Virgil's *Aeneid*, but about the destruction of one. It is a scathing and sarcastic

jeremiad, written in response to the 9/11 attacks, that protests the abuse of power against

the oppressed, both domestic and abroad. Representative of Baraka's so-called "Third

World-Marxist" phase, "Somebody Blew Up America" attempts to contextualize the acts

of terror within larger histories of slavery and colonial and neo-colonial racism and

aggressively tries to shock an already shocked nation out of the stupor of American

exceptionalism. The anaphoric "Who," which is the poem's main structuring device, is at

once an angry questioning and an accusatory interjection that mimics the hoot of the

owl:[15]

Who cut off peoples hands in the Congo

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[14] For an account of "the mythical method," see T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" (1923).
[15] As William J. Harris and Aldon Lynn Nielsen suggest, the syllable "who" here also provides a critical response to the use of the phoneme "hoo" in the work of white modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot, Vachel Lindsay, and Wallace Stevens (185). According to Rachel Blau Duplessis' "'Hoo, Hoo, Hoo': Some Episodes in the Construction of Modern Male Whiteness," the seemingly nonsensical syllable—which is really a truncation of "hoodoo"—"draws on black agency and autonomy, which, because mysterious, inexplicable, and frightening to Euro-American writers, is therefore paradoxically affirmed and denied" (81-2).

> Who invented Aids Who put the germs
> In the Indians' blankets
>
> Who thought up "The Trail of Tears"
> Who blew up the Maine
> & started the Spanish American War
>
> Who got Sharon back in Power
> Who backed Batista, Hitler, Bilbo,
> Chiang Kai-shek
>
> who WHO W H O (48)

While many of the questions have clear-cut answers (from Leopold II to Andrew Jackson to William McKinley) and many are contested (in the case of the USS *Maine*'s destruction), the illocutionary force of much of the poem suggests a variety of conspiracy theories—that HIV was part of a United States biological warfare program and, in what are now the most infamous lines of the poem, that Israel had foreknowledge of the World Trade Center attacks and warned Israeli nationals employed in the buildings to take the day off:

> Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get
> bombed
>
> Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers
> to stay home that day
>
> Why did Sharon stay away ?

Baraka circulated "Somebody Blew Up America" via the Internet, at poetry readings around the world, and in a chapbook edition before he read it at the Dodge Poetry Festival in New Jersey in September of 2002.

After the widely attended festival that bi-annually attracts several thousand spectators (it is currently the largest poetry event in North America), the Anti-Defamation League, which was notified by a local Jewish newspaper, charged the poem as anti-

Semitic—citing the above passage as its main piece of evidence—and requested that

Governor James McGreevey fire Baraka from his post of New Jersey Poet Laureate to

which he was appointed the previous spring. In agreement with the ADL, McGreevey

asked Baraka for both a public apology and a resignation. Baraka refused and accused

the ADL of running a "smear campaign" against him; according to Baraka, the ADL, in

its "insulting, non-interpretation" of the poem, was confusing anti-Zionism with anti-

Semitism and misunderstood the poem as a whole, which, as he emphatically noted, also

expresses outrage against the Holocaust and other violence perpetuated against Jews ("I

Will Not Resign, I Will Not Apologize").[16] Nevertheless, in 2003, the state government

attempted to pass legislation that would allow the governor to formally remove Baraka

but, unable to do so, decided to abolish the laureateship altogether.[17] Poetry *seemed* to

matter—but how? Interviewed for a *New York Times* article that covered the

controversy, entitled "When Poetry Seems to Matter," Baraka scholar Kimberly Benston

began to probe the matter of the poem. He mentioned that the poem is "incendiary" and

has "performative force" (qtd. in Pearce)—but Benston never mentioned *what exactly* is

being performed.

Because of the extreme scrutiny placed on only a fraction of the poem, it is worth

noting that the litany of questions that insistently asks "who, who, who?" in "Somebody

Blew Up America" begins with the framing line "They say (who say? Who do the

saying)" (42). What is at stake here is nothing less than a questioning of the archive

itself: who controls it, who has the rights to its access, to its use and interpretation. We

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[16] "Somebody Blew Up America" also asks: "Who put the Jews in ovens, / and who helped them do it / Who said 'America First' // And ok'd the yellow stars."

[17] For a thorough account of the controversy and a sustained defense of Baraka's poem, see Gwiazda. In November 2007, the United States Supreme Court declined to review a lawsuit Baraka filed that claimed his freedom of speech was violated.

are reminded of the restrictions and exclusivity of Mullen's "dark archive" as well as the Greek *archons*, the magistrates who, as Derrida reminds us, both house the archives and impose the law. Derrida's *Archive Fever* is, in fact, particularly useful in illuminating the "trouble" that Baraka finds in the archive, the trouble of (what Baraka calls in *Wise, Why's, Y's* through a clever pun) the "scribe." I argue that "Somebody Blew Up America" is a feverish, incendiary performance of paranoia that points to a contemporary crisis of the archive, what Derrida calls "*mal d'archive*" or "*trouble de l'archive.*" The genuinely high stakes of Baraka's poem, while easily dismissible as mere conspiracy theory, as bad history, behooves us to reckon with

> the archive fever or disorder we are experiencing today, concerning its
> lightest symptoms or the great holocaustic tragedies of our modern history
> and historiography: concerning all the detestable revisionisms, as well as
> the most legitimate, necessary, and courageous rewritings of history.
> (Derrida, *Archive Fever* 90)

Baraka's burning search for historical causes, culprits, and explanations and his recourse to the alternate and revisionary history of conspiracy theory powerfully manifests the failures of our cultural memory, the dangerous confusions of our time that conflate "courageous rewritings of history" with "detestable revisionisms"; it shows, in Baraka's trademark excoriating style, that "[w]e are *en mal d'archive*: in need of archives" (Derrida, *Archive Fever* 91).

"No Black Ink in Fax," the wry subtitle of the postscript to *Somebody Blew Up America & Other Poems*, indicates Baraka's belief that no one is getting the message, that there is a major disconnect in our modes of communication, but also, through the

homophonic play of the words "fax" and "facts," Baraka suggests the lack of black

agency in the creation of the historical record and a need to counter—to quote Harryette

Mullen's clever torquing of the famous phrase attributed to Woodrow Wilson—a "history

written with whitening" (45). The blanks, gaps, and lacunae in "the facts" are

symbolized in the idiosyncratic punctuation that riddles the online text of "Somebody

Blew Up America." Baraka's deployment of the caret sign (*caret* literally means "there

is lacking" or "it is missing" in Latin)—precisely where the poetic voice is asking

"who?"—performs his fervent impulse to fill in and supplement the historical record:

> WHO/WHO/ ^^
> …
> Who/Who/Who   ^^^
> …
> Who and Who and WHO (+) who who ^[18]

The plus sign—which famously indicates the presence of variant words and phrases in

Emily Dickinson's holographic manuscripts—implies the need for alternatives, additions,

and interventions; it implies that the facts, as they are, don't add up.[19]

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[18] See the complete poem available on Baraka's website: <http://www.amiribaraka.com/blew.html>.

[19] In Armand Schwerner's *The Tablets*, a long poem begun in 1969 which parodically presents itself as the translation of Sumero-Akkadian tablets, the plus sign (+) is meant to indicate "missing" text. In the Spring of 2003, after the invasion of Iraq led by the United States and the subsequent looting of the National Museum of Iraq, Schwerner's text gained contemporary relevance; on May 12, at a Poets House event in New York City devoted to mourning the loss of Baghdad's cultural centers, Charles Bernstein read Schwerner's "Tablet II" as well as his own Schwerner-inspired parody, "The Rumsfeld Tablet":

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While it is not my intention to minimize the issues which the Baraka controversy has sparked within public debate—issues concerning free speech, the representation of Jews, and the fraught relationship between aesthetics and politics—I believe understanding "Somebody Blew Up America" as a text deeply engaged with what scholars in various disciplines term the "archival turn" will advance the poem into more productive discussion and treat it not as some idiosyncratic and ill-advised rant but as one text, among many texts, that are responding to a historically specific crisis. In this context, the second most inflammatory and oft-cited passage of Baraka's poem comes into focus as not so much a dismissible example of anti-Semitism but as an anxious questioning of archival control:

> Who know why Five Israelis was filming the explosion
> And cracking they sides at the notion (46)

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The poem at once references the missing artifacts of Mesopotamian culture stolen in the wake of the invasion but also mocks the archival misinformation, the "missing" Weapons of Mass Destruction that United States and British intelligence relied on as a *causus belli*. This spectacular failure of intelligence is of a piece with the paranoid voice of "Somebody Blew Up America." For an account of Bernstein's reading, see the post "Charles Bernstein: The Rumsfeld Tablet" on Brian Kim Stefan's anti-war blog, <http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000634.html>.

What is at stake in this "meta-archival" description is not only the privilege (because of the alleged foreknowledge of the attack) to document the instantaneous moment, to have "the scoop" on a momentous and fleeting event but also the power to enlist the archived instant of witness not for mourning and elegy but for purposes of gleeful celebration.[20] The "notion" that Baraka finds so troublesome is as much the privileged point of view of the documentary eye as the "explosion" itself.

When asked at a press conference by a CNN producer, "Do you know who?" regarding his insistent catalogue of interrogations, Baraka responded, "I don't purport to be a statistician. I don't have a mainframe. If I had a staff, like you do at CNN, I could answer these questions" (qtd. in Paumgarten). Implied in Baraka's answer is that it is not his job, as poet, to "add things up," to process statistics, nor to merely engage in the journalistic activities of recording and reportage.[21] In a sense, *all* poems archive and document their historical moment in their formal, generic, thematic, and linguistic choices; they are, indeed, "archives for our times," as Canadian poet Dorothy Livesay has famously suggested.[22] Yet I believe that there is a particular archival impulse in the work of Baraka (as well as Kitaj) that is importantly bound with paranoia.

The "Archival Impulse" and Paranoia

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[20] I take the term "meta-archival" from Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, which refers to filmic documentations of explosions that "reduce the corrupting, dismantling work of time to an instant that can be seized and circulated" (222-3).

[21] Baraka is invoking an opposition between the news and poetry which was key to modernist poetics— from Ezra Pound's declaration that poetry "is news that stays news" to William Carlos Williams' late musings in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower": "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there" (318). This opposition reached its parodic, postmodern implosion with Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day* (2003), which, in over 800 pages, reproduces the entire issue of the *New York Times* for September 1, 2000 word for word. This conceptual work will be treated in the next chapter.

[22] In the poem "Anything Goes," Livesay says, "Above all / a poem records speech: / the way it was said / between people   animals   birds / a poem is an archive for our times" (245).

His questions are simply rhetorical. He is not using his paranoia ironically in some way
as an indictment of paranoia. This is a very straightforward poem.
—*Washington Post*'s Gene Weingarten on "Somebody Blew Up America"

According to Foster, there is "an archival impulse at work internationally in contemporary art," and even if, as Foster admits, this impulse is "hardly new," "an archival impulse with a distinctive character of its own is again pervasive" (3). My concept "the archival long poem" thus piggy-backs on Foster's observation and orients it towards illuminating the specific contours of contemporary North American poetry. Foster chooses Thomas Hirschhorn (and his makeshift assemblages), Sam Durant (and his détournements of late modernist and postmodernist styles), and Tacita Dean (and her strange documentary photographs and films) as representative artists and argues that "[i]n the first instance" they "seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" retrieving "obscure" sources "in a gesture of alternative knowledge" ("An Archival Impulse" 3-4). Some of the sources which Baraka queries are indeed obscure (as if from a "dark archive")—either because there is no consensus about historical causes ("Who blew up the Maine"), because they suggest dubious conspiracy theories ("Who frame Rap Jamil al Amin"), or because the questions themselves are periphrastically obscure ("Who told you what you think that later you find out a lie"). And what is conspiracy theory if not an "alternative" mode of apprehending the world and the way it functions?

Moreover, archival art, says Foster, "assumes [the] anomic fragmentation [of post-modernity] as a condition not only to represent but to work through, and proposes new orders of affective association"; such orders include—and I take this to be an animating tension of the archival long poem—a dialectic between a utopian desire to be

"institutive" and a "paranoid" urge, as Hirschhorn would have it, "to connect what cannot be connected":

> [archival art's] will to connect can betray a hint of paranoia—for what is paranoia if not a practice of forced connections and bad combinations, of my own private archive, of my own notes from the underground, put on display? On the one hand, these private archives do question public ones: they can be seen as perverse orders that aim to disturb the symbolic order at large. On the other hand, they might also point to a general crisis in this social law—or to an important change in its workings whereby the symbolic order no longer operates through apparent totalities. For Freud the paranoiac projects meaning onto a world ominously drained of the same (systematic philosophers, he liked to imply, are closet paranoiacs). Might archival art emerge out of a similar sense of a failure in cultural memory, of a default in productive traditions? For why else connect so feverishly if things did not appear so frightfully disconnected in the first place? ("An Archival Impulse" 21-2)

In this sense, Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America," is the paranoid postmodern poem *par excellence*; it is an angry aggregation of "forced connections and bad combinations" (in the way it indiscriminately links such various historical events such as the Trail of Tears, the Holocaust, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, in the way it suggests that the assassinations of Malcolm X, JFK, Martin Luther King, and Abraham Lincoln are "linked") in the service of "disturb[ing] the symbolic order at large." His poem strives to activate cultural memories of injustice so that the 9/11 attacks can be connected to

different contexts besides the presentist confines of an exceptional nationhood. Baraka's seemingly contradictory statements about the poem suggest that its rampant paranoia was what troubled critics as much as its purported anti-Semitism; he told the *New York Times*, "Everything that was flowing into my mind at the time flowed into the poem…I can understand people being excited and outraged, but the point is that you have to investigate" (qtd. in Pearce). According to one reading of this statement, Baraka is casting his text as an investigation of research materials in the tradition of documentary poetry—or what second generation beat poet Ed Sanders calls "investigative poetry"— ("the point is that you have to investigate"), but, at the same time, he treats the poem as an anti-positivist transcription of automatic writing as if he were accessing or channeling some kind of transhistorical and transnational unconscious of the oppressed ("[e]verything that was flowing into my mind"). Alternately, Baraka is finessing a distinction between the "I" of the vatic poet and the "you" of the reader/researcher: his job, he seems to be implying, is to draw on inspirational energies in order to speculate upon global oppression while it is the job of his audience to either disprove or corroborate his findings through verifiable sources. In any case, "Somebody Blew Up America" dramatically highlights the slippage between the private delusion of conspiracy theory and the archival technologies that buttress our sense of a shared and consensus reality; this paranoid confusion between inner and outer realities is precisely what Elin Diamond is referring to when she says, "Someone who has been in the political furnace as long as Baraka has knows how to go for the jugular. But this poem is deeply confused about what it is trying to be" (qtd. in Pearce). Such confusion, nevertheless, also exposes the fact that what we may call "consensus" might actually be coercive hegemony.

Craig Dworkin, another scholar interviewed for the Baraka *New York Times* article, endorses "the sense that a poet can be disturbing and not necessarily comforting or consensus-building" (Foster's "disturb[ing] the symbolic order at large") even if he ultimately considers Baraka's poem to be "not…particularly interesting" (qtd. in Pearce). Dworkin's disinterest in Baraka's poem is surprising in light of his extended interest in the *linguistic* paranoia of Lyn Hejinian. In a creative (and collaged) piece of scholarship on the now classic L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E work *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* called "Parting with Description," Dworkin says, "paranoia, in linguistic terms, would be defined by the equation—or the integration—of different semiotic systems, so that it concatenates signifiers under the regime of a single system of meaning" (249). He goes on, in turn, to advocate a kind of paranoid hermeneutics: "*The paranoia of writing requires paranoid readers…the question, of course, as you read, is never whether you are being too paranoid, but whether you are ever being paranoid enough*" (253-4). "Somebody Blew Up America" raises the question of whether one can be *paranoid enough* when reading history, when reading one's own subject position within a socio-discursive landscape or within an oppressive network of power relations.

I'd like to suggest, pace Dworkin, that paranoid knowledge has a value beyond merely challenging a public order or consensus reality and is of intellectual interest in the way it attempts to account for and analyze abstract structures of power. While Foster suggests that archival art points to the fact that "the symbolic order no longer operates through apparent totalities," the archival long poems I wish to discuss mobilize paranoid modalities in order to interrogate and expose totalizing systems of power and control. In Baraka's case, he describes such power in ever-expanding concentric circles, as a totality

of global capitalism that can be indentified but whose ultimate scope eludes complete

comprehension. With an assonantal and polyptotonic panache (as if the resources of

verse and rhetoric could bolster a "forced connection"), he asks: "Who own what ain't

even known to be owned / Who own the owners that ain't the real owners." Baraka's

gesture to expose the "real owners" and distinguish them from their subordinates

represents a kind of vernacular Marxism and is consistent with what Paul Ricœur calls a

hermeneutics of suspicion, an interpretive practice that attempts to unveil, to parse the

real from the apparent, and to demystify false consciousness.

In "Bad Timing (A Sequel): Paranoia, Feminism, and Poetry," Sianne Ngai

proposes that conspiracy theory, a mode of thinking that is generally considered

illegitimate if not pathological, can act as "a viable synecdoche for 'theory' itself" (2).

Ngai uses the example of Frederic Jameson invoking "the system" in his critique of a

pervasive anti-intellectualism, but just a cursory review of twentieth century philosophy

and critical theory will demonstrate the extent to which thinkers have formulated models

based upon a paranoid and "dysphoric apprehension of a holistic and all-encompassing

structure": Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry, Althusser's state ideological

apparatuses, Lacan's law of the father, DeBord's society of the spectacle, Derrida's

logocentrism, Foucault's panopticism, and Deleuze's societies of control.[23] And because

paranoia is "an exigency in a world where any analysis of power at the transindividual

level increasingly requires a language capable of dealing with 'the system' as an abstract

and holistic entity," Ngai is careful to point out that

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[23] Ngai cites Jameson's article "The Theoretical Hesitation" (1999): "The system has always understood that ideas and analysis, along with the intellectuals who practice them, are its enemies and has evolved various ways of dealing with the situation…" (2-3).

the fact that any attempt to think beyond local and particular circumstances currently seems to bear a 'paranoid' inflection, even if only by default, makes it important to note that paranoia can be denied the *status* of epistemology when claimed by minority subjects, though valorized *as such* when claimed by the status quo…particularized subjects are increasingly denied the right to a fear grounded in their own cognizance of power's abstract and holistic structure—a denial with the pernicious effect of ensuring that this affective orientation to the world, *when it functions as a mode of knowledge*, becomes safeguarded as the special provenance of male agent-intellectuals. (5-6)

Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" clearly raises crucial issues about how minority and particularized subjects can legitimately express fear and how such subjects can articulate their own condition of being caught in what Diamond calls the "political furnace." To deem Baraka's poem uninteresting, I maintain, is to deny it its epistemological status. Moreover, I want to argue that writers of twenty-first century long poems (more of whom will be treated in subsequent chapters) attempt, among other things, to do the theoretical work akin to the more prestigious labor of the "male agent-intellectuals" that I catalogued above but from the standpoint of the "particularized subject."

In contradistinction to the heavily metaphorized objects of fear in Eliot's *The Waste Land*—"[t]he wind under the door" (line 118) and "the hooded hordes" (line 368) for example—the paranoid fears of the twenty-first century long poem are socio-politically specific and such precision relates to what might be called the "monographic"

(rather than encyclopedic) feel of these long poems. In other words, each writer is confronting a particular abstract system which entails a historically specific set of fears: for example, C.D. Wright's *One Big Self* (2007), a book based on trips to three Louisiana prisons, is an investigation of the prison-industrial complex while Mark Nowak's fear, in *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004), is of the deleterious effects of global capitalism and de-industrialization. Brenda Coultas' fear in "The Abolition Journal" (2007), which is a documentary effort to trace remains of the underground railroad in her home county, is that—to use Andreas Huyssen's vocabulary—"usable pasts" are eroding (or have already vanished beyond recovery) while gigabytes of "disposable data" (28) are being "musealized" as a part of our "culture of memory" (25).[24]

If Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" contains a dearth of data and statistical information—we remember that he pointedly stated that he did not have a mainframe computer nor the staff power of CNN—then the twenty-first century archival long poem is obsessed with statistics, research, evidentiary information, and the news. One reason is that, as Williams notes, the Library is sanctuary to our fears (paranoid or otherwise). In other words, contemporary writers, I suspect, take Walter Benjamin's dictum that "[t]here is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" as a truism and see the use and appropriation of documentation as a way to unveil the abstract systems of power which perpetrate and perpetuate the various barbarities of our time ("On the Concept of History" 392). The libraries, archives, and

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[24] Huyssen says, "No doubt, the world is being musealized, and we all play our parts in it. Total recall seems to be the goal. Is this an archivist's fantasy gone mad?" (25) He later articulates what he calls our "culture of memory": "the more we are asked to remember in the wake of the information explosion and the marketing of memory, the more we seem to be in danger of forgetting and the stronger the need to forget. At issue is the distinction between usable pasts and disposable data. My hypothesis here is that we try to counteract this fear and danger of forgetting with survival strategies of public and private memorialization. The turn toward memory is subliminally energized by the desire to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space" (28).

cultural institutions which house such documentation are then of special interest to the

paranoid theoretical thinker. Moreover, the paranoid fear of such encompassing systems

necessitates a knowledge of its workings in advance, for, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

usefully points out, paranoia is anticipatory and retroactive: "because there must be no

bad surprises, and because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself

constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known"

(130). The twenty-first century archival long poem, therefore, is a privileged domain for

working through bad news—not poetry as "news that stays news," to cite Pound's well

known formulation, but as a performative and ethical engagement with bad news and

cultural barbarity. The paranoid thinker must either intuit the knowledge found within

the archive (or the knowledge that *should be* found within the archive), as Baraka does,

or obsessively scour it to find evidence of what was already known.

"The point is that you have to investigate": Twenty-First Century Inventories

The book-length poem *Inventory* (2006) by the Caribbean-Canadian poet Dionne

Brand ends: "I have nothing soothing to tell you, / that's not my job, / my job is to revise

and revise this bristling list, / hourly" (100). The list to which she is referring is (in the

words of the back cover copy) "an inventory of the tumultuous early years of this new

century." It is, in an attenuated way, a pendant piece to Mullen's *Dark Archive*. Not

only does Brand's poem register the "explosive…rains" of Katrina but also the accretive

violence of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Informed by the digital archive that is the

Iraq Body Count project, Brand, who calls the book's heroine "the wars' last and late

night witness" (21), presents her precise attention to the civilian deaths as a collective

series of micro-elegies:[25]

>…here is the latest watchful hour

> — twenty-seven in Hillah, three in fighting in
> Amariya, two by roadside bombing, Adhaim,
> five by mortars in Afar, in firefight in Samarra

> two, two in collision near Khallis, council member
> in Kirkuk, one near medical complex, two in
> Talafar, five by suicide bomb in Kirkuk, five

> by suicide in Shorgat, one in attack on police
> chief, Buhurz, five by car bomb in Baquba,
> policeman in Mosul, two by car bomb, Madaen

> five by mortars in Talafar, Sufi follower
> near Baghdad, twelve by suicide bomb in
> restaurant, bystander in Dora, in Mishada,
> in Hillah, twenty-seven again, twenty-seven —

> …

> twenty-three by suicide bomb at Ibn Zanbour kebab
> restaurant, no need to repeat this really, just the name
> of the kebab place is new… (23, 26)

With its deliberate mention of place names, this list recalls the famous catalogue of ships

in Book II of *The Iliad*, but rather than honoring the military leaders and commanders, as

does Homer, Brand's catalogue attempts to turn bad news, which quickly takes on the

status of Sedgwick's "already known" ("no need to repeat this really, just the name / of

the kebab place is new"), into a funerary rite, a kind of ritualistic "wake" by proxy, a

Whitmanesque "vigil strange" for our telecommunicative age: "At least someone should

stay awake, she thinks, / someone should dream them along the abysmal roads" (26). If

Inventory doesn't exactly exhibit the paranoid knowledge that Cindy Patton mentions in

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[25] The Iraq Body Count project is "the world's largest public database of violent civilian deaths during and since the 2003 invasion." <www.iraqbodycount.org>.

k1405	Policeman shot dead in Samarra	1 Jun 2005
k1404	Policeman in Amil, Baghdad	1 Jun 2005
k1403	TV anchor man in Mosul	31 May 2005
k1402	Policeman shot dead in Mosul	31 May 2005
k1425	Shiite political leader in Baghdad	30 May 2005-3 Jun 2005
k1399	Twenty-seven by suicide bombers, Hillah	30 May 2005
k1394	Two by roadside bomb in Adhaim	30 May 2005
d4132	High school teacher shot dead by US forces in Baghdad	29 May 2005-3 Jun 2005
k1395	Kurdish tribal leader in Mosul	29 May 2005-30 May 2005
d4131	Two policemen by suicide bomb in eastern Baghdad	29 May 2005
k1401	Anbar governor near Rawa	29 May 2005
k1400	Up to 2 by car bomb, near Madaen	29 May 2005
k1398	Two policemen in Dora, Baghdad	29 May 2005

Figure 1. <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/incidents/page430>.

one of this chapter's epigraphs—that "the military deliberately researches ways to kill

noncombatants"—then it does apprehend an abstract collusion between the military, the

news, and what Adorno and Horkheimer would call the culture industry: "the news was

advertisement for movies, / the movies were the real killings" (22). Here, Brand is

suggesting an unsavory ecology of capital and violence through a clever pun on "killing"

and "profit"—as well as through a chiastic structure that inverts and blurs the relationship

between the real and the staged. If this is a "bad combination" or "forced connection" so,

too, is much of the output of poetry in general; metaphor, after all, is the practice of

saying A equals B when A is, in fact, A (The speaker of Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," for

example, famously calls her father a "panzer-man" (75)).

Inventory ends with another metaphorical "bad combination": "there are atomic

openings in my chest / to hold the wounded" (26). Such a statement recalls the work of

one of Foster's key archival artists, Thomas Hirschhorn—particularly his collage series

"Every Wound is My Wound." For example, in "Every Wound is My Wound! Every

Wound is My Wound (III Vera)" (see fig 2), Hirschhorn links—in a bad combination—

the representational violence enacted on women through pornographic images to the

physical violence of bullets. Yet, if Hirschhorn attempts to archive or embed violence

within the very *faktura* of his collage, Brand locates the poet's body as a kind of

repository (through the pun on the word "chest") in which the wounds (the "atomic

openings") themselves might become receptacles for archival storage. What is important

is that the archival locus that interests Brand is situated within the subject not the actual
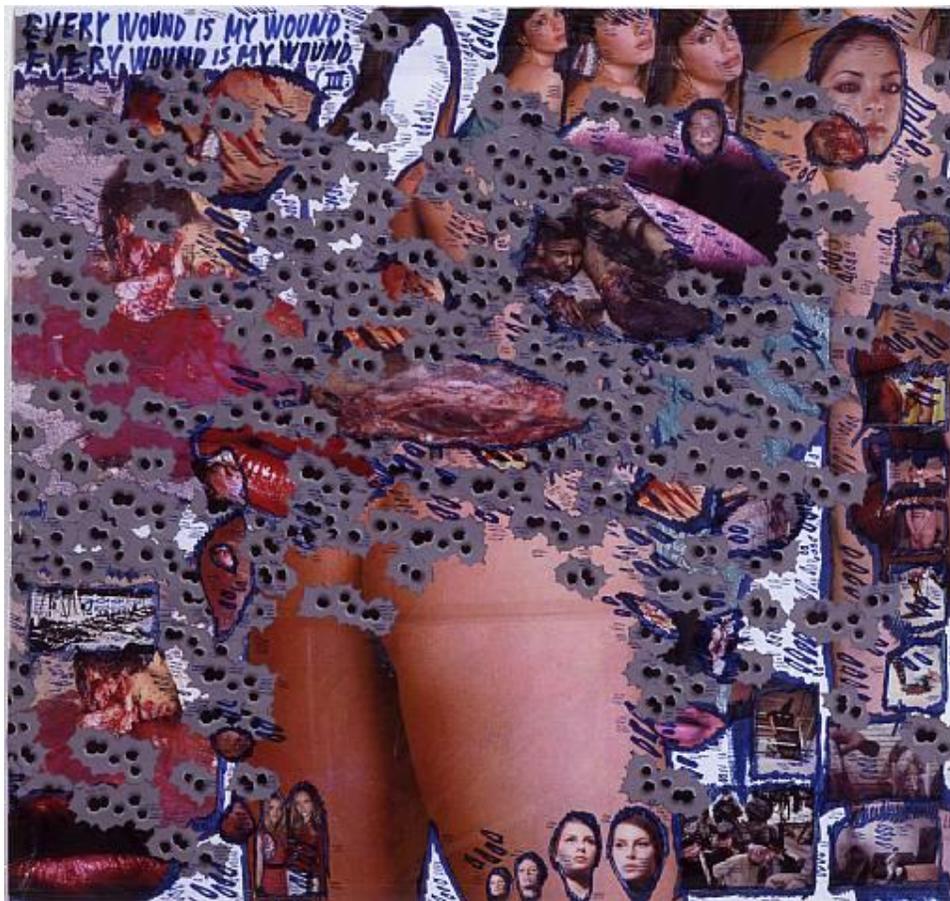
Figure 2. Thomas Hirschhorn. "Every Wound is My Wound! Every Wound is My Wound (III Vera)." Mixed Media. Paper, prints, plastic foil, adhesive tape, marker, ballpoint. h: 84 x w: 89 cm. Arndt & Partner Berlin.

poem—this is why the long poem is titled *Inventory* not *Archive*. An inventory, more specifically, is "[a] finding aid that includes, at a minimum, a list of the series in a collection" (Pearce-Moses, "Inventory"). It offers, in other words, a map or interface to an archive. Brand's book then is a list of the specific violences which she has registered in the first years of the twenty-first century.

While writing *Inventory*, Brand had tacked up above her desk a quote from Edward Said's *Orientalism* which is, itself, a quote adapted from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*: "The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory … therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile an inventory" (qtd. in Brydon 993). I want to suggest that Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" is also an inventory, a compilation that indexes a wide range of historical traces, and, like Brand's *Inventory*, it attempts to begin the work of critical, if not theoretical, thought. "The point is that you have to investigate," says Baraka, and his poem has, indeed, given us a map, an inventory (by way of the interrogative) to an archive that has not yet been collected and codified. And if Baraka's inventory is, at times, a confusing and contradictory catalogue of bad combinations and forced connections, this shouldn't minimize the importance of the notional archive at which he points. "Modern memory is, above all, archival," says Pierre Nora, "It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (13). Baraka's poem, in contrast, points exactly to memories of which there are no trace—which is why they necessitate his insistent, anaphoric interrogatives. He explicitly contrasts the hyper-visibility of the 9/11 attacks

and the "notion" of "filming the explosion" against his fiery need for an archive that could adequately furnish answers to his questions.[26]

What I am calling archival long poems—because of their limning of a space in which historical processes are inscribed within a witnessing subject (such as Brand's "late night witness")—can productively accommodate what has become known in the past few decades as "a poetry of witness," which has been notably theorized by Carolyn Forché. According to Forché, "We need a third term [besides "personal" and "political"], one that can describe the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal. Let us call this space 'the social'" (31). Such a space—between the state and the subject, in which "an infinity of traces" are deposited—is *an archival space*, as Said has suggested, and *archive* recommends itself as a heuristic term, as a privileged site through which the poet negotiates the traces of history and the ideological effects of the state. Creating an inventory (à la Brand and Baraka) is one way to engage this space, and, as I will show in the remainder of this chapter, creating a registry is another. Moreover, as I shift to a reading of Kitaj's *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, I wish to show that Kitaj's long poem has, importantly, an "institutive" as well as a "paranoid" urge. To provocatively link Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America," which is a polemical poem haunted by the specter of anti-Semitism, and Kitaj's *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, which calls for a new Jewish art, may be yet another instance of a bad combination. Yet both poems converge precisely at the intersection which can be called the paranoid archive, and both poems have been disparaged by various critics as not counting as actual poetry.

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[26] Perhaps Baraka's poem, in going against the grain of what Nora calls "modern memory," while archival itself (the poem is, after all, a collection of inscriptions), gestures toward a body of knowledge that is, in fact, nonarchival; in other words, perhaps Baraka is also presenting "Somebody Blew Up America" as an inventory of *repertoires*. Here, I am using the term "repertoire" as Diana Taylor has defined it: as "performance…transmitted through a nonarchival system of transfer" (xvii).

I wish to mobilize this suggestive (if forced) affiliation to show that both poems shed light on the changing role of the poet (and poetry) in the new century.

"A New Kind of Long Poem": Kitaj's Registry of Constant Circulation

In the entrance hall of the British Library at St Pancras—the largest public building constructed in the UK in the twentieth century—hangs a monumental tapestry: a 7-square meter reproduction of R.B. Kitaj's painting "If Not, Not" (1975-6) (see figs 3 and 5). The work depicts the gatehouse of Auschwitz in the upper left-hand corner overlooking a surreal landscape scattered with abandoned objects, fragments, and bodies, deliberately echoing the "heap of broken images" of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. To the right, human forms lie strewn in water—an allusion to the "Death by Water" section of Eliot's poem.[27] The tiny upside down book and the dark bird—perhaps a nod to Poe's raven—perched on the soiled document in the painting's mid-ground suggest a ravaged and depleted culture in the wake of modernity's traumas. The curious title, "If Not, Not," is a possible allusion to Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and refers to another distinguished writer of long poems, Ezra Pound:

> We met Ezra Pound at Grace Lounsbery's house, he came home to dinner with us and he stayed and he talked about japanese prints among other things. Gertrude Stein liked him but did not find him amusing. She said he was a village explainer, excellent if you were a village, but if you were not, not. (200)

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[27] According to Kitaj's own commentary, "two main strands come together in the picture. One is a certain allegiance to Eliot's Waste Land and its (largely unexplained) family of loose assemblage" (qtd. in Corbett 44).

The anecdote above ridicules Pound as being provincial, as being merely a *village* (as

opposed to a global) explainer despite his cosmopolitan posturing (his interest in

"japanese prints among other things"); by extension, Stein's comment exposes the failure

of Pound's *Cantos* as an international and encyclopedic "poem containing history"

(Pound's own definition of an epic poem) and, ultimately, as a guidebook to a renovated

culture. Formally and thematically, "If Not, Not" is a visual analog to the modernist

Figure 3.
If Not, Not, 1975-76
Oil and black chalk on canvas
152.4 x 152.4 cm
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh
<http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/online_az/4:322/result/0/644?initial=K&artistId=3784&artist
Name=Ronald%20Brooks%20Kitaj&submit=1> (accessed 15 April 2008).

encyclopedic long poem in the way it responds to the abhorrent and alienating conditions

of modernity through a collage of historical fragments and citations. Such a technique,

proposing new connectivities from disparate sources in order to confront the radical

disjuncture of the present—is the technique of the twentieth century long poem *par excellence*; we find it in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in Pound's *Cantos*, in H.D.'s *Trilogy*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, and William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*. Kitaj's image, bolstered by the exfoliating connotations of its title, at once mourns the devastating condition of modernity as well as critiques the literary texts of modernism, such as the *Cantos*, that have proposed alternate socialities in utopian albeit totalizing ways.

Kitaj's view of history here is a melancholic one. History is not seen as progress—as in Crane's *The Bridge* (1930) which turns the Brooklyn Bridge into a metaphor for both technological triumph and mythical recovery—but decline. [28] The tapestry is allegorical in the Benjaminian sense of the term: composed of isolated fragments, it elicits a gaze of melancholic contemplation in which the viewer drains the life out of its disparate pieces in the process of interpretation; history is thus understood, in Benjamin's famous phrases, as the *facies hippocratica*, as "the Passion of the world" (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 166). Situated at the threshold of the British Library, the tapestry, I believe, is meant to be an icon of literariness as such as it welcomes the visiting reader or scholar into a dense and canonic network of intertextuality. On the library's website, the tapestry's brief description suggests this very function: "It reflects a host of literary references, chief among them T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*."[29] Yet the tapestry is also a *memento mori* writ large that specifically invites a melancholic mode of reading; it suggests that one might find refuge in the archive, shoring up textual fragments against

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[28] In "Atlantis," the final section of the sequence, Crane conflates the bridge with the mythical city, suggesting that the ruins of antiquity can be fully recovered by poetic *fiat* and that the plentitude of history can be fused with modern progress. In Crane's vision, the bridge threads together the "labyrinthine mouths of history" into "[o]ne arc synoptic" (105).

[29] <www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/visits/artworks.html> (accessed 15 April 2008).

the wreck of history. Kitaj, a Jewish American painter who spent over three decades in

England (he is associated with the so-called "London School of Painting," which includes

Frank Auerbach, Lucien Freud, and David Hockney), has been routinely criticized for his

hyper-literary paintings and the at-times lengthy self-interpretive glosses that he has

appended, in the manner of Eliot's *Waste Land* notes, to his works. In response to a

major 1994 retrospective at the Tate Gallery, London critics lambasted Kitaj and

dismissed him as a pedantic charlatan; Brian Sewell remarked in a particularly negative

Figure 4.
"Sitting on History" (1995)
Entrance Hall: West Wall, British Library
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/visits/artworks.html> (accessed 12 December 2008).

review that Kitaj was "imprisoned by his library" (qtd. in Wolff). I will return to the

controversy of the Tate retrospective, but, for now, I want to suggest that this conception

of the archive—perpetuated in Sewell's critique and the British Library's redeployment

of Kitaj's image (as well as other public art on the library grounds like "Sitting on

History" (see fig 4))—as an ontologically discrete place that at once shelters and

imprisons the artist/scholar in a mausoleum of historical memory no longer pertains to

Kitaj's latest book, *Second Diasporist Manifesto: A New Kind of Long Poem in 615 Free

Verses* (2007), which imagines the archive to be a shifting site of intervention and

collective *poiesis*. Published just a month before Kitaj's death, *Second Diasporist*

Figure 5.
The tapestry based on Kitaj's "If Not, Not," constructed by the Master Weavers of the Edinburgh Tapestry
company.
<http://www.bl.uk/news/pictures.html>

Manifesto, is, like "If Not, Not," a mass of citations, but it offers a pointedly different

conception of the fragment. The book, accompanied with 42 illustrations, is "a sort of

primer of a new Jewish Art" which presents fragments not to be "shored" (Eliot) or

"shelved" (Pound) but to be shared in a diasporic dispersal.[30] The book's structure—

strikingly different from the more conventional prose format of *First Diasporist*

Manifesto (1989)—is loosely based on the 613 commandments or "mitzvoth" of the

Torah, with each numbered "manifestation" taking the form of an observation or

quotation (from various Jewish writers and intellectuals such as Albert Einstein, Franz

Kafka, Robert Alter, and Harold Bloom) which is then followed (but not always) with a

brief comment or directive. Number 263, for example, reads: "Someone said that Kafka

retained 'only the skeleton of sense, or a paper cutout.' Paint a Jewish cutout, 60 yrs after

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[30] Pound's Canto VIII memorably pokes fun at Eliot's *The Waste Land*: "These fragments you have shored
(shelved)" (28).

Matisse laid down his scissors…" (*Second Diasporist Manifesto* n.pag.). The

proposition, meant to inspire a new work of Jewish art, takes as its starting point an

unattributed quote from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor*

Literature.[31] As this example makes clear, *Second Diasporist Manifesto* is a deliberate

work of appropriation and the curious conflation of Deleuze and Guattari with an

unnamed "someone" is not likely a casual slip of unattribution but an intentional attempt

to posit an alternate tradition. The very next manifestation reads: "Heschel says: 'The

Ashkenazim were not interested in writing literature; their works read like brief lecture

notes.' Descending from them, I try a minor literature…" This gesture, attributing the

concept of "minor literature" to the Ashkenazi Jews instead of Deleuze and Guattari, is

nothing other than what Foster calls the archival impulse of recovering displaced and

alternative knowledge. It is a kind of "deterritorializing" of the notion of "minor

literature" away from French theory.

An early version of the manifesto appeared in the catalog for his exhibition *How*

to Reach 72 In a Jewish Art at the Marlborough Gallery (New York City, March 1-April

2, 2005); but interestingly, this text was not explicitly marked as poetry. What do we

make of this crucial difference—particularly in light of the way the book version

aggressively and repeatedly declares its generic status? In the introduction alone (called

"Taboo Art"), Kitaj calls the text "a long poem," a "grand Experimental poem," and a

"Manifesto Poem." The difference between the catalog and book version is something

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[31] Deleuze and Guattari say, "Since things are as they are ('it is as it is, it is as it is,' a formula dear to
Kafka, marker of a state of facts), he will abandon sense, render it no more than implicit; he will retain only
the skeleton of sense, or a paper cutout" (20-1).

like the difference between the 1855 and 1856 versions of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.[32]

And what do we make of the poem's claim to newness? To be sure, Kitaj may be

overcompensating for his reputation as not a poet but as a painter despite his strong links

to the poetry world—he was friends with poets such as Robert Duncan and Jonathan

Williams, and poet-friends such as John Ashbery and Robert Creeley have written

admiringly about his work—and there is more than a bit of modernist posturing going on

here in accordance with the Poundian imperative of "make it new." But I argue that

taking Kitaj at his word—deeming this text as, in fact, a new kind of long poem—will

shed crucial light on the relationship between the contemporary long poem and the

expanded and archival role of the poet in the twenty-first century. Critics, however, have

yet to give Kitaj's poem fair consideration; this is surprising given that a discussion of

Kitaj would undoubtedly supplement *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture* (2010),

the recent collection of essays edited by Stephen Paul Miller and Daniel Morris, or Maria

Damon's notion of "micropoetries" in context of the "JEW as Diasporic icon" (20). It is

also interesting that Simon Eckett's recent essay "The Poet Lover: R.B. Kitaj and the

Post-Pound Poets," which details Kitaj's relationship with Creeley and Duncan,—while

good-intentioned—only mentions *Second Diasporist Manifesto* in passing without ever

considering it as a serious object of study as a book of poetry. Eckett closes his essay,

somewhat sentimentally, with the following remark: "Kitaj's passion for the word, for

poets and poetry never left him…Kitaj's oils and print portraits of his friends, Jonathan

Williams, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, and the other poets he engaged with, are a

---

[32] While Whitman never explicitly marked the 1855 version of *Leaves of Grass* as poetry, in the 1856 version, he obsessively gave his poems titles such as "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American," "Poem of Women," "Poem of Salutation," and, somewhat redundantly, "Poem of The Poet." See, for example, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Whi56LG.html>.

testament to that love" (51). It seems painfully obvious that Kitaj's *own book of poetry*

should also signify as a testament to his love for poetry; indeed, Eckett seems to

implicitly instantiate a divide between Williams, Creeley, and Duncan, the professional

poets, and Kitaj, the amateur or "outsider poet." Even worse, scholar and *Guardian*

blogger Germaine Greer wrote of Kitaj's book that "[t]he poem wasn't a poem," and in

The Horizon, the blog for *Commentary* (a publication, in fact, referenced in Kitaj's

poem), Benjamin Ivry also denies that *Second Diasporist Manifesto* "is a poem."[33]

Yet, throughout the text (the 615 verses themselves) and the para-text (the title

page, the Preface, the Afterword, etc.), we find the phrase "long poem" no less than six

times:[34]

> Following is a long poem, an Endless Column of propositions, etc., for a
> new Jewish painting Art.
> (from "Taboo Art")
>
> PLEASE THINK OF THIS MANIFESTO AS A LONG POEM!
> (from "Manifesto Continued")
>
> Yes, I am composing a long poem here about my Jewish painting art
> (from "Manifesto Continued")
>
> I write this long poem under the spell of next to no limitations, I hope and
> pray. Please suspend the usual laws of poetry
> (from "197")
>
> I try a minor literature…these manifestations, this long poem (see 266),
> while I paint in old age
> (from "264")
>
> You've been reading a long unfinished poem called HOW TO DO A
> JEWISH ART
> (from "Afterword")

---

[33] Ivry says, "Both books [*First Diasporist Manifesto* and *Second Diasporist Manifesto*] declare the author's principles, as any manifesto should, but neither is a poem."

[34] According to its Library of Congress call number—N6537.K53A35—the book is classified as "Visual Arts," not poetry; *Google Books* tags it, curiously, as "History."

Nearly all poetic conventions, what Kitaj calls the "usual laws of poetry," are absent in this text. And for a work of prose poetry, there is a curious absence of figuration such as metaphor. In fact, what Kitaj calls "a new kind of long poem" actually takes its form, its structure from an older model, the commonplace book, and it is this that paradoxically constitutes its "newness" (I will return to this point later). The commonplace book—a form which has its roots in the *florilegia* or "books of flowers" of the Middle Ages, reached its peak during the Renaissance, and declined in popularity during the Victorian Era—was a kind of "information-retrieval system," a library-in-miniature in which readers could store, annotate, and organize pithy quotes and passages under general thematic headings such as "Nature" or "History" (Moss vi). Since the Renaissance, the commonplace book has undergone various permutations and has blurred with associated forms such as the scrapbook, the album, the diary, and the miscellany. According to Earle Havens, many twentieth-century commonplace books were "[o]ften written and published by prominent authors and acknowledged literati" and were considered "as literary texts in their own right" (60-1). Such is an apt description for *Second Diasporist Manifesto* as well, though Kitaj's text, unlike other well known twentieth century examples such as W.H. Auden's *A Certain World*: *A Commonplace Book* (1971), also looks forward, both in its design and its ethos, to the commonplace book's latest and most popular incarnation: the weblog (or blog).

Composed in the early mornings at Kitaj's favorite L.A. café, the Coffee Bean, *Second Diasporist Manifesto* has the diaristic informality that is characteristic of personal blogs. Manifestation 102, for example, reads:

> "I regularly express the concepts of Judaism in an oblique way./I am the last Jew./Jesus was the last Jew."—Derrida

> Who knows what JD means here?
> Yes, <u>very</u> oblique, as usual, and my favorite poet, the Hermit of Amherst,
>   wrote:
> "Tell it <u>Slant</u>," so, OK! Diasporism is quite Slant too (and often oblique).
> (See 86.)

The conspicuously casual use of initials ("JD") gives Kitaj's befuddlement at Derrida a much friendlier cast than Foucault's infamous critique, via John Searle, of Derrida's so-called "*obscurantisme terroriste*": "He writes so obscurely you can't tell what he's saying" (qtd. in Zlomislić 305). In fact, Kitaj enlists both a Derridean and Dickinsonian obliquity in service of what he calls "diasporism" (in *First Diasporist Manifesto* "diasporism" seems almost synonymous with slippery and difficult art in which meaning refuses to stay still). The irony, of course, is that Kitaj's poetry is hardly oblique or slant; it is, to the contrary, all too literal and that is precisely why critics have had such a hard time taking the text seriously *as poetry*. With the sarcastic use of scare quotes, Joshua Cohen writes that "[e]ach of these 'verses' — un-rhyming, un-metered — seems to be a sketch for an aphorism, a left-handed jotting or scrapbook quotation, and the whole comprised becomes a quodlibet (quod: 'whatever'; libet: 'pleases') of the intellectual and idle" ("R.B. Kitaj's Final Draft"). Without the ghost of meter, Kitaj's leisurely verses also seem to replace the bad combination of metaphor with the bad combination of juxtaposition and free association. The blithe, incongruous, and almost freely associated connection between Derrida and Dickinson above is an obvious example; Marjorie Perloff actually speaks of "the neglect of Dickinson on the part of post-structuralist theory" ("Emily Dickinson and the Theory Canon"). Reminded of Stein's quip to Hemingway that "remarks are not literature," we seem to be clearly in the territory of

blog-like "remarks" and sketches, not poetry (*The Autobiography* 77). How can we consider this commonplace book to be a literary text in its own right?

Rachel Blau Duplessis notes that "[t]he demotic form of the encyclopedia poem is the scrapbook," and Kitaj is surely positioning his scrapbook/commonplace book as a demotic counterpart to (and revision of) his painting "If Not, Not," which, I have argued, stems from a tradition of the modernist encyclopedia poem ("Anne Waldman: Standing Corporeally in One's Time"). I take this difference to be instructive of a general movement away from modernist forms, which still cleave closely to the long-poem-as-epic, toward what Brian McHale identifies as a postmodern interest in recovering "'lost' and ephemeral genres" (xi); this is, in fact, part of a larger archival impulse of activating obscure or marginalized sources (in chapter three, I will argue that C.D. Wright similarly draws on such "minor" genres such as travel writing and the epistle).[35] I argue that Kitaj's move to recover the commonplace book form has allowed his text to become legible among a range of contemporary long poems such as Eleni Sikelianos' scrapbook-like *The California Poem* and Susan M. Schultz's *Dementia Blog*, which actually takes the reverse-chronological order of the blog. And I argue that the red underlining present in the book design (see fig 6)—which cleverly reflects Kitaj's practice of "annotat[ing]…research materials with his signature red pen" (Myers "Portrait of a Jewish Artist: R.B. Kitaj in Text and Image")—points forward to the hyperlinks of the internet (which presents underlined words) as well as backward to the rubrication (the practice of adding red headings) of medieval manuscripts, such as the fifteenth century commonplace book, the *Book of Brome* (see fig 7). In this way, *Second Diasporist*

---

[35] McHale is interested in subgenres such as "Menippean satire, learnéd wit, and court masque" (xi).

323 "One asks oneself again how the Jew came to be what he is and why he has drawn upon himself this undying hatred." —*Sigmund Freud*

324 "I am a deeply religious nonbeliever. . . . This is a somewhat new kind of religion." —*Einstein* The quote above is supremely worth repeating because I'm into yr new religion, Al! And its painting art. (See 284.) And, I've got my own somewhat new kind of Jewish religion (see 114).

325 Depart this world having urged my pictures upon it without enough hesitation.

326 A WORLD HAS VANISHED (see 310) but my grandparents from there helped raise me in Cleveland where I learned some Picasso and Ryder and baseball sans dad. I wish I had picked up their Yiddish for my painting.

327 The profoundly Jewish FRANKFURT SCHOOL of disappointed Marxists kinda bores me and, its star Adorno, is mostly a famously unreadable closed book anyway, but Marcuse, chatting about their "aesthetics" said clearly that "art is a rupture with the established reality principle; at the same time it invokes the images of liberation" — in other words: Degenerate Art. The Frankfurters fled, mostly to L.A. So did I 60 yrs later, in the name of a Jewish Art.

328 SHOAH. "Why dost Thou hide Thy face?" —*from Psalm 44 . . .* I want this to be my next little JEWISH ABSTRACT, and, if it feels "good," do a larger one, a nervous Shoah canvas one.

Figure 6. Page scan of *Second Diasporist Manifesto.*

19
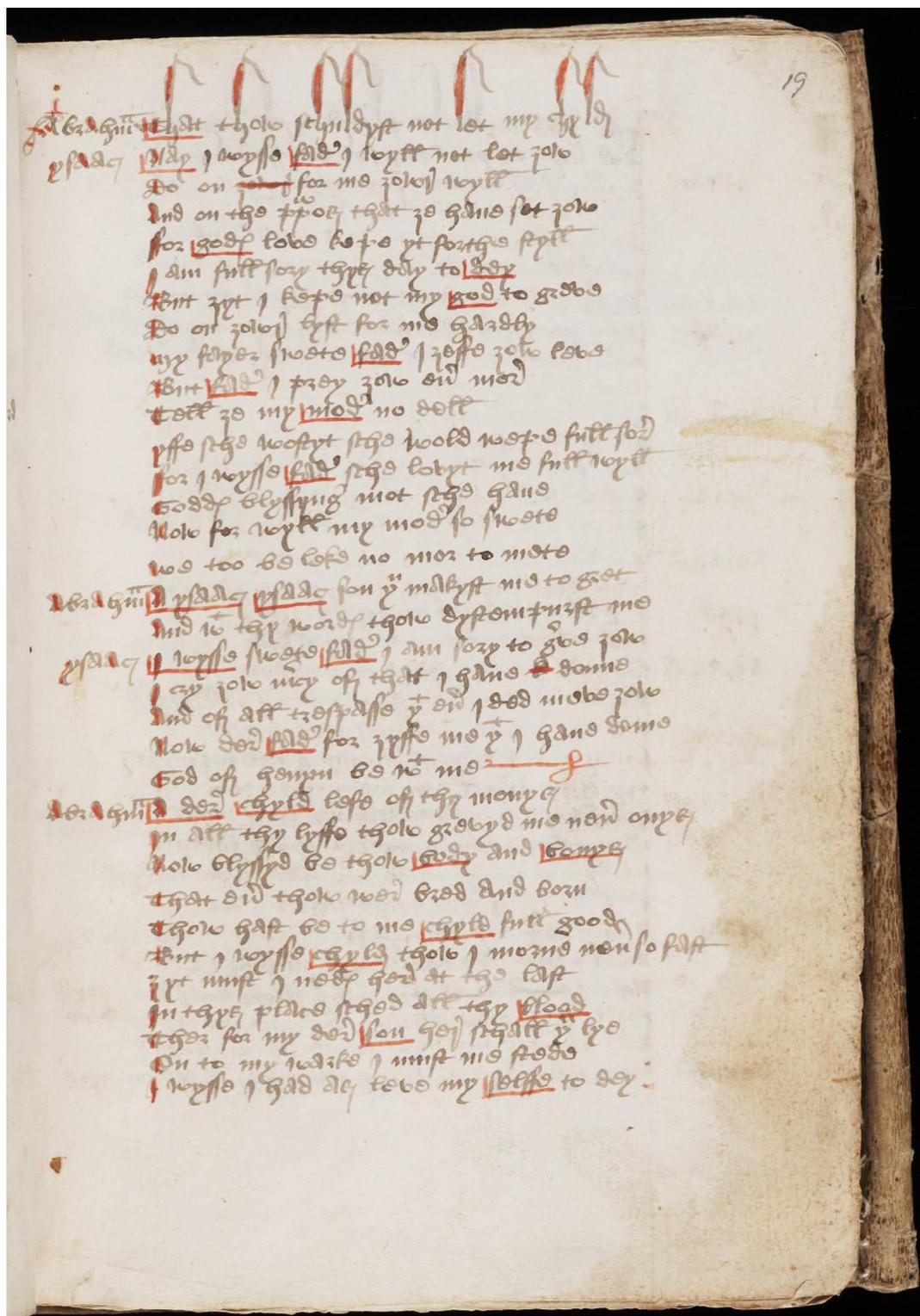
Figure 7.
Page 19r from the *Book of Brome*
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

Manifesto archives a history of writing and data collection from the fifteenth century onward.

Archival Aspiration and the Registry: Kitaj's "Urinal-In-Constant-Use"

> Don't be afraid of SUFFERING as an attribute of Jewish Art (or Black Art, etc.)! Whoever don't like that in art, fuck them! Badmouthing Suffering in Art is enuf already.
> —R.B. Kitaj, Manifestation "584"

> But is…suffering the whole story? …The work of the imagination, especially for poorer migrants, is critical for exercising the capacity to aspire.
> —Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration"

Like "Somebody Blew Up America," *Second Diasporist Manifesto* is a paranoid text—both Baraka's and Kitaj's poems were surely written and conceived under the sign of Delmore Schwartz' felicitous phrase, "even paranoids have real enemies" (qtd. in Farrell 49). Like Baraka, Kitaj has the dysphoric apprehension of an oppressive and totalizing system—in his case, an insidious anti-Semitism (particularly in England). *Second Diasporist Manifesto* begins with the observation that "Jews have been in deep trouble since the expulsion from Eden"—which recalls Baraka's phrase "people / caught in deep trouble"—and is repeatedly filled with the language of persecution, of being "in the face of enemy fire," of having "killer-enemies," and of dying "on guard." Much of this language can be connected to the fallout of his 1994 Tate Gallery retrospective in London. After overwhelmingly hostile reviews (some of which were discussed above), Kitaj blamed the death of his wife Sandra Fisher, who died of a brain aneurysm shortly after the exhibition closed, on his critics; he said, "They tried to kill me and they got her instead" and referred several times to "Sandra's death under fire" (qtd. in Wolff 33). Kitaj even gave works such titles as "The Critic Kills" and "The Killer-Critic

Assassinated by his Widower." Yet above and beyond this personal paranoia, Kitaj's

understanding of the archive is, at root, traumatic. In Manifestation 142, he says, "An

Egyptian column from 1207 B.C. seems to contain the 1st mention of my tribe, saying

that Israel is no more." And like Baraka—who asks "Who cut your nuts off / Who rape

your ma / Who lynched your pa"—Kitaj is not adverse to the thematization and thinking

through of suffering.

Yet as Arjun Appadurai importantly notes, the archive needn't be just about

suffering; it is also an instrument for intervention and aspiration, which is crucial for

migrant and diasporic communities. (And this constitutes what Foster calls the

"institutive" as opposed to "paranoid" urge of archival art.) "[T]he migrant archive,"

says Appadurai,

> is highly active and interactive, as it is the main site of negotiation
>
> between collective memory and desire. As the principle resource in which
>
> migrants can define the terms of their own identities and identity-building,
>
> outside the strictures of their new homes, the diasporic archive is an
>
> intensified form of what characterizes all popular archives: it is a place to
>
> sort out the meaning of memory in relationship to the demands of cultural
>
> reproduction. (23)

Appadurai here offers an enormously useful corrective in unmooring the archive from a

perspective that is strictly oriented toward the past: "The archive, as an institution, is

surely a site of memory. But as a tool, it is an instrument for the refinement of

desire…such desire has everything to do with the capacity to aspire" (24). In this sense,

Second Diasporist Manifesto can be provisionally understood as a diasporic archive, a

repository of quotes that the young Jewish painter can use while residing in what Kitaj calls his or her "HOST KULCHUR" (Kitaj also quotes George Steiner's reflection on Jewish textuo-mobility: "Like a snail, his antennae towards menace, the Jew has carried the house of the text on his back.") Kitaj explicitly frames his poem as a communal project *in becoming* (he says he wants "to help a Jewish Art become!"); and not only is "cultural reproduction" an imperative—"PUT something Jewish in each picture," says Manifestation 439, "DO something Jewish in each picture"—but Kitaj encourages future readers to "UNFINISH THIS MANIFESTO." The book itself is imagined as an "Endless" and unfinished project of collective aspiration. And in perhaps the most striking statement of the entire book, Kitaj says, "This Manifesto is one of my works of art, like a Urinal-In-Constant-Use" (Manifestation 130).

Kitaj is, of course, referring to Marcel Duchamp's famous *objet trouvé* "Fountain" (1917), which consists of an industrial-made urinal metamorphosed, by the artist's sheer nominating power, into a work of art. It is important to note that Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* [Box in a suitcase] (1935-41) could have made a more suitable analogy or model for *Second Diasporist Manifesto*; *Boîte-en-valise* is a leather valise containing almost seventy miniature reproductions of Duchamp's work (including "Fountain.") It is thus a kind of portable retrospective; Okwui Enwezor calls it "an archival system cum mobile museum" (14). This would also accurately describe the diasporic archive that is *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, which presents among Kitaj's selection of quotations and remarks reproductions of over forty of Kitaj's works (including well-known oil paintings like "If Not, Not"; "Reflections on Violence"; and "The Autumn of Central Paris (After Walter Benjamin)") and which systematizes such

Figure 8.
Fountain, 1964 (replica of 1917 original)
glazed ceramic with black paint
15 in. x 19 1/4 in. x 24 5/8 in. (38.1 cm x 48.9 cm x 62.55 cm)
Collection SFMOMA
< http://collections.sfmoma.org/OBJ25853.htm>

materials in 615 numbered entries. Yet "an archival system cum mobile museum,"
despite the seductions of its portable self-sufficiency, would fail to suit Kitaj's insistence
on a collective project of aspiration.

I am arguing that *Second Diasporist Manifesto* is best read not as an archive but
as a *registry*. According to art historian Sven Spieker, nineteenth-century administrative
archives were part of a tripartite structure: "the office, where records are produced; the
registry, where they are kept as long as they circulate; and the archive itself, where they
are stored in perpetuity" (21). The archive thus is a place where—according to the
demotic language of Interfolio, the popular dossier service—"you…put documents that
you don't use very often but that you don't want to delete for good" ("Help Center"). In
short, Kitaj is interested not so much in storage but in frequent use and circulation;
clearly the nod to Duchamp's urinal is a conceptual pun on micturition-circulation. And

"constant use," as Kitaj is defining it, would require no less than an active registry and a

flipping, as it were, of Duchamp's urinal. Thus, Kitaj forcefully responds to the likes of

Sewell, who believed that Kitaj was "imprisoned by his library," with not a library or

museum-in-miniature but with a diasporic, open access registry, a site of communal

contribution "in which new solidarities might produce memories rather than just

wait…for them" (Appadurai 25). Kitaj importantly notes that he would "be mighty

pleased if some young Jewish and Gentile painters got hold of this eccentric <u>Manifesto-</u>

<u>Poem</u> and used it as a guide to a new and personal way to break the ice of their own tribal

legacies." Thus, Kitaj's long poem—while clearly fueled by a desire to "make it new," to

shatter the "ice" of tribal orthodoxies—is not so much "a tale of the tribe" that contains

history (according to Pound's epic-inflected understanding of the long poem) but rather a

registry for new solidarities between tribes, an aspirational tool for the creation of new

histories.

<u>"Left-handed Jottings": The Work of Poetry/The Work in Poetry in the Twenty-First
Century</u>

> I don't purport to be a statistician.
> —Amiri Baraka

> that's not my job
> —Dionne Brand

> this unrhymed poem is a tribal Manifesto like Ginsberg's HOWL or Whitman's Leaves
> of Grass, but less accomplished
> —R.B. Kitaj, Manifestation "523"

The long poems discussed here, in a various ways, challenge or redefine 1) the

role of what the contemporary poet should do, 2) the work expected of or required of the

poet, and 3) the set of evaluative criteria that we, as critics, should use when considering

their aesthetico-cultural and socio-political values. Not only does Baraka actively reject

the poet's task of being beholden to the positivity of fact, but the politics of his poetry

puts pressure on the very ontological grounding of his art form; in an analysis of

"Somebody Blew Up America," Piotr Gwiazda reminds us that "the challenge is how to

read overtly political poetry *as poetry*" (462). On a more dismissive level, writer John

Derbyshire opined in the conservative publication the *National Review* that Baraka's

poem actually isn't a poem at all:

> As a former teacher of English literature, accustomed to describing and
>
> analyzing poems for the benefit of students, I should like to give you an
>
> outline of the thing…They must rhyme, scan, and make sense. I have also
>
> offered my opinion that, in the present state of English-language poetry, I
>
> would happily settle for any two out of the three. "Somebody Blew Up
>
> America" scores zero.

For Derbyshire, who uses an extreme neo-formalist criteria of evaluation (and who, in

fact, seems to conflate the distinct categories of *poetry* and *verse*), "Somebody Blew Up

America" is not poetry but polemic. Yet, as I have been trying to argue in this chapter,

the work of Baraka's poem can be usefully compared to the work of theorists such as

Jameson who attempt to identify totalizing systems; moreover, I consider "Somebody

Blew Up America" to be a Gramscian inventory which forms the basis for critical

inquiry. And if Baraka fails to employ traditional skills like rhyme and meter (much to

Derbyshire's dismay), his poem points, if only by negative example, to the kinds of work

that contemporary poets are now drawing on. "[Y]ou have to investigate," says Baraka,

and Brand's *Inventory* highlights the fact that the poet can easily draw on the

investigations and administrative and organizing work of others. If Baraka repudiates the job of a statistician, Brand quite literally draws on the statistical database of the Iraq Body Count Project (see fig 1). Such work of appropriation looks forward to the writers I will treat in the next chapter.

So too, does *The Second Diasporist Manifesto* rely on the work, investigations, and research of generations of thinkers. And, so too, does *The Second Diasporist Manifesto*, with its prolific use of found text, challenge our very notions of poetic skill. It is true that both Baraka and Brand—while easily dismissible by the Derbyshires of the world—rely on a host of traditional poetic resources. "Somebody Blew Up America," for example, ends with a string of similes that plays with such basic techniques as consonance, parallelism, and repetition:

> Like an Owl exploding
> In your life in your brain in your self
> Like an Owl who know the devil
> All night, all day if you listen, Like an Owl
> Exploding in fire. We hear the questions rise
> In terrible flame like the whistle of a crazy dog

And even if Brand integrates such un-poetic material as statistics into her poem, she does so in neatly manicured stanzas. Kitaj's writing, on the other hand, is, as he says, much "less accomplished." His saying so, in the context of Whitman and Ginsberg, is, in fact, an extreme litotes, but his foray into poetry attests to the fact that, as Enwezor notes, "we have witnessed the collapse of the wall between amateur and professional" (13). Reviewer Joshua Cohen even calls the work a conglomeration of "left-handed jottings." Such a term, though flippantly used, points to the very crucial issue of skill and writerly/artistic ability: a left-handed jotting is done as a kind of parlor-game-like challenge, an intentional deskilling of available capabilities. As I will argue in chapter

two, we are seeing an immense deskilling of poetry and it is necessary to identify how contemporary poets are *reskilling* poetry in order to appreciate their works as socio-cultural interventions.

In a blurb for Kitaj's long poem, *The New Republic* art critic Jed Perl inexplicably says, "*The Second Diasporist Manifesto* comes straight out of the artist's workroom." While this statement may have some kind of metaphorical (and promotional) value, it is patently and literally wrong. "[T]his thing," writes Kitaj in the pages of *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, "was written in the very early mornings at dawn" in "my L.A. café" "*before* I got to my studio" (emphasis mine). According to Kitaj's daily (and Great Gatsby-like) schedule—available at the UCLA Library Special Collections, where his archive is stored—writing and studio-work constituted discrete activities for Kitaj, however linked they may have been:

> 4:30 alarm rings
>
> 5:30 depart for walk to Coffee Bean, Westwood
>
> 6:00 arrive at Coffee Bean after stop for the *LA*
>
> > *Times*, and on Fridays and Sundays the *NY*
> >
> > *Times*, order large black coffee, plain bagel with
> >
> > butter, and bran muffin. read and write.
>
> 10:00 depart Coffee bean for return home
>
> 10:30 to Painting Studio
>
> ("Kitaj Daily Schedule").

I am not being merely pedantic here. Perl's imagined narrative of *Second Diasporist Manifesto*'s creation—that the text came "straight out of the artist's workroom" (as if the

workroom itself were a metonym for the artist's unadulterated imagination)—perpetuates

what Enwezor calls "the myth of a coherent monographic artistic identity" (14). What I

have been arguing is that Kitaj's long poem is presented as a collaborative registry of

aspiration and that it, importantly, came "straight out of" multiple sites of production.

Second Diasporist Manifesto, of course, was written not within the private confines of the

artist's studio but in the social space of a café among circulating papers like the *LA Times*

and the *New York Times*. I begin my next chapter with a precise attention on the

conditions of work that actually gave rise to the poetry under discussion and to another

writer who was once trained as a visual artist, a writer who (in)famously copied an entire

issue of the *New York Times* and called it a poem: Kenneth Goldsmith.

Chapter 2

***"Work itself is given a voice": Labor and Deskilling in the Poetry of Kenneth
Goldsmith and Mark Nowak***

[T]he newspaper arrives at our door, it becomes part of the archive of human knowledge,
then it wraps fish.
—Malcolm Gladwell

The title of Mary Ann Caws' recent article "Poetry Can Be Any Damn Thing It

Wants" blithely, but no less accurately, indicates the anarchic condition, both liberatory

and destabilizing, of contemporary North American poetry production—particularly in

the way it speaks to the recent and controversial trends of Flarf and Conceptual Poetry,

both of which eschew the lexical, semantic, and syntactic difficulty that is the heritage of

the so-called L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E group in favor of a resolutely anti-literary poetics of

distastefulness, plagiarism, appropriation, and the readymade. Indeed, Caws' title

highlights, through a metonymic substitution, the sheer nominating power of the poet: the

Flarfist mines the internet for linguistic detritus in order to cobble together an outrageous

text (which is then considered "a poem") while the Conceptualist's animating concept

often takes precedence over the text itself (which, nevertheless, is also considered "a

poem.")[36] Such developments have put both the definition of poetic skill and the criteria

for aesthetic evaluation into a severe crisis. How are we to judge poetry now that major

strands of contemporary poetry are disavowing—sometimes with a vengeance—the

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[36] The aesthetics of Flarf, a movement associated with Michael Magee, Gary Sullivan, Nada Gordon, K. Silem Mohammad, Drew Gardner, and Jordan Davis, among others, is based on the "deliberate shapelessness of content, form, spelling, and thought in general, with liberal borrowing from internet chat-room drivel and spam scripts, often with the intention of achieving a studied blend of the offensive, the sentimental, and the infantile." See "The Flarf Files," <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/syllabi/readings/flarf.html>/. Here's an excerpt from Nada Gordon's "Coney Island Avenue": "Recharge here -- Lahore fashions -- Bahar shishkebab chum chum, aloo chat -- [goat pic] / halal meat khoobsurat beauty salon (ladies only) -- one black headscarf, one white head scarf, / one yarmulke on a head of greasy spikes like circumcision of a black horse / by the Urdu Bazaar."

traditional skill set of lyric expressivity, figuration, and metrical ability? What

constitutes poetic skill or ability in the twenty-first century? For now, I wish to assert

that a new aesthetics of the twenty-first century must surely take into account two

interlocking questions: what is the *work* of poetry within a socio-cultural arena and what

kinds of work go into the making and presenting of poetry?

In order to answer these questions, I will analyze and put into critical dialogue the

long poems of two very different writers, one associated with conceptual poetry (and the

championing of what he calls "uncreative writing") and one associated with investigative

or documentary poetry (and the championing of labor rights): Kenneth Goldsmith and

Mark Nowak. Goldsmith is best known for his massive transcription projects such as

Traffic (2007), a word-for-word transcription of traffic reports over the course of a day,

or the forbiddingly long book *Day* (2003), an 836-paged transcription—it must surely be

one of the longest poems so far in the new century—of an entire issue of the *New York*

Times (Goldsmith transcribed all available text in the paper from photo captions to

advertisements). *Day* was, importantly, "written" against Truman Capote's famous quip

about Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*: "That's not writing. That's typing."[37] Nowak, on the

other hand, is best known for documenting working-class experiences in books such as

Revenants (2000), which explores Polish communities in Western New York, and *Shut*

Up Shut Down (2007), which details the hardships and complexities of the labor

movement along a deindustrialized rust belt. Both *Revenants* and *Shut Up Shut Down* are

collections of long, serial poems that, while immensely shorter than Goldsmith's

conceptual projects, nevertheless present length as an indicator of sustained socio-cultural

ambition. In reviewing (favorably) Nowak's most recent book *Coal Mountain*

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[37] The Capote quote is, in fact, the epigraph that presides over *Day*.

Elementary (2009), a collocation of found texts about the global coal mining industry, Maurice Manning begins by acknowledging the extreme uncertainties regarding evaluation, genre, and authorship I mentioned above: "To call Mark Nowak's haunting new book a collection of poetry would be a bit of a misnomer. It would also be misleading to say Nowak is its author." This would seem to put Nowak firmly into Goldsmithian territory; the trajectory from *Revenants* to *Coal Mountain Elementary* certainly suggests a clear turn away from the recognizably poetic toward an aesthetic of extended citation or copying. Nevertheless, on the level of theme or content, the difference between the two writers seems glaring. On the surface, it looks like we have, on the one hand, a poet who radically re-conceptualizes the labor that a poet can and ought to do through a fastidious engagement with ambient, everyday textualities (newspapers, traffic reports, etc.), and, on the other, a poet who explicitly thematizes labor and worker's rights as fundamental and pressing concerns. In short, it appears that we have two poets interested in *labor* but one whose interest is primarily *technical* (as it relates to poetry's method) and one whose interest is primarily *thematic* or content-based. But such an understanding, while tempting, would be naively incomplete.

The Practice of Archiving

Throughout the course of this chapter, I adumbrate the similarities between Goldsmith's *Day* and Nowak's photo-documentary poem "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down," the final series from *Shut Up Shut Down*, which records job loss and economic hardship in towns throughout the iron range due to the bankruptcy of LTV Steel (the third largest U.S. steel maker) and the closing of its taconite mine and processing facilities. I show

how the two very different poems, when considered together, offer a nuanced

understanding of the work *of* poetry and the work *in* poetry within a global economy

without unnecessarily privileging technique over theme or content over method. I also

demonstrate how *Day*, in fact, thematizes labor, and how "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down"

entails a redefinition of the poet's job along with a redefinition of what should constitute

the materials of poetry. Moreover, this unlikely pairing will show that conceptual poetry

and documentary poetry converge at a point which I will call *the archive*. Though it is

true that both *Day* and "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down" draw on newspaper archives for source

material—*Day* (perversely and spectacularly) reproduces one single newspaper *in toto*

while "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down" draws on over twenty articles from local Minnesota

publications—Goldsmith's and Nowak's works don't employ unique or original

documents in the way Susan Howe uses, say, a picture of a piece of fabric from the

Beinecke's Jonathan Edwards Collection in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007) or a

facsimile image from Charles Sanders Pierce's manuscripts in *The Midnight* (2003).

Thus, by "archive," I don't mean "the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its

person as documents attesting to its own past" (145)—such a definition, which is

explicitly rejected in Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, clearly informs

Malcolm Gladwell's loose, metaphorical understanding of "the archive of human

knowledge" ("Something Borrowed.") Nor do I mean "institutions, which, in a given

society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to

remember and keep in circulation"—Yale's Beinecke Library, one of Howe's favorite

research sites, is part of such an institution (Foucault145). Following Foucault, I

understand the "archive" as *a set of practices*. Foucault's archive, situated "between the

language (*langue*) that defines the system of constructing possible sentences, and the

corpus that passively collects the words that are spoken[,]…reveals the rules of a practice

that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification" (146).

It is my argument that poetry, as a discursive formation (that is, as a group of

statements), has been in the midst of an irregular modification, and the epistemic shift in

the way we are now re-conceptualizing the discipline "creative writing" has been

provoking the crisis in evaluation to which I alluded above. This is why Manning is so

hesitant to consider Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary* "poetry" even though the

book's subtitle, according to the Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data, is

"New and Selected Poems." Yet I wish to take Foucault's idea of the archive as "a

practice of modification" and place it in the interval between the *corpus* (and its potential

uses) and *language* as *parole* instead of *language* as *langue*, orienting it away from an

impersonal discursivity toward the subject's performative appropriation of pre-existing

materials. The practice of re-working and re-situating extant language is part of what I

am calling "archival capability."[38] I don't wish to detract from the value or scope of

Foucault's archaeological method but rather to highlight the active role that poets play in

modifying what he calls "the law of what can be said" and the way poets re-imagine

crucial activities, such as reading and writing, which allow us to process, produce, and

transform our knowledges.[39]

My focus, then, will not be on "The Archive" as some reified entity but on

archiving as a dynamic set of personal, social, and cultural practices. I also wish to

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[38] "Archival capability" is, in a sense, a focused extension of what Arjun Appadurai calls "archival agency" (18); Appadurai says, "I propose…that we need to look at the archive, in the spirit of Foucault, less as a container of the accidental trace and more as a site of a deliberate project" (24).
[39] According to Foucault, the archive is "the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events" (145).

identify within these writers something akin to what Hal Foster calls "an archival impulse." Foster, whom I discussed in detail in chapter one, claims that a number of contemporary artists are "seek[ing] to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" and retrieving "obscure" sources "in a gesture of alternative knowledge" (4). In this sense, an old newspaper is an eminently displaced and obscure source; as Gladwell casually remarks, "it becomes part of the archive of human knowledge, then it wraps fish." Goldsmith and Nowak wish, for varying reasons, to imbue such sources with renewed epistemological value. Such notions of displacement and obscurity—on a social level—are also crucial to Nowak's activist project: the title of his book, *Shut Up Shut Down*, suggests that the imperiled workers he advocates are being "shut up" by corporate and political interests as their livelihoods are being "shut down." It harbors an anxiety that his subjects have already been "archived" out of public consciousness—and here, we can understand the verb *to archive* as it is employed in computing: "to transfer to a store containing infrequently used files, or to a lower level in the hierarchy of memories" ("Archive, v."). Nowak's "archival impulse" involves a re-situating of neglected information from the lower hierarchies of social memory into a counter-archive of alternative knowledge.

Goldsmith, on the other hand, is interested in computerized archiving in a more direct and specific way. Following digital theorist and film archivist Rick Prelinger, Goldsmith associates personal archiving on home computers as a kind of "folk art." For Goldsmith, the storing and configuring of digital files is like quilting—both involve the accumulation of various items into a heterogeneous mass. Yet, unlike quilting, the archival activity of personal computing might be subconscious: "The advent of digital

culture has turned each one of us into an unwitting archivist. From the moment we used the 'save as' command when composing electronic documents, our archival impulses began." He continues, describing the way he organizes and tags his music files:

> Let's say I want to play a CD on my computer. The moment I insert it into my drive, a database is called up (Gracenote) and it begins peppering my disc with ID3 tags, useful when I decide to rip the disc to MP3s. The archiving process has begun. Unlike an LP, where all that was required was to slap the platter on a turntable and listen to the music, the MP3 process requires me to become a librarian. The ID3 tags make it possible for me to quickly locate my artifact within my MP3 archive. If Gracenote can't find it, I must insert those fields — artist, album, track, etc. — myself.

Though Goldsmith stresses the automated and "unwitting" nature of these archival processes, he does, importantly, mention the deliberate act of inserting the ID3 fields of artist, album, and track himself.[40] Another important ID3 field is "genre," and we might, by analogy, even consider Goldsmith's most significant act in producing *Day* to be not the actual re-typing of the newspaper's content (he later used OCR technology to copy the text) but simply changing the *New York Times*' "genre tag" from "news" or "journalism" to "poetry." In other words, Goldsmith's most radical act is on the level of *metadata* rather than data. Metadata is, according to the National Information Standards Organization, "structured information that describes, explains, locates, or otherwise

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[40] The blog *Queer City*, a self-described "membrane recording interactions between artist/poet/researchers and queer archives" takes issue with Goldsmith's understanding of the term "archive": "he conflates the art of archiving to the unconscious digital processes of a computer…he seems determined to reduce the deliberate activity of archiving to a mechanization. a reflex rather than an impulse." <http://www.queercity.org/2011/04/25/i-should-know-better/>.

makes it easier to retrieve, use, or manage an information resource" and is similar to the

cataloging work of an archivist or librarian (*Understanding Metadata* 1). Goldsmith, in

fact, goes well beyond Pound's "memorial to archivists and librarians" in "Canto XCVI"

(674) and collapses the very distinction between poet and archivist, writer and librarian:

> Having moved from the traditional position of being solely generative
>
> entities to information managers with organizational capacities, writers are
>
> embodying tasks once thought to belong only to programmers, database
>
> minders, and librarians, thus eradicating the distinction between archivists,
>
> writers, producers and consumers. (Goldsmith "A Textual Ecosystem")

The task of the poet, according to Goldsmith, has shifted from a High Romantic

imagining (à la Coleridge) to an administrative *managing*.[41] Although John Berryman's

The Dream Songs anticipated, albeit in negative terms, Goldsmith's aesthetics of

administration nearly half a century ago—in #354, Berryman sardonically says, "The

only happy people in the world / are those who do not have to write long poems: muck,

administration, toil"—digital tools have made manipulating and arranging information

much less toilsome (286).[42] Such tasks are part of a new poetic skill set—for Nowak,

newer skills include "remix/sample/mash-up techniques" in the tradition of "Afrika

Bambaataa and Negativland and (ex post facto) DJ Danger Mouse"—that constitutes

archival capability (Nowak, "Notes toward an Anti-capitalist Poetics II" 334).

The Deskilling/Reskilling of Poetry

Is writing poetry a skill or can anyone do it?

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[41] See Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[42] For an overview of conceptual art and the "aesthetic of administration," see Buchloh.

—Mark Delahunte, question posed on "Yahoo!® Answers"

While traditional notions of writing are primarily focused on 'originality' and 'creativity,'
the digital environment fosters new skill sets that include 'manipulation' and
'management' of the heaps of already existent and ever-increasing language.
—Kenneth Goldsmith, "Revenge of the Text"

"The building blocks of poetry itself are elements of fiction—fable, 'image,'

metaphor—all the material of the nonliteral" (Hollander 1). So goes John Hollander's

popular primer *Rhyme's Reason*. Yet, in twenty-first century poetry—particularly in long

poems—we are seeing a new literality, a deliberate disavowal of poetry's fictive

foundations along with a rejection of verse's rhythms and sonorous musicalities. For

example, here are brief excerpts from Goldsmith's *Day* and Nowak's "Hoyt Lakes / Shut

Down" respectively:

> Union officials said that they were not trying to pressure Bridgestone
>
> at a time of trouble. Rather, they said, workers at the nine plants, who have
>
> been working under temporary extensions since their contracts expired,
>
> have grown frustrated about not having reached a new agreement after
>
> months of talks.
>
> "It seems that it's high time," Mr. Ramnick said. "Negotiations have
>
> been going on a long time, and the company has been stalling for a long
>
> time in the talks." (*Day* 225)

> "In December, after LTV stopped making steel, a U.S. bankruptcy judge
>
> approved a plan that allows the corporation to stop paying health-
>
> insurance premiums and supplemental unemployment pay at the end of

February for laid-off workers, and in June for retirees." (*Shut Up Shut Down* 155)

Both of these excerpts are based on news reports and contain a prosaic flatness far beyond the "informational style" of the realist novels that André Breton famously criticized in his first surrealist manifesto (7). (The Goldsmith excerpt comes from an article called "As Tires are Recalled, Bridgestone Faces Strike," and the Nowak excerpt is based on the article "Ex-LTV Workers Feeling Financial Pinch" from Minnesota's *Star Tribune*.) "Where is the art in this poetry?" one might ask. "Where is the craft? Where is the creation of fable, image, or metaphor?" But these would be the wrong questions to ask. Rather than seeing these texts as merely examples of a "deskilled" poetry, we need to acknowledge their *archival capability*—that is, we must also understand a concomitant "reskilling" operating within their processes of composition. After all, if Goldsmith insists that poets are assuming the tasks of archivists, data managers, and librarians, and if Nowak is taking technical inspiration from musicians and DJs as much as from other writers, we need to attend to the wider social and cultural forces and conditions that are shaping a new and expanded sense of literacy.

The word "deskill" in English can be traced to the 1940s and refers "to the increasing [use] of unskilled labour" in factories ("Deskill, v."). The term was crucial in Marxist labor theorist Harry Braverman's account of the increased routinization and alienation of work under a Taylorist system of management. According to Braverman, the reliance upon new technologies rather than craft-based skill transformed workers into untrained and replaceable components divested of autonomy and creativity. In the context of the arts, the term was first used by Australian conceptual artist Ian Burn and

was subsequently mobilized by art historian Benjamin Buchloh who defined "deskilling" as the "persistent effort to eliminate artisanal competence and other forms of manual virtuosity from the horizon of both artistic production and aesthetic evaluation" (Foster, Krauss et al, *Art Since 1900* 531). In terms of poetry, "artisanal competence" and "manual virtuosity" directly correlate to the crafting of rhetorical figures (Wallace Stevens' "the intricate evasions of as," for example) and the skills of formal versification (as in Shelley's brilliant use of *terza rima* in "Ode to the West Wind")—these are traditional abilities that Goldsmith and Nowak, by and large, repudiate. Deskilling, according to one reading, creates an affiliation or solidarity between the poet/artist and the non-artistic worker (who is subjected to the socially divisive effects of capitalism) and democratizes a seemingly elitist and isolated artistic process.

In *The Intangibilities of Form*, art critic John Roberts has usefully situated deskilling within a larger "*dialectic of skill-deskilling-reskilling*" and conceives of artistic authorship as "an 'open ensemble of competences and skills'…grounded in the division of labour" (2-3). Such a dialectic, I argue, has vast implications in our understanding of recent developments in North American poetry and can help us come to terms with the radical uncertainty of an age when "poetry can be any damn thing it wants." According to Roberts, "[t]he nomination of found objects and prefabricated materials as 'ready-made' components of art is the crucial transformative event of early twentieth-century art" (21). He reads the Duchampian *objet trouvé*—such as the famous urinal-as-fountain, which I discussed in the previous chapter—as a site of both alienated and unalienated labor (being an industrial-made object presented as an artifact of artistic labor). Rather than seeing "Fountain" (1917) as just an example of deskilled art or sculpture-without-

craft (see fig 8), Roberts stresses the role of Duchamp's immaterial labor in reskilling the role of the artist: Duchamp performs valuable intellectual work in "disclos[ing] the capacity of commodities to change their identity through the process of exchange" (34). In other words, just as a urinal becomes art without the artist's physical intervention (and this is the virtue of Duchamp's "unassisted" readymade), an object becomes a commodity precisely through a transformative process that, as Marx says, "transcends sensuousness." Thus, I read both Goldsmith's and Nowak's poems as reskilled works "in which productive labour [that is, labour which returns a profit or surplus-value to the employer] and artistic labour are conjoined in a state of critical tension and suspension" (41). Both works are, moreover, utterly dependent on the work of newspaper editors and journalists for their textual substrate and, in the words of Christopher Schmidt, "remind…us of the vast work expended in the newspaper's production" (26).

The newspaper is not only an apt figure or synecdoche for Gladwell's "archive of human knowledge" but it also is an especially privileged textual site that can reveal the modern dynamic between consumer and producer as well as a new sense of literary competence. It is no wonder then that the newspaper figures so prominently in both Goldsmith's and Nowak's compositional techniques. In the now classic essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Walter Benjamin describes the utopian potential of the newspaper and identifies, within its circuit of production and consumption, a literary deskilling and reskilling *avant la lettre*:

> With the growth and extension of the press…an increasing number of
> readers—in isolated cases, at first—turned into writers. It began with the
> space set aside for 'letters to the editor' in the daily press…[the ease of

finding] an opportunity to publish somewhere or other an account of a

work experience, a complaint, a report, or something of that kind. Thus,

the distinction between author and public is about to lose its axiomatic

character. The difference becomes functional…At any moment, the

reader is ready to become a writer. As an expert—which he has had to

become in any case in a highly specialized work process, even if only in

some minor capacity—the reader gains access to authorship. Work itself

is given a voice. And the ability to describe a job in words now forms part

of the expertise needed to carry it out. Literary competence is no longer

founded on specialized higher education but on polytechnic training, and

thus is common property. (144)

While Benjamin's notion of the worker as "expert" ("even if only in some minor

capacity") doesn't accurately describe the post-WWII deskilled laborer, his notion of

"polytechnic training" holds immense promise for both productive and artistic workers.

This insistence on a flexible non-specialization opens writing up to a range of social

fields. Nowak mines local newspapers precisely because they have, to some extent,

given work "a voice," and, as we will see later, he draws on extra-literary skills, such as

photography, to embrace a populist aesthetics of amateurism. Goldsmith's erosion of the

line between "producers and consumers" is clearly indebted to Benjamin's theorization of

artistic production as it interfaces with technical reproduction. Moreover, *Day* playfully

takes up Benjamin's observation that "[the newspaper] reader is ready to become a

writer" by rewriting the very newspaper which allows for this expanded sense of writerly

competence.

"A whole new skill set": The Work of Art in the Age of Optical Character Recognition Technology

> It would indeed seem as if the postmodern credo—the creative impulse in the era of cybernetics—is a DOS command: 'copy*.*.'
> —Sylvia Söderlind, "Margins and Metaphors: The Politics of Post-***"

The fact that Goldsmith began *Day* on September 1, 2000, the Friday before Labor Day Weekend, immediately announces its preoccupation with labor, and I wish, accordingly, to analyze the labor both *in* and *of Day* on multiple levels. That Goldsmith's project merely involves a transcription/copying of a found text, without any authorial intervention, shows the self-conscious reskilling of poetry: we are meant to focus not on the creation of new material but on the critico-conceptual work that his appropriation project is meant to accomplish. In short, he is highlighting not his imaginative *poiesis* but his archival capability. Moreover, *Day*, as an archive of numerous stories, contains important accounts of work experiences (giving, as Benjamin said, work a "voice"). In fact, a fact sheet provided by The New York Times Company, reiterates Benjamin's point in strikingly similar language (and, through a polyptoton, simultaneously advertises the publication's cultural capital): "As a resource of the influential, The Times also gives voice to those without influence" ("Did You Know? Facts about The New York Times"). That Goldsmith chose the *New York Times* as his source text—a publication that "has approximately 1,150 news department staff, more than any other national newspaper"— makes us consider *Day* as a kind of massive collaborative project dependent on numerous hands, as a deliberate alignment of the labor of non-artistic and artistic workers.

As mentioned above, *Day* began as a typing project, a retort to Capote's snide

distinction between well-crafted literary writing and Kerouac's "empty" typing.[43] As

such, Goldsmith's newspaper appropriation seems particularly legible as a body art

project—a rejection of literary standards of quality in favor of a feat of physical

endurance, of the body's sustained and perverse engagement with an inscription

technology. The back cover copy of *Day*, in good advertising fashion, highlights the

text's conceptual mechanism along with its toilsome execution; it refers to Goldsmith's

"typing page upon page" of the *New York Times*, which includes such dry and exhausting

material as stock quotes and baseball box scores. There is even a quote from Goldsmith

himself that authenticates his chosen process: "…with every keystroke comes the

temptation to fudge, cut-and-paste, and skew the mundane language. But to do so would

be to foil the exercise." Some reviewers, moreover, find Goldsmith's "un-fudging"

commitment to the labor of every keystroke to be the project's most redeeming and

meaningful factor. Ralph Rubinstein, commiserating with the physical tediousness of the

poem's procedure, says of Goldsmith:

> he must have recognized his own situation when he copied the lead
>
> sentence of an article on Andre Agassi: 'There are days when an adult
>
> goes to work and just doesn't feel like being there.' But it's precisely by
>
> his devotion to this demanding project that Goldsmith brings new meaning
>
> to his material, something that never would have happened if he'd simply
>
> scanned the pages into his computer. (53)

---

[43] In responding to the conspicuousness of the Cress letters in William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, Randal Jarrell has said, "What has been done to them to make it possible for us to respond to them as art and not as raw reality? to make them part of the poem 'Paterson'? I can think of no answer except: *They have been copied out on the typewriter*" (qtd. in Doyle 239).

As is often the case with texts that challenge normative protocols of interpretation, self-reflexive moments tend to come into high-relief and the suggestive Agassi quote is no exception. *Day*, Goldsmith tells us, was a "gig" that took him "a year" to execute, and surely there were times, suggests Rubinstein, when he had wished to absent himself from the task at hand ("Being Boring" 364). Yet Goldsmith later admitted that he, in fact, "foiled the exercise" by using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology. Contrary to the framing paratexts of the book's epigraph ("That's not writing. That's typing.") and the back cover copy, Goldsmith chose to *scan* the newspaper's pages rather than type them letter by letter. On the surface, it seems like this shift in methodology has jeopardized what Rubinstein calls the "new meaning" of the entire project. It seems that Goldsmith, in a loss of devotion, failed to show up for work.

Goldsmith, himself, attributes the move from typing to scanning to a different kind of "meaning": to a willed subversion of capitalist value. "[I]n capitalism," says Goldsmith, "labor equals value. So certainly my project must have value, for if my time is worth an hourly wage, then I might be paid handsomely for this work. But the truth is that I've subverted this equation by OCR'ing as much of the newspaper as I can" ("Uncreativity as Creative Practice"). Goldsmith here seems to be conflating how simple and complex labor is compensated, and there is nothing about saving time (or using time-saving technologies) that is inherently anti-capitalist. Moreover, Roberts reminds us, via Marx, that "*labour and value are not identical*." In fact, this very condition of labor-power's non-identicality allows for what Roberts calls "the *negative power* of human labor" and "a critique of the value-form": "A critique of the heteronomy of productive labor is…embedded in the labour process itself through labour's negative

relation to itself—in the labourer's labour over and above value and, consequently, in the labourer's constant refusal or unwillingness to labour" (33).[44] This is Bartleby's "I would prefer not to"—or Rubinstein's adult-who-doesn't-feel like-being-at-work actually refusing to work (or Andre Agassi putting down his tennis racket). In critiquing the unwillingness of Melville's Bartleby and Coetzee's Michael K, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri maintain, *"This refusal certainly is the beginning of a liberatory politics, but it is only a beginning. The refusal in itself is empty"* (204). Yet such "emptiness," I argue, can be filled with Goldsmith's transformation of heteronomous work through a reskilled and autonomous artistic practice, a practice which, in turn, critiques the heteronomy of productive labor.

After all, Goldsmith still "went to work"; he just used a different set of skills (Benjamin's "polytechnic training") to accomplish the task. In short, he reskilled a practice of an already reskilled conceptualism (simply retyping an extant text already challenges and expands received standards and criteria of writerly competence). Moreover, by eventually rejecting the act of typing, Goldsmith diverts attention away from a heroicized and performative feat at the scene of writing (*Day* as meta-inscriptural body art) and brings into view the heterogeneity of the poet's tasks and an intentional reliance on mixed technologies. Goldsmith points out that "if there was…an ad for a car" in the September 1, 2000 *New York Times*, he would use "a magnifying glass" to read the car's license plate and transcribe it ("Being Boring" 364). From scanning pages to magnifying miniature license plate numbers, Goldsmith seems to revel in a whole range of activities *besides* writing. Thus, in reexamining Capote's writing/typing distinction, we find that typing, for Goldsmith, may have been too associated with writing and

---

[44] "Heteronomous labor" is labor divided into predetermined tasks that are controlled from elsewhere.

writing's physical choreography or with the modernist practice that preceded him.

Goldsmith, after all, is invested in what he calls "a whole new skill set," a complete

reskilling of literary activity:

> Contemporary writing requires the expertise of a secretary crossed with
>
> the attitude of a pirate: replicating, organizing, mirroring, archiving, and
>
> reprinting, along with a more clandestine proclivity for bootlegging,
>
> plundering, hoarding, and file-sharing. We've needed to acquire a whole
>
> new skill set: we've become master typists, exacting cut-and-pasters, and
>
> OCR demons. (*Uncreative Writing* 22)

And, here, it is again tempting to indulge in another one of *Day*'s self-reflexive moments.

The job description that Goldsmith is detailing may be found, in part, in the very text he

has replicated:

> SECRETARY F/T Great Neck, L.I. CPA firm seeks responsible indiv.
> MS Word, Excel: Exclnt salary & bnfts. FAX 516-466-3349
> SECRETARY P/T or F/T For jewelry office. Computer and basic
> accounting a must. Send resume to: PO Box 2544, New York, NY 10185
> SECRETARY BILINGUAL, Diplomatic Mission seeks bilingual
> secretary,French/English w/computer skills. Word 2000. Call 212-421-
> 1580.
> SECRETARY/BOOKKEEPER Computer literate, Word &
> Quickbooks. Fax resume to: 212-366-0979. (829)

The job "secretary" is, of course, not the same as "faculty member with the Center for

Programs in Contemporary Writing" and "Lecturer in the History of Art" at the

University of Pennsylvania (where Goldsmith currently teaches) or "Anschutz

Distinguished Fellow Professorship" at Princeton University (where Goldsmith taught in

2010). In other words, the affiliation Goldsmith has forged with productive office

workers might be a relation of appropriation rather than solidarity; it might simply be

"the mere imposition of non-heteronomous thinking." Yet, according to Roberts, this is

not the case since "the hand at the machine in productive labour…will shape the content

of the relations between autonomous and heteronomous labour" (97). Finally, what

separates Goldsmith's task from the various secretary job descriptions listed above is the

very autonomy of art—that Goldsmith, who is subsidized by prestigious universities, is

able to work unconstrained without the controlling supervision of, say, the CPA firm or

the Diplomatic Mission. He has the freedom and choice to "cross" the function of a

secretary with that of a "pirate" and therefore to consolidate and practice his archival

capability (Goldsmith's piracy is made abundantly clear at the very beginning of *Day*:

"Copyright © 2000 The New York Times") (*Day* 11). In other words, Goldsmith is a

digital-age scrivener with a difference.[45]

What Goldsmith produces is not a poetry that adheres to a Romantic or post-

Romantic sensibility—a "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions…recollected in

tranquility" (Wordsworth) or "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude"

(Mill) or "a momentary stay against confusion" (Frost) or "notes toward a supreme

fiction" (Stevens)—but rather a new and provocative configuration of social relations of

production. Through "a radical alignment of artistic labour with non-artistic labour,"

Goldsmith triangulates the work of a poet, the work of a journalist, and the work of a

secretary/copyist (Roberts 149). Now that we've established the mixed work that it took

to accomplish *Day*—work that started with the *New York Times* staff and ended with

Goldsmith's reskilled archival capability—we are now in the position to evaluate the kind

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[45] Goldsmith references Bartleby in discussing the work of fellow conceptualist Vanessa Place: "As a beacon of stillness and silence in a frenzied workplace, Bartleby's composure and strict sense of self-imposed ethics exposed the hollowness and habitualness of the busy routine that surrounded him. Like a black hole, he sucked everything into him, finally causing a total implosion" (*Uncreative Writing* 101).

of intellectual work that *Day*, as a conceptual poem, accomplishes. To begin, we can

consider Goldsmith to be "a theorist of artistic labour" (this is how Roberts reads

Duchamp) vis-à-vis a bureaucratized, professional-managerial economy for all the

reasons enumerated above (5). But there is more. Just as Duchamp's readymades expose

"the apparitional identity of the commodity," Goldsmith's *Day* exposes the apparitional

identity of the fetishized book object, making him a theorist of media and their cultural

uses (Roberts 34). According to Marcus Boon,

> It's certainly true that Day costs 20 times as much as the newspaper that
>
> Goldsmith has 'retyped'. But, as Walter Benjamin suggested, one does not
>
> necessarily buy a book in order to read it. The book as object confers a
>
> certain fetish value on the text it contains – a fetish value which Day
>
> exposes.

Indeed, on a bookshelf, *Day*—as a material object—would fit in quite inconspicuously

among the epic tomes of modernism (such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Charles Olson's *The

Maximus Poems*, or Louis Zukofsky's *"A."*) *Day*, in this sense, is a newspaper disguised

as a literary monument.

This work of "exposing" is akin to what Heidegger calls "revealing" (*Entbergen*).

"Unlike *poiesis*," explains Sven Spieker, "which implies a direct shift from absence to

presence, *Entbergen* uncovers and transforms what is already present yet invisible" (9).

The numerous advertisements that Goldsmith reproduced are duplicated word by word

but without pictures; thus, as Brad Ford observes, "the eye-catching tricks of Madison

Avenue are stripped of all but caps and exclamations, and it deflates them or makes them

comedy." In this way, *Day* uncovers the ideology of what Hardt and Negri call "[t]he new managerial imperative… 'Treat manufacturing as a service'" (285-6):

> THE WORLD IS YOURS. THE MAINTENANCE IS OURS.
> Welcome LAND ROVER
> This is an invitation to venture forth with nary a care in the world. Because now, for a limited time, you can lease a brand-new Land Rover, the most capable 4x4 on the planet, as we'll take care of all scheduled factory maintenance. Oil. Labor. Et cetera. Just about the only thing with which you'll have to concern yourself is exactly where to spend your 36-month honeymoon. COME SEE WHAT A LAND ROVER IS MADE OF. (771)

In this Land Rover ad, car manufacturing is treated precisely as a service—to the comedic extent that the leisurely consumer becomes "reskilled" as a wedding planner ("Just about the only thing with which you'll have to concern yourself is exactly where to spend your 36-month honeymoon.") The comedy is both humorous and generic: the ad is a micro-drama ending prosperously in marriage. Of course, the fact that *production* is tending toward the *production of services* creates an ideology that not only obscures the global economy's fundamental reliance on industry but masks the productive labor which makes services possible: Land Rover sublimates both oil and labor into an abstract "et cetera." Moreover, the tension here between the tangibility of the vehicle ("WHAT A LAND ROVER IS MADE OF") and the intangibility of the services ("Labor. Et cetera") is a miniature recursion of *Day*'s dialectical concerns: the materiality of the text and the intangibilities of its form.

"What is found there": *Day*'s Content

> Happy Labor Day weekend. Buy a steelworker a drink.
> —Milton Glaser, quoted in Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day*

In "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," William Carlos Williams memorably says, "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there" (318). What exactly can be found in *Day* that is tangible? Or to rephrase the question: how do we deal with the difficulty of confronting old news? Goldsmith seems to suggest that such a question is a red herring. In discussing Vanessa Place's conceptual work *Statement of Facts* (2010), a simple re-presentation of appellate briefs that Place wrote as a practicing lawyer, Goldsmith argues that "to linger on the content is to miss the concept: it's the matrix of apparatuses surrounding it…that give the work its real meaning" (*Uncreative Writing* 104). And even more pithily: "context is the new content" (3). Yet such a dismissal, I argue, relies on the crude binary of content/concept and ignores the fundamental question of engaging the archive and what the archive records.

Reviewer Bill Freind—in a reversal of the notorious Derridean idea that there is nothing outside the text—identifies *Day* as a content-less book, as a kind of vacuum between two covers: "*Day* is fascinating because it's so meaningless, so utterly empty of content that there is virtually no inside-the-text; it operates as a kind of conceptual vacuum which practically demands to be filled by the reader." Rhetorical cleverness aside, *Day* is, in fact, *replete* with content and meaning—not only content that, as I will show, perfectly coincides with Nowak's interests in working class rights but content from all across the social spectrum. (The text that Freind is describing more properly resembles Davis Schneiderman's recent conceptual novel *Blank* (2011), which is a 206-page "blank" book that contains only suggestive chapter titles and white-on-white pyrographic images by the artist Susan White.) Freind's understanding of *Day* is

certainly conditioned by Goldsmith's very vociferous demotion of content and overly polemical insistence on the "valuelessness" of the material with which he works. In "Uncreativity and Creative Practice," Goldsmith says, in direct reference to *Day*, "Nothing has less value than yesterday's news." Similarly, in "I Love Speech," a paper originally delivered at the 2006 MLA Presidential Forum and published in *Harriet*, the Poetry Foundation's website, Goldsmith imagines the conflation of recording and archiving into one automated and non-interpretive act, doing away with all criteria for archivization (what archivists call "appraisal"):

> I wish that they would graft an additional device onto the radio—one that
> would make it possible to record and archive for all time, everything that
> can be communicated by radio. Later generations would then have the
> chance of seeing with amazement how an entire population…had
> absolutely nothing to say.

Goldsmith's desire to "archive…everything" is not in the service of preserving material that might have future historical value but because such an audio archive would demonstrate the ahistorical valuelessness of all broadcasted speech. "We're more interested," says Goldsmith, "in accumulation and preservation than we are in what is being collected" ("I Love Speech").

This interest in collecting without selection, archiving without evaluation, is comparable to the poetics of Andy Warhol's *Time Capsules*, a serial project, begun in 1974, that consists of hundreds of cardboard boxes containing a morass of documents that Warhol encountered and collected during his everyday activities (documents such as magazines, newspapers, correspondence, and notebooks along with various ephemera

like brochures and ticket stubs). According to Spieker, "documents went into…[a Time Capsule] box not because they were important, valuable, or otherwise memorable, but because they were 'there,' on the desk" (3). Spieker likens such contents to "clutter and background noise," which suggests a link between Warhol's hoarding and the audio clutter of Goldsmith's notional radio archive of valuelessness. And what is the news in *Day* but news that was "there" to be reported on the "slow news day" ("Being Boring" 364) of September 1, 2000? Yet Spieker continues and describes encountering what we might call an "irruption of content":

> [Warhol's] boxes seemed to me like so much clutter and background noise—until, that is, I was suddenly struck by a small collection of Concorde memorabilia (napkins, tickets, dinner knives) that Warhol had brought back with him from one of his flights across the Atlantic. A few weeks before I visited the exhibit, a Concorde had crashed on an airfield near the French capital, killing all passengers aboard. Eerily, it was as if the presence of these articles in Warhol's archive only a week or so after the fatal crash commemorated an event, a trauma—that of those killed on the plane some three decades later—that had not yet occurred when the archive was put together. (3)

Even more, this eeriness is redoubled: Warhol's Time Capsule 21 contains—among business cards, invoices, manuscripts, and other assorted material—the front page of *The New York Mirror*, June 4, 1962, whose headline reads: "129 DIE IN JET!" This headline, of course, inspired "129 Die in Jet," Warhol's last hand-painted canvas, and prompted his well-known "death and disaster" series. To compound Spieker's uncanny

sense of "as if" ("as if the presence of these articles in Warhol's archive…commemorated an event… that had not yet occurred")—it seems as if the Concorde memorabilia acted as a study for a "death and disaster" print that never existed. According to Spieker, this experience within Warhol's archive suggests that "[a]rchives do not record experience so much as its absence; they mark the point where an experience is missing from its proper place," hence making them seem "haunted" (3).

Similarly, *Day*, a project begun just over a year before the World Trade Center attacks, seems to record not contentlessness, pace Freind, but a spectral absence, a pathos for a trauma yet to happen: sandwiched between an article on the housing market in Queens and an advertisement for Radioshack is a small, unassuming piece entitled, "6

Figure 9. Screenshot from *the warhol: resources & lessons*, a pedagogical website developed by The Andy Warhol Museum. <http://www.warhol.org/tc21/main.html>.

Real Estate Companies Submit Bids on 99-Year Lease for the World Trade Center"

(177). The missing experience that this archival text records is what Hélène Aji cleverly

(and cynically) calls the "terrifying…ready-made…of catastrophe." Even in retrospect,

history is, so to speak, a given. To be sure, we can read this headline with a sense of *ex*

post facto irony, yet the very mention of the World Trade Center also enables us to read it

as an improvised textual memorial, a proleptic and poignant obituary for the building and

its daytime inhabitants. The "content" of this archival trace, dependent as it is on the

researcher's use of it, cannot exist in a vacuum (nor can it exist in a blank book).

Furthermore, as a post-9/11 poem, *Day* is, I argue, far more powerful than, say, Galway

Kinnell's "When the Towers Fell," which, in a pseudo-Whitmanian fashion, tries to

synchronically catalog the economic diversity of the tragedy's victims: "The banker is

talking to London. / Humberto is delivering breakfast sandwiches. / The trader is already

working the phone. / The mail sorter has started sorting the mail" (52). The loose

iambic/anapestic lilt, the plodding end-stopped lines, the consonance between "*b*anker"

and "Hum*b*erto": this is nothing other than what Theodor Adorno would call an

"aesthetic principle of stylization…[that] make[s] an unthinkable fate appear to have had

some meaning…[and hence] does an injustice to the victims" (198). Such intentional and

contrived commemoration—placing imaginary toads in an imaginary garden (to adapt a

phrase from Marianne Moore)—pales in comparison to the archive's uncanny "effect of

the real"—that is, "the fact that [the archive] stores what was never meant to be stored"

(Spieker 22).

      There are, of course, actual rather than notional obituaries in *Day*:

> Paul Yager, a veteran federal labor mediator who helped resolve several
> important labor strikes in the New York City region, died Monday at a
> hospital in Edison, N.J.…He was active in 1984 in negotiations that led to
> a settlement of a 68-day strike by unionized workers against 11 nursing
> homes York City [sic]. (118)

This is to say if we look through Goldsmith's "magnifying glass"—zooming in on specific passages in this nearly 900-page text—we can apprehend that *Day* is, on the level of content, very much about labor (and the diversity of labor to which Kinnell strainingly pays tribute). Reading this long poem, we learn of an overqualified school teacher who was "turned away from a job fair in Queens…because she was certified"; she explains that school teachers are unfairly being reskilled under heteronomous conditions: "You have to be a combination of a social worker and Mother Teresa to work in…[New York City] schools…Those kids deserve a decent education, but we as teachers deserve a decent work atmosphere" (*Day* 180). We learn that workers at an Earthgrains Company plant "had walked off the job at the company's bakery in Nashville" (216), that "Bridgestone/Firestone face[d] a possible strike…by 8,000 workers at nine American factories" (197), that approximately "1,500 striking machinists at the Bath Ironworks shipyard…reached a tentative settlement with the General Dynamics Corporation" after agreeing "to allow General Dynamics to cross-train workers building complex ships" (216). Goldsmith's voluntary re-reporting of these various stages of employee refusal exposes the fundamental difference between the deskilled and alienated worker and the reskilled and autonomous artist; in the last example, General Dynamics' desire to "cross-train" workers is to make them more "swappable" not to reskill them (as

Goldsmith reskills the task of poetry by crossing the activities of a secretary and copyright pirate). Additionally, we learn from *Day* that "[t]he nation's largest operator of welfare-to-work programs violated federal law by paying lower wages to women than to men placed in the same jobs in a Milwaukee warehouse." While the company, Maximus Inc., claims that women were being paid a "training wage" for inadequate job history, we learn that Tracy Jones, the woman who filed the complaint, has experience working "as a machine operator, a warehouse carton packer and a building maintenance worker" (*Day* 181). In Benjamin's sense, work here is being given a voice.

Yet not only is the proletariat—what the *Times* calls "those without influence"— given a voice in *Day*. To take up Benjamin's notion of "polytechnic training"—the Yankees baseball star Derek Jeter (whose current salary is $15,729,365) ("New York Yankees Salary/Payroll Information – 2012") demonstrates all too well that "the ability to describe a job in words now forms part of the expertise needed to carry it out." "My job is to score runs," says Jeter, "and that's the bottom line…I think everybody would like to hit more home runs, but, hitting first or second, that's not my job. As long as I'm getting on base, that's what I worry about" (*Day* 507). Of course, one of the virtues of *Day* is its "cross-class ventriloquy" (a phrase from a *Publisher's Weekly* review), its synoptic capturing of stories from many walks of life ("Day" 190). Yet if the "leveling of artistic and social hierarchies" (a phrase again from *Publisher's Weekly*) is effected only by virtue of poetic fiat (Tracy Jones, the warehouse worker, is on the "same level" as Derek Jeter, the celebrity athlete, in that both appear in the same poem), does the very presence of the likes of Jeter constitute "a distraction from the battle of real interests" (Adorno 188)? Such, indeed, might be the opinion of Nowak, who, in "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down,"

collages newspaper articles that expressly pertain to working-class rights. However, as I

shift to a discussion of Nowak's docu-poetics, I don't wish to further entrench the

enduring categories, famously theorized by Adorno, of "committed" and "autonomous"

literature; *Day*, indeed, might be considered a work that "from…[its] first day belong[s]

to the seminar…in which…[it] inevitably end[s]" while "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down" might

be considered a work that "all too readily credit[s]…[itself] with every noble value."[46]

Rather, I wish to ground Goldsmith's and Nowak's commonalities on the level of

archival capability, on the level of a reskilled methodology: a heuristic rapprochement

between "the Sartrean goats and the Valeryan sheep" (Adorno 188).

"[R]epositioning poetic practice": Mark Nowak's Aesthetics of Amateurism

In a rush of hyperbolic enthusiasm, Goldsmith argues that *Day* is, in actuality, a

novel—"a great novel…filled with stories of love, jealously, murder, competition, sex,

passion, and so forth." "It's a fantastic thing," he continues, "the daily newspaper, when

translated, amounts to a 900-page book…And it's a book that's written in every city and

in every country, only to be instantly discarded" ("Being Boring" 364). But New York is

not Minnesota; Goldsmith's "readymade novel" produced in Duluth would be quite

different in content from the novel produced in New York City. Nowak's "Hoyt Lakes /

Shut Down" tells a much more focused narrative as it is concerned with the personal

effects of deindustrialization—specifically the shutdown of LTV Steel—on the local

economies of Minnesota's iron range and thus culls material from newspapers based in

---

[46] While I am treating *Day* as an "autonomous" work in the specific sense that Goldsmith's labor is not
subject to external control (as is the case in heteronomous labor), Adorno would likely denounce
Goldsmith's promotion of valueless information and substance-less speech as "a bad positivism of
meaninglessness" (200).

northeast Minnesota. It is a story, in part, about "competition," as Goldsmith claims, but not the kind of competition that has the entertainment value of an Andrew Agassi/Arnaud Clément tennis match. In a 2000 press release, LTV president Richard Hipple explains the shutdown of the company's operations:

> The employees have done their utmost to maximize the performance of this mine. They are skilled, dedicated people. In spite of their efforts and LTV's investments of $20 million annually over the past five years, the quality of the LTV Steel Mining operations and ore reserves have deteriorated to noncompetitive levels. The mine's ore body stripping ratios and levels of impurities are too high and overall costs are no longer competitive.

In this case, the "maintenance-intensive" shaft furnaces of LTV are "not competitive with modern straight grate or grate kiln furnace operations, which produce better quality pellets at lower cost" ("LTV Steel Announces Intention to Close Minnesota Iron Mining Operations"). Hipple's comments suggest that the economic logic of deskilling has made his "skilled" LTV employees unemployable.

In contrast to the LTV workers, Nowak, like Goldsmith, has the artistic freedom to reskill his poetic practice; this is a process that Nowak himself calls "repositioning":

> my new projects and new books participate not only in repositioning poetic practice ("make it new," if you will) but also participate in varied movements for social, political, racial, economic, cultural, and environmental justice at the same time. (qtd. in Clinton)

How exactly has Nowak reskilled or repositioned his compositional methodologies? To begin, Nowak's preference for the long poem can make us understand the extended sequence or poetic series as a deskilled form in itself. Clearly this is the opinion of the *North American Review*, a literary journal which boasts of being "the nation's oldest literary magazine." In reference to its Annual James Hearst Poetry Prize, its editorial staff offers potential submitters the following tip: "We have noticed that long poems rarely do well -- too much can go wrong in a large space" ("The Annual James Hearst Poetry Prize"). Such an attitude implies a Romantic/New Critical aesthetic that places supreme importance on poetic technique ("the most proper words in their proper places," as Coleridge famously stresses) as well as the unity and coherence of the artistic artifact (exemplified by Cleanth Brooks' "well wrought urn"). In short, the long poem is an invitation to error. Nowak's "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down," by contrast, relinquishes such received notions of poetic skill and utilizes the "large space" of extended poetic form to investigate specific socio-economic crises, the "too much" that goes wrong in the large space called the United States of America. The front cover of *Shut Up Shut Down* (as well as the title page of each poem) portrays an upside-down American flag (which is flown as a distress signal) indicating that "too much" is indeed going wrong in the communities of northeastern Minnesota.[47]

Additionally, photography plays a crucial role in "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down," which is a poem interspersed with thirteen black and white images of mostly LTV signs and vacant storefront windows from small Minnesota towns; one photograph shows an empty window displaying only a "Northland Realty" sign, suggesting the shutting down

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[47] The cover depicts an upside-down flag above the blast furnace at the Bethlehem Steel plant in 1983.
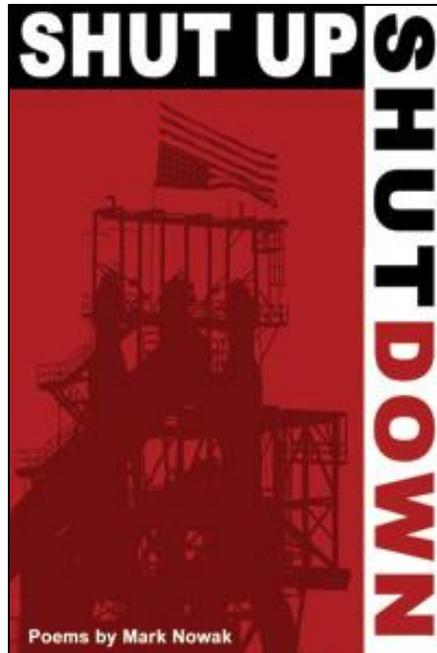
Figure 10. Cover of *Shut Up Shut Down*.

of the entire community.   In contrast to the more recent *Coal Mountain Elementary*, a

collaboration with professional photographer Ian Teh, the photographs in *Shut Up Shut

Down* appear to have been taken by Nowak himself and have an unstudied, amateurish

quality. Such a quality is accentuated by the fact that "$00 / Line / Steel / Train," the first

series in *Shut Up Shut Down*, is, in part, an ekphrastic piece based on Bernd and Hilla

Becher's *Industrial Façades*; perhaps Nowak chose not to reproduce the Bechers'

photographs (which are internationally renowned) because they would have clashed with

his aesthetic of amateurism. Yet rather than perceiving the amateurism of Nowak's

photographs as an aesthetic flaw, we can understand it as a reskilling of the task of

documentary poetry; in other words, a deskilled photography emerges as a reskilled

poetry. In "The Author as Producer," Benjamin writes,

> What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture the
>
> caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a
>
> revolutionary useful value.   But we shall make this demand most

emphatically when we—the writers—take up photography…only by transcending the specialization in the process of production…can one make this production politically useful; and the barriers imposed by specialization must be breached jointly by the productive forces that they were set up to divide. The author as producer discovers—in discovering his solidarity with the proletariat—simultaneously his solidarity with certain other producers who earlier seemed scarcely to concern him. (46)

Nowak has quite literally "taken up photography" to make his mixed-media work "politically useful," and Benjamin's redefined conception of authorship shows the emancipatory potential of a reskilled poetry. Like Goldsmith, who celebrates the tasks of workers who were once of little concern to writers, Nowak repositions his poetic practice to trespass the specialization of production. Such repositioning is what Jules Boykoff calls Nowak's "strategic inexpert stance."

Nowak is both amateur photographer and deskilled poet, yet the curious combination of image and text in "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down" fulfills what Foster considers to be a primary function of archival art: "to fashion distracted viewers into engaged discussants" ("An Archival Impulse" 6). The photograph, for example, on page 152 (see fig 11) deepens the caption-like statement that is found on the previous page:

"Windows® is shutting down…" (*Shut Up Shut Down*151)

As "engaged" readers, we note that Nowak's clever visual and homophonic punning allows us to recover an alternative syntactic reading—"Windows® is shutting down…" as well as "Windows® [are] shutting down"—shifting our focus from the computer-based, informatized society we take for granted to the ailing local economies of post-industrial

Figure 11. Image from p. 152 of "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down." The prose section on the following page ends with the description: "*The smile plastic and purchased, community disembarked in the window*" (153).

05.25.2000

"The shutdown will mark the first closing of one of the Iron Range's behemoth taconite plants since the 1980s, when a brutal shakeout closed two of eight mines and cut employment in the industry from 16,000 to 6,000."

My stomach dropped to the floor. It was like my stomach was hit by a 10-ton brick. We knew for the last few years that things weren't the best, but we never expected this. It's just unbelievable.

The factory of my father [reduced to rubble]. Factory [after factory (shut down)]. Seventeen stories. The blast furnace of my grandfather. The slaughterhouse across from the railroad [terminal] where my father's aunt used to work. Seventeen stories, and every single window shattered [shut up].

*

workers / words / worth / [repeating]

Iron : 21

Figure 12. Page scan of p. 133.

America. Nowak, in other words, sets up a dialectical tension between the computerized prompt and the "CLOSED" sign in the failed business' ("shut down") window. The smiley face in the storefront, like the polyvalent phrase "Windows is/are shutting down," indexes a jarring collision between big and small business and attests to the complex interaction between the poem's images and texts: the previous page repeats a union criticism that "'Wal-Mart'"—a corporation which unsuccessfully attempted to trademark the smiley face for use on store materials and employee uniforms—"'brings sub-standard wages and benefits to the area.'" I argue that Nowak—in Benjamin's sense—has wrenched the caption "Windows® is shutting down…" "from modish commerce"—and, by juxtaposing it with the photograph above, has given it "a revolutionary useful value."

Resisting/Remixing the Headlines: "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down"

'load every rift' of your subject with ore
—Keats to Shelley, 16 August, 1820

ore / pits / fill / with / water
—Mark Nowak, from *Shut Up Shut
Down*

In "Notes toward an Anticapitalist Poetics," Nowak says, "I…want to be able to imagine a future for poetry, as [Adrienne] Rich says, in 'Defying the Space That Separates,' 'not drawn from the headlines but able to resist the headlines'" (240). Here, Nowak and Rich are treating "the headlines" as a kind of metonym for the status quo, as a figure for the structures of power that perpetuate the injustices and iniquities of the present. I want to explore "the headlines" not as a metonym but as a textual substrate for poetry. In "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down," Nowak collages newspapers, remixing them in DJ-like fashion, precisely to resist "the headlines," to perform an immanent critique of

the present. The poem is clearly *about* work, but less clear is the work that is embedded

within the poem. In order to understand this, we first need to understand the long poem's

elaborate structure.

    To begin, the poem's prefatory material includes a note, an image, and an

epigraph. In the note, we are informed: "The numbers that conclude each section

correspond to workers who lost their job in that particular Iron Range community" (*Shut

Up Shut Down* 130). Across the page is an image of the Hoyt Lakes water tower above a

quote from Richard Hipple, the LTV Steel President: "It's important to note that this is

not a people issue" (131). Within this context, Nowak's note becomes a "counter-note"

as it exposes the disingenuous disavowal of Hipple's statement (which relies on a

tautological, "business-is-business" logic) by reminding us of the number of people

directly affected by the LTV shutdown.[48] Nowak exposes Hipple's statement as being

nothing other than an example of commodity fetishism, which, according to Marx,

supplants social relations with a relationship between things. We also better understand

the serial structure of the work in that Nowak's note identifies a serial problem which

affects not only Hoyt Lakes, where LTV was based, but also the communities of Iron,

Tower, Virginia, Gilbert, Biwabik, Ely, Hibbing, Aurora, Embarrass, Babbitt, and

Eveleth. In "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down" (as well as in "June 19, 1982," another long poem

in *Shut Up Shut Down*), Nowak's basic unit of composition is the doublespread, which

includes a photograph on the verso (such as the one in fig 11) facing a heterogeneous text

of both prose and poetry on the recto (see fig 12 above); such a unit is iterated twelve

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[48] Gov. Jesse Ventura mimics such logic in a statement reproduced in the poem's third section: "Nobody likes to see companies close down and leave, but that's the negative part of doing business" (137).

times throughout the course of the poem advancing a working class critique of capitalist

practices through accumulating contexts.[49]

Since the structure of the recto itself is quite complicated, I'd like to attend to its

constitutive parts before discussing the ways in which the photographic images contribute

to the text as a whole. A date in bold (such as "5.25.2000") tops the text—which

corresponds to the date of the newspaper articles from which the section's content was

drawn—followed by a prose section consisting of three parts: 1) "a reportage-style

paragraph in quotation marks which appears to excerpt a newspaper report or headline,"

2) **a paragraph in bold presenting first-person reactions to the LTV shutdown in

free direct discourse**, and 3) *an italicized paragraph which most resembles a narratorial

or even authorial voice as it frequently refers to Nowak's autobiographical experiences

of growing up in working-class Buffalo.*[50] This latter section is the most complex as it,

too, contains quoted material—in one italicized portion, Nowak ironically cites the

Emergency Broadcast System to indicate that the shut down is indeed an "actual

emergency" (elsewhere it is described as "**an economic tornado**": "*This is a test of the

Emergency Broadcast System…If this had been an actual emergency…*'" (139). While

the quotes, boldface, and italics suggest three discrete registers of emphasis, the order of

these parts constantly shifts from section to section, creating a weaving, choral-like

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[49] "June 19, 1982" refers to the date when two Detroit auto workers murdered Vincent Chin with a baseball bat in the mistaken belief he was Japanese and hence somehow responsible for the failing American auto industry; Chin, a Chinese-American, was, in fact, an auto worker as well.

[50] Page 151 is a notable exception. In lieu of a newspaper report, the quoted portion cites Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, who confidently proclaims, "[W]e'll give the world an opportunity to see what it's like to save and have a better lifestyle, a better life for all." Below this are fast-food advertisements from KFC and Hardee's welcoming a new Wal-Mart Supercenter to Hibbing, MN. And below this is a block of prose which is in bold as well as in italics (an interesting merging of the authorial and the "testimonial" frames) quoting a local union's critique of Wal-Mart's wages and benefits. On page 145, the paragraph in bold resembles the paragraphs in quotation marks in that it is an example of tagged direct discourse with the use of italics to indicate the reported speech.

effect. Below the prose, separated by an asterisk, is a line of haiku-like poetry (such as "workers / words / worth / [repeating]") which is often punctuated by virgules or other marks of punctuation and which often acts as a caption to the photo across the gutter. At the very bottom of the page is a box which encloses the name of a town (such as "Iron") followed by the number of laid-off workers.

Nowak himself attributes the poem's distinctive structure to two different influences, the Japanese haibun, which mixes poetic prose description and haiku, and Marx's architectural metaphor of the base and superstructure. In an interview with *Chicago Postmodern Poetry*, Nowak says,

> [The Chinese-Canadian poet] Fred Wah got me very interested in the haibun, and so my new book, *Shut Up Shut Down*, includes experiments with the possibilities of that form in relationship to photo-documentary, labor history, etc. In one of these serial pieces, "Hoyt Lakes/Shut Down," I wanted to see if I could find a way to replicate Marxist base/superstructure in poetic form; so I worked at developing haibun structures in which the ideological information at the top of the poem would balance precariously above the direct economic impact as base— represented by the number of taconite miners who lost their jobs in the Iron Range towns in northern Minnesota. ("Interview with Mark Nowak")

If the boxed number represents the Marxist base, then the superstructure would consist of the haibun, which is, itself, a two-part structure (prose writing combined with haiku). How, then, do we account for these *two* two-part structures in terms of Marxist theory? Marx's writings do suggest that the superstructure was comprised of two distinct tiers: 1)

the state and 2) social consciousness. In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels argue

that "the basis of the state and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure" evolves directly

out of material production, and, again, in "A Contribution to the Critique of Political

Economy," Marx maintains that both "a legal and political superstructure" and

corresponding "forms of social consciousness" arise from "the economic structure of

society" (159-60). Yet it seems unfruitful to reductively align the poetry and prose of

haibun with the state and social consciousness of Marx's superstructure. One suspects

that Nowak's choice was motivated by the fact that the statistics below appear to be more

"direct" and less "ideological" than the mix of different discourses presented above. In

any case, I ultimately find Nowak's recourse to Marxist theory to be a red herring and

while it may have acted as a productive starting point, the base/superstructure as a poetic

model obscures the ways in which the poem's formal features actually operate and

suggests unneeded oppositions.[51]

I'd like now to turn to Michael Davidson's essay "On the Outskirts of Form:

Cosmopoetics in the Shadow of NAFTA" and his analysis of "05.25.00" to show how

complex Nowak's poem actually is and to then clarify the poem's complicated issues of

voice, structure, time, and place. Davidson spectacularly misreads this section, especially

the italicized portion (see, again, fig 12 to situate this passage in context):

> *The factory of my father [reduced to rubble]. Factory [after factory (shut*
>
> *down)]. Seventeen stories. The blast furnace of my grandfather. The*
>
> *slaughterhouse across from the railroad [terminal] where my father's*

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[51] Here, one thinks of Ron Silliman's book-length prose poem *Tjanting* (1981) which he based on the Fibonacci number series in order to embody the class struggle in poetic form.

aunt used to work. Seventeen stories, and every single window shattered

[shut up].

Here is Davidson's erroneous gloss:

> Below this testimony by one of the laid-off workers is the schematic
>
> summary: 'workers/words/worth/[repeating]' which condenses the links
>
> between labor, language, and value in an alliterative sequence. Below this,
>
> outlined in black, is the word 'Iron' followed by the number '21',
>
> indicating that in the small town of Iron twenty-one workers lost their
>
> jobs. A photograph on the facing page shows the road to the main gate of
>
> the closed LTV steel plant. Each level of the poem deepens the 'base' by
>
> framing it in specific voices and images. (746)

Despite being one of our more savvy and intelligent readers of contemporary poetry,

Davidson makes several puzzling errors here. Perhaps misunderstanding Nowak's

Chicago Postmodern Poetry interview, Davidson initially appears to associate the

Marxist base with the verse component of haibun while he links the superstructure with

the prose description: "the relationship of prose to poetry replicates the classic division

between superstructure and base, between narrative representations of 'real conditions'

and the economic realities sustained by (or interpreted through) those representations"

(745-6). Yet by the end of his analysis, both the prose *and* the poetry ("the schematic

summary") seem to be different "levels," along with the photograph, which deepen the

"base." The quotation marks are telling since it is unclear whether the base is now

represented by the "Iron : 21" at the bottom of the page or if it is a loose metaphor for the

"economic realities" of the iron range.

My point is that this section, as well as the others in the poem, is less focused and coherent than Davidson assumes—that it does *not* represent a synchronic, topographic unity which can be "condensed" and "schematized" by neatly correlating frames which isolate a specific time (05.25.00) and place (Iron). Davidson simply thinks that the section "records the shutdown of the LTV steel factory in Iron, Minnesota" (746). The LTV taconite plant is actually located near Hoyt Lakes. Worse yet, the italicized "testimony" which Davidson attributes to a laid-off worker from Iron refers not to Iron but to Buffalo, New York (the "terminal" mentioned is New York Central Terminal). Moreover, the voice corresponds not to some laid-off worker but to Nowak himself. Throughout the poem, the italicized sections fragmentarily recount Nowak's working-class upbringing and make spatially-marked references to "Rejtan Street" (in the Kaisertown neighborhood of Buffalo where "Uncle Ray" used to play) (143), "General Motors" (an allusion to the GM Powertrain Engine Plant in Tonawanda) (135), and the "Westinghouse" plant where Nowak's father worked (137). The "blast furnace" referred to in the italicized passage above is the Buffalo steel mill where Nowak's grandfather worked (LTV's blast furnaces are located in Cleveland and Indiana Harbor).[52] Thus, the primary action of the frame is not to "deepen" a localizable base, which acts as a kind of common denominator (elsewhere Davidson calls it a "bottom line"), but rather to offer one precarious component within a constellatory structure (746). The effect is more like a broadening or proliferation of contexts as we now understand the economic plight of the Iron Range in the larger context of what is called the Rust Belt—which stretches from

---

[52] In talking about the changing landscape of Buffalo, Nowak has said, "The steel mill where my grandfather worked, with like 35,000 people—gone…The train station where my other grandfather worked—closed. The Westinghouse plant where my dad worked, which probably employed 15,000 to 20,000 people—torn down" (qtd. in Demko).

Illinois to New Jersey—and we see the LTV shutdown and the events of May 25, 2000 as part of the longer durée of deindustrialization that has affected several generations of workers.[53] While Davidson's essay is surely sensitive to these contexts, his "stressing [of] a hemispheric frame" over "a kind of spiritual localism" and his attempt to study poetic production "created in the long shadow of NAFTA" (by putting Nowak into dialogue with the Mexican writer Cristina Rivera-Garza and the Canadian poet Lisa Robertson) ultimately deters him from clearly apprehending the local as he confuses Buffalo, New York for Iron, Minnesota (735-6). (Again: *New York is not Minnesota*.) Not only that: Davidson is also missing the very important local choices that Nowak made in the process of composition by privileging the neologic rubric of "cosmopoetics." To fail to grasp the fact that many of Nowak's sources are newspaper sources diminishes the crucial concept of Benjamin's polytechnic training that underwrites Nowak's poetics and overlooks the labor *embedded* within "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down"—the poem is not only a tribute to the steel workers of LTV but to the important labor of journalists that "repeat" (and "give voice" to) the reports of the workers. Indeed, Nowak's 2011 blog post "New Labor Journalism and the Poets" makes his indebtedness to journalists abundantly clear.

And while Davidson claims that the base is framed by "specific voices," the specificity of many of the voices remains indeterminate due to Nowak's aggressive use of free direct discourse (the presentation of speech without any narratorial mediation or use of tag clauses).[54] Davidson assumes that the bulk of *Shut Up Shut Down* was based on "interviews with workers" (and surely Nowak's formulation "workers / words / worth /

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[53] Here, I concur with Davidson's astute assessment that "[t]he theme of *Shut Up Shut Down* is one of framing: how to see the photographs of closed factories in their largest social meaning" (748).

[54] On free direct discourse and tag clauses, see Prince's *A Dictionary of Narratology*, pp. 34, 97.

[repeating]" invites such a view), though many of the voices presented in bold are not actually from the taconite miners who lost their jobs but rather come from newspaper quotations representing a range of people.[55] Here, David Ray Vance's caveat that "Nowak's use of textual documentation reinforces…[a] sense that we're not getting the whole story" is particularly germane; he states, "short of doing the legwork of tracking down the original sources, we simply can't know" which materials came from which sources thereby inviting a "skeptical inquiry" of the presented materials (348).[56] If we re-examine page 133 (again, see fig 12), the paragraph in bold *appears* to represent a single worker's "testimony":

> **My stomach dropped to the floor. It was like my stomach was hit by a 10-ton brick. We knew for the last few years that things weren't the best, but we never expected this. It's just unbelievable.**

If we consult, however, the poem's "Works Cited" of some twenty newspaper articles and do our due diligence in performing the detailed "legwork" in the various archives of local newspapers (most of which are conveniently digitized), we realize that this boldface block is a centaur construction—the first two sentences come from Marlene Pospeck, the mayor of Hoyt Lakes and the last two sentences come from Jerry Fallos, president of United Steelworkers of America Local 4108 in Aurora.[57] I repeat: the only way to know this is to consult such publications as the *Duluth News-Tribune*, the *Mesabi Daily News*, and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and to painstakingly crosscheck the articles alongside Nowak's poem. Here, we sense an axiom of archival poetry: that archival poetry, if

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[55] Davidson is not alone in this misreading. According to Jia Shi, "[Nowak] renders facts by transcribing workers' oral testimonies and taking actual documentary photographs. All the readers can see is the reality" (39).

[56] The dates of the poem's sections do match the dates of the newspaper articles in the bibliography, so we do know, at least, the source texts of each section.

[57] Nowak's source for this section is the article "Plant Closing Hits Hard on Range: Taconite Mine is Old, Inefficient, LTV Says." *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 25, 2000, 1A.

successful, leads its readers on a ramifying search through the archives with a skeptical

eye toward documentation—that is, the value of archival and documentary poetry is not

strictly informational but rather lies in its ability to suggest a particular methodology or

practice of skeptical inquiry and research. In any case, the words of the laid-off workers

from Iron, MN are not represented here as Davidson suggests—neither in the italicized

nor the boldface sections. We thus grasp the limitations of Nowak's sources in that the

newspapers seem much more inclined to interview and cite more visible figures (such as

the mayor and union president) rather than the unemployed laborers.[58] To be fair, Nowak

does "repeat" the words of workers in other sections (the "Aurora" section cites Dale

Walkama who endured two mining accidents), yet they don't always directly correlate to

the LTV layoffs let alone the community represented at the bottom of the page. For

instance, in the section which is "based" on the town of Ely, Nowak fuses the words of

Matt Tichy, a sales manager of a welding supply firm in Virginia, with the words of Jim

French, a manager of a lumber company in Aurora:

> **The biggest thing is that it's going to have a trickle-down effect. It will affect everyone, from grocery stores to gas stations. It affects everybody up here. But it's happened before and we made it through it. We're fighters up here. You make it through those lean years and you go on.** (143)

In the passage above, the first three sentences are Tichy's and the last three are French's.

If Nowak's poetry gives "voice to constituencies seldom freed by free trade," as

Davidson claims, it appears that his use of free direct discourse strips them of their

individuality—particularly in the way one voice rapidly cuts to the next without any

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[58] Nowak's most recent book *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009) represents a marked shift in methodology as it draws on testimonies of coal miners from the Sago mining disaster in West Virginia and newspaper reports of various mining accidents in China without mixing voices in the manner of "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down."

distinguishable shift (739).[59] Committed literature, according to Adorno, "renders the content to which the artist commits himself inherently ambiguous," and the blurring effect of the voices surely contributes to a sense of ambiguity. Yet, if we consider Nowak's intention to tell "a group narrative," as Adrienne Rich points out in her back cover blurb, and place this poem within an epic or, better yet, "pocket epic" tradition, we can better understand his use of boldface to smooth over the collaged "cut" (in the example above, the "cut" occurs between the third and fourth sentences) as a means to achieve and present a collective voice (190).[60] In this sense, Nowak's sentiment matches Matt Tichy's observation that this issue affects "everybody up here"—hence the choice to include a range of voices from a variety of locales.

My larger argument is that it is far more productive to read "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down" with a close attention not only to its "intangibilities of form"—the way it, like Goldsmith's text, brings both productive and artistic labor into view—but also to its genre and formal techniques (such as unconvential punctuation and typography) rather than by focusing on the misleading metaphor of "the base" which tends to falsely orient

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[59] In a largely negative book review of *Shut Up Shut Down*, Danusha Goska opines that in presenting the workers' statements in "a disembodied, decontextualized format" Nowak erases working class individualities as part of his "larger, socialist agenda" (1135). In an interview in *12th Street: Writing & Democracy*, Nowak, himself, in discussing his more recent book *Coal Mountain Elementary*, critiques the rapidity of the cuts in favor of a more focused attention on the integrity of voice: "I began to feel that the cuts or edits in Shut Up Shut Down were too quick. And so for the next book, Coal Mountain Elementary (CME) I made a conscious decision to drastically slow down the speed of the cuts. If I can use a documentary film example, I wanted to move from something like the Dziga Vertov Man with a Movie Camera speed of Shut Up to something more akin to Frederick Wiseman in High School or Public Housing in the new book. So what you'll find in CME is a much, much slower pacing to the cuts between voices; you'll find that each 'voice' is given an entire page before the voice shifts on the successive page" (qtd. in Axelrod).

[60] According to Nigel Alderman, the pocket epic sets out to tell the "tale of the tribe" even as it eschews the mythic and encyclopedic reach of its modernist counterparts; it is a form situated "between the lyric and longer narrative forms; between individual subjectivity and some larger social collective; between a hegemonic history and forgotten histories" (1). While Alderman focuses on a particular British context, his formulation of the pocket epic can be usefully applied to much contemporary American writing and, for purposes of my argument, what he calls the pocket epic represents a specific modality of the archival long poem.

each section of the poem toward particular voices (of unemployed workers) in particular

places (such as Iron or Hoyt Lakes). The almost obsessive use of punctuation—

particularly in the italicized sections and the haiku—counterbalances the free direct

discourse of the boldface sections in which voices indiscriminately mix without

attribution. Likewise, the asterisk which punctuates each recto of the doublespread

indicates that there is a missing component, that we are dealing with an "inadequate"

descriptive system.[61] (Elsewhere, Nowak deploys the asterisk to make a witty and

pointed critique of capitalism: "'in God we *rust'"). Nowak's liberal use of brackets

betrays an anxiety that something is always being left out, since brackets, after all, are

used to enclose explanatory or missing material. The phrase "workers / words / worth /

[repeating]," on closer inspection, seems to acknowledge the lack of the workers' words

in the prose structures above, and the bracketed intrusions can be read as Nowak's desire

to fill in that lack. Since he doesn't include an apostrophe in "workers," we can perhaps

understand the phrase to mean "words on behalf of the workers are worth repeating."

The virgules which separate each word call attention to the mediation of the text (and the

articulated spaces that exist between every grapheme), suggesting that this is a rewriting

of several lines of poetry in paragraph form. I'd like to propose that this is a deliberate

move on Nowak's part, which behooves us to question, in a similar fashion, the mediated

nature of the blocks of prose. In other words, the poem is teaching us the "skeptical

inquiry" which Vance mentions—that we should not make hasty assumptions about the

documents presented in the poem. In this manner, we should even question the way the

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[61] Here, I mean to invoke Martha Rosler's classic hybrid work of text and photography, "The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems" (1974-1975).

book is presented on the publisher's website, which describes the pieces of *Shut Up Shut Down* as "*poetic oral histories*" rather than newspaper collages ("Shut Up Shut Down").

Furthermore, the suggestive phrase "words / worth," I believe, is a pun on (William) Wordsworth which calls to mind one of Wordsworth's most canonical poems which, like the sections of "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down," is temporally and spatially marked: "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, *on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798*." Because of the pun's double nature, the intention behind it is, of course, impossible to prove, but it is "worth" repeating that Nowak practices the trite pun as a kind of art form. *Shut Up Shut Down* contains some choice examples such as, "blight flight" (69) and "Read the writing on the Wal-Mart" (25). Moreover, I suspect that the "words / worth"/Wordsworth pun alludes to and implicitly recapitulates Marjorie Levinson's influential new historicist critique of "Tintern Abbey." In her eyes, the poem's "primary poetic action is the suppression of the social" (35) as it "present[s] culture as Nature" (39). In contradistinction to Wordsworth's "green pastoral landscape," Levinson's description of the Wye Valley in 1798 accounts for the region's industry and unemployment, subjects which Nowak is so at pains to portray:

> The region showed prominent signs of industrial and commercial activity: coal mines, transport barges noisily plying the river, miners' hovels. The town of Tintern, a half mile from the Abbey, was an iron-working village of some note…The Abbey grounds were crowded with the dispossessed and unemployed. (29-30)

Levinson's chapter, entitled "Insight and Oversight," argues that the Romantic insight of "imageless deep truth" is predicated upon Wordsworth's omission of the social from the

landscape. While I do not wish to endorse Levinson's reading (and realize that other

Romanticists have taken her to task for the specific claims of her argument), I do wish to

show how this intertextual reference extends the poem's uneasiness about how labor is

represented.[62]

I'd now like to turn to Nowak's use of haiku as a way for him to present culture

and nature in dynamic tension and, more generally, as a technique to layer different

temporalities into the poem. In the popular American imagination, haiku represents a

kind of simplistic "nature poetry"—which is probably due to the presence of a "seasonal

word" (*kigo*) which is a conventional component of the form. Similarly, haiku is often

regarded as a brief snapshot, a condensed description of an instant; according to

Davidson, "haiku …reduces the description [of the haibun] into a few words" (745). Yet

less is known about another convention, the "cutting word" (*kireji*), which typically gives

the haiku a two part structure, allowing for not a reduction, summary, or schematization

that the reader can easily absorb (which suggests that the archival poem's main goal is to

inform) but rather allowing, according to Haruo Shirane, "a space that the haikai reader

occupies metonymically or synecdochically, by moving from the detail or part to an

imagined whole…and in montage, collage fashion, by exploring the reverberations and

interactions among the different parts" (83-5). I suggest that this is also a useful model

for reading "Hoyt Lakes / Shut Down" as we jump from prose to poetry, from word to

image, from section to section, from text to bibliography and eventually to the world

outside the poem. Shirane and James Brandon also note in their anthology of Early

Modern Japanese Literature that often "one part of the hokku, most often the part with the

seasonal word, has a classical seasonal topic, and the other part features an image from

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[62] See, for example, Rzepka.

01.06.2001–01.19.2001

"NATIONAL STEEL TO LAY OFF 10 WORKERS"
"EVTAC NEXT MINE TO CLOSE?"
"HIBTAC WILL CLOSE FOR 10 WEEKS"

One brick [broke (frames)] the remains of my father's factory. Ten less ten weeks less next [mine] to close. The background [under (ground)], the economic [limits (of)]. One miner one thousand four hundred miners minus miners minus plus. What broke [one brick] one miner one bricklayer what broke one worker down. Broken [under (ground)].

The plant was usually blowing smoke out of it. Today, there was nothing . . . We don't want to be here. It's embarrassing. We went through this in the early '80s. I remember standing in the cheese line. For us, it's a matter of life or death on the Iron Range. We don't want to see what happened in the early '80s happen again . . . Please help us. This is an economic tornado.

*

no tres- / no trees // -passing / leaves

Embarrass : 85

148
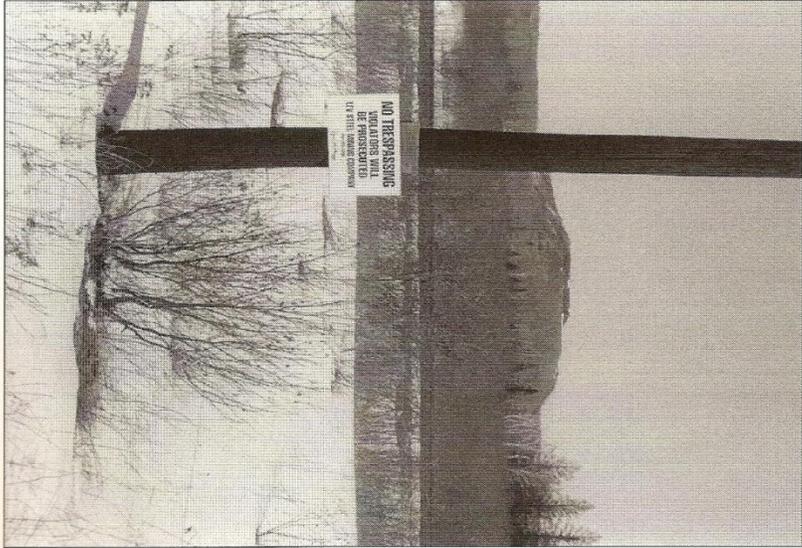
Figure 13. Page scan of pages 148-9.

contemporary, popular culture, thus creating a tension between the two" (171). Nowak specifically mobilizes this juxtaposition in "1.06.2001-01.19.2001" (see fig 13) with the haiku, "no tres- / no trees // -passing / leaves," which references winter with its image of fallen leaves (*ochiba*) at the same time as it stutteringly reiterates the LTV "NO TRESPASSING" sign depicted on the verso. The collision between the calendrical time of the headlines and the cyclical seasons of the haiku, between the micro-interval ("The plant was usually blowing smoke…Today there was nothing") and the macro-interval (the economic contraction of the early '80's and the LTV shutdown in the late twentieth century) represented in the boldface section—all of these temporal markers—indicate what Foster calls the "different speeds" of postmodern society, and, in the previous section, Nowak's wordplay "*strip mines frame strip malls*" (technically, an example of *antanaclasis*) registers postmodernity's "mixed spaces" as industrial spaces sit uneasily on the periphery of the service sector ("Postmodernism in Parallax" 4).[63]

Thus, Nowak maps and measures the dis/connectivities of postmodernity (to adapt Foster's phrase) precisely through techniques of dis/connection: 1) the seamless suturing of newspaper statements to create a collective voice and 2) the haiku convention of the "cutting word" that, in fracturing the surface of the poem, creates an articulated space that the reader can hermeneutically inhabit ("Postmodernism in Parallax" 19). If we consider Keats' famous imperative to "load every rift" with ore (which, as I understand it, is a call for musical lushness and linguistic and descriptive density—in other words, poetic skill) along with Nowak's stark line, "ore / pits / fill / with / water," then we can understand the ways in which the archival long poem is deliberately anti-

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[63] Foster insists that postmodernism is a category that can usefully "think…[the] strange chrono-tropic terrain…of fortressed cities armored against urban inhabitants and industrial remains suspended in twilight zones" (4).

poetic: the virgules, here, cut across and disrupt the musicality of the assonantal *i*'s with

anti-absorptive caesurae. It is within these gaps, I argue, that the reader is meant to raise

such unnoticed phenomena (the ore pits, here, constitute a kind of ironic objective

correlative for the sorrow of deindustrialization) into a higher tier of social memory.

The Goldsmith-Nowak (Dis)connection

> Conceptual Writing is, indeed, a form of Documentary Poetics, a school of writing that
> we feel very sympathetic with.
> —Kenneth Goldsmith

> I think I'm finally beginning to understand Conceptual Writing thanks to Kenneth
> Goldsmith.
> —Mark Nowak

Both Goldsmith and Nowak have acknowledged, if not each other directly, the

respective "school" that the other is associated with in a series of 2010 blog posts at

Harriet, the popular web forum of the Poetry Foundation: the Goldsmith quote above

comes from an April 27th post called "If I were to raise my children the way I write my

books, I would have been thrown in jail long ago" and the Nowak quote comes from his

April 29th response called "Conceptual Writing [verb, repeat] and Silence."[64] As I have

shown, Goldsmith's and Nowak's sensibilities sit rather uneasily beside one another, and

there is certainly a note of sarcasm in both of their statements. While Goldsmith prefers,

in an almost quietist fashion, to "embrace…the inherent and inherited politics of the

borrowed words…[rather than] to morally or politically dictate words that aren't…[his]"

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[64] To be clear, while Goldsmith fully endorses his affiliation with conceptualism (he, in fact, actively participates in discourses about contemporary poetry as conceptualism's spokesman), Nowak is wary of being called a "documentary poet" even though he is frequently branded as such and taught under a documentary rubric. He says, "I don't really view myself as a 'documentary' poet (in fact, I've turned down offers to edit an anthology on that subject, etc.), preferring more 'social' poetics, i.e., a poetics practiced in conjunction with social movements (particularly movements for economic justice for working people)" (email to author, 13 June 2012).

("If I were to raise my children"), Nowak fervently supports "the revitalization of a political poetry of the Americas within the United States" ("Notes Toward an Anticapitalist Poetics" 240). Nowak is clear to state that he is not writing "as an enemy of Conceptual Writing" but as a poet who finds the "a-ethical" stance of much of conceptualism to be inadequate given "the politics of massive cuts to governments arts funding during the current economic crisis and the Draconian policies of NCLB (No Child Left Behind)" ("Conceptual Writing [verb, repeat] and Silence").

And if Goldsmith is too hasty in dismissing the obsolescence of content ("context is the new content"), Nowak is quick to correct the myopic monomania of procedural methods. For example, Nowak critiques the poet and filmmaker Nick Twemlow's enthusiastic approval of the constraint-based methods of the film *Lumière and Company* (1995), a collection of shorts commissioned for the 100th anniversary of the Lumière brothers' *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* (1895), which consists of a fifty second shot of workers leaving a factory. A group of internationally-renowned directors (such as Wim Wenders, Spike Lee, Abbas Kiarostami, and Zhang Yimou) were asked to use an original hand-crank *cinématographe* camera (like the one the Lumière brothers used), to edit in-camera (as the Lumière brothers did), and to follow a set of constraints: no longer than 52 seconds, no use of synchronized sound, and no more than three takes. Twemlow found the project "fascinating" since the participating filmmakers "probably rarely shoot anything resembling procedural film, at least in, say, an Oulipian sense" ("Lumière, Redux"). Nowak replies with "a foil — or perhaps alternative — to…[Tremlow's] conceptual poetry analogy":

there is, it seems to me, an alternative possibility for a constraint-based response to the Lumière film: a response based on *content*. If you watch the Lumière original, it is about more than its 52-second length, in-camera editing, lack of synch-sound, and how many or how few takes; it is about workers… leaving… a factory.

Nowak continues:

How might restraints based not on method but based on content radically alter the *Lumière and Company* project? Imagine Wim Wenders at the coal mine in Shanxi province where underwater divers are attempting to rescue 153 miners who have been trapped since the mine flooded earlier this week? How might these workers eventually leave their factory? Imagine Spike Lee in Algeria where reports say as many as 500,000 public workers in 1,451 communes have gone on strike this week. These, too, are workers choosing to leave the "factories" that employ them. ("Lumière, Redux (Redux)")

Nowak's remarks seem to instantiate a divide—or at least a tension—between an autonomous conceptual practice driven by method (à la Goldsmith) and a committed documentary practice driven by content. Is this another separation of the Sartrean goats and the Valeryan sheep? The strike that Nowak references above, the refusal to work, is what Roberts calls "the point where the hand withdraws from labour…[which] provid[es] a gap through which the artistic critique of heteronomous labour enters" (96). This is the very gap that allows for a range of reskilling—for poetry reskilled as a theory of labor

(Goldsmith) and poetry reskilled as new labor journalism (Nowak). And—as I have argued—both contain within them the trace of the other.

Chapter 3

Poetry in the Field: Brenda Coultas' and C.D. Wright's Anti-Romances of the Archive

In a PBS interview, the former Poet Laureate of the United States Billy Collins explained his sensibility by saying "the real question for me, is getting the reader into the poem and then taking the reader somewhere because I think of poetry as a kind of form of travel writing" (Farnsworth). This conception of imaginative transport ("taking the reader somewhere") relies on a distortion and metaphorization of the genre of travel writing, and if it cleverly appropriates the genre for mainstream lyric purposes, it also obscures the precise and actual work that travel writing does and the work that makes travel writing possible. Collins' aesthetic is clearly informed by what art critic John Roberts, whose theory of art was discussed at length in the previous chapter, would call "the cloying mystifications of traditional notions of artistic craft," which "in poetry [is manifested through] the bardic, spiritualized eye" (70). This type of lyric "I"/"eye" underwrites the post-Romantic poet's claim to be under the reader's boot soles (Whitman) or the poet's insistence that he can, in fact, see into the life of things (Wordsworth). But what about poets who actually travel as part of the long poem's research program, who incorporate site-specific field work as a crucial part of poetic competence, who can actually say, as Whitman does in "Song of Myself," "I was there"? Fieldwork is, according to the *OED*, "[p]ractical work, esp. as conducted by a researcher in the natural environment, rather than in a laboratory or office" ("Fieldwork, n"). Fieldwork, thus, seems to be within the purview of not the poet but the social scientist. Indeed, as I discussed in chapter one, the archival long poem seems to be interested in the tripartite structure of the "office-registry-archive." Yet the poets I study in this chapter

see the archive—and by extension the writing office—as insufficient and thus move

outward to the field in order to engage with the archive's many lacunae. In this sense,

they adopt Joseph Roach's advice to historians to not "abandon the archive" but "to

spend more time in the streets" (xii).

"What is there, hidden underneath"

As I elaborated in my preface and first chapter, poetic ambition for certain

contemporary practitioners of the long poem is intimately connected to their engagement

with the archive, but, more particularly, their skepticism toward the archive's explanatory

powers, their distrust of its stability, that it can reliably serve as an objective substrate for

the writing and telling of our histories, importantly distinguishes them from their

modernist precursors. The modernist long poem, in many ways, was conceived as a

mode to effectively respond to the reams of information—what Sven Spieker calls the

"giant paper jam"—produced by the journalistic, corporate, and bureaucratic offices of

modernity (5).[65] It was an answer to the question William Carlos Williams posed in the

early 1920s in his poem "Young Love": "What about all this writing?" In this context,

we can understand the aim of Ezra Pound's *Guide to Kulchur* to be coterminous with that

of his *Cantos*: "I am at best trying to provide the average reader with a few tools for

dealing with the heteroclite mass of undigested information hurled at him daily and

monthly and set to entangle his feet in volumes of reference" (23). This "daily and

monthly" information surely includes the news that no longer "stays news," as Pound

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[65] According to Spieker, "early-twentieth-century modernism…[is] a reaction formation to the storage crisis that came in the wake of [James] Beniger's revolution [of the rationalizing modern bureaucracy and the development of communications technologies], a giant paper jam based on the exponential increase in stored data, both in the realm of public administration and in large companies whose archives were soon bursting at the seams" (5).

would have it, the "undigested" data mindlessly handled and filed by T.S. Eliot's typist and clerk, those notorious automatons from section III of *The Waste Land*. In this reading, the author of the twentieth- century long poem is a heroic researcher that sifts through massive amounts of heterogeneous information to compose a form that can cohere in the midst of a fragmenting and oppressive reality. Anne Waldman's *Iovis* (1993), a two-volume long poem published some 60 years after the first *Cantos*, provides an apt example, demonstrating the enduring difficulties of writing and organizing an extended form. According to a passage that describes the work's composition,

> The poet has by now traveled a distance, spanning mental universe, moving cross country, moving cross town and comes to rest with her box of scraps, notes, journals, memorabilia, letters, unfinished versions, her major task continuing unsettled at her feet. She spreads the documents about her, and bows her head. She feels a burden to sustain the plan. The society is crumbling around her. She can barely withstand the daily news. (279)

Such an engagement with what Pound calls "volumes of reference" is an explicit way for the long poet to address the social and cultural conditions in which she is embedded, and the long poem's capacious form is ideally suited to incorporate and reference a wide variety of documents such as the "journals, memorabilia, [and] letters" mentioned in *Iovis*. "Sustaining the plan" of the poem hence becomes an aesthetic response to the larger crumbling society.

The handling and arrangement of a diverse range of accumulated data continues to be a crucial concern for contemporary long poets, particularly in our age of

information, or better yet, "information overload"—and here one thinks of Tan Lin's

BlipSoak01 (2003) which considers a society saturated in digital detritus, perpetually

punctuated by "blips" of electronic static and signals. Similarly, Kenneth Goldsmith, the

writer of massive, conceptual long poems (some of which were treated in the previous

chapter), calls for a reskilling of writing in the face of such overload: "Faced with an

unprecedented amount of digital text, writing needs to redefine itself in order to adapt to

the new environment of textual abundance" ("A Textual Ecosystem"). However,

Rosmarie Waldrop, a writer of long prose poems, has identified another pressing

objective:

> There is an immensity of data around us, and to choose the ones that are
>
> relevant and to connect them is my sense of life. And, again, there is an
>
> anxiety of the too much, of wanting it all, of the impossibility of choosing.
>
> I'm now thinking again of the page as palimpsest, the anxiety does not
>
> only have to do with the boundlessness of the possibilities, but also with
>
> what has been censored, what is there, hidden underneath. (qtd. in
>
> Retallack 370)

Waldrop's comment shows an important dialectical sensitivity—that in our information

age of textual abundance, there is both "too much" as well as "not enough" archival

material. We are, as Derrida reminds us, "in need of archives," and the "anxiety"

Waldrop mentions above is nothing other than Derrida's "archive fever." She is

suggesting that we need to archive not only "the immensity of data around us" but also

"what is there, hidden underneath."   To probe "what is there, hidden underneath"—or, in

the words of Myung Mi Kim, "[w]hat is occluded in the sociohistorical index" (251)—is

precisely the goal of Brenda Coultas' "The Abolition Journal (or, Tracing the Earthworks of my County)" (2007) and C.D. Wright's One *Big Self: An Investigation* (2007) as both poems explore not the daunting materiality of Pound's "volumes of reference" or Goldsmith's "textual abundance" but rather that which eludes the physical archive or that which has been sequestered (as if in a "dark archive") away from normative society—for Coultas, it is the documentation of underground railroad sites which have already deteriorated beyond recognition, and for Wright, it is the recording of testimony from inmates in three Louisiana prisons.

To better understand the stakes which modern and contemporary writers have in exploring the archive (as both a physical place and a theoretical concept), I'd like to briefly consider Pound's dizzying ambition to write the *Cantos*, which Pound, himself, deems "a poem including history," an epic which depends so much upon the constellation of textual fragments collected from disparate sources ranging from Machiavelli to Confucius to Thomas Jefferson. As Pound would have it, such a juxtaposition of what he called "luminous details" selected from history would lead to a transhistorical illumination and a renovation of a deteriorating present in which "things fall apart" and "the centre cannot hold." Pound's utopian belief that his poem could effect a cultural enlightenment stems from his epistemological confidence in the archive, in the "transmission of knowledge obtainable…from…concrete manifestations," from "whole slabs of record" and "whole beams and ropes of real history" which have been "shelved, overclouded and buried" prior to the poet's intervention (*Guide to Kulchur* 28-30).[66] "Canto XCVI," which Pound fittingly calls a "memorial to archivists and librarians"

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[66] As Christopher Beach notes, "Pound's method is fundamentally that of the nineteenth-century cultural archaeologist: he studies the cultural archive for comparisons with, and supplements to, an unfavorable present" (87).

(674), contains such a "slab of record." "[W]e are getting to / the crux of one matter," he

Anno sexto imperii sui Justinianus (the second) pacem, quam ad Habdimelich habuit, ex amentia dissolvit, et omnem Cypriorum insulam, et populum irrationabiliter voluit transmigrare, et characterem qui missus fuerat ab Habdimelich, eum noviter visus esset . . . et his auditis Habdimelich satanice stimulatus rogabat ne pax solveretur, sed susciperent monetam suam, cum Arabes non susciperent Romanorum incisionem in suis nummis. Verum dato pondere auri ait: Nullum Romanis damnum efficitur, ex eo quod Arabes nova cuderent . . .
Quod et factum est, et misit Habdimelich ad aedificandum templum Muchan, et voluit auferre columnas . . .
— col. 1060, The Deacon, Migne's Patrologia.

Figure 14. Page scan of *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, p. 678.

promises before citing a passage from Paul the Deacon's 8th Century account of Emperor

Justinian II's tenuous treaty with Caliph Abd al-Malik in *History of the Langobards* (see

fig 14). The "crux" for Pound seems to be the issue of coinage ("nummis")—that

Justinian refused Abd al-Malik's demand that the Arabs mint their own currency

("monetam suam")—and money is, indeed, one of the most significant and obsessive

"subject-rhymes" (to use Hugh Kenner's term) throughout the *Cantos* (423). "I have set

down part of / The Evidence," Pound triumphantly proclaimed in Canto XLVI, a

continued attack on "usura" (234); similarly, in the Thrones Cantos passage above, we

appear to have another piece of evidence in support of Pound's monetary theories, which,

by virtue of his ideogrammatic presentation, becomes transubstantiated into "Evidence"

with a capital "E." Yet Pound's compression of this textual fragment to get at the "crux"

(which literally means *cross* in Latin) excises the story of a traumatic *crossing*, the result

of Justinian's irrational decision to move the people of Cyprus ("et populum

irrationabiliter voluit transmigrare"). The first ellipsis in the passage above effectively

crosses out the account of the ones who died, the ones who were coerced and *crucified* by

history's unreason: "A great number of Cypriots while they were trying to get across

were plunged into the water and perished from weakness" (Terrell 602). In

contradistinction to Pound's elision, M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (taken up in chapter

four) attempts to bear witness to what she calls "the 'meagre' ones" (127), and like

Brenda Coultas' "The Abolition Journal (or, Tracing the Earthworks of my County),"

which is the first of two long poems in *The Marvelous Bones of Time: Excavations and*

Explanations, gestures toward histories written, not in Pound's "piles of stone books"

(*Cantos* 63) but on the uneven surface of troubled waters. (Both poems center around

particular crossings in the history of transatlantic slavery—in Coultas' case, the

movement of slaves across the Ohio River and in Philip's case, the disastrous voyage of

the slave ship *Zong* as it sailed from West Africa to Jamaica.) My focus in this chapter,

however, has less to do with particular exclusions or inclusions of historical events in

modern and contemporary long poems but rather how modern and contemporary poets

mobilize specific genres and strategies in different ways to make claims about historical

memory and the archive.

Finally, I wish to treat Coultas' "The Abolition Journal" and Wright's *One Big*

Self as poetic performances that locate "what is there, hidden underneath" through what

performance theorist Mike Pearson and archaeology scholar Michael Shanks call a

"rescue archaeology"—a key term from their hybrid, collaborative work

Theatre/Archaeology which "involves a complex interpenetration of the two discourses in

an account of projects which begin to fuse performance and archaeology in the dynamic

interpretation of the material past" (1). I contend that "The Abolition Journal" and *One*

Big Self are such projects in that both works are based on archaeological metaphors even

while both Wright and Coultas are "lacking physical evidence" (Coultas, *The Marvelous*

Bones of Time 31). Such evidence is replaced by the poets' performative acts of doing

field work, of being on-site. In the beginning pages of *One Big Self*, Wright transcribes a

plaque from Angola's prison wall:

>THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT BLOODHOUND SITE WAS ENTERED
>
>INTO THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORICAL PLACES
>
>NATIONAL PRESERVATION ACT OF 1996. (18)

Discovered in 1976 by prison inmates, this site (Archaeological site 16-WF-21)

represents the location of Tunica Burial Mounds (Mann 250). Wright's project suggests

that the site of Angola prison, while having material importance to national memory, is

also what Pearson and Shanks call a palimpsestic site of "endless narratives…[and]

political aspirations and disappointments," and the documenting of the inmates'

aspirations and disappointments is, according to Wright, also of cultural value (156).

The site-specificity of Coultas' poem (which is based on field work done in

Southwestern Indiana) and Wright's book (which records trips to three Louisiana prisons)

call our attention not just to the texts themselves but to the poets' actual field work.

Moreover, such extra-writerly work is as equally as important to the poets as traditional

resources of technique. Coultas remarks, "in a matter of tracking a passage through

grass, how difficult after 100 or more years" (*The Marvelous Bones of Time* 22). The

technical difficulty of sustaining a long poem—what Edmund Spenser calls in *The Faerie*

Queene "endless worke" (502)—seems to have migrated, for Coultas, outside the bounds

of the text. In short, part of the value of these works lies in the sole fact that they were

done.[67] We can then read these works as not just poetic texts but as documentation of

performances, of Coultas' "tracking" and "tracing"—and here we can read the verb

"trace" as meaning not only "to find signs or proof of" but also "to write, especially by

forming the letters carefully or laboriously"—as well as of Wright's "archaeological"

effort to make "the [Louisiana] countryside's apparent emptiness…more legible" by

exploring sites of restricted access ("Trace" 2214). Finally, Coultas and Wright treat the

Ohio River Valley and Louisiana respectively as sites which, according to Pearson and

Shanks, are "places…saturated with meaning: whilst little of physical worth is at risk

here, everything of cultural value is at stake…they require a 'rescue archaeology' not of

physical remains but of cultural identity" (156). Coultas and Wright recover "cultural

identity" through what Roach has called "surrogation," a process by which a "culture

reproduces and re-creates itself": "Into the cavities created by loss through death or other

forms of departure, I hypothesize, survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates" (2).

Thus, these works perform more than just an "excavation"—a hollowing out (*ex-* out +

cavus hollow)—as Coultas claims, but a construction of historical memory. What these

poets find "hidden underneath" are cavities in the social fabric which they attempt to fill

in through poetic acts of surrogation.[68]

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[67] Elin Diamond defines performance with elegant concision as "a doing and a thing done*"* (1).
[68] "This move to turn 'excavation sites' into 'construction sites,'" says Hal Foster in reference to archival artists Thomas Hirschorn, Sam Durant, and Tacita Dean, "suggests a shift away from a melancholic culture that views the historical as little more than the traumatic" ("An Archival Impulse" 22).

<u>"Acts of Research" / "Creative Invention" / Archive as "Practice"</u>

   While *The Marvelous Bones of Time* and *One Big Self* are vastly different books

that draw on entirely different sets of tonal registers, I would like to adumbrate two

important commonalities between the works before analyzing the texts in detail in order

to demonstrate the vital differences between, on the one hand, modernist long poems

whose recourse to archival materials form a key part of their aesthetico-political projects

and, on the other, what I have been calling the twenty-first century archival long poem.

First, *The Marvelous Bones of Time* and *One Big Self* are both "acts of research" that

importantly narrativize their own processes.[69] Coultas does so throughout the entire

volume through the use of narrative poems (both lineated and in prose) while Wright

begins her book with a memoiristic section called "Stripe for Stripe" that recounts the

composition of the poem proper through essayistic prose. Such recourse to narrative, as

Brian McHale notes, is a rejoinder to the modernist long poem which favors non-linear,

paratactic structures such as those we find not only in Pound's *Cantos* but in long poems

that are considered late- and even post-modern like Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*

and Robert Duncan's *Passages*. In *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole*, McHale

investigates six narrative poems (Ed Dorn's *Gunslinger* and James Merrill's *Changing

Light at Sandover* among them) which follow what he calls "the novelistic model"—that

is, poems which follow "the erratic and discontinuous tradition (or anti-tradition)

of…pre- and para-novelistic genres" such as Menippean satire or Petronius' *Satyricon*.[70]

According to McHale's argument, the postmodern long poem (as well as the postmodern

novel) "returns to these obsolete and marginalized genres" to explore, not

---

[69] The phrase "acts of research" comes from Kate Greenstreet's "An Interview with Stephanie Strickland."
[70] Here we might consider long poems such as Fred D'Aguiar's *Bloodlines* (2001) and Thylias Moss' *Slave Moth* (2003) to expand McHale's model in new directions.

"epistemological questions," as was the case in modernist literature, but to raise "ontological ones" (4). So the dominant concerns of such postmodern texts are not "issues of perception, knowledge, reliability, etc." but rather issues of "fictionality, modes of being, [and] the nature and plurality of worlds" (4). While McHale's distinction has a great deal of heuristic force, it does not hold for these two texts under discussion which are resolutely concerned with epistemological questions (such as "What constitutes evidence of Underground Railroad activity?" and "How can I represent the feel of 'hard time'?"). Coultas' narrative-based poetry and Wright's essay "Stripe for Stripe," which precedes the long poem proper, are examples, in an extended sense, of what Antoinette Burton calls "archive stories," which are "narratives about how archives are created, drawn upon, and experienced by those who use them to write history" (6), narratives which help us recognize that "all archives are 'figured'" (6) and that "history is not merely a project of fact-retrieval…but also a set of complex processes of selection, interpretation, and even creative invention" (7-8). In the case of Coultas and Wright, the landscape and the prison constitute their archives.

The second important affinity between Coultas' and Wright's texts is that while they both heavily rely on the visual look of the page—what history of the book scholars call the *mise-en-page*—they also depart significantly from the modernist model of collage which is arguably the premier technique in modern art. According to David Antin, "For better or worse, 'modern' poetry in English has been committed to a principle of collage from the outset" (49). Similarly, collage continues to be the dominant model in understanding many of the experimental long poems of the late twentieth century. For example, Manina Jones' *That Art of Difference: 'Documentary-Collage' and English-*

Canadian Writing focuses on "[t]he central citational project of documentary-collage" in six Canadian long poems while Lynn Keller's *Forms of Expansion*, a study which sets out "to examine six quite different kinds of poems," considers four of them to be collage poems, implicitly recognizing collage as the technique *par excellence* in contemporary long poems (14). Thus, Sharon Doubiago's *Hard Country*, according to Keller, is in "the tradition of sprawling didactic cultural collage" (6), Susan Howe's "The Liberties" is a "non-narrative collage poem" (6), and Beverly Dahlen's *A Reading* and Rachel Blau Duplessis' *Drafts* extend the tradition of what Robert Duncan calls "*grand collage*" (qtd. in Keller 284). While collage is surely an important technique in a long tradition of poetic experimentalism—and many commentators have remarked on its critical ability to challenge traditional notions of "the poetic" by drawing on extra-literary material (such as Muriel Rukeyser's use of interview and trial transcripts in "The Book of the Dead"), to blur generic boundaries (as in the heterogeneous amalgam of materials in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*), to rupture the singular lyric voice with heteroglossia (as in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*), to unsettle the distinction between text and para-text thereby interrogating the authority of established discourses (as in Melvin Tolson's "Libretto for the Republic of Liberia"), to complicate issues of authorship (such as the incorporation of the "Cress" letters in William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*), and, more generally, to interrupt the absorptive dream of referentiality and impel the reader to constantly recalibrate his or her hermeneutic strategies—we should seek different critical paradigms to account for new extended forms that continue to challenge our current classifications. For example, Pound's use of the textual "slab" by Paul the Deacon, like other interpolated fragments in the *Cantos* (see fig15), foregrounds what the Russian formalist

We have already raised our stele to Musonius,
the man with the spade

Five, twenty two   發   fa¹⁻⁵

                      財   ts'ai²

29-   中   chung
                             as yung chung

VESPASIAN a. D. 69
        formó nuevos archivos
                BUT did not show good sense in Greece.

Said ANTONINUS:
        "Law rules the sea"
                meaning lex Rhodi
Daughter of a sun priest in Babylon
        told Philostratus to set down this record
                of TYana
τῶν ἑαυτοῦ παίδων ὑπὸ τοῖς θεοῖς
not particular about theoretical organizations

                      一
                      人

V. 35 worth attention
ἐπὶ νοῦν ἐλθὸν εἰρήσεται
εἰ τὴν ψυχὴν τὴν ἐμὴν ᾤκεις

659

Figure 15. Page scan from "Canto XCIV."

Viktor Shklovsky calls *faktura*, the materiality of the poem's surface. Thus Marjorie

Perloff can claim,

> Pound's basic strategy in the *Cantos* is to create a flat surface, as in a
>
> Cubist or early Dada collage, upon which verbal elements, fragmented
>
> images, and truncated bits of narrative, drawn from the most disparate
>
> contexts, are brought into collision...the referential process is not cut off
>
> but it is subordinated to a concern for sequential or spatial arrangement.
>
> (*The Poetics of Indeterminacy* 181-2)

Likewise, according to Charles Bernstein, the reason why Pound left

"quotations…untranslated … [was] because Pound was interested in an opaque texture

for the poem" (75). In his subordination of reference, Pound's recourse to the quiddity of

the material sign—his emphatic use of majuscules, his inclusion of Greek text and bold

Chinese ideograms—suggests the solidity and plenitude of the historical record, the new

records ("nuevos archivos") which are at our disposal to sort, digest, and rearrange. The

technique of collage, to gather "a mass of detail / to interrelate on a new ground / … /

pulling the disparate together to clarify / and compress" (Paterson 19), as Williams

described it in *Paterson*, is thus an apt means to handle the "volumes of reference" that

threaten to engulf the modern reader. This method relies on both the mass and

heterogeneity of the accumulated evidence—in Williams' case, letters, newspaper

excerpts, civic documents, and interviews—to create a "new ground" which is the

material poem itself. Such inclusion, along with the clarification and compression done

by the poet, should afford the reader with a more illuminated understanding of both a

people—Pound's "tale of the tribe"—and an era—Williams' "big, serious portrait of my

Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit

the windows here

whiten in increments

there is no emptiness

only a silence that does not go in reverse

I want to say I will be there   to collect your tears

after all, I am not Sister Prejean

no one here for urinating in public

tell me a woman's hand will moisten your lips

7 a.m., the white ladies already out on soul patrol
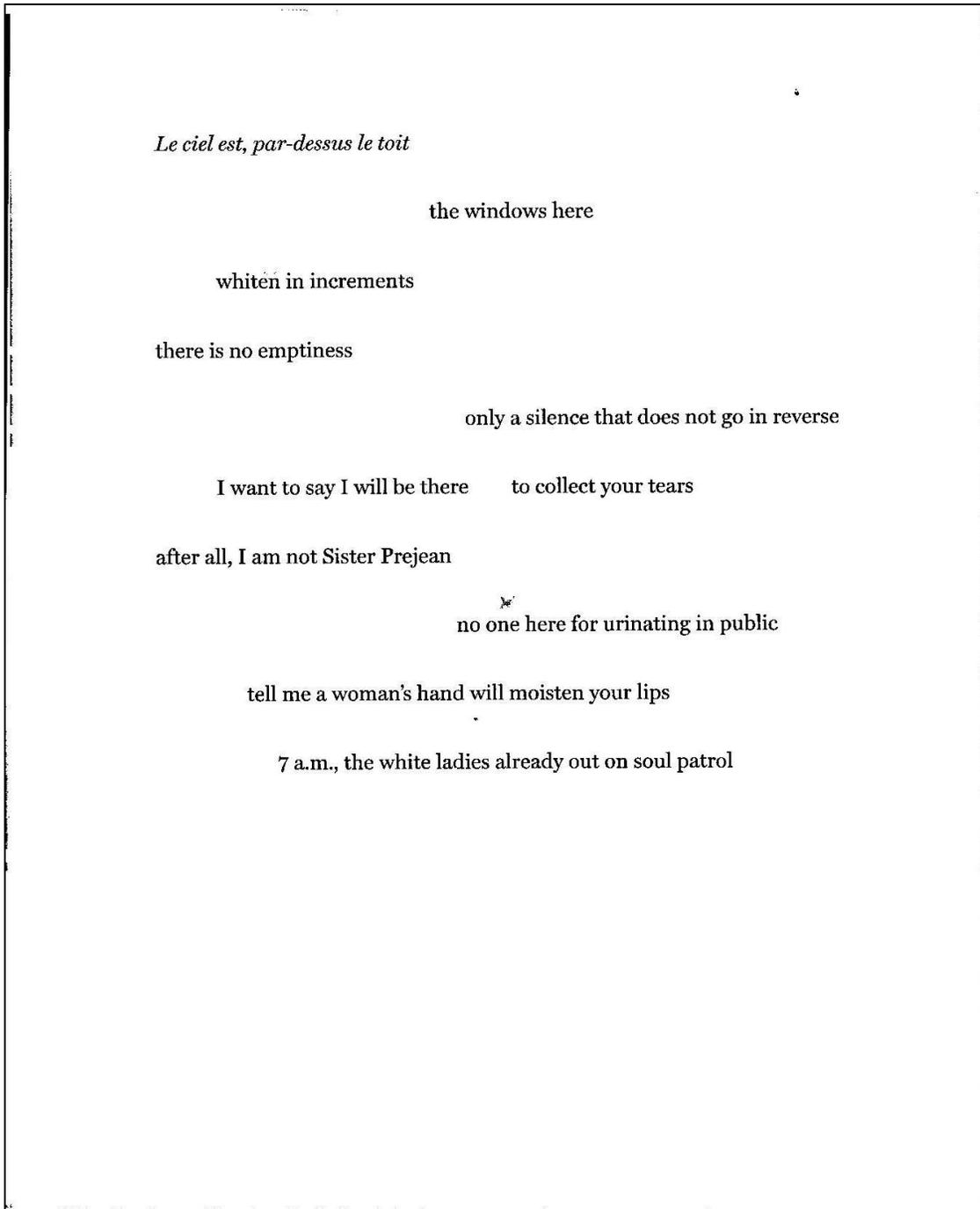
Figure 16. Page scan of *One Big Self.*

time" (*Selected Essays* 62)—and such "interrelation" utopically suggests a new ordering

of society. If we glance at a page from *One Big Self* (see fig 16), we notice that the

emphasis is not on the thickness or texture of the interpolated elements—as is the case

with Pound's page from "Canto XCIV" or even Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning*

(1912), that classic example of cubist collage. Rather, in Wright's passage, we sense a scarcity, a haunting "silence," as she says, "that does not go in reverse." In short, we experience not the solidity of what Donald Davie pejoratively calls the "blocks of dusty historical debris" contained in the *Cantos* but the echoic and precarious ephemerality of "[p]hrases saved like pieces of string" (*One Big Self* 68).

Coultas' "The Abolition Journal (or, Tracing the Earthworks of my County)" similarly utilizes the full field of the page (see fig 17) though, again, not to stage a collision of disparate textures or to emphasize the word as material object as is the case in the constructivist line of poetics that runs through the work of Pound, Williams, and Louis Zukofsky, but rather to emphasize the variability and contingency of historical evidence. Each statement about Lyles Station, the only remaining African-American settlement in Indiana, is anaphorically qualified by the subjunctive construction "I could write…" and the copious blank space in the middle of the page suggests both the elision of "left out" histories as well as a potential space to write new ones. In such a way, Coultas' technique is at once indebted to and a departure from that of Ed Sanders, the second generation Beat writer who was her teacher at The Naropa Institute in Boulder. While Sanders' manifesto *Investigative Poetry* (which he adapted from a 1975 lecture) insists "that historians should leave well-defined gaps in the text or in the presentation equal to the circumstances concerning which they have no knowledge: that is, their AREAS OF DARKNESS," the desideratum, nevertheless, is "to bring the Darkness / the

Of Lyles Station in 1849
I could certainly write "the best cantaloupes in these sandy bot-
    toms," and
"the first African Methodist Episcopal church."
I could write "a station existed run by a freeman Thomas Cole."

I could write "these nearby whites
David Stormont
John Caithers
David Hull
assisted passengers."

I could write, "the author of *Lyles Station Yesterday and Today* asks
why this history has been left out of the textbooks."

28

Figure 17. Page scan of "The Abolition Journal."

'hard Sophoclean light'" (27).[71] Furthermore, with his Olsonian penchant for "high

energy verse grids," "data clusters," and "thick vector clustors [sic] of vector clustors

[sic] of / Gnosis" and the use of "flow charts," "pictographs," and "mandala-like lyric-

wheels"—his two volume *America: A History in Verse*, which is densely saturated with

lists, statistics, and images, is a case in point—it is not surprising that he believes "an

Investigative poet of any worth at all will have to become as skilled a collagist as the

early Braque" (10). Moreover, the overall goal of Sanders' investigative poetics, which

combines elements from Pound's imagist project of condensation (the linking of

Dichtung with *Verdichtung*), Olson's kinetically-driven projective verse, and Allen

Ginsberg's declamatory bravura, is to redact the sprawling breadth of history into an

illuminating poetic form in a Poundian belief that the "book shd. be a ball of light in

one's hand" (*Guide to Kulchur* 55).[72] Such an approach which favors both speed and

compression would ostensibly allay what Sanders calls, in reference to the *Iliad*, "the

catalogue of ships problem" or "data-midden boredom," a perennial problem for both

writers and readers of long poems. In the second section of his manifesto, "Techniques

---

[71] Since Sanders' influential manifesto, various permutations of the rubric "investigative poetry"—from what Paul Naylor calls "contemporary investigative poetry" to Kristin Prevallet's elaboration of a "relational investigative poetics"—have emerged to describe a species of poetry that sensitively describes and accounts for various historical events and processes, and poets, such as C.D. Wright, have deliberately imagined their projects to be investigations. For Naylor, poets Susan Howe, Nathaniel Mackey, Lyn Hejinian, Kamau Brathwaite and M. Nourbese Philip "investigate disparate language-games in order to produce new poetic forms…[to write] history poetically" (10). For Prevallet, who synthesizes the work of Olson, Sanders, and Édouard Glissant, the poetry of younger writers such as Ammiel Alcalay and Deborah Richards "develop[s] rhizomatically along Synchronic/Investigative/ Relational root systems" to examine history and knowledge in dynamic, non-hierarchical ways. Susan Howe likens her poetry to "a search by an investigator for the point where the crime began" (qtd. in Beckett 21). According to Claudia Rankine, author of the long poem *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004), a hybrid work which mixes autobiographical prose with photographs and diagrams, "I need to come up with a form that accommodates an investigative poetics. For instance, the introduction of images in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* was an attempt to acknowledge a total experience of being – to involve as many of our senses as possible" (qtd. in Flescher and Caspar).

[72] Because "you could easily spend a hundred years / researching" among "tall stacks of information," Sanders invokes the muses "Retentia: Muse of the Retained Image," "Sequentia: Muse of the Array & the Sequence," and "Condensare: Muse of Distillations & Essence" (*America: A History in Verse* 10).

of investigative poetry," Sanders recounts a similar strategy (suggested to him by Ginsberg) that involves placing on the "top and bottom of each page," a "sort of…ticker tape to run to tell what significant info is in the sandwiched page."[73]

Coultas' page, on the other hand, "sandwiches" a historical blind spot, "an area of darkness" rather than a conglomeration of data, and as a text composed and published in the years of the post-9/11 news crawl, it casts suspicion on rapidly delivered bites of information. On the morning of September 11, 2001, several news channels including Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC started using a scrolling news ticker (which has become known as the "crawl") to deliver breaking news regarding the 9/11 attacks. In December 2008, CNN discontinued the crawl in favor of a "cleaner screen" which, according to a *New York Times* article, represents "a tacit rejection of the information overload that has typified television news for much of this decade" (Stelter). It is my contention that "The Abolition Journal" engages with "the information overload" of contemporary media culture by relying on a critical minimalism. The purpose of "The Abolition Journal (or, Tracing the Earthworks of my County)" is not to describe history à la Sanders but to interrogate the historiographic processes that make history legible. In the minimally presented page above, there is a significant progression from fragmented nouns modified by both qualitative and quantitative adjectives ("the best cantaloupes," "the first African Methodist Episcopal Church") to past tense substantive and transitive verbs regarding historical events ("a station existed," "whites…assisted passengers") to a declarative that links present inquiry ("the author...asks") to previous historiographic elisions ("this

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[73] Like "Wichita Vortex Sutra," a long poem which Allen Ginsberg calls "Headline language poetry," much archival and documentary poetry of the twentieth century is obsessed with brevity and speed (400). According to William Carlos Williams, "The epic poem would be our 'newspaper'…It must be a concise sharpshooting epic style. Machine gun style. Facts, facts, facts, tearing into us to blast away our stinking flesh of news" (qtd. in Kadlec 325).

history has been left out"). Lyles Station of 1849 thus emerges as a site constructed by

partial and provisional citations—better yet, it is understood here as what Michel

Foucault would call a "discursive formation," a dispersion of possible statements which

depend on the archive for their very formation and transformation. For Foucault (see

chapter two), the archive is irreducible to neither a repository of past traces nor the

boundless potentiality of language but rather constitutes a practice. Foucault's

redefinition of the archive—which goes beyond a traditional understanding of an archive

as a collection of original records left behind by a governmental entity, organization, or

person—is crucial in understanding how the works of Coultas and Wright depart from

what Thomas J. Nelson (following historian Steven Conn) calls the "object-based

epistemology" of the "archival long poem." According to Nelson, such an epistemology,

which can be found in the work of Olson as well as the Poundian tradition of the

twentieth-century long poem, assumes that "[m]eaning can be abstracted directly from

the objects" and privileges a knowledge that emerges from the collection and

arrangement of objects and documents into "meaningful patterns" (128). On the other

hand, both Coultas and Wright are interested in the archive not as a "corpus" or source

from which primary documents can be gathered (like Olson's use of Stephen Higginson's

eighteenth century letters in *The Maximus Poems* or Sanders' presentation of his own FBI

file in *1968: A History in Verse*) but as a poetic practice.

Tracing the Ruins of the Ohio Valley

> Archaeology is all about absences, about writing around what is
> obstinately not there—which is why archaeology should be poetic.

—Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology*

While a number of important studies on the underground railroad have emerged in recent years including Keith P. Griffler's *Frontline of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (2004) and Fergus M. Bordewich's *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* (2005), Coultas' long poem "The Abolition Journal (or, Tracing the Earthworks of my County)" attempts not to provide a detailed or comprehensive history of the grassroots network but rather to give an account of the poet-researcher confronting what Walter Benjamin calls "the events of history [which have] shrivel[ed] up and become absorbed into the setting" (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 179). Like C.D. Wright's *One Big Self*, Coultas' text is a work of docu-poetics that is based on investigative field work: Coultas, currently a New York-based poet, traveled to Indiana to research the traces of the underground railroad at the border of Spencer County (her home county) and Daviess County, Kentucky, which, according to the book's opening acknowledgements, "is a relatively undocumented field where the remaining sites of underground railroad activity are still largely unprotected from further destruction" (*The Marvelous Bones of Time* 4).

What one expects after reading this para-textual introduction is, in fact, *documentation* of the remaining sites in the manner of Coultas' first book, *A Handmade Museum*, her debut collection which chronicles the waning sidewalk culture—particularly the dumpster-diving, street peddling, and circulation of discarded objects—of New York City's historic Bowery district before the single room occupancy hotels and soup kitchens gave way to luxury condominiums, NYU dorms, and specialty supermarkets (such as the

Whole Foods complex which now stretches from The Bowery to Chrystie Street along the south side of Houston Street). Coultas' careful descriptions of garbage accompanied with the date and location suggest a link between her site-specific poetry and the archival principles of originating context and provenance:

> Two matching sofas with TV resting on seat. A day later, TV on sidewalk between them and only the wooden skeletons of couches remain. (OCTOBER 30, 2001, 1ST ST. & 2ND AVE.)

> Later man with bed roll sleeping by wooden skeletons and then two days later, a man sleeping inside them with his shopping cart beside him, TV, screen cracked on ground. Shell removed. (NOVEMBER 8, 2001) (32)

What is at stake here is not the individual object per se but the activity of the larger body called "the Bowery" which deposited (and altered) the items. According to T.R. Schellenberg, the archivist "does not take an individual item, such as a letter, a report, or some other document, and say[s] that it has value…he judges the value of the item in relation to other items…his effort is to preserve evidence on how organic bodies functioned" (21). Thus, Coultas' poetry becomes most compelling when we consider not "the thing itself" (that modernist bugbear)—such as the cracked television screen on the ground—but the shifting relations between the scene's elements (note the emphasis on prepositions such as "between," "with," "by," "inside," and "beside") and the intervals in which time has elapsed (note the repetition of "later").[74] Within these relations and intervals we poignantly register the scarcity of shelter as the sofa is stripped down to its

---

[74] We might compare Coultas' descriptions with William Carlos Williams' brief poem "Between Walls," which, despite its focus on "betweenness," tends to concentrate on the imagist value of the broken glass: "the back wings / of the // hospital where / nothing // will grow lie / cinders // in which shine / the broken // pieces of a green / bottle" (453).

frame, eventually becoming a kind of skeletal tent. In contradistinction, the assemblages

cobbled out of found objects in "Unmonumental," the inaugural exhibit of The New

Museum which opened on the Bowery in 2007, are displayed as discrete objects in a

collection which emphasizes the different functions of the archive and the museum.[75]

Take, for example, Jim Lambie's "Split Endz" (see fig 18), which appears to mimic the

spontaneously gathered accumulations that Coultas' prose poems document—the belts,

shoes, and perforated wardrobes of Lambie's sculpture seem so much like discarded

items one could have found just meters away on the street. In many ways, Coultas'

Figure 18.
Jim Lambie, *Split Endz (wig mix)*, 2005
<http://www.newmuseum.org/assets/images/exhibitions/00000004/Split-Endz-_wig-mix_-HQ8-JL4644S.jpg>

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[75] Joey Arak, writing for the real estate blog *Curbed.com*, calls the New Museum "the biggest symbol of the Bowery 2.0" ("Bowery Will Have Sunshine for a Little While Longer").

"Bowery Project" anticipated the New Museum's simulacra of the old neighborhood—

the $50 million museum as skid-row theme park. If a sculpture such as Lambie's

"incorporate[s] pieces of the situation it describes" as Laura Hoptman claims, then

Coultas' poem attempts to archive the larger social matrix—the Bowery as "organic

body"—in which these pieces have circulated (138).

Yet, turning to the first poem of "The Abolition Journal (or, Tracing the

Earthworks of my County)," we find, not the density of urban materiality, but a lack of

hard evidence. The opening section begins:

> I found pathways and markers but none led directly north
> I could walk and find an arrowhead or spear point
> I could walk after the plowing and find flints
> I knew someone, an ironworker, who could point out burial and village
>   sites in the river bottoms
>
> These things can be proven with stone
>
> I could follow these paths and find car bodies and dump sites
> deer bones and garbage
>
> I could mow a new path; still, it would not be evidence
> Even if the tobacco leaves all pointed north, it would not be evidence. (15)

This opening, with its references to paths and pathways, subtlety echoes the beginning of

Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead," a groundbreaking documentary poem from

the 30s, which begins "These are roads to take when you think of your country."

Rukeyser's poem continues, "Now the photographer unpacks camera and case, /

surveying the deep country, follows discovery / viewing on groundglass an inverted

image" (*Out of Silence* 10). This suggests a deep trust in the technologies of the archive,

that the lens of the documentary camera can unveil the false consciousness of ideology,

which, as Marx famously suggested, turns men and their circumstances upside-down as if

in a *camera obscura*. Yet, Coultas' poem yields no such "discovery" and throws into

question her entire documentary project. While Ed Sanders' back cover blurb

hyperbolically claims, "This is a revelatory book," there are no obvious revelations here.

On the contrary, Coultas presents us with a seemingly intractable archaeological scene, a

place which Pearson and Shanks liken to a scene of a crime, a place where there is "a

surplus and a simultaneous dearth of meaning." In fact, this difficulty that confronts the

researcher—which approaches what Vladimir Nabokov has memorably called

"referential mania" (surely a precursor to Derrida's "archive fever")—is transferred to the

reader, for it is now unclear what Coultas' objective really is (Nabokov 1166).[76] And, as

is the case with Pearson and Shanks' model archaeologist/investigator, "[a]nything"—

from the title to the acknowledgements to the epigraph—"might be significant" (61).

On closer inspection, the very title of Coultas' work sits uneasily with her

preceding acknowledgment; not only do we expect *documentation* of underground

railroad sites but we expect an impulse toward *preservation*—such sites are, after all,

"largely unprotected from further destruction." To begin, "earthwork" is a multivalent

term that traverses a number of disciplinary fields and a careful parsing of its meanings

will better define Coultas' complex and seemingly contradictory project. In regards to

engineering, an earthwork is the "action or process of excavating (the bed of a canal, line

of a railway, or other civil engineering work)" ("Earthwork, n."). Thus, in this context,

the term "earthworks" extends the (admittedly misconstrued) metaphor of the railroad as

it references the secret activities that make the "railway" possible. In archaeological

terms, "earthworks" refer to ancient structures such as henges or burial mounds (such as

---

[76] Nabokov's short story "Signs and Symbols" (1958) describes a curious boy who believes that "everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence" (1166) so that "[t]he very air he exhales is indexed and filed away" (1167).

Stonehenge, the Nazca Lines in Peru, or the Newark Earthworks in Ohio constructed by

the Hopewell civilization), and Coultas' poem indeed makes reference to burial sites, and

the title and subtitle of her book suggest an "excavation" of the "bones of time." In an art

historical context, however, it is a term that refers to an informal movement (which is

also known as "land art"), inspired by Conceptual art, that emerged in the late 60s and

70s that, in using land and the natural environment as the very medium, unmoored the

work of art from the physical confines of the museum. Among classic examples are

Figure 19.
Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*, 1969
240,000-ton displacement of rhyolite and sandstone, 1500 x 50 x 30 ft.
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles Gift of Virginia Dwan

Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" (1970), a massive rock projection that extends into the

Great Salt Lake in Utah, and Michael Heizer's "Double Negative" (1969) (fig 19) which

presents absence or negative space in two enormous rectangular trenches cut into the

edge of a mesa near Overton, Nevada.[77] Earthworks, like the related institutional critique

movement of the 70s, challenge both the gallery/museum as a neatly packaged collection

of commodities as well as the monument as a technology of public memory.

The monument enshrines the past and, in its visual salience and accessibility,

suggests a message that is at once immediately intelligible and enduring. According to

Henri Lefebvre, the monument

> says what it wishes to say—yet it hides a good deal more…[it] mask[s] the
>
> will to power and the arbitrariness of power beneath signs and surfaces
>
> which claim to express collective will and collective thought. In the
>
> process, such signs and surfaces also manage to conjure away both
>
> possibility and time.[78] (143)

As they are located in remote locations, "Spiral Jetty" and "Double Negative" require

mediating documentation (descriptions, photographs, film) to make the works accessible

to those who don't experience them *in situ* and, furthermore, are constructed laterally on

such a large scale that it is impossible for even an on-site viewer to grasp them as static

totalities. Their deliberate susceptibility to entropy make both "possibility and time" a

central part of the work. One might say that such earthworks monumentalize time itself

(as opposed to some hypostasized concept such as "liberty" in the Statue of Liberty).

"Spiral Jetty," indeed, was submerged for three decades, slipping into public

forgetfulness until its resurfacing in 2002, a process which attests to Smithson's

ambitious attempt to insert "forgetfulness and the archiviolithic into the heart of the

monument" (*Archive Fever* 12).

[77] Surely Michael Arad's "Reflecting Absence," a design selected in 2004 by the Lower Manhattan Development Corp. to be the 9/11 memorial, is indebted to Heizer's work.
[78] One can productively read Elizabeth Bishop's "The Monument" alongside this Lefebvre passage.

Africa, in the river bottoms, north bank, washed away. No evi-
dence, barely written down. I asked if this was a settlement of
freed people? The librarian can tell me
nothing   only the name remains.

Emancipation Day observed on September 22 in the twentieth
century.

51

Figure 20. Page scan of "The Abolition Journal"

Reading "The Abolition Journal" in the context of earthworks' institutional

critique troubles the implicit call for preservation in the book's acknowledgments since

Smithson's and Heizer's earthworks depend so much upon a willful openness to entropy.

Yet such a context helps us understand Coultas' implicit critiques of institutionalized

forms of memory. Toward the end of the poem she presents us with an image of absence

in the manner of "Double Negative" (see fig 20) to emphasize the paucity of archival

evidence ("The librarian can tell me / nothing") and the erosion of material evidence into

the landscape ("north bank / washed away"). The huge gap of blank space in the middle

of the page is crucial as it implicitly critiques the inadequacies of both the library and the

celebration (in this case, Emancipation Day) as instruments of remembering (here we can

understand the celebration as a monument in time). It suggests simultaneously the

lacunae in the historical record as well as a subjunctive space, the *could*-ness of space, for

the writing of other histories, for practicing journal writing (the poem, after all, is framed

as an "Abolition *Journal*") that, in its everyday diurnality, offers greater possibilities of

tracing memories than the annual memorial celebration.[79]

Such a critique also sheds light on the poem's curious epigraph, which is a site of

a series of repressions that the reader is meant to explore and excavate:

> "The Iroquois called the river 'Ohio' and the
> name was later translated by the French as 'the
> Beautiful—La Belle Riviere.' Not a beautiful
> river, mind you, but the beautiful, with no fear
> that it might be confused with any other."
>
> —OHIO RIVER MUSEUM WEB SITE,
> MARIETTA, OHIO

Figure 21. Page scan of *The Marvelous Bones of Time*.

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[79] We might compare this critique to Philip's statement, "I have always felt a bit discomforted by the whole notion of emancipation celebrations or 'markings.' While I think on the one hand that it is important to mark these events, on the other hand, when you deconstruct this type of activity and question what it is we are, in fact, commemorating you realize that it has more to do with Europeans finally…" (qtd. in Sanders, "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive" 67).

We are immediately confronted with some confusions and anomalies: why is a poem that

is ostensibly about Spencer County, Indiana referring to Marietta, Ohio? And why is the

epigraph enclosed in quotation marks? While in the French tradition, "the *epigraph may*

be printed within quotation marks, in italics, or in roman type," English guides to style

indicate that epigraphs should be presented without them (Genette 152; cf. "Quotations

and Dialogue"). If we access the museum's web site, we realize that this is a citation of a

citation, an unattributed epigraph that the Ohio River Museum uses to precede its mission

statement: "Marietta, Ohio is proud of its riverboat heritage and at the Ohio River

Museum visitors can discover the golden age of the steamboat, and learn more about the

ecology of the Ohio River system" ("Ohio River Museum.")[80] Coultas' poem thus

presents itself as a counter-museum—like the "Handmade Museum" of her first book—

which acknowledges that beneath this idyllic monument to the steamboat lies a contested

site, what Keith Griffler calls "a river of freedom and of slavery…[that] both divided and

connected a nation" (1). Yet the Ohio River Museum quite literally represses the source

of the quotation, which comes from R.E. Banta's *The Ohio* (1949), a volume from

Hervey Allen and Carl Carmer's *Rivers of America* series. Once we identify the source

of the quote and return it to its originating context, we learn that the French translation of

"Ohio" as "The Beautiful" is, in fact, a dubious one: "The French may have been

mistaken as to the exact meaning of the Iroquois word; linguists—possibly no better

qualified as translators than were the early French—have preferred 'The Great' or 'The

White' or 'The Sparkling.'" In his characteristically smug and judgmental tone, Banta

continues by rhapsodizing on the beauties of the river's waters (the "smooth-flowing

---

[80] Coultas' epigraph, though, replaces the double quotes around "Ohio" and "the Beautiful—La Belle Riviere" with single quotes.

water the color of burnished copper," "the jade green of low winter water," etc.) before

concluding, "those sights should convince even scholars of linguistics that 'Ohio' must

mean 'The Beautiful,' no matter what the apparent connotation of the Iroquois noun" (8).

We might then understand the museum's significant elision of the source text as a

disavowal of Banta's overenthusiastic approval of overwriting the original Iroquois name

while, at the same time, the museum trades upon the very concept of "beauty" that the

overwriting makes possible. But there is more—later in *The Ohio*, Banta criticizes the

community of Marietta for being negligent in maintaining its cultural heritage: "While

Marietta has always exhibited an immense interest in its past, that interest was not quite

strong enough to influence the convenience of the moment, so that few historic sites

remain in their original state" (38). We might finally see the museum's sloppy textual

appropriation as symptomatic of Marietta's self-serving and selective memory which is

chastised by the very text that the museum cites.

Coultas' intention, however, seems less about poking fun at provincial institutions

or even exploring "her county" of Spencer, Indiana, as the title suggests, but rather about

highlighting the difference between "the Ohio" as a physical location and "the Ohio" as a

discursive formation and the ways in which discursive practices articulate and transform

material domains to serve particular cultural and ideological purposes. Ultimately, the

poem is a "rescue archaeology" of the Ohio River Valley which attempts to recover and

"return dignity" (to use a phrase by M. NourbeSe Philip) to that which was overwritten

and supplanted by powerful interests—hence Coultas' chiding of Peabody Coal (the

world's largest private-sector coal company) which "chomped-up" the site of an

"abolitionist's farm" (25). Hence, her situating the very name "Ohio" within a wider,

trans-cultural and trans-linguistic matrix:

> Of this name Iroquois is not the only one   the Shawnee said
> Kis-ke-ba-la-se-pe (Eagle river)
> Wyandottes said O-he-zuh-yean-de-wa,
> Delawares said "Pal-a-wa-the-pec"
> Each nation giving its own name. (50)

Again, the fact that the word "Pal-a-wa-the-pec" is isolated within quotation marks while

the word O-he-zuh-yean-de-wa, which occurs just a line above, is not indicates not a

sloppiness or inconsistency on Coultas' part but a vigilant awareness of issues of

attribution and provenance.

"Here's a document"

In a review of Coultas' *A Handmade Museum*, the poet-critic Stephen Burt

criticizes Coultas' book for an apparent lack of craft:

> Such writing displays sincerity, close observation, and a defiant refusal to
>
> organize, a refusal so dramatic and well-intentioned that Coultas wants it
>
> to do the work of organization: "Thought it would come out in the writing
>
> like dreams or nightmares, it would manifest and that writing it all down
>
> was important if just to say here's a document." (Though that passage
>
> concerns September 11, it also describes Coultas's project as a whole.)
>
> Yet there is all the difference in the world between an apparent refusal to
>
> organize…and an actual lack of organization. When prose poems, or
>
> poetic essays, say so insistently "Here are things I really observed," it
>
> seems uncharitable and undemocratic to answer, "These things are

certainly interesting, but your linguistic choices have not made them more

so." ("Their Kind of Town")

Such criticism could well be applied to "The Abolition Journal" as well. Through an

apophatic sleight-of-hand ("it seems uncharitable and undemocratic to answer"), Burt

charitably attempts to shield himself from such uncharitability. Nevertheless, he very

much intends to critique Coultas' poetry for both structural defect and linguistic banality.

In short, Coultas is privileging content at the expense of form. Yet Burt's desire for

organization makes him miss the point that Coultas' poems precisely challenge what

Nelson calls the "meaningful patterns" of "an object-based epistemology."

    If Pound's poetics entails an assumption that the "Evidence" could speak for itself

if arranged in novel, ideogrammatic ways, then it follows that the presentation of

documentary material should adhere to a kind of Imagist doctrine; there should be a

"direct presentation of the thing." In other words, Pound presents much quoted material

in the *Cantos* (fig 15) as if it constituted a self-testifying "slab of record" like the "blocks

of historical debris" that so offended Donald Davie. Coultas, on the other hand,

highlights the spectacular lack of evidence. And when she does present evidence, such as

the epigraph from the Ohio River Museum Website, she frames the evidence, through the

use of quotation marks, as suspect. In a section of "The Abolition Journal" called "A

Postcard," which describes an archival document, Coultas noticeably refracts all

information regarding the document through her own subjectivity:

<div align="center">A POSTCARD</div>

The reverse side is inscribed "abolitionist." I know this to be true as I have

read her mighty speeches, and I know she is a woman, too. This occurred

in Indiana where she had to bare her breasts. I never doubted her, and

when she said, "Ain't I a woman, too?" I said "Yes," from this place in

which I write, and in which she once lived, and there exists a library

named for her and as always, we are near a river. (38)

If Mark Nowak, who was discussed at length in the previous chapter, speaks of "a

continuum [in documentary poetics] from the first person auto-ethnographic mode of

inscription to a more objective third person documentarian tendency," then Coultas is

clearly privileging the first person mode. She could have easily performed a more

"objective" (and Poundian) presentation of the document simply by inserting into the

book a facsimile image of the postcard (just as Anna Rabinowitz, who will be discussed

in the next chapter, includes facsimiles of letters and photographs in her book-length

poem). Yet she is interested not in the archive in itself or its contents (Pound's "nuevos

archivos") but what Burton calls "archive stories"—narratives of how the archive

intersects with human use. In other words, if Pound quotes the Deacon's *Migne's

Patrologia* with the illocutionary intention of saying, "Here's a document," then Coultas

points at her own writing and says, "Here's a document." It is the difference between

indexicality and self-reflexivity. In the former, authority and authenticity is grounded on

a supposedly objective archive; in the latter, all documentation is considered figured and

the result of invention.

"To be Handled and Studied": Deborah Luster's Loose Archive

> The small 5" x 4" photographs in the exhibition are printed in creamy
> tones on prepared black aluminum plates and are shown here both framed
> for formal viewing and loosely archived in the drawers of a heavy steel
> cabinet where they are available to be handled and studied.

—Jack Shaiman Gallery, "One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana," New York, NY, 2004

Wright's poem *One Big Self* was the product of collaboration with the photographer Deborah Luster, and I would like to discuss Luster's work as a way to contextualize Wright's specific concerns and to ultimately argue that Wright's poem is most effective when separated from its original collaborative matrix. The exhibition of Luster's "One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana" is especially configured to make its displaced information physically present (to paraphrase Hal Foster again) as her tactile tintypes are meant to be released from the heavy steel cabinet (see fig 22) which so dramatically represents their archival condition—a state of being which, as Derrida reminds us, takes place under "house arrest" (*Archive Fever* 2). Luster's photographs allow her photographic subjects "to be seen," as Wright says in "Stripe for Stripe," "in their larger selves" (xiv) rather than as criminals territorialized within Sekula's subordinate "shadow domain" ("The Body and the Archive" 10). In this sense, the tintype, a popular nineteenth-century form which is created as a direct positive on a treated sheet of metal, is an apt choice for this project. According to Steven Kasher, who curated the recent show "America and the Tintype" at the International Center of Photography in New York, "the tintype studio became a space for performance, where sitters could express and re-constitute their personal identities. Often they brought the people and things that would allow them to assert how they saw themselves, or that enabled them to re-imagine themselves in a different light."[81] Luster's documentary project afforded the prisoners exactly this "space for performance" so that they could momentarily resist the discursive and representational violence done to their identities by

---

[81] See the press release of the show which ran from September 19, 2008 to January 4, 2009: <http://www.icp.org/sites/default/files/exhibition_pdfs/TINTYPE_PRESS.PDF>.

Figure 22. Deborah Luster *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*, 1998-2002; photograph; silver emulsion on 288 aluminum plates, steel cabinet, and lamp, various dimensions; Collection SFMOMA. <http://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/109335#> (accessed 31 March 2009). According to Allan Sekula's "The Body and the Archive, "Developments in late nineteenth century criminology integrated the camera into "a bureaucratic-clerical-statistical system of 'intelligence'" (Sekula calls it "a sophisticated form of the archive") whose "central artifact" is "the filing cabinet." In contrast, one might understand Luster's cabinet as part of an ethical-aesthetic-documentary system of pedagogy and activism.

a penal apparatus which bureaucratically reduces them to mere numbers within the

Department of Correction's Inmate Classification System. "The tintype," says Kasher,

"was a great promoter of multiple identities and [provided] a sense of liberation from the

prison of the proscribed role" (96). Luster's project, then, attempts to disentangle literal

from discursive imprisonment and, in so doing, liberate the Louisiana inmates from the

roles assigned to them by the prison-industrial complex. Thus, among her striking

portraits, we witness a wide range of performative tableaus that include a variety of

costumes and props suggesting numerous roles besides that of "the prisoner": we witness a woman posing unironically, almost tenderly, with a stuffed bunny; we see a man proudly displaying championship boxing belts; we see a man shrouded hopefully (or is it resignedly?) in an American flag (as if the fabric were acting as both a ceremonial cloak as well as a straightjacket), reminding us of the dialectical tension between the stigmatizing stripes associated with prison uniforms and the freedom-evoking stripes of

Figure 23. Image from "One Big Self: Finding the Noble Vernacular," an article by Martin Earl from *Harriet*, the blog of the Poetry Foundation, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2009/04/one-big-self-finding-the-noble-vernacular-cd-wright-deborah-luster/> (accessed 21 April 2011).

Old Glory (see fig 23); we see a field worker deferentially placing his straw hat over his

chest; we see a woman clad in a white chef's hat and coat; we see only the protruding

forearm of an inmate on which is tattooed the face of a woman; we see an extended hand

holding a small portrait of a boy (the inmate's son), a gesture which re-asserts the

inmate's connections and affiliations to the free world.

If as, Allan Sekula claims, "in serving to introduce the panoptic principle into

daily life, photography welded the honorific and repressive functions together," then

Luster's "One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana" attempts to recuperate the honorific

function of the photograph by ethically bearing witness to men and women serving hard

time under notoriously repressive conditions (10). While such a project may seem

voyeuristic, as a romanticizing and unabashed aestheticization of the socially marginal,

one might consider the cultural work of the contemporary mug shot as an instructive

comparison. (Indeed, Wright's poem quotes an unnamed inmate on the repressive

functions of photography: "My mug shot totally turned me against being photographed")

(7). Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County, Arizona, the self-styled "America's Toughest

Figure 24. Screen shot detail of Sheriff Joe Arpaio's website. <http://mcso.org/Mugshot/> (accessed 24 April 2011).

Sheriff," has created a new webpage that features booking photos of pre-trial inmates who are forcefully and mockingly proscribed the roles of social deviants and delinquents. "Numerous people are booked into our jails each day," says the site, "Vote for the mug shot you like best then see if your choice makes mug shot of the day tomorrow! You can change your mind as often as you like but your final vote will be the only one cast. Tell us what you think!"[82] A kind of interactive version of the reality show *COPS*, Arpaio's site trades upon a late-capitalist logic of consumer choice and feedback while consolidating the socio-economic differences between the "normal" voyeurs/voters and the stigmatized and often mentally-ill populations which are the objects of both police control and public delectation and ridicule; this "public service" of visual entertainment and interactivity seems to tacitly justify the public resources spent on law enforcement and immigration control.[83]

     That Arpaio's "Mug Shot of the Day" website is so exploitatively spectacular in its use of the internet's scopophilic machinery, one might be inclined to question and re-evaluate the epistemic shift that Foucault famously described in his influential study *Discipline and Punish*. In discussing eighteenth-century public displays of torture and execution, Foucault says,

> [b]y the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the gloomy festival of punishment was dying out…Punishment, then, will become the most hidden part of the penal process…it leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness;

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[82] <http://mcso.org/Mugshot/> (accessed 21 April 2011).
[83] According to journalist J.J. Hensley, "more than 25 percent of the inmates in Maricopa County admit to being diagnosed with mental illness."

> its effectiveness is seen as a resulting from its inevitability, not from its
> visible intensity. (8-9)

Sheriff Arpaio is at once extending the concept of punishment, which is usually associated with post-trial sentencing, to pre-trial inmates through the shaming capacities of his website as well as returning such punishment into the domain of "everyday perception" (the internet, after all, constitutes for its users a digital or virtual "everyday" in its mediation of information and social relations). In other words, Arpaio's site is so popular (it attracted 135, 000 hits in its first four days of existence) precisely because of the "visible intensity" of its representations of social deviancy. Yet rather than understanding Arizona's new policing techniques as a simple regression from Foucault's carceral and disciplinary culture to an antiquated culture of theatrical punishment and perverse festival, Maricopa County's publicized mug shots might be more productively seen as an example of spectacle (in the Debordian sense) being mobilized for the sake of surveillance (in the Foucauldian sense).[84] It is a way of enlisting and incorporating the entire community (through a populist appeal to vigilante justice) into a postmodern Panopticon; Arpaio said of his website, "I want people to turn to see if their neighbor's been arrested" (qtd. in Dwyer). Foucault defined the Panopticon as "a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole" (207). In this case, such supervision is abetted by both the voyeuristic consumption of images and the pseudo-democratic lure of free choice and individual preference ("Vote for the mug shot you like best then see if your choice makes mug shot of the day tomorrow").

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[84] Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, which was published several years after Guy DeBord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, memorably and underhandedly critiques DeBord's master term: "Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance" (217). I understand "spectacle" and "surveillance" as not mutually exclusive but as different and sometimes intertwining modalities within a late-capitalist system.

Rather than emphasizing the role of people as panoptic supervisors, Luster's art project

bids people to imagine themselves as similarly caught up in a visual field of surveillance.

The visitors to her exhibition at SFMOMA were both viewers as well as objects on view;

Luster had installed a security camera, initially in response to concern about the safety of

her removable tintypes, but, ultimately, in order to film "a video piece of people who

have stolen…[the] prisoners" (see fig 25). At the end of his chapter on Panopticism,

Foucault asks, "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks,

hospitals, which all resemble prisons" (228)? With "One Big Self: Prisoners of

Louisiana," Luster adds the museum and archive to this list; in a video interview for

SFMOMA, she says, she wanted the exhibition to be "cold …and to be like an archive

but also like a prison" ("Deborah Luster Speaks on Her Accidental Performance Work").

Figure 25. Video still of "One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana,"
<http://www.sfmoma.org/multimedia/videos/284> (accessed 24 April 2011).
Note the positioning and vigilance of the museum guard.

If Luster's art is most effective and sophisticated—and I think it is—within the institutionalized space of the performative installation, which allows for several layers of specularity, what do we make of her book project which also presents the work of National Book Critics Circle Award-winning writer C.D. Wright? And what do we make of the fact that Wright's text was subsequently published without Luster's images as a self-contained long poem? Generically, *One Big Self*, as a collaborative work, may be most legible within an American tradition of photo-documentary works which include Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) and James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Yet, as Smaro Kamboureli notes in *On the Edge of Genre*, the contemporary long poem, itself, is an unstable genre, a generic hybrid, and *One Big Self* is no exception. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore how Wright's poem draws on multiple genres to enact socio-political critiques that are not available solely through the art of photography. I will argue that *One Big Self* acts as an *archive of genre* as it draws on various and seemingly conflicting sub-genres such as the travel narrative, epistolary writing, and prison writing—all of which have considerably less prestige than the epic, which has, throughout literary history, cast a dominating shadow on the long poem from Homer to Pound. If Wright bids us to take seriously large segments of our population that have been severed from free life, she is also suggesting that we take seriously supposedly "minor" or "inferior" genres—Paul Fussell, for example, has suggested that travel writing attracts "second-rate talents"—in the service of a postmodernism of resistance (212).

"All roads are turning into prison roads": Genre in C.D. Wright's *One Big Self*

What kind of book is *One Big Self*? To answer that question, one would first need

to recognize that *One Big Self* is actually *two* quite different books that share the same

Library of Congress call number.[85] The first book, *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*,

is a collaborative project between Wright and Luster that calls upon the resources of both

text and image to document the lives of men and women incarcerated in three Louisiana

prisons: East Carroll Parish Prison Farm, Louisiana State Penitentiary (which,

colloquially, goes by the name of "The Farm"), and Louisiana Correctional Institution for

Women. This book—which was published in 2003 by Twin Palms Publishers in a lavish,

hardcover edition—presents selections of Luster's tintype portraits of the over 1,500

inmates she photographed alongside Wright's characteristically heterogeneous and

fragmented writing. Luster's haunting black and white portraits importantly display the

inmates how they wished to be shown—some of them wear Mardis Gras or rodeo

costumes for prison events; others display tattoos or props. Interspersed among these

photographs, Wright's text incorporates a wide range of material including found text,

rhythmic lists, epistolary poems, micro-essays, aphoristic reflections, and fragments of

inmates' testimony garnered from correspondence and interviews. In contrast, the second

book, *One Big Self: An Investigation*—which was published as a paperback in 2007 by

Copper Canyon Press—reframes Wright's text as an 80-page stand-alone long poem, and

it is this text that I will primarily discuss in this section. I want to suggest that this

revised edition's reframing of the poem is crucial in understanding the force of Wright's

socio-cultural critique. *One Big Self* is, indeed, an "investigation," as the new and

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[85] According to the LOC's classificatory system, the books belong in "Subclass HV," which is the rubric
for "social pathology," "social and public welfare," and "criminology."

significant subtitle indicates.[86] In opposition to the depersonalizing effects of the penal

system, it is, as many reviewers and critics have noted, an investigation of the inmates'

humanity, but it is also an investigation of the larger prison-industrial complex in which

these inmates are embedded and, more generally, an interrogation of the inequalities

produced and perpetuated by the configurations of postmodern space. It is my argument

that the efficacy of this multipronged investigation, which shuttles between the particular

and the abstract, relies upon Wright's deft yoking of two seemingly incompatible genres:

travel writing and prison writing.

Wright's prose preface "Stripe for Stripe," which precedes the poem proper,

juxtaposes an image of the moving automobile, that quintessential symbol of American

freedom, with a serialized landscape of confinement: "Driving through this part of

Louisiana you can pass four prisons in less than an hour. 'The spirit of every age,' writes

Eric Schlosser, 'is manifest in its public works.' So this is who we are, the jailers, the

jailed. This is the spirit of our age" (ix).[87] This introduction suggests that *One Big Self* is

an example of travel writing, an investigation of place, a tour of Louisiana's "public

works," a sequel of sorts to Wright's previous book *Deepstep Come Shining* (1998),

which is a lyrical and elliptical road narrative based on a car trip through rural Georgia.

Indeed, significant portions of the found text in *One Big Self* were grafted directly from

roadside language. Wright's transcription of road signage (such as a homemade sign for

"BULLWHIPS") and various church marquees (that proclaim pithy mottos such as

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[86] This subtitle constitutes part of what Gérard Genette has famously called the "paratext"—that is the "fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text" (2).
[87] The title "stripe for stripe" references the (in)famous passage from Exodus, "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, / Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" while at the same time it evokes both the customary stripes on nineteenth-century prison uniforms as well as the stripes of the U.S. flag.

"AFTER GOOD FRIDAY COMES EASTER / GOD ALWAYS WINS") gives the reader a sense of "local color" while subtly framing the prisons which she visits within a culture of dominance and authority. "Everything about Louisiana," Wright says in the preface, "seems to constitute itself differently from everywhere else in the Union: the food, the idiom, the stuff in the trees, the critters in the water, and the laws, Napoleonic, not mother-country common law. The prisons inevitably mirror differences found in the free world" (x). Thus, *One Big Self* is quite typical of travel writing in that it documents differing social practices within an othered, exoticized location. Much of the book's content, moreover, is doubly othered since it derives from highly restricted grounds— *terra incognita* from the standpoint of the free citizen.[88] Thus, C.T. Mansfield can claim in an Amazon.com book review that *One Big Self* constitutes "[a] trip into an unknown world." If the "Travel Writing" entry in *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English* can ask "where is there left to 'discover'" when "[t]he homogenization of the world's cultures, thanks to global capitalism, has meant that there is very little periphery left for the centre to explore," then *One Big Self* represents new and remarkable subject matter for an increasingly ossifying and predictable genre (Sage 631). The text, in short, relays fresh and eye-opening experience despite the radical space-time compression of globalization; in an interview with poet Kent Johnson, Wright remarked, "I know I am as glad to have been at the Louisiana State Institute for Women and Angola and East Carroll as I am to have been to Macchu Picchu."

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[88] Doran Larson points out that "[t]he rightward turn of the 1980s, with its war on drugs and the continuing get-tough-on-crime campaigns, completed the century-long process of transforming lawbreakers into an enemy race, a race apart from the sovereign 'we the people'" ("The People vs. The People" 13). Such socio-cultural "apartness" makes the prison a particularly privileged site for both physical exploration and epistemological investigation.

In a wry and highly self-reflexive moment in the book's proem (which bridges the preface and the poem proper), Wright says, "I am going to prison in order to write about it. Like a nineteenth-century traveler" (xv). Hyper-aware of her own position of privilege and mobility, Wright admits to her own artistic voyeurism by linking it to the imperial and colonizing gaze of the nineteenth-century traveler. Yet, *One Big Self* is remarkable in that it unsettles the binaries of home/abroad and center/periphery that inform a nineteenth-century epistemology of travel writing. Wright considers her own country made strange by the pernicious effects of capital and deindustrialization, by what Foster calls the "different speeds as well as the mixed spaces of postmodern society" (4) which is characterized by a "new intensity of dis/connection" ("Postmodernism in Parallax" 19). *One Big Self*, as Wright claims, makes the Louisiana "countryside's emptiness … more legible" as it chronicles the "claustral space" and "hard time" of those who have been disconnected from the free world, those who have been, as Wright memorably puts it, "[c]ropped out of the picture" (57). Yet Wright also emphasizes how both the production and maintenance of prisoners are connected to the economic vitality of languishing communities; as Angela Davis remarks in her influential essay "Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex," "the practice of disappearing vast numbers of people from poor, immigrant, and racially marginalized communities has literally become big business" (683).[89] In an epistolary section called "Dear Dying Town," a supermaximum security prison (supermax) seems interchangeable with a casino, a nerve gas factory, and a nuclear dump within a purgatorial space of postmodern, postindustrial modularity:

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[89] In a section called "Dialing Dungeons for Dollars," Wright critiques (as does Davis) Corrections Corporation of America and the massive revenue it generates from the government (28).

Dear Dying Town,

The food is cheap; the squirrels are black; the box factories have

all moved offshore; the light reproaches us, and our coffee is watered

down, but we have an offer from the Feds to make nerve gas; the tribe is

lobbying hard for another casino; the bids are out to attract a nuclear

dump; and there's talk of a supermax—.[90] (27)

The management of criminality is put on par here with the management of other

"hazardous" materials (nerve gas, nuclear waste, gambling-as-vice), and the logic of the

local economy dictates that the proper management of any such materials will yield a

profit. In another epistolary section called "My Dear Affluent Reader," Wright implicitly

connects the prison with another "public work," the shopping mall:

My Dear Affluent Reader,

Welcome to the Pecanland Mall. Sadly, the pecan grove had to be

dozed to build it. Home Depot razed another grove. There is just the one

grove left and the creeper and the ivy have blunted its sun. The

uglification of your landscape is all but concluded. We are driving around

the shorn suburb of your intelligence, the photographer and her factotum.

(24)[91]

Rather than separating the privileged and "affluent" from the disciplined, Wright shows

how both populations are subject to analogous architectures of order and surveillance

(and here we might think of Mike Davis' idea of the "panopticon shopping mall"

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[90] The letter is, as Alan Gilbert notes in a review of Wright, "always a valued mode of contact for inmates."
[91] According to Thomas O. Beebee, the letter is "a Protean form which crystallized social relationships in a variety of ways" (3). In the two "open letters" quoted here, social relationships are crystallized and determined not only by the epistolary address but by the corporate and institutional structures which Wright describes (such as the prison, the mall, and the Home Depot).

("Fortress Los Angeles" 412)). Between the hyper-real and regimented *agora* of the

shopping mall and the razed and shorn *oikos* of the suburbs, the heterotopic public works

mentioned in *One Big Self* (such as the prison, the casino, the church, or the stadium) fail

to constitute a meaningful and egalitarian public space for society; in response, Wright

uses the no-place, the *utopia*, of the poetry page to configure an alternate order of the

social, to propose different relations between the free and the incarcerated that are not

mediated by capital. In other words, she uses the material and rhetorical privileges of the

traveler-writer to re-connect that which has been disconnected, to bring together and

survey, if only metaphorically, the whole of society as "One Big Self" and, at the same

time, to expose the invisible and abstract connections created through proliferating

networks of capital.[92]

But there is more: I argue that Wright importantly draws on the resources of

prison writing and transmutes the privilege of the traveler-writer—who, as James Clifford

notes, "is someone who has the security and privilege to move about in relatively

unconstrained ways" (107)—into the privilege of the prison-writer, who despite being

physically constrained to the highest possible degree, can "claim," as Doran Larson

argues, "the right to judge judges whose moral authority must resort to shackles and

stone" ("Toward a Prison Poetics" 149). At first glance, travel writing and prison writing

may appear as oppositional, even mutually exclusive genres—particularly if we consider

some of the sentiments, some of the dreams deferred that Wright registered during her

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[92] According to Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, the privilege of the traveler-writer is "due in part of
course to sometimes crude economic advantage, but also in part to more sophisticated techniques of
rhetorical control." *One Big Self* is atypical of the mainstream travel writing that Holland and Huggan
analyze in that it doesn't provide "an effective alibi for the perpetuation or reinstallment of ethnocentrically
superior attitudes to 'other' cultures, peoples, and places," nor is it "a refuge for complacent, even
nostalgically retrograde, middle class values" (viii-ix).

prison interviews. One inmate (presumably) says (with Wright's fragmented style and montage-like presentation it is hard to be sure exactly who is saying what): "I miss driving" (7). Another says: "My idea of a good car: anything that is fast, solid, and bulletproofed" (23). In short, these inmates desire, to varying degrees, the "security and privilege" that Wright enjoys; in contrast, we might think of the opening images of *Deepstep Come Shining* which portray very different possibilities of aesthesis: "the seclusionary cool of the car" and the "saturate levels of green" "[b]eyond the windshield" (*Deepstep* 5).[93]

One might say that prison writing is the other of the road narrative, yet *One Big Self* is framed and articulated precisely by the deliberate conjunction of these two genres. This is the way the proem begins:

> I am going to prison.
> I am going to visit three prisons in Louisiana.
> I am going on the heels of my longtime friend Deborah Luster, a
>   photographer.
> It is a summons.
> All roads are turning into prison roads. (xv)

The first line—"I am going to prison"—trades heavily upon the idiomatic slippage between "going" as an enforced displacement (as in being *sent* to prison) and "going" as a voluntary act of travel (as in *visiting* a prison). If the former is momentarily suggested but not literally or factually true, how can we understand *One Big Self* as a legitimate instance of "prison writing" or as a text that can usefully establish a dialogue with the genre? H. Bruce Franklin, after all, defines prison writing in his important anthology as

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[93] In the *Jacket* interview with Kent Johnson, Wright expands in detail about the discrepancy between the motility of her own social position (as well as Luster's) and the position of the prisoners: "We are two fairly brazen women who can handle our mortgages and walk out any door we please, whereas poverty is the common denominator of the vast majority of prisoners. And the door is most definitely locked. Illiteracy, abuse, mental impairment are all evident in extreme disproportion to the 'free world.' These disadvantages Debbie and I did not inherit or incur on the road. The effects of these disadvantages, especially in combination, are catastrophic."

"writing by…prisoners…about prison experience" (1). Simply put, Wright was never a

prisoner. But what if we take seriously Doran Larson's recent and provocative article

"Toward a Prison Poetics" which suggests that "[p]rison writing is a genre bound not

only by its subject and authors but in its expressive tropes" (143)? And what are the

consequences of recognizing that such tropes can travel? According to Larson, there is

"a transnational literary structure" of prison writing which can be described through a

"virtually universal" "dissociative-associative trope" which entails 1) "a dissociative turn

of voice that allows the 'I' of the prison text...to represent communities larger than the

prison author and *other* than those insisted upon by the prison" and 2) a "concomitant

associative gesture whereby the prison writer names the contemporary communities

among whom s/he numbers him- or herself, and/or names an ancestry in the history of

prison writing." Ultimately, "[b]oth gestures," says Larson, "serve to dismantle the

isolating power of the prison" (145).[94] I argue that Wright effectively employs this

"dissociative-associative trope" in *One Big Self*—not in an appropriative move that

aesthetically capitalizes on her subject matter but in an ethical act of solidarity. Thus, the

phrase "All roads are turning into prison roads" quite dramatically indicates the

meaningful traffic between the generic vectors of the road narrative and prison writing.

Wright has led the road narrative into an apparent generic cul-de-sac—swapping the

accumulating, snowballing time of the picaresque for the hard, regimented time of the

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[94] If this model seems overly schematic in my brief rehearsing of it—Larson cannily points out that "[i]t would be a mistake to counter and supplement Foucault's history of disciplinary strategies with an equally limited repertoire of prison literary tactics. It is by writing each in their own way, by responding both to the fixed schematic of power and to the singular characteristics of their particular conditions and treatment that prison writers, first, bear evidence to the failure of fixed strategies to overcome a diverse set of aleatory tactics, and, second, in their singular responses, expose a particular system of justice's failure to bear responsibility for its penal regime" ("Toward a Prison Poetics" 152).

prison—in order to re-mobilize particular experiences of incarceration into a moving and collective voice.[95]

Well aware of the complications of speaking for a particular population while not being an actual part of it (and thereby sharing the same material conditions of constraint), Wright threads throughout the text numerous disclaimers that initially seem to distance her from the genre of prison writing: "After all, you are not Gramsci" or "After all, you are not Mandelstam." I read such self-deprecating statements as instances of *meiosis*— that is, as rhetorical appeals to *ethos*. Even if she is not claiming *identity* ("you are not"), she is suggesting an empathic *association* as a way of naming or identifying "an ancestry in the history of prison writing" (Larson 145). By mixing the reported speech of the prisoners with quotes from famous inmates such as Paul Verlaine, Oscar Wilde, and Perry Cobb (who was wrongfully sentenced to death-row in 1977 and exonerated in 1987), Wright effectively enacts the associative trope.[96] This rhetorical-expressive move, however, can be made more legible within the book's larger movement of the associative-dissociative trope or what Larson calls "the autobiographical-testamentary shift." If the beginning of the text, particularly the preface, quite clearly describes a particular body traveling through space (as is typical in travel writing), then much of the body of the poem, which mixes direct and indirect discourse, which unmoors pronouns from their antecedents and deictics from their contexts, evidences a shift from an "I" to a

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[95] I want to propose that such generic traffic goes the other way around, though such an investigation goes beyond the scope of my chapter. Darrell Grayson, who was executed in Alabama in 2007 (having been denied a reprieve for a DNA test), wrote a poetry chapbook called *Holman's House* (The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature), which contains the phrase, "It was the simple chore of washing a face that has become a state highway." Prison writing, from another perspective, can be understood as a form of travel writing.

[96] Wright's text contains quotes from Verlaine's lyric "The Sky is above the Roof"; it also cites Wilde's well known phrase "the meaning of sorrow and its beauty" and Cobb's phrase "All these days I've been off death row / death row has not been off me."

"we," from the individuated author to a collaborative work of testimony. Here is a

typical section of Wright's polyvocal montage:

>In the old days they would have sent you to America
>
>The one called Grasshopper raises wild things—sparrows, hares, you
>>name it
>
>They've got a muleskinner here that can make one sit down and talk
>
>Then there's the wren nesting in the razor wire
>
>I read that the former governor is employing Mr. von Bülow's attorney
>
>Sissy is Mr. Redwine's Catahoula
>
>Nolan knows where the dove eggs are
>
>Pop named every single one of his roses, his company keepers
>
>I haven't found anyone good enough for my cats, said Lyles
>
>He bottle-fed the colt Lil Tête, and rehabilitated Ginger
>>whose backend is sunken still
>
>That dog, the guard said, is emancipated
>
>That man, Nolan said, of Ginger's former keeper
>>didn't need no dog
>
>Smurf is photographed with Daisy; she's just a pup
>
>But she's a Fila Brasileiro
>>as draft horse to regular horse, the very core of horseness
>
>Tiger Lady, Storm, Kilo, Thunder, Josie, Duke, Bonnie, Blaze,
>>Dolly, Grubby, Jack, Buster, and Tracker
>
>Put your hands together for the K-9 unit
>
>If they can get outside the fence they still have to beat the dogs
>>No one's beat the dogs yet, said Castlebury. (15-6)

In the excerpt above, there is such a blurring of voices (between that of the poet, the inmates, and, quite noticeably, Glen Castlebury, the spokesman for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice) that it is difficult to tell who is saying what: the text quite literally forges "one big self," "a post-traumatic identity," in Larson's words, "that reaches beyond the prison" (159).

In an article called "Lightsource, Aperture, Face: C.D. Wright and Photography," Stephen Burt claims that "most often and most insistently…[Wright's] poems invoke and liken themselves to photographs, and to the work photographers do" (227). Wright, according to this line of reasoning, "presents lines as if they were photographic captions," and, in a discussion of *Deepstep Come Shining*, Burt calls for "literary works that function like cameras: not to depict social problems in general but to illuminate particular persons, to make them present to us" (234). While I do agree that Wright has made the prisoners of Louisiana movingly present to us, I think it is unwise to keep *One Big Self* tethered to the genre of ekphrastic poetry (Burt tellingly refers to only the Twin Palms Press edition). As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, Wright also investigates general "social problems" with great theoretical insight and strategically calls upon disparate genres to do so. In fact, I claim that Wright's interrogation, if not outright rejection, of *ut pictura poesis* (which Burt seems to uncritically accept) allows her to explore the particular resources of literary genres in successful and unexpected ways. In a statement for an exhibition at Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies, Wright said, "I felt a queasiness regarding poetry in tandem with portraits of prisoners."[97] I don't wish to cast suspicion upon the efficacy or validity of Wright and Luster's collaboration or to promote a neo-modernist conception of disciplinary autonomy and

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[97] See the online exhibition at <http://cds.aas.duke.edu/l_t10/gallery.html>.

opacity *à la* Clement Greenberg but rather to stress the productive and oftentimes uneasy friction when differential media come into contact. Moreover, Burt's formulation of the poetic line as photographic caption is ill suited in regards to *One Big Self*: if a "caption" is not only a sub-title but also a "catching," "seizure," or "capture," then it seems as if Wright's intention is not to fix the speech and voices of the prisoners but to circulate and disseminate them through a new environment.[98] In other words, if we are to adhere to a framework of photography, I suggest we see *One Big Self* not as a photograph or series of photographs but as a montage-like *moving picture—moving* in the sense of "producing strong emotion" (or "affecting") as well as *moving* in the sense of "travelling" beyond the ideological confines of the prison.

Anti-Romances of the Archive

In *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (2001), Suzanne Keen identifies a renaissance of detective fiction, including novels by authors such as A.S. Byatt and Julian Barnes, whose central plot involves "'doing research'" (10). Such research, notably, "yields tangible benefits" and "climatic discoveries and rewards" (42) and even involves "sex and physical pleasure gained as a result of questing" (63). Moreover, "[r]omances of the archive repeatedly insist that there is a truth and that it can be found in a library or a hidden cache of documents" (27). While the central "plots" of "The Abolition Journal" and *One Big Self* also involve research they remarkably yield little material of evidentiary value. In an epistolary section entitled "Dear Prisoner," Wright sums up her findings: "I confess. To nothing / You could use. In a court of law"

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[98] I am referring to Gregory Ulmer's oft-cited distinction between collage and montage: "'Collage' is a transfer of materials from one context to another, and 'montage' is the 'dissemination' of these borrowings through the new settings" (95).

(42). Similarly, Coultas fully admits to "lacking physical evidence" (31). These books

then are *anti*-romances of the archive; they point so insistently not to the archive-as-truth-

telling-apparatus but to impoverished, inadequate, or restricted archives. "The librarian

can tell me / nothing," says Coultas. The history which she seeks "has been left out of

the textbooks" (28). Wright explicitly critiques the resources of the prison libraries when

she mentions some of the inmates' favorite authors: "The women like Nora Roberts and

John le Carré / The men like Danielle Steel and Louis L'Amour" (22). And if "a random

book skimmed from the women's shelf" has a scene "[i]n which an undine-like maiden /

is espyed feeding white daises to a bear," the reason, as Wright sarcastically notes, is that

"[s]omething on anarcho-syndicalism wasn't really expected" (11). If the prison libraries

do house texts of more socio-cultural interest, then they heavily restrict their access:

> DUE TO THEFT:
> All True Crime and Black Study titles
> Are housed in closed shelving
> Limit 3 books per person
> 0 exceptions   so don't ask. (18)

In a striking comparison, Wright also makes clear the massive amount of textual

resources that are at her disposal. In a section addressed to an inmate that employs a

perspective-shifting "If I were you"/"If you were me" strategy, she says, "If you were

me…You [would] have so many good books you can't begin to count them" (9). A

suggested reading list, entitled "Why not check it out and lock it down," that ends *One

Big Self* makes this fact abundantly clear. It contains over fifty texts including James

Baldwin's *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, Gramsci's

Prison Letters, Camus' *The Stranger*, Kafka's *The Castle*, Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and

the anthology *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America*. It is an odd supplement. It is a

small glimpse into Wright's archive of "good books" and a list that could have amply

served as the source of some long poem in the tradition of "grand collage"—but didn't.

Chapter 4

Literary Constraint, Testimony, and the Limits of Memory: M. NourbeSe Philip's and Anna Rabinowitz's Long Poems of Witness

> The Archive is th[e] kind of place…that is to do with longing and appropriation.
> —Carolyn Steedman

> I don't trust the archive.
> —M. NourbesSe Philip

> Archival dwindle / *liquefied prayer*
> —Anna Rabinowitz

Elizabeth Alexander's recent poem "Hayden in the Archive" gives us a brief, snapshot scene of what it must have been like for Robert Hayden to conduct the elaborate research—at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Collection, which he visited in 1941, and at the University of Michigan, where he attended graduate school and taught for several years—that informed his most famous poem "Middle Passage," an ambitious, late-modernist collage that mimics such documentary forms as the ship's logbook, the diary, and the legal deposition to dramatize the horrors of and resistances to the transatlantic slave trade. Alexander, who herself conducted archival research at, among other places, the New Haven Historical Society for her suite of "Amistad" poems, describes Hayden as "[s]toop-shouldered, worrying the pages, / index finger moving down the log, / column by column of faded ink" (240).[99] The predicament that Alexander's poem explores, which in the passage above is vividly embodied in Hayden's stooped and worrying posture, is the grave difficulty, the burden, of turning a traumatic history into poetry, a kind of Adornian impasse of writing lyric poetry after the Middle Passage:

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[99] For a brief account of the genesis of "Amistad," see Elizabeth Alexander's "The Negro Digs Up Her Past: 'Amistad.'"

> Blood from a turnip, this
> protagonist-less
> Middle Passage.
>
> Does the log yield lyric?

The archival materials that Hayden confronts are presented as intractable in their "turnip-ness," as faded but barbaric documents (of "[t]he slavers' meticulous records") that resist giving up the inspirational life-blood that would enable lyrical expression. Alexander's alliterative question—*Does the log yield lyric?*—interrogates not only the usefulness of the archive (in all its limitations and its complicity with state power) for poetic means but also the efficacy of lyric to accommodate a sustained historical inquiry; both Hayden's "Middle Passage" and Alexander's "Amistad" are, interestingly, more dramatic than lyric and their structures of linked but discrete parts allow for a variegation of formal techniques that is not possible in a brief, stand-alone lyric poem. Alexander's question almost seems to imply that if the log can't yield *lyric* per se, it might yield a *long poem* instead (or in Hayden's case, a kind of compressed "pocket epic.") Ultimately, "Hayden in the Archive" is about the ethical imperative to write poetry after immense historical tragedy—even under the impossibility of such poetry's conditions and even in the face of the archive's obvious biases and incompleteness. "Hayden in the Archive" emphatically ends with such an imperative: "this morning, the poem insists."

We can understand this *insistence* (which is paralleled by the sonic insistence of Alexander's assonantal *i*'s) in terms of what Jacques Derrida had diagnosed as "archive fever"—a condition of being "in need of archives," of "searching for the archive right where it slips away" (91). It is, indeed, a longing to squeeze blood from a turnip. Hayden's "irrepressible desire to return to the origin" that is the Middle Passage is a

desire to poetically document what Aldon Lynn Nielsen calls "the 'X' that marks the spot

of both origin and sea burial, vanishing point of horizons both coming and going" (xiii).

From a wider standpoint, Alexander's poem is remarkable in that it conjures not only

Derrida's highly metaphorical "archive fever" but also the sheer literality and even

ordinariness of what social historian Carolyn Steedman has called "the deeply

uncomfortable quest for original sources" (we remember Hayden's stooped posture) and

the very real occupational hazards that have been associated with archival scholarship.

Steedman's subtly incisive collection of essays, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*,

makes the somewhat parodic (but ultimately serious) distinction between "the more

general fever to know and to have the past" and what she archly terms "Archive Fever

Proper" (75), a meningital fever contracted after spores of anthrax have been inhaled

from old books (Steedman links *bacillus anthracis* to pre-twentieth-century bookbinding

and leather-making practices, such as the use of "the putrid serum of sheep's blood" for

bookbinding glue) (24). Like the historian Jules Michelet, Hayden is seen breathing in

bits of the dead—what, according to Steedman, could very well be "the malignant,

eternal dust of the Archive" (157)—at the same time he strives to invoke them:

> At times the dusty pages make him sneeze,
> small sneezes, which he suppresses,
> chew – chew – chew.
> (Alexander, *Crave Radiance* 240)

For Steedman, it is these "dusty pages" (or ones like them) from an actual archive—not

any burning search for origins—that would be the legitimate cause of what we could

properly call archive fever. In this formulation, *dust*, as both literal phenomenon and

figure for the material past, acts as a kind of Derridean and double-valenced *pharmakon*:

while it may be a remedy for the general fever, the insistent desire, to commune with, if

not resuscitate, the archive's dead, it can also be a poisonous vector, an agent of Archive Fever Proper.[100]

Steedman, interestingly, connects the archive to psychoanalysis not through Freud, as does Derrida, but through the object relations theory of D.W. Winnicott; she suggests that, like play, archival work takes place in an "aloneness [that] is dependent on the presence of someone else." According to this view, the archive, through the concentrative play-like activity of the researcher, may open up onto a third dimension, the "potential space" of culture. "The Archive," Steedman concludes,

> is something that, through the cultural activity of History, can become
>
> Memory's potential space, one of the few realms of the modern
>
> imagination where a hard-won and carefully constructed place, can return
>
> to boundless, limitless space, and we might be released from the house
>
> arrest that Derrida suggested was its condition. (82)

The work that Steedman ascribes to the historian—accessing "one of the few realms of the modern imagination"—curiously resembles the work associated with the poet.[101] Steedman's suggestion is a seductive one. But there is, I maintain, a crucial distinction between the activity that is writing history and the activity that is *poiesis*. As Alexander says in reference to her "Amistad" poems, "the imagination, in the history poem, can take up where written history stops" ("The Negro Digs Up Her Past" 465). I want to suggest that poetry has a better purchase on "Memory's potential space" because of its criticality toward history (not its specific affinities with what Steedman is calling the "cultural

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[100] For a detailed discussion of the *pharmakon*, see Jacques Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy."

[101] The poet Susan Howe describes in similar ways how the ordinary place of the archive can be transformed into a transcendent space. In a 2011 lecture called "The Whispered Rush, Telepathy of Archives," Howe says, "The inward ardor I feel while working in research libraries is intuitive. It's a sense of self identification and trust, or the granting of grace in an ordinary room, in a secular time."

activity of History"), because of the way it extends beyond history's limits ("where written history stops"). I want to adhere to Steedman's observation that the historian's—and, by extension, the poet's—work in the archive can "offer a striking reversal of the general impulse of modernity, to turn space into place" (82). This is, in my estimation, the same impulse of modernity that tends to reduce memory to the merely archival. Over two decades ago, Pierre Nora noted that "modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (13); modern memory then is not a living, collective memory but "a prosthesis-memory" (14). Though his discussion pertains predominantly to a French context, Nora's observations clearly—if perhaps too hyperbolically—speak to the intensity and perils of a general and contemporary archive fever in which a positivist history has usurped memory's functions. With a vehement eloquence, Nora claims: "The indiscriminate production of archives is…the clearest expression of the terrorism of historicized memory" (14). To counter the "indiscriminate" archivization of memory, writers such as Hayden (in "Middle Passage") and Alexander (in "Amistad") have followed the insistence of poetry: to squeeze the lifeblood of active memory from the prosthesis-memory of the archive (whether the Schomburg Collection or the New Haven Historical Society).

This approach towards the past departs from Steedman's perhaps overly optimistic (or disciplinary-biased) view that "the cultural activity of History" alone can convert the place of the archive into the space of memory. I argue that poetry—particularly in what we might call *post-archival poems*—is both a more privileged and far less acknowledged "realm of the imagination" to effect such a change; it is the

contemporary poet's very skepticism of history that impels her to invent and experiment with new techniques and performances of memory. I prefer the term "*post-archival poem*" over what Alexander calls a "history poem" because I want to emphasize the work done by the poet *after the archive*, a work which allows for the transmutation of history's material traces into memory. I appropriate the phrase "after the archive" from Steedman's recent and somewhat polemical article "After the Archive" (2011). Steedman observes that "[h]istorical knowledge is always produced *after* the archive, in the thought and writing of historians and other archival scholars" (323). I am suggesting here that "non-historicized"—that is "real" or "social"—*memory* (according to Nora's understanding of those terms) can be produced after the archive as well.

While recent poetic production has impelled us to find paradigms that can adequately make sense of poetry's complicated relation to both history and memory, I want to focus on works that, to rework and extend Alexander's phrase, take up *where modern memory stops*. This is not to say that such works disavow memory; indeed, they may perform similar kinds of functions as that of the post-archival poem. But there is more: they boldly offer, through ingenious technical means, alternatives to remembering without endorsing forgetting. In this chapter, I discuss two book-length poems, *Zong!* (2008) by Tobagan-born writer and activist M. NourbeSe Philip and *Darkling* (2001) by Brooklyn-born poet and librettist Anna Rabinowitz, that employ unconventional formal constraints to confront traumatic histories. Such constraints are "unconventional" not so much in themselves—some of them (such as the acrostic and the anagram) are, in fact, quite traditional and have a deep history of use—but in their surprising scale of execution; they are long poems by other means. *Darkling* is an 80-page acrostic poem (it

spells out the entirety of Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" along its left-hand margin) that draws on her family archive of letters and photographs to narrate, in fits and starts, the fragmented story of two families that suffered dire losses during the Holocaust. *Zong!* is a 200-page poem based on appropriations and rearrangements of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the 500-word legal decision which determined who was financially liable for the cost of approximately 150 forcibly drowned African slaves in the notorious, eighteenth-century "Zong" case.[102] I argue that these taxing, even perverse, constraints constitute crucial methods of what Steedman calls "the modern imagination," methods that can, indeed, disentangle us from the archive's archontic power. Moreover, Philip and Rabinowitz subject carefully chosen source texts—the material traces of "prosthesis-memory"—to various poetic procedures (such as the acrostic, the anagram, and erasure) in order to bear witness to unarchivable memories and histories; in this way, they go beyond the limits of memory.

Like Alexander, the poets under discussion here have a guarded, melancholic, if not oppositional stance toward history which they view as insufficient and even coercive. Rabinowitz, for example, writes of the desire to grasp "kernels of *was*" and "memory-shucked husks of history" (25) even when "history is an epitaph spinning / Away from her" (24). We might compare this to Steedman's sanguine belief that "History has become the place where quite ordinarily and by remembering, we can find things where we have already put them" (*Dust* 83). And in a blurb, to which I will return later, poet-critic Nathanial Mackey describes the way Philip "wants to chant or shout history down [and] shut history up" as well as to "derange …history [to] undo or redo history itself."

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[102] As Philip notes, the figure of "150" slaves comes from *Gregson v. Gilbert* though the exact number is contested. James Walvin's *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (1994) mentions "131" and Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005) mentions "133."

I will focus on *Zong!*'s and *Darkling*'s formal constraints that, in their extreme restrictiveness, catalyze the poet's imagination beyond the limits of both history and memory into what radical political philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls *testimony*. By testimony, which I will discuss later at greater length, Agamben means neither an eye-witness account that verifies an event (as in the Latin-American *testimonio* or C.D. Wright's *One Big Self*, which I discussed in the previous chapter) nor a juridical attestation of fact, but a bearing witness to the unsayable. Both Rabinowitz and Philip make explicit reference to the German-language Romanian writer Paul Celan, who has, perhaps more than any other poet of the twentieth century, taken the task of responding to historical trauma by honoring the unsayable; in so doing, they propose an ambitious and arduous practice of what Maurice Blanchot has called *writing disaster*—by way of procedural *rite*—for the twenty-first century. If modern history is the nightmarish constraint—as James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus famously intimated—that imprisons us all, then rather than attempting to bind or "contain" history within the body of a monumental poem (in the manner of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*), Philip and Rabinowitz paradoxically impose strict limitations on their own poetic methods as a way to bear witness to those who can't bear witness: the results are anti-monumental long poems that differ from the modernist epic in both technical execution and epistemological ideology. We can thus consider *Darkling* and *Zong!* as *testimonial long poems* that intersect with what I have been calling *archival long poems* in that they do "seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" (Foster, "An Archival Impulse" 4); however, unlike the poems (save Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America") that I have discussed in the previous three chapters, these works pay particular attention to the

"lostness" of the "lost." Because of this, they turn to the enabling effects of literary constraint in order to give the lost a physical and affective presence. In an interview, Philip explained, "I am rewarded by the fact that although I have imposed the limitation of the text [the 500-word legal decision of the *Zong* case] on myself, I have been able to find a lot of freedom within those limitations. I believe that this is a lesson poetry offers us—freedom within limitation—that is especially poignant in this post 9/11 world" (Saunders 218). Similarly, in reference to her choice to use the acrostic form as *Darkling*'s armature, Rabinowitz has stated in an interview with the online publication *Bookslut* that "constraints are liberating" (Schecter). Rabinowitz also connects the value of her book to a world "after 9/11" in attributing its appeal to the way in which "people have become…sensitized to…fragmented memory" (Singer). This suggests that literary constraint—which allows the contemporary poet to brush history against the grain, to liberate and re-constellate fragmented memories, to, indeed, honor the immemorial—is particularly crucial after 9/11 as a means to not only bear witness to those who were locked in slave ships (Philip) or trapped in World War II Poland (Rabinowitz) but also to interrogate more contemporary forms of coercion and constraint—from Guantánamo to Abu Ghraib.

More recent examples of politicized constraint-based work would include Philip Metres' 2012 Arab American Book Award-winning *abu ghraib arias* (2011), a long poem which limits its language to various source texts including "a Standard Operating Procedure manual for Camp Echo at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp, the testimony of Abu Ghraib torture victims, the words of U.S. soldiers, the Bible, [and] the Code of

Hammurabi."[103] Like Philip, who decided to "white out and black out words" in the *Gregson v. Gilbert* decision, Metres uses the technique of erasure to achieve a kind of "freedom within limitation." We might compare his section entitled "Document Exploitation (Standard Operating Procedure)" (see fig 26), which was based on a Standard Operating Procedure manual for Camp Echo, with an analogous text: the Document Exploitation (DOCEX) Translation Guidelines found in "Camp Delta Standard Operating Procedures" (see fig 27). Metres enacts a kind of poetic "counter-intelligence"— putting a new spin on Wallace Stevens' dictum that "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully"—by recoding the military protocols for DOCEX, "the systematic extraction of information from threat documents for the purpose of producing intelligence" ("Appendix I: Document Exploitation and Handling"). If the DOCEX guidelines direct translators to "summarize…[poems] to the best of your ability," Metres' appropriation by redaction (or "sanitization") creates a concrete-like poem that resists the heresy of paraphrase through the opacity of black rectangular forms, which could very well "be used as a code of some sort." The poem forces a confrontation with the unextractable; it is, in short, a renegade text that usurps the government's archontic authority to present, intercept, and withhold information.

Another significant (and perhaps paradigmatic) post-9/11 work of erasure is Travis Macdonald's *The O Mission Repo* (Fact-Simile Editions, 2008), a manipulation of *The 9/11 Commission Report* through crossing out, blurring, and redaction. Macdonald's long poem paradoxically attempts to "repo[ssess]" what has been omitted in official accounts of the World Trade Center attacks through the act of erasure and omission.

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[103] For more information ,see <http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org/2012.book.award.winners#book3>.

Document Exploitation (Standard Operating Procedure)

clearly and legibly   skip lines

████████████ as close as possible
██████████

████████████ to the original █████████████

tense and person the writer used

don't translate proverbs word for word

don't translate poems word for word
██████████████████

ask someone for help
████████████████████

the meaning of some words

████████████████ further clarify
██████████████

names

███████████████████████ look up

██████████████████ the letter you started

███████ to translate letters, not

████analyze them

Figure 26. Page scan of *abu ghraib arias*.

15-7. DOCEX Translation Guidelines

 a. If there's anything anywhere in the letter that could possibly be used as a code of some sort, be sure to make note of it in the Interpreter's Comments section.

 b. Write clearly and legibly, and skip lines. Keep in mind a one-page letter shouldn't come out to more than three finished pages.

 c. Make your translation as close as possible to the meaning of the original text.

 d. Don't use abbreviations (e.g. CA for California, TU for Tuesday).

 e. Don't write in the third person format, i.e. "detainee XYZ says hello to his family". Maintain the same tense and person the writer used.

 f. Don't translate proverbs word for word. Give intended meaning only.

 g. Don't translate poems word for word. Read the poem and summarize it to the best of your ability.

 h. When translating a Quranic verse or Islamic expression, give the closest possible meaning rather than a word-for-word translation.

 i. If you aren't sure about the meaning of a word, then ask someone else for help. If you have to guess the meaning of some words, make sure to note those parts in the "Interpreter's Comments" section, (i.e. a, b: best possible translation).

 j. In general, use the Interpreter's Comments section if you need to further clarify something to the reader.

 k. Write names in CAPITAL letters.

 l. If you don't know how to spell a word, look it up in the dictionary.

 m. Make an effort to finish the letter you started.

 n. Remember that our job is to translate letters, not analyze them.

Figure 27. "Camp Delta Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)." Image from Wikileaks, <http://wlstorage.net/file/gitmo-sop.pdf>.

"Remembering," suggests Macdonald (in one of the most memorable phrases of the book), "might also be hijacked" (see fig 28). "Hijacked memory" eerily recalls Nora's "terrorism of historicized memory"; literary constraint, as I have been arguing, allows for a remediation of the archive's "errorism" (to cite another one of Macdonald's memorable coinages) in an attempt to liberate cultural memory. But that is not all that
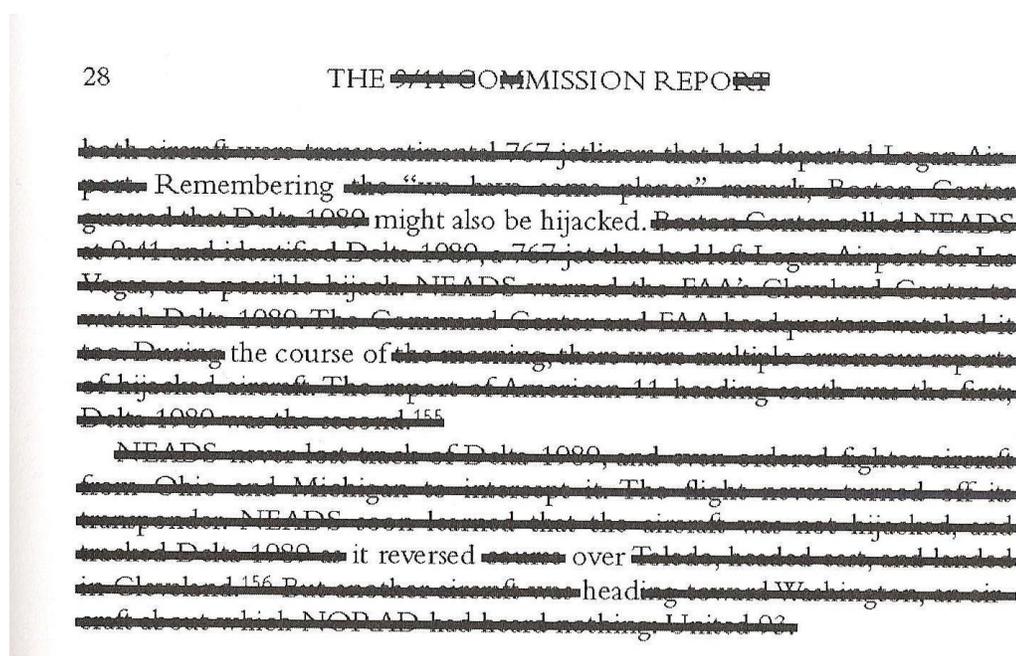
Figure 28. Detail of p. 28 of *The O Mission Repo*.

literary constraint can do.

Constraint is most associated with the neo-avant-garde group most commonly known as Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérature potentielle*), an idiosyncratic conglomeration of mathematicians and writers interested in both theorizing and engineering literary forms based on extreme constraints and rule-bound procedures. Its most famous members included Marcel Duchamp and Italo Calvino, and its most famous text might be Georges Perec's *La Disparition* (1969), a 300-page novel, which, as a *lipogram*, refrains from using the letter *e* for the entirety of the text. Though Oulipian works may appear to be indulgently perverse diversions or merely formalist parlor tricks, literary constraint can

stage a profound and moving engagement between the intricacies of the word and the wider world. (Perec's novel, of course, acknowledges, if obliquely, the "disappearance" of his mother during the Holocaust.) During a 2005 conference in Los Angeles, Oulipo member Paul Fournel, cited Jean Lescure, who maintained that constraint is intended "to force language to say what does not want to be said" ["pour faire parler dans le langage ce qui ne veut pas parler"] (40). I want to suggest that this amounts to a powerful ethics, if not a politics, of poetic form.

In the case of Rabinowitz's *Darkling* and Philip's *Zong!*—"what does not want to be said" is related not so much to the system of relations between "the said and the unsaid" which grounded Foucault's counter-intuitive but provocative conception of "the archive" (see my discussion of Foucault in chapter two); rather, Rabinowitz's and Philip's use of constraint attempts to force a witnessing, in poetic language, of testimony. This impossible witnessing is an important acknowledgement of the unarchivable. Rabinowitz's use of the acrostic—which, by some accounts, was originally a mnemotechnic device—allows her to bear witness to and sing of those who, according to the poem's introductory tercet (which acts as a stark and sobering proem), "did not wish to sing." The poetry of *Darkling* is inextricably marked by a paradoxical logic, an awareness of "singing your song without singing your song" (29). Similarly, in *Zong!*, Philip tells what she calls "a story that cannot but must be told," a story that "can only be told by not telling." This impossibility of speech (of telling, of singing) is, for Agamben, what makes testimony possible and is, paradoxically, what guarantees the ethical honoring of the dead. In this way, *Darkling* and *Zong!* use constraint to perform the work of elegy.

Rabinowitz's and Philip's approaches go not only beyond the limits of history but beyond the limits of memory as well. They are not solely interested in the passage from history to memory (in the manner of Steedman); rather they wish to perform in their poems the difficult adherence to what Agamben calls the "unforgettable" (or in a more fragmentary and lyrical moment the "immemorable").[104]   In a discussion of messianism in Paul the Apostle's Letter to the Romans, Agamben says:

> The exigency of the lost does not entail being remembered and commemorated; rather, it entails remaining in us and with us as forgotten, and in this way and only in this way, remaining unforgettable. From this stems the inadequacy in trying to restore to memory what is forgotten by inscribing it in the archives and monuments of history, or in trying to construct another tradition and history, of the oppressed and the defeated. While their history may be written with different tools than that of the dominant classes, it will never substantially differ from it… The alternatives at this juncture are therefore not to forget or remember, to be unaware or become conscious, but rather, the determining factor is the capacity to remain faithful to that which having perpetually been forgotten, must remain unforgettable. (*The Time that Remains* 40)

It is tempting to claim that Rabinowitz and Philip are constructing a tradition and a history of the oppressed; but the difficulty of their poems and the extremity of their aesthetics point, in my mind, to a different ambition: an anti-monumental engagement

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[104] Agamben says, "The immemorable, which skips from memory to memory without itself ever coming to mind, is, properly speaking, the unforgettable. This unforgettable oblivion is language, the human word" (*Idea of Prose* 68).

with the unforgettable.[105] The concept of the unforgettable animates, in subtle but

important ways, much of Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the

Archive*, and that will be the key text from which I will construct my theoretical

framework.

　　To be sure, *Remnants of Auschwitz* is a controversial text and any sympathetic

engagement with it will necessitate a certain amount of risk. J.M. Bernstein offers

perhaps the most provocatively scathing criticism of the book when he says,

"[w]itnessing in Agamben becomes, finally, an aesthetic act; witnessing aestheticises the

remnant, producing a pornographic scene, the pornography of horror." For Bernstein,

this appropriation of witnessing "suppresses the very ethical space it means to elaborate"

(4). In a similar but slightly less damning register, Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg find

Agamben's formulations to be "problematic and inadequate" for his "remov[ing of] the

figure of the *Muselmann* from the context—the camps—in which he or she is

'produced'…[as well as from] the historical, legal and political conditions that led to the

development of the camp system." In Agamben's treatment, so their logic goes, the

Muselmann (which was the slang word that referred to the most impoverished of camp

prisoners, mute and at the edge of death) floats "like a Giacometti sculpture…in an

otherwise apparently empty abstract space" (29-30).[106] If Agamben aestheticizes ethics,

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[105] I am not in any way *against* a tradition of the oppressed so as much as I want to identify other models
for an oppositional cultural practice. As Benjamin says in "On the Concept of History": "[t]he tradition of
the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of exception' in which we live is the rule" (392). The relationship
between Benjamin and Agamben is outside of the scope of this chapter, but Agamben's work on the state
of exception is, to my mind, an important and immensely relevant extension of Benjaminian thought. See
Agamben's *State of Exception*.

[106] Levi and Rothberg's reference to the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti is a loaded and ambiguous one.
Giacometti denied the explicit linkage between his post-war sculptures and Holocaust prisoners—"I never
tried to make thin sculptures….They became thin in spite of me"—though Levi and Rothberg's perhaps
gratuitous simile begs difficult questions about artistic intention and if the autonomous art object can
actually transform its context into an "empty abstract space" (qtd. in Wilson 227).

as Bernstein claims, I'd like to read *Remnants of Auschwitz* through the "ethicized aesthetics" of Rabinowitz and Philip to more forcefully demonstrate the ways in which poetry's linguistic capabilities can attest to what eludes rational knowledge and sense-making. And if Agamben moves somewhat cursorily from the historically-situated figure of the *Muselmann* to arrive at an abstract theory of testimony, as Levi and Rothberg claim, I'd like to supplement Agamben's thought about the remnant with Rabinowitz's and Philip's books, which are both framed by a rigorous historical particularity. To my understanding, Agamben does not so much take the figure of the *Muselmann* out of (a "historical, legal, and political") context so much as he inserts it into a different one (a context that is not legal but ethical, not political—in Levi and Rothberg's sense of the term—but biopolitical).[107] Agamben, I maintain, is not interested in turning witnessing into an aesthetic act but in insisting that aesthetic acts should be predicated upon bearing witness to "the voice of something or someone that…cannot bear witness" (*Remnants* 39). But my primary goal is not so much to defend Agamben's (admittedly extreme) philosophical thinking than it is to use his illuminating ideas about language, testimony, the unsayable, and subjectivity as a theoretical hinge to bring together two books that rely upon similar poetic techniques to address two distinct traumatic histories. In the end, I concur with Levi and Rothberg that "[r]ecognition of the particular challenges posed by distinct histories, such as the Holocaust and Atlantic slavery, can coexist with a broad understanding of the possibilities and dangers of the modern world" (24). I assert that understanding Rabinowitz's *Darkling* and Philip's *Zong!* in close conjunction can shed

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[107] Agamben closes chapter two of *Remnants of Auschwitz* with a reflection on "the camps in the system of Nazi biopolitics": "[t]hey are not merely the place of death and extermination; they are also, and above all, the site of the production of the *Muselmann*, the final biopolitical substance to be isolated in the biological continuum" (85).

new light on the possibilities for twenty-first century poetic praxis; if nothing else, an

engagement with Agamben's thinking through paradox—for which he is (in)famous—

can help us reckon with the major paradoxes that animate these crucial and ambitious

books.

"By figment or fragment": The Archive and Testimony in Anna Rabinowitz's *Darkling*

> The past belongs to the dead.
> —Elie Wiesel

> As if all this thinking restores the dead, undead
> —Anna Rabinowitz

> (Unasylumed, un-
> archived, un-
> cared for, a
> -live?)
> —Paul Celan

A word used by Milton (in Book III of *Paradise Lost*) and Keats (in "Ode to a

Nightingale"), "darkling" came to be associated, at least after Matthew Arnold's "Dover

Beach" (1867), with poems that documented moments of severe historical crisis. The

ending of Arnold's quasi-free verse poem famously metaphorizes Victorian cultural life

as a battlefield of radical uncertainty: "And we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept

with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night."

Another notable example, Walt Whitman's "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors," a dramatic

monologue contemporary with Arnold's, describes a newly emancipated slave in the

voice of one of General Sherman's soldiers marching to the sea: "Her high-borne

turban'd head she wags, and rolls her darkling eye / And courtesies to regiments, the

guidons moving by."[108] Whitman's poem is fraught with the uncertainty of a late

Reconstruction-era United States, and the woman's "darkling eye" indicates, from the

white soldier's point of view, the obscurity of "the things so strange and

marvelous…[that she] see[s] or ha[s] seen"—what is at stake in "Ethiopia Saluting the

Colors" is nothing less than the legibility of different ethnic histories and futures within a

tenuously unified and multi-racial nation.

Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush," the source text of Rabinowitz's poem,

presents a new crisis of poetic epistemology and expression. Hardy wrote it precisely at

the turn of the century on January 1, 1900 and, in the second stanza, memorably surveyed

the present landscape in terms of the newly enshrouded past: "The land's sharp features

seemed to be / The Century's corpse outleant, / His crypt the cloudy canopy, / The wind

his death-lament." The "tangled bind-stems" "[l]ike strings of broken lyres" indicate a

failure of lyric poetry to translate history—that which is "written on terrestrial things"—

into meaningful song; the modern poet, according to Hardy, has become moored in a

state of "unaware[ness]," unable to, as Sarah McKim Webster Goodwin has suggested,

"find an adequate prophecy" that can "raise that corpse [of the past] from the dead" (95).

Rabinowitz calls "The Darkling Thrush" a poem of "millennial mourning"—not only

does Hardy mourn the past century but also the very techniques (lyrico-poetic expression)

that made such mourning possible. Rabinowitz encrypts, by way of acrostics, a new text

into Hardy's canonical poem in order to fashion a "death-lament" for the millions of

victims that perished during the Holocaust. *Darkling* is a poem of "millennial mourning"

---

[108] An 1867 version of the poem called "Ethiopia Commenting" was rejected by *The Galaxy*, but Whitman included it in the 1871 *Leaves of Grass* and, in 1881, put it in the *Drum-Taps* sequence.

customized for the twenty-first century, and it suggests new techniques (or the creative resuscitation of old ones) that can confront the twentieth century's traumatic histories.

The title *Darkling*, as this historical contextualization has shown, puts Rabinowitz into conversation with a tradition of Anglo-American poetry that necessarily views a modern engagement with history as a peering through a glass darkly (or a darkling glass). Perhaps we can understand the word "darkling" in the title of Rabinowitz's book as not an adjective shorn of its noun but as a noun itself: "[a] child of darkness; one dark in nature or character" ("Darkling, n.1"). This reading suggests that Rabinowitz is a child of darkness, a child of a traumatic history. "[W]ho will acknowledge things of darkness as their own?" asks *Darkling* (33). This is, to be sure, an ethical, Adornian question for any poet writing after Auschwitz, but, for Rabinowitz, it is also an intensely personal issue that speaks to the weight of her familial inheritance. She calls the various letters and photographs that she found in her parents' house (which was all that remained of two families killed in the Holocaust) "evidence... / [s]tashed away in a corner of the closet" (30). In the *Bookslut* interview with Jessica Myers Schecter, Rabinowitz addresses the way in which her parents deliberately archived those materials away from conscious attention, imposing a taboo on their intergenerational transmission: "[I]n those days, most of this stuff got swept under the rug. Nobody wanted to talk about it. The children weren't supposed to know."

But ultimately what interests Rabinowitz is not *the stuff*, the matter which constitutes "the archive" (in a very conventional understanding of the term) of the Holocaust:

We have many Holocaust memoirs: we know all these hideous details;

we've seen the most horrible film clips -- about what happened, how

people looked. Most of it is unfathomable, but we know it. I don't mean to

suggest that this diminishes those memoirs in any way -- but it's a story

that's known. I'm not a witness. I'm not going to repeat this story or try to

repeat it. I didn't want to create another narrative. So I needed to come at

it in a different way, particularly since I didn't have the details anyway.

(Schecter)

In other words, Rabinowitz is not interested solely in what Nora calls the material traces

of historicized memory ("the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image")

even though *Darkling*'s bibliography cites many of such traces (including, for example,

Etty Hillesum's *An Interrupted Life*) and even though *Darkling*'s handsome and creative

design reproduces some of the letters, photographs, and documents (see fig 29) that

inspired the creation of the book. To put it another way: Rabinowitz could have simply

organized and published what she found in that shoebox in her parents' closet in a

facsimile edition, as a familial scrapbook of original sources that might add contextual

detail to our knowledge of what life was like on both sides of the Atlantic during the

Holocaust. But Rabinowitz chose to write a long poem instead, a long poem that took

the"different way" of literary constraint, a way that would lead to a confrontation with

testimony. In a review that appeared in *American Book Review*, poet John Olson

eloquently speaks to this alternative approach: "If you're 'stalking the unpossessable, /

entreating the impalpable,' Rabinowitz states, you need phantoms and metaphors, not a

photo album" (5).

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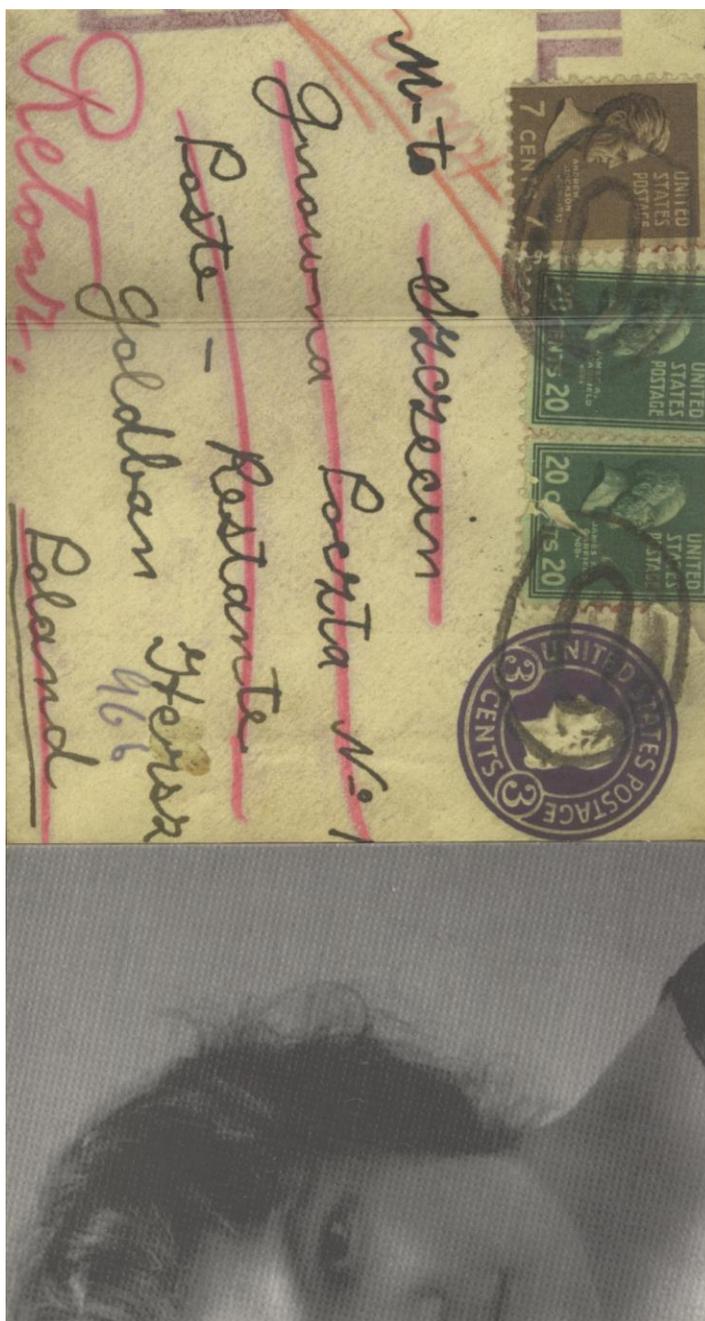
Figure 29.
The black and white photograph appears on the verso side of *Darkling*'s last page. The image of the inverted envelope is on the reverse side of the back cover and is fully visible when the "French flap" is unfolded. This envelope, meant for Poland, was, significantly, returned to its sender (the address has been crossed out with the word "Retour" inscribed below). In the *Bookslut* interview, Rabinowitz explains, "The Europeans had no idea that their relatives in America were writing to them. And the Americans didn't know the Europeans were writing to them. They really thought they had been forgotten. One wrote: 'Why have you forgotten me? Why don't you remember me?' But the truth was that the mail never arrived. And then in the end they were gone*"* (Schecter). *Darkling*, we might say, is framed by the Derridean belief that "a letter can always not arrive at its destination…Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving" (*The Post Card* 444).

But we, the readers, who, in fact, receive the language of the letters feel powerfully interpellated, as if the words were uncannily bound for us (As Barbara Johnson has said, in a chiastic reformulation of Lacan, "A letter always arrives at its destination *since its destination is wherever it arrives*" (qtd. in Zizek 10)). "To my dear brother and sister-in-law, / Have you been gone so long to write so little? / Upon our knees, we beseech you — do not become / Strangers, keep us informed… / Taste our cries, touch our fires / do not mention us in passing — // Our screams — wild for our shadows — (surely they did not intend their leave-taking?) / tumble from us like unstrung beads" (*Darkling* 53).

Rabinowitz's insistence not "to repeat th[e] story [of the Holocaust] or try to repeat it" through a memoiristic mode of vivid detail echoes Agamben's tactical/methodological choice not to reproduce at length already-existing testimonial or eye-witness accounts. In the "Preface" to *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben says, "Some readers may be disappointed to find that there is little in this book that cannot already be found in the testimonies of survivors. In its form, this book is a kind of perpetual commentary on testimony" (13). He thus preempts criticism (which he eventually received) for focusing on philosophical commentary and not the wealth of testimonies available in the historical record. For example, Geoffrey H. Hartman quips that "[Agamben's] position neglects, when it comes specifically to the Holocaust, thousands of survivor testimonies that actually exist" (90). Yet the core of Agamben's project is to interrogate what he calls "the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension" (12). Rabinowitz's book wrestles with a similar aporia; she maintains, "what I cannot know, I must not forget" (27).[109] Can one even remember what one does not know? Is remembering equivalent to not forgetting? How does one attain the non-knowledge of the unforgettable? What does one do with it? Agamben's powerful and suggestive conception of the "exigency of the lost" has already provided us with some clues about how to answer these questions. A close textual analysis of *Darkling* will allow us to elaborate these answers and will provide perhaps stronger literary examples than the ones Agamben provided in *Remnants of Auschwitz*.

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[109] Rabinowitz's statement reprises Blanchot's observation about the relationship between the "knowledge of horror" and the "horror of knowledge": "The wish of all, in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know" (82).

To be clear: I am advancing an Agambenian reading in this chapter not to discount the value of a work like Charles Reznikoff's *Holocaust* (1975), an important work of found poetry that lineates and collages eye-witness accounts taken from transcripts of the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials. Rather, I want to present an interpretive framework that can appreciate poetic works that wish to confront the "non-coincidence between facts and truth," that strive to ethically respond to the past in ways that go beyond the limits of history and memory, and, finally, that wish to bear witness to the unarchivable. For Reznikoff's documentary project, "[w]hat is important is what is said" (qtd. in Sutherland 92). For Rabinowitz, on the other hand, what is important is something like the opposite: not the unsaid but the unsayable. Like Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*, *Darkling* is a perpetual commentary on testimony; it is an investigation of "inventories, incidents — / pleading to be flossed / from the teeth of silence" (3) as well as a listening for what is "[w]*alled up* / *whelmed in the unutterable* / *Incised in the unforgettable*" (57). If the ethics of Reznikoff's *Holocaust* relies upon—to cite the opposing, titular terms of Primo Levi's final memoir—honoring the words of *the saved*, the ethics of *Darkling* is predicated upon bearing witness to *the drowned*. Rabinowitz is surely after what we might call "comprehension" of the Holocaust and her family's history, though she readily admits that she is not in a position to provide any historical "verification" since—as *Darkling*'s dust jacket makes clear—the "factual details are largely lost." Yet Rabinowitz's project militates against the notion of a total loss, of total oblivion. One of *Darkling*'s six epigraphs is a quote from John Berryman's *The Dream Songs* (a quote which, as Rabinowitz suggests, should be read in the context of *The Black Book*, Berryman's unfinished suite of Holocaust poems): "Nobody is ever

missing." Rabinowitz's seemingly contradictory hope of recovering those who "did not want to sing" in the face of "[a]rchival dwindle" (50), in the face of archival loss, is made possible through Agamben's "exigency of the lost"—not through remembering (by passing from the *archive* into *memory*) but through attention to the "immemorable" (by passing from *testimony* to the *unforgettable*).

Rather than telling "another narrative," much of the beginning of *Darkling* reflects upon the impossibility of narrative's very telling. "Again and again the narrative howls for words," says Rabinowitz, "Circling, leaping into / / out of / shade, but it makes / Only wrong turns" (3). And again, she reflects upon the utter inaccessibility of history, of the possibility of assembling the fragments of the past into a textual whole: "The troved treasure of histories [is] closed, / Reduced to an index of footnotes bereft of a text" (5). But if Rabinowitz finds it impossible to make a coherent narrative when researching and foraging through the "[t]angled bindweed in the debris of what had occurred" (8), she takes as her task in *Darkling* a necromantic performance, the equally impossible "restor[ation of]...the dead"—"[a]s if a pen's breathprint clears heartlands where the / Nearly nulled rise like saplings from the austere / Drive of an unsummoned earth…" (12). The "[n]early nulled" here are not the survivors, the ones who were nearly killed, but the true witnesses that experienced the full horrors of the death camps—examples of what Agamben calls "the 'complete witness'" (a synonym for Primo Levi's "integral witness.") As Agamben says, "not even the survivor can bear witness completely" (*Remnants* 39); this is the extreme paradox that is witnessing. Rabinowitz, like Agamben, thus differentiates between a witness who objectively corroborates an empirical reality (*terstis*) and one who carries a "non-juridical element of truth…such that

the *quaestio facti* can never be reduced to the *quaestio iuris*" (17) (see fig 30). The

"[n]early nulled," I want to suggest, refer to the *Muselmänner*, the true witnesses, the

ones who have "'touched bottom' in the camp," who have endured such intense

desubjectification and cruelty that their autistic unresponsiveness and apathetic despair

mark "the threshold between the human and the inhuman," a threshold which, indeed,

makes the human and inhuman indiscernible (54-5).[110] The survivors like Levi, on the

other hand, speak on behalf of the true witnesses. Agamben calls them "proxy-" or

"pseudo-witnesses." "And yet," he elaborates,

> to speak here of a proxy makes no sense; the drowned have nothing to say,
>
> *nor do they have instructions or memories to be transmitted*…Whoever
>
> assumes the charges of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she
>
> must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness. (34,
>
> emphasis mine)

Rabinowitz, I argue, has assumed this charge; thus, her concerns go beyond Steedman's

relation between the institutional place that is the archive and the unbounded space that is

memory or Nora's polarized relationship between a living, affective memory and a

reconstructed history. The *Muselmänner* do not have "instructions or memories to be

transmitted," yet they are those who burn, like Derrida's cinders, insistently in our

memories. As Agamben says, the *Muselmann* "is truly the *larva* [in the sense of the

Latin term "specter"] that our memory cannot succeed in burying, the unforgettable with

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[110] According to Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, "the *Muselmänner,* the drowned form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand" (qtd. in Agamben, *Remnants* 44). Agamben explains that there is no consensus regarding the derivation of the word *Muselmann*, but "[t]he most likely explanation of the term can be found in the literal meaning of the Arabic word *muslim*: the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God" (45).
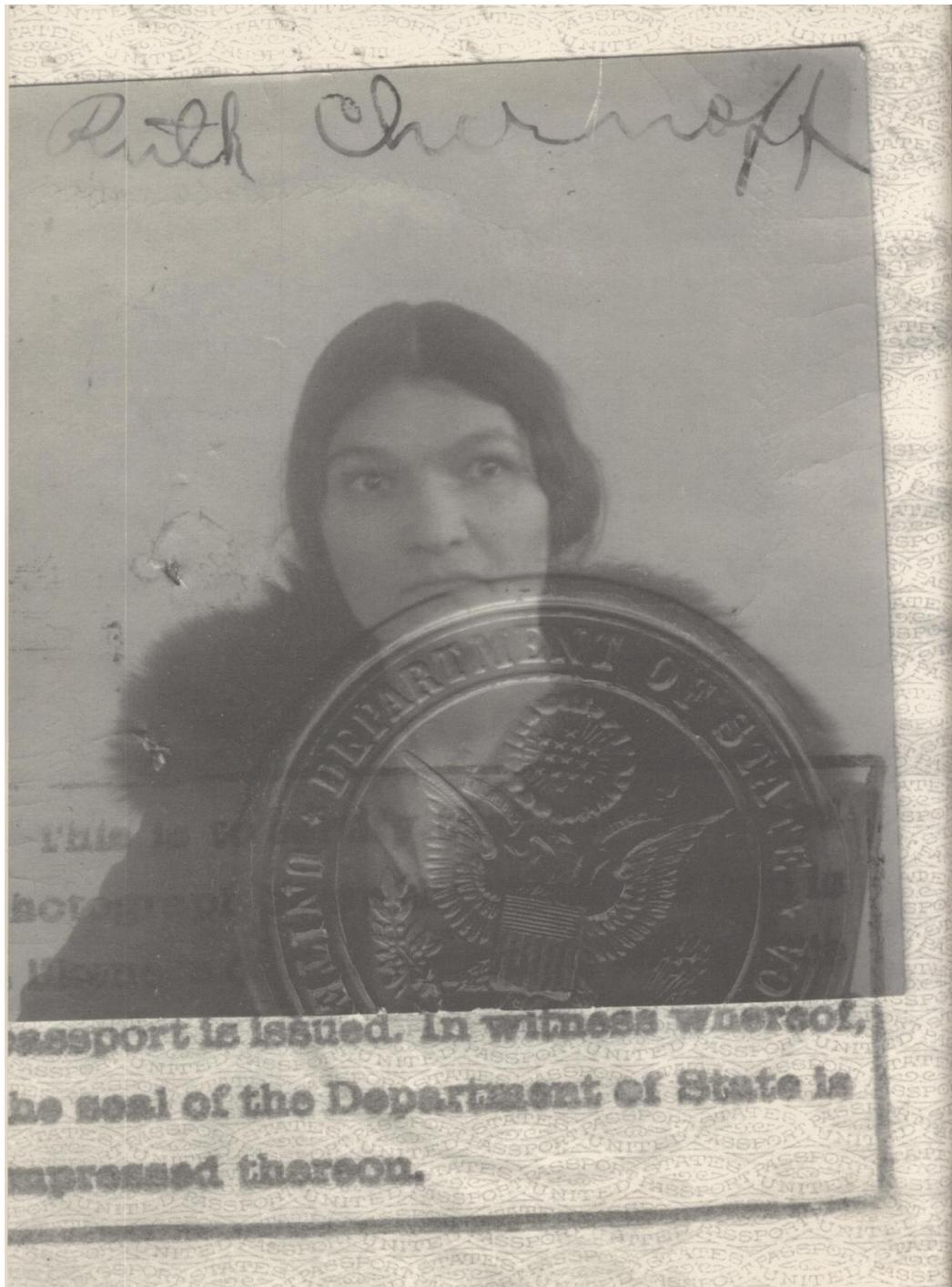
Figure 30. This image of the passport photo of Rabinowitz's mother, Ruth Chernoff Goldban (1902-1983), precedes the book's epigraphs and dedicatory proem. The photo's legend that is cropped links witnessing to state authority: "This is to certify that the photograph attached hereto is a likeness of the person to whom this passport is issued. In witness whereof the seal of the Department of State is impressed upon the photograph." Rabinowitz, as I have been arguing, is interested in the authority of another kind of witnessing—not a legalistic or juridical witnessing but an ethical bearing witness "in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness" (*Remnants* 34). She is, in short, interested in not only the documented but the undocumented. This creates an ongoing epistemological tension between the family documents reproduced in *Darkling* and the poetic text itself; this tension reflects Rabinowitz's confrontation with the "non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension" (*Remnants* 12).

whom we must reckon" (81). To return to Rabinowitz's phrase, the *Muselmänner* are the

"[n]early nulled," but it is this *nearly*—that is, the *Muselmänner*'s resistance to being

fully buried, their unforgettableness—that gives Rabinowitz the hope that her "pen's

breathprint" can resuscitate them through the virtual CPR that is poetry. For her,

remembering is not enough.

The impossibility of witnessing—the fact that "[n]oone / bears witness for the /

witness" (99) as Paul Celan memorably expressed in *Breathturn* (1967), a book to which

Rabinowitz pays explicit homage in her Celan-like compound "breathprint"—is perhaps

most evident in *Darkling* when Rabinowitz speculates what it would be like to put herself

in the role of the survivor:

> Had I lived this —
>
>   even then —
>
> Everything would be missing —
>   even so —
>   stalking the unpossessable,
>   entreating the impalpable —
>
> I would forage through Nothingness —
>
>   in case —
>
>   in
> Case —
>
>   even then —
>
>   by figment or fragment —
>
>   it was there
>   (22-3)

When Rabinowitz makes a point to state in the interview that she is "not a witness," she

means that she is obviously not an "integral witness" or a "total witness" but that she is

not a "pseudo-witness" as well. But even if she had lived through the camps as one of the saved, as this passage makes clear, "[e]verything" would [still] be missing." This "everything" is nothing other than the missing testimony of what Agamben, following Levi, calls "the drowned." Yet Rabinowitz still—if only subjunctively (through the phrase "I would")—accepts the charge of searching through "Nothingness" and stalking "the unpossessable." She suggests that the "figment" and "fragment" (or the *fashioned fragment* or the *fragmented figment*) can occupy the middle ground between "facts and truth, between verification and comprehension." One notices in the passage above the way in which Rabinowitz breaks open the acrostic form (few sections of the book pay strict allegiance to the rigorous determinations of the left-hand margin). The three letters "HE C" that run along the left-hand margin correspond to letters in Hardy's phrase "[h]is crypt tHE Cloudy canopy, / The wind his-death lament," though Rabinowitz, in open-form style, liberally inserts lines unconnected to the letters of the source text.[111] This creates a multi-dimensional space in which the letters along the left-hand margin represent the plane of memory—tethered as they are to past material traces—while the portions that veer toward the right-hand margin inhabit, as it were, the immemorable space (or the non-space) of "the unpossessable," of "Nothingness." But in order to more clearly understand what Rabinowitz means by "the unpossessable," the *there*-ness of "Nothingness," we need to understand Agamben's crucial distinction between the archive and testimony.

---

[111] Rabinowitz says, "after a while I could not honor the left hand margin. It just didn't work. I didn't know what I was going to do because now I wasn't really writing an acrostic anymore. But then I've always been willing to break the form. I said to myself this is the perfect form to *break* because you're working with fragments, so why not let the acrostic be fragmentary as well?" (Schecter).

Beginning where Foucault left off, Agamben calls the archive "the unsaid or sayable inscribed in everything said by virtue of being enunciated" (*Remnants* 144). The archive is not, as Foucault has insisted, "the library of all libraries" (an archive of documentary plenitude) but the system of rules situated "between tradition and oblivion" that determines the creation and modification of discursive statements (*Archaeology* 146). Agamben calls it the "dark margin encircling and limiting every concrete speech act"—a kind of counter- or alter-archive that shadows every archivable statement. Foucault's redefinition of the archive is meant to be a corrective to an older, obsolete practice of what he calls a "total" or "continuous" history "that made use of material documents to refresh its memory" (7). Agamben continues Foucault's anti-historicist line of thinking in order to posit, after Auschwitz, what we might call an ethics of an enunciative unsayability:

> In opposition to the archive, which designates the system of relations between the unsaid and the said, we give the name *testimony* to the system of relations between the inside and the outside of *langue*, between the sayable and the unsayable in every language—that is, between a potentiality of speech and its existence, between a possibility and an impossibility of speech. (145)

The unsayable, the impossibility of speech, is the domain of Rabinowitz's "unpossessable" (elsewhere Agamben says, "*Testimony takes place in the non-place of articulation*") (130). This is why *Darkling* is filled with references to what Agamben calls "non-language"; it is, indeed, obsessed with the unsayable and the inarticulable or in the blurring of the articulate and inarticulate. Rabinowitz is interested in, as we have

already seen, a narrative that "howls" for rather than signifies with words. She is interested in "frayed echoes [that] / …dissolve…out of shadowrange" (10), in "a stutter / between two voids (24), in "silence exiled from / sounds of uncountable generations," in "language with the grammar beaten out of it" (28), in "a vocabulary…[with] merely howls and ash to record it" (29), in "[p]articles of data unable to testify" (52), in those who were "[f]luent with anecdote torn from their mouths" (51).

The ethical element of the unsayable should now be coming closer into view. Rabinowitz's staging of a howling and ashen vocabulary (as in the words "*dungfire / bonemoulder   ashbreeze*") (75) and a stuttering fluency and beaten grammar (as in the phrase "*Upon a time hardened regions / once a time ambushed*") is for the sake of the true witnesses, the ones who had their own stories—and the capability of telling them—sundered from their mouths (56). Agamben posits the existence of two types of unsayabilities that parallel the poet's unsayability and the unsayability of those fluent "with anecdote torn from their mouths":

> [T]estimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance—that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness. To bear witness, it is therefore not enough to bring language to its own non-sense, to the pure undecidability of letters…It is necessary that this senseless sound be, in

turn, the voice of something or someone that, for entirely other reasons,

cannot bear witness. (39)

Rabinowitz's disarticulation and deliberately awkward re-articulation of the phrase "once

upon a time" in the example above risks bringing language to its non-sense, to a state in

which it cannot bear witness; but this move toward unsayability is a bearing witness for

those who cannot bear witness. It is not only a transmission of memory in the language

of fact (the language of "Once upon a time" that Benjamin derisively likened to a

"whore…in historicism's bordello"); it is also a language of poetry that keeps the

unremembered and dismembered unforgettable ("On the Concept of History" 396).

Agamben's logic of testimony, as Leland de la Durantaye observes, links one

impossibility of bearing witness with "a second one that is not empirical but

transcendental, insofar as it concerns not the actual possibilities and impossibilities of

testifying for another but the structure of linguistic signification itself" (260). The

Muselmänner cannot testify because, on a purely empirical level, they have been

traumatized to the point of speechlessness and unresponsiveness and because they have

not survived to tell their story. But, for Agamben, speaking itself is "a paradoxical act

that implies both subjectification and desubjectification, in which the living

individual…becom[es] a speaking being only on condition of falling into silence" (129).

This relation that Agamben establishes through analogy—"where language does not

make sense…it becomes *like* the language of testimony" (Durantaye 261)—makes him

susceptible to critique. Geoffrey Hartman, for example, wonders if Agamben is

"exploiting the Holocaust as an extreme occurrence in order to exemplify a well-known

thesis (89). And, according to J. M. Bernstein, Agamben's theorization of testimony is

not an ethical response to the *Muselmann* but "an aestheticization of his fate for the sake

of a metaphysics of language…And while that metaphysics of language may or may not

be more ethically capacious than the enlightened rationality it means to displace, nothing

in *Remnants* speaks to what that metaphysics concretely requires" (17). I argue that

Rabinowitz's *Darkling* offers a concrete example of such an ethically capacious

metaphysics. Moreover, Agamben's linkage between one impossibility of language with

another impossibility makes clear that "the structure of linguistic signification itself"

presents a crucial opportunity for identification—the poet can identify, through a

disarticulation, her own insignificance with "a different insignificance."

The charge of aestheticization against Agamben is curious in the context of

Agamben's critique of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. In their commentary on Claude

Lanzmann's documentary film *Shoah*, Felman and Laub state, "Each testimony speaks to

us beyond its words, beyond its melody, like the unique performance of a singing" (qtd.

in *Remants* 36). This is Agamben's canny response, which should guide our

understanding of the relation between testimony and aesthetics: "To explain the paradox

of testimony through the deus ex machina of song is to aestheticize testimony…Neither

the poem nor the song can intervene to save impossible testimony; on the contrary, it is

testimony, if anything, that founds the possibility of the poem" (36). Testimony requires

not a redemptive singing but the exigency of the lost which might authorize another kind

of song—what Philip calls "the Song of the untold story" that constitutes *Zong!* (207).

Agamben then moves to a brief discussion of Celan's poetry through Levi's reading of

Celan's inscrutable "background noise": "I think that Celan the poet must be considered

and mourned rather than imitated. If his is a message, it is lost in the 'background noise.'

It is not communication; it is not a language, or at the most it is a dark and maimed language" (qtd. in *Remnants* 37). We can see here how Agamben can posit that the non-language of testimony can establish the founding possibility of Celan's "background noise," his "dark and maimed language." But it is a bit puzzling why Agamben didn't return to Celan or a more carefully historicized example in his subsequent discussions of poetry in chapters three and four of *Remnants of Auschwitz*. I think he is right in highlighting the importance of poetry's function in relation to the structure of witnessing though he could have benefitted from a more persuasive corpus, one which could have deflected the numerous criticisms of irrelevance and aestheticization. The poet, for Agamben, is the exemplary witness because "[i]n the Western literary tradition, the act of poetic creation and, indeed, perhaps every act of speech implies something like a desubjectification (poets have named this desubjectification the 'Muse')" (*Remants* 113). It is this act of desubjectification that enables the emergence of "the voice of something or someone [else]." Agamben's examples form a motley collocation; they include Keats' assertion that "the poetical Character…has no self," the remarkable creation and proliferation of Fernando Pessoa's many heteronyms (such as Alberto Caeiro), Arthur Rimbaud's famous formulation that "'I' is another," and the glossolalia (*lalein glōssē*) of religious traditions.[112]

By situating *Darkling* and *Zong!* within the framework of testimony and desubjectification, we can do in this chapter what Agamben did not: differentiate between historically-marked types of desubjectification and different varieties and intensities of

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[112] Durantaye's commentary on chapter three nicely encapsulates the questionable applicability of these examples: "What does this have to do with Auschwitz, with those who survived it, those who testified to it and to its 'remnants'? The connection is not an easy one to make, and Agamben first leads his readers through an excursus on poetic subjectivity, discussing Keats, Dante, Pessoa, and others, without a clear end in sight" (280).

glossolalia; indeed, we can historicize different kinds of testimony without an overly

general recourse to "the Western literary tradition." A notable example of glossolalia—it

might be more properly an occurrence of *xenoglossy* or a polyvocal, polyglot irruption—

occurs when Rabinowitz is describing a particularly horrific occurrence:

> *Walled up   whelmed in the unutterable*
> *Incised   in the unforgettable*
> *Nightmare   of nothing   and notbeing*
>
>> indecipherable hieroglyphs   hurled this hour
>> at two thousand Jews in the shtetl   az men
>> klingt   when church bells ring   goyim
>> have a holiday   WHEN THERE'S SMOKE   there's fire
>
> *Grammar of ashword   syntax of howl* (57)

The alternation between roman, italicized, and capitalized typefaces indicates a shifting

of vocal registers. The snippet "az men / klingt" is the first part of the Yiddish phrase *az*

men klingt iz oder a khoge, oder a peyger, oder a sreyfe ("when church bells peal, it's

either a [Gentile] holiday, a funeral, or a fire") (Kumove 139). We can see that this

phrase has been fragmented and deformed as Rabinowitz's construction repeats the initial

snippet in English ("when church bells ring"), proceeds to paraphrase the rest in a crude

and mongrelized form ("goyim have a holiday"), then inserts another idiom that shares

the same last word as the original saying ("WHEN THERE'S SMOKE there's fire.") If

not a true form of glossolalia, this is a stuttering concatenation of voices with a

glossolalic tic—its casual idiomatic registers ironically link the "smoke" and "fire" to the

Nazi incinerators (which are expressed through an unsayable "[g]rammar of ashword

[and a] syntax of howl") and the ringing bells of the church to a signaling of what

Agamben, after Benjamin, calls a "state of emergency" ["stato di emergenza" /

"Ausnahmezustand"], which is produced by a spectacular abuse of sovereign law that

paradoxically authorizes lawlessness (The Reichstag Fire Decree is, of course, a most egregious example of this) (Durantaye 435). Later in this chapter, we will see a more radical form of glossolalia in Philip's *Zong!*, but, for now, we should note the importance of the presence of Yiddish in *Darkling*; elsewhere Rabinowitz calls Yiddish "the only tongue without / a vocabulary for war: merely howls and ash to record it" (29). It is thus, for Rabinowitz, a strategic language to inhabit when speaking not for herself but for the drowned.

To return to Agamben's perhaps overly Romantic or transhistorical understanding of desubjectification—it is one thing to say, with Keats, "Darkling I listen; and, for many a time / I have been half in love with easeful Death"; it is quite another to say, with Rabinowitz:

> Every day a new an-other, a bruised
>   ignorance   *in this difficulty*
> Bleeds from me containing   *among shards*
> Losses and the long dead I did not know
>
>   (74)

We might consider this passage from *Darkling*—which, through the italicized type, mimics the marginal glosses of midrashic hermeneutics—as a remarkable example of negative capability after Auschwitz. The unawareness that closes Hardy's "Darkling Thrush" ("And I was unaware," goes the last line) is, at root, a reiteration of Keatsian negative capability with a millenarian difference. Rabinowitz, in turn, transforms this unawareness to "a bruised / ignorance," which reflects the historicity of writing at the beginning of the new century; it reflects an Adornian resistance to the verdict that the event of Auschwitz has rendered poetry unwritable. Rabinowitz's difficult confrontation with the dead that perished in the Holocaust, those who did not wish to sing, nicely

exemplifies the process of desubjectification in which the "*I-other* stands in an

impossibility of speaking" and in which "an impossibility of speaking…in an unknown

way, come[s] to speech" (Agamben, *Remnants* 117). Rabinowitz figures this traumatic

coming to speech as "a bruised ignorance," a leakage or hemorrhaging of alterity: it is a

transmission of loss but also a transmission, through language, of the unforgettable ("the

long dead I did not know.") We can infer that such a leakage aspires to contain the loss

of what Rabinowitz has called a "*[g]ematria drowned in / Liquid numbers*" (57); the

Hebrew term *gematria*, which is based on the Greek word for geometry, "is the general

term for a variety of traditional Jewish coding practices used by the Jewish mystic-poets

to establish correspondences between words or series of words based on the numerical

equivalences of the sums of their letters or the interchange of letters according to a set

system" (Rothenberg, *Pre-faces* 158).[113] Rabinowitz's desubjectification-by-acrostic is a

way to establish a link between the constraint-based poetics of *gematria* and her own

(admittedly less restrictive) procedures of poetic coding. This means that if Rabinowitz's

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[113] Rothenberg explains further: "The numerical method—*gematria* per se—typically took *alef* as 1, *bet* as 2, *yod* as 10, *kuf* as 100, etc., through *tav* (last letter) as 400—although more complicated methods (e.g., reduction to single digits, etc.) were later introduced. Non-numerical methods included: (1) anagrams, or the rearrangement of the letters of a word to form a new word or word series, as "god" to "dog" in English; (2) *notarikon,* the derivation of a new word from the initial letters of several others & vice versa, as "god," say, from "garden of delight;" & (3) *temura,* various systems of letter codes, e.g. the common one in which the first half of the alphabet is placed over the second & letters are substituted between the resultant rows, etc., *in search of meaningful combinations*" (*Pre-faces* 158). Rothenberg's own "14 Stations," which is a series of gematrias based on the names of 14 extermination camps, is another constraint-based work that addresses the Holocaust through procedural desubjectification. In speaking of what I have been calling, after Agamben, *desubjectification*, Rothenberg uses the term "objectivity": "The full series of fourteen poems was written to accompany Arie Galles's monumental charcoal drawings derived from World War II aerial views of the principal Nazi extermination camps---each with an attendant railroad station---known even then to have been the sites of holocaust. As Galles worked from documentary photographs to establish some pretense at distance (= objectivity), I decided to objectify by turning again to gematria (traditional Hebrew numerology) as a way to determine the words and phrases that would come into the poems. The counts were made off the Hebrew and/or Yiddish spellings of the camp names, then keyed to the numerical values of words and word combinations in the first five books of the Bible…It is my hope that this small degree of objective chance will not so much mask feeling or meaning as allow them to emerge" (*Writing Through* 188). This is the poem "Stutthof" in its entirety: "the evil water / in my dream // has emptied out / their cities // like my mouth / a hole // & in the blood / they burn // they turn them / into smoke." See his *Gematria Complete* (Grosse Pointe Farms, MI: Marick Press, 2009).

desubjectification is historically specific, so too is the mode of its technical achievement.
I want to extend and update Agamben's discussion about poetry and suggest that literary
constraint is a crucial technique for desubjectifcation, for forcing an uncanny colloquy
between *I* and *other*. Agamben describes the singular moment of Pessoa "standing
up…in a kind of ecstasy" as he wrote "thirty-odd poems" from "his nonexistence as
Alberto Caeiro" (*Remnants* 119). We might compare "this incomparable phenomenology
of heteronymic depersonalization" with the phenomenology of Rabinowitz's constraint-
bound compositional process in which she gathers together the nonexistence of spectral
presences:

> Disembodied voices, spoken and sung, vestigial utterances, shifting
>
> grounds, indeterminate events, ruptured histories. How does one make a
>
> poem from so much that is broken, unraveled, erased? Somehow, using
>
> Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush," as my armature to hold the
>
> scraps together, I made a book-length acrostic poem. It seemed a miracle.
>
> (Rabinowitz, "Liner Notes" 3)

Both accounts seem equally "miraculous" and both recount the way in which "an
impossibility of speaking has, *in an unknown way*, come to speech" (emphasis mine).
Poetic constraint—whether through acrostic, anagram, or erasure—makes this "way" less
unknown and does much to demystify the ecstatic imagination of the poet. To be even
more specific: poetic constraints that subject found texts (such as "The Darkling Thrush"
or *Gregson v. Gilbert*) to appropriative procedures can make the "miraculous" leap from
the material traces of the archive to the unforgettable of testimony. I maintain that the
phenomenology of Rabinowitz's depersonalization, unlike Pessoa's, is eminently

comparable and offers promising directions for the twenty-first century long poem. *How does one make a poem from so much that is broken, unraveled, erased? Darkling* addresses this question through procedural constraint, which, as I am suggesting, can be a powerful poetic practice of the exigency of the lost.

I'd like to reread the striking phrase "Every day a new an-other, a bruised / ignorance / Bleeds from me containing / Losses and the long dead I did not know" through a Celanian lens in order to arrive at a specifically postwar understanding of Agamben's conception of the *remnant*. The "long dead," invoked by Rabinowitz, can be found "unlost" amid the "losses" because language—"[i]n a kind of philological *nekuia*" (*Remnants* 161)—passes through the unsayable, through what Celan calls "the thousand darknesses of deathbringing talk." This is a passage from Celan's oft-cited Bremen Prize speech (from 1958) in which he articulates a metaphysics of language after Auschwitz:

> Reachable, near and unlost amid the losses, this one thing remained: language. This thing, language, remained unlost, yes, in spite of everything. But it had to go through its own loss of answers, had to go through terrifying muteness, had to go through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing talk. It went through and gave no words for that which happened; yet it went through this happening. Went through and was able to come back to light "enriched" by it all. (qtd. in Carson 29)

The "terrifying muteness" of Agamben's unsayability is understood here in the context of the Shoah. In *Darkling*, Rabinowitz derides what Celan calls "deathbringing talk," the Nazi perversion of language, through a piece of mock propaganda that ruthlessly fuses a modernist aesthetics with a thanatopolitics: "OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT: we

proudly report a new technique for site-specific articulation of negative space / … /

Hundreds of Jews were laid face up in a grid-like pattern. / Enticements to the eye were

provided by wobbly reliefs of bodies on / Cobbled stone" (61). Language that survives

and bears witness to such historical trauma, that is stricken by reality (to use a Celanian

phrase), must, according to this metaphysics, return to us "maimed" but also "enriched"

by the unforgettable; only then can it form a poetry of what Celan has called the

"singable remnant" (*Paul Celan* 99). It is curious indeed that Agamben cited Hölderlin

and not Celan when introducing, at the end of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, his concept of the

remnant. What Celan calls "the unlost" *is* the remnant in an Agambenian sense:

> Hölderlin's statement that "what remains is what the poets found" (*Was*
>
> *bleibt, stiften die Dichter*) is not to be understood in the trivial sense that
>
> poets' works are things that last and remain throughout time. Rather, it
>
> means that the poetic word is the one that is always situated in the position
>
> of a remnant and that can, therefore, bear witness. Poets—witnesses—
>
> found language as what remains, as what actually survives the possibility,
>
> or impossibility, of speaking. (161)

Language that passes through the dark silence of "no words" and is "able to come back to

light" survives the impossibility of speaking. *Darkling*, in this sense, is situated in the

position of the remnant: its expression belongs neither wholly to Rabinowitz nor to the

"long dead" but to the language that survives between them, that bears witness to the

unsayable. We can also think Agamben's formulation through Rabinowitz's practice of

appropriation. She quite literally finds language ("The Darkling Thrush" as *objet trouvé*)

and positions the words of *Darkling*, which grew, as if by miracle, out of the "The Darkling Thrush," between the drowned and the saved—the poem is what remains.

I want to make clear the fact that Rabinowitz is not casting an aestheticized aura around the unsayable or unknowable nature of the Holocaust—we remember that in the interview with Schecter she says it is "unfathomable, but we know it." As Agamben cautions us, "To say that Auschwitz is 'unsayable' or 'incomprehensible' is equivalent to *euphemein*, to adoring in silence…[which] contributes to its glory" (32-3); it would be to "unconsciously repeat the Nazi's gesture" and be "in secret solidarity with the *arcanum imperii*" (157). In *Darkling*, Rabinowitz cites Heinrich Himmler's 1943 "Speech to the SS Officers" ("Rede zu den SS Fuhrern") in which he frames "the extermination of the Jewish people" as a subject to be left unsaid and unwritten, a subject to be, in other words, adored in silence: "Among ourselves we will discuss it openly; in public, however, we must never mention it…This is a glorious page in our history which never had and never will be written" (85). She thus differentiates between the Nazi injunction of unsayability with the unsayability that is at the heart of testimony. George Steiner has speculated that "[t]he best now, after so much has been set forth, is, perhaps, to be silent [about Auschwitz]; not to add the trivia of literary, sociological debate, to the unspeakable" (253). According to Agamben's logic, this position would be unconsciously repeating the Nazi's act of *euphemein* and unintentionally attaching a mystical significance to the Holocaust. It asserts a false binary between silence on the one hand and adding to "the indiscriminate production of archives" (Nora) on the other. Agamben's notion of the "exigency of the lost" offers the poet another option: *treating that which has been completely forgotten as unforgettable*. This involves an engagement

not with "a factual truth, a conformity between something said and a fact or between memory and what happened, but rather on the immemorial relation between the unsayable and the sayable" (*Remnants* 158). A recording of Himmler's speech can be found in the National Archives and is surely an archival memory that confirms (and conforms to) what happened.[114] But addressing the "forgotten unforgettable"—what Rabinowitz calls "never-to-be known / scenarios sentenced to decomposed alphabets"— requires a different approach, that of a language that decomposes, that splinters itself toward the limits of the sayable (28).

Toward the end of *Darkling*, Rabinowitz describes a woman who might stand in for the figure of the poet (and even herself), a woman in search of the non-language of the unsayable. Here Rabinowitz's language approximates on a stylistic level what she had previously thematized as "a stutter between two voids," and we see a striking intertwining between form and content:

> On hands and knees digging to
> Unearth words
> Native to no language
>
>   O woman on your odyssey to no
>
> Destination
>
>   you must stumble
>
>   you must stumble
>
>   these stumbling blocks in your hands
>
>   are in
>
>   your hands

---

[114] See Agnes F. Peterson and Bradley F. Smith, "Captured German Sound Recordings: Select Audiovisual Records." The National Archives Trust Fund Board, <http://www.archives.gov/research/captured-german-records/sound-recordings.html>.

                                        your hands are in

                                                in
                                                            (66)

The linguistic breakdown at the end of this passage performs an asymptotic itinerary

toward words "[native] to no language," toward an Agambenian "non-language"—it is a

bearing witness to the "senseless sound" of testimony (39). The force of the woman's

trauma represented in Rabinowitz's language pressures the very language to the point of

collapse. This stumbling and stuttering breakdown, this lexical fraying, this dissolving of

words out of "shadowrange," recalls Celan's famous and celebrated ending of "No

Sandart Anymore": "Your chant, what does it know? // Deepinsnow, / Eepinno, / I-i-o"

["*Dein Gersang, was weiß er? // Tiefimschnee, / lefimnee, / I-i-e*."] (100).[115]

        The knowledge of Celan's chant and the knowledge that Rabinowitz impels

herself not to forget in her writing are located in the very aporia of historical knowledge

after Auschwitz. To undertake this writing, this chanting—as if "sentenced to

decomposed alphabets"—is to decompose the grammatical sentence in turn; it "is to

place oneself in one's own language in the position of those who have lost it, to establish

oneself in a living language as if it were dead, or in a dead language as if it were living—

in any case, outside both the archive and the *corpus* of what has already been said"

(*Remnants* 161). In *Zong!*, Philip performs a much more spectacular fracturing of the

sentence as an ethical response to those who have been sentenced to law's unreason: to

adapt the book's back cover copy, *Zong!* is a haunting remnant "between archive and

---

[115] Following John Felstiner, Anne Carson observes, "if this poem were translated into Hebrew, a language
in which vowels are not usually printed, it would vanish even before its appointed end. As did many a
Hebrew" (116). Felstiner notes: "translated into Hebrew, which has no vowel letters, this poem would
verge on silence—a testimony to the literal truth Celan sought" (220).

memory, law and poetry," and, like Rabinowitz's *Darkling*, it is a haunting remnant between the drowned and the saved.

"[M]oan! Mutter! Howl! And shriek!": "The Background Noise" in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*

> Not my language
> but a voice
> chanting in patterns
> survives on earth
> not history's bones,
> but vocal tones
> —Allen Ginsberg, "A Prophecy"

> To read the archive is to enter a mortuary; it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold.
> —Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

As with Rabinowitz, M. NourbeSe Philip sets out in *Zong!* to tell "a story that cannot but must be told" (196). Using solely the legal decision of *Gregson v. Gilbert* (from the so-called *Zong* case) as her "word-hoard," Philip transforms an eighteenth-century archival document into a nearly 200-page open-field poem. The *Gregson v. Gilbert* case concerned the slave ship, *Zong*, which in 1781 left the west coast of Africa for Jamaica carrying over 400 slaves. Because the trip, which should have taken six to nine weeks, took a grueling four months, the captain Luke Collingwood ordered a portion of the remaining "cargo"—many had already perished from thirst, sickness, and suicide—to be jettisoned in the belief that the insurers of the ship would underwrite the cost of the slaves if they did not die a natural death. Gregson, the owner, unsuccessfully filed a claim for the destroyed "cargo" but was successful in recovering the previously lost cargo. The two-page legal decision of the insurer's appeal, which runs to approximately 500 words, constitutes the found text that Philip subjects to "a variety of

techniques such as whiting and/or blacking out words, fragmentation and reversals."

Technically speaking, Philip's process might be understand as what "Oupeinpo"—the

painting arm of Oulipo—calls "*reassemblage*," which is a collage in which "the

fragments assembled all come from the same source" (Mathews and Brotchie 281).

Raymond Queneau, one of the co-founders of Oulipo, had famously described Oulipian

writers as "rats who must build the labyrinth from which they propose to escape" (qtd. in

Wardip-Fruin and Montfort 175). In *Zong!*, Philip powerfully connects the practice of

poetic constraint with the material conditions of transatlantic slavery, conditions which

constrained millions of African people. If part of the Oulipian project was to replace, and

so demystify, the inspirational plenitude of the Surrealist unconscious—which the

labyrinth, with its involuting recesses, often signified—with the elaborate workmanship

of Daedalian formalism and engineering, then Philip does away with the metaphor of the

labyrinth altogether; for her, what needs most to be overcome is the exclusionary nature

of discursive constructions or, indeed, the limitations of the archive (whether Foucauldian

or otherwise). In the book's conclusion, called "Notanda," Philip says, "My intent is to

use the text of the legal decision as a word store; to lock myself into this particular and

peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women,

and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies, the story that

can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text" (191). We can link Philip's anti-

rational "belief" with the faith implied in Agamben's exigency of the lost—"the capacity

to remain faithful to that which having perpetually been forgotten, must remain

unforgettable" (*The Time that Remains* 40). In other words, bearing witness to "the story

that can only be told by not telling" is not to remember that story and to inscribe it within

an archival economy; it is to treat the story of the drowned as unforgettable, as unarchivable.

Kate Eichorn argues that "it may be tempting to locate Philip's *Zong!* as a form of 'postcolonial Oulipo,' but such a reading is one that only dares to read the text as an impressive procedural work when, in fact, it is doing much more and comes into being as a text and performance under radically different conditions" (35). These "conditions," for Eichorn, are distinctly Caribbean.[116] Yet I want to extend this observation that *Zong!* is "doing much more" and assert that different types of desubjectification necessarily create different conditions as well. In evaluating a work of literary constraint, one would have to identify what exactly "escapes" from the labyrinth of limitation; one would have to analyze the precise mechanism of desubjectification-resubjectification that operates within every act of *poiesis*. For example, an "impressive procedural work" (to use Eichorn's phrase) may release the triumphant rat who built his own maze—the resulting language would be enriched, to be sure, by the desubjectifying process of procedure but enriched by a particular kind of desubjectification: that of the laboratory scientist who assumes the position of test subject (Queneau's lab rat) in an act of literary auto-experimentation. Such work might, as Agamben says, "bring language to its own non-sense," but it wouldn't necessarily "be, in turn, *the voice of something or someone that, for entirely other reasons, cannot bear witness*" (emphasis mine). That which emerges from the labyrinth of limitation might only be the linguistic pyrotechnics of the author's own mastery. *Zong!*—which we might compare to a post- (or neo-) Oulipo text like Christian Bök's *Eunoia* (2001)—bears witness to the voice of something other, to those

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[116] Eichorn cites an interview in which Philip ascribes the "bricolage and competing discourses" of *She Tries Her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989) not so much to a postmodernist aesthetic but to "the postcolonial aspects" of the Caribbean (35).

silenced by the violence upon which the archive of slavery rests; it, to cite Celan once

again, passes through the "terrifying muteness" of unsayability to emerge enriched but

"maimed," enriched *because* it is maimed.[117] It is surely an "impressive" work but it is

more than that: it is a work that bears—somehow, miraculously—*the impressions*, the

traces, of impossible testimony.

Of course, the nature of the procedural work will depend upon the chosen

procedures or whether the procedure calls for a source text that can act as some kind of

documentary substrate. Philip, in choosing the legal decision of the *Zong* case as a

starting point, has allowed herself the opportunity to brush a "document of barbarism"

against the grain, to critically engage with, through textual appropriation, the ideological

forces which have produced and shaped the archive.[118] Here are two sentences—one

short and one extremely long—from *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the discursive and labyrinthine

"mortuary" in which Philip willingly locked herself:

> This was an action on a policy of insurance, to recover the value of certain
>
> slaves thrown overboard for want of water. The declaration stated, that by
>
> the perils of the seas, and contrary currents and other misfortunes, the ship
>
> was rendered foul and leaky, and was retarded in her voyage; and, by
>
> reason thereof, so much of the water on board the said ship, for her said
>
> voyage, was spent on board the said ship: that before her arrival at

---

[117] *Eunoia* is a series of univocalisms, that is, it uses only a single vowel in each of the book's five chapters. Here is an excerpt from Chapter U: "Duluth dump trucks lurch, pull U-turns. Such trucks dump much undug turf: *clunk*, *clunk* — *thud*. Scum plus crud plugs up ducts; thus Ubu must flush such sulcus ruts. Sump pumps pump: *chuff*, *chuff*. Such pumps suck up mush plus muck — dung lumps (plus clumps), turd hunks (plus chunks): grugru grubs plus fungus slugs mulch up humus pulp." While such language might tend toward non-sense, it serves a much different cultural purpose than language that tends toward the non-sense of testimony. Interestingly, the writing of *Zong!* and the writing of *Eunoia* both took seven years.

[118] In Thesis 7 of "On the Concept of History," Benjamin states that "[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (392).

Jamaica, to wit, on, &c. a sufficient quantity of water did not remain on

board the said ship for preserving the lives of the master and mariners

belonging to the said ship, and of the negro slaves on board, for the

residue of the said voyage; by reason whereof, during the said voyage, and

before the arrival of the said ship at Jamaica—to wit, on, &c. and on

divers days between that day and the arrival of the said ship at Jamaica—

sixty negroes died for want of water for sustenance; and forty others, for

want of water for sustenance, and through thirst and frenzy thereby

occasioned, threw themselves into the sea and were drowned; and the

master and mariners, for the preservation of their own lives, and the lives

of the rest of the negroes, which for want of water they could not

otherwise preserve, were obliged to throw overboard 150 other negroes.

(qtd. in *Zong!* 210)

To the contemporary reader, *Gregson v. Gilbert* must register, as James Walvin puts it, as

"[t]he most grotesquely bizarre of all slave cases heard in an English court" (qtd. in *Zong!*

189). Philip notes how the legal logic of this case exposes what we might call the

rapacious biopolitics of slavery: "even if the courts had found against the owners of the

Zong and ruled that they could not claim insurance compensation…neither Captain

Collingwood nor those who had helped in the massacre could be charged with murder"

(*Zong!* 191). The slave, as what Agamben calls *homo sacer,* "is reduced to a bare life

stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing

homicide…he is at every instant exposed to an unconditioned threat of death" (*Homo*

Sacer 183). What Agamben calls the "inclusive exclusion" (*Homo Sacer* 7) of bare

life—which is a result of dominant Western conceptions of sovereignty—captures the paradox that has ensnared, and continues to ensnare, the black subject; as Philip says, "It is a painful irony that today so many of us continue to live…either outside of the law, or literally imprisoned within it" (*Zong!* 207).

To refer to a memorable phrase from *Zong!*'s first section "Os," Philip's intention is to "defend the dead" (*Zong!* 25). We can interpret this phrase in a variety of ways, which should show the surprising scope of Philip's project. Firstly, we can, given the legal context of the book, read *Zong!* as a juridical defense of the drowned. Philip—who, as many commentators have observed, is also an attorney—can be seen as symbolically trying the "master and mariners" for murder. *Zong!* #24 bluntly ends: "[T]he case // is // murder" (41). *Zong!*, in addition, seems to put the entire eighteenth-century legal system (in which "the *ratio* of murder // is // the usual") on tribunal (25). "[Q]uestion / therefore / the age," begins *Zong!* #6 (14). Elsewhere, Philip periodizes her anti-narrative as belonging to "the age of guns / gin & rum [and] of / murder" (66-7). But it would be naïve to neatly separate the injurious past from the perspective of a righteous present. Such a conception would fail to acknowledge the temporality of trauma, the way in which historical trauma extends into the present;[119] moreover, such a conception would fail to acknowledge that Philip is putting the present on tribunal as well. This is clear, I argue, in *Zong! #4,* which forcefully, if awkwardly, uses an attenuated language of fact to denounce not only the past but the status quo. This is the section *in toto*:

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[119] To adapt Agamben's formulation about Auschwitz, the middle passage "has never ceased to take place; it is always already repeating itself" (*Remnants* 101). This awareness permeates *Zong!* and can be easily seen, for example, in one of the epigraphs to the section entitled "Ferrum" ("*Praesens de praereritis*. / *The past is ever present*. / ST. AUGUSTINE") as well as in one of the epigraphs to the section entitled "Sal" (*Non enim erat tunc*. / *There was no then*. / ST. AUGUSTINE).

Zong! #4

this is

not was

or

should be

this be

not

should be

this

should

not

be

is

_____

Lipapwiche Aziza Chipo Dada Nomsa

(7)

The illusive deictic or shifter "this" can, for our purposes, refer to the set of discursive

practices and ideologies that enable the material conditions of black subjugation. We can

thus re-read the closing phrase above as: "this // should // not // be // [but it] is." In short,

this section from *Zong!* identifies as untenable (in a brilliantly oblique, epigrammatic, and

minimalist fashion) "a past that has yet to be done…and the ongoing state of emergency

in which black life remains in peril" (Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 13). That last

phrase comes from Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts," a searching meditation on

what it means to write a counter-history of slavery when "[t]he archive of slavery rests

upon a founding violence" (10). I will return to Hartman at the end of my discussion of

Zong!, but, for now, I'd like to point out the importance of thinking through historical

abuses of sovereignty to arrive at a better understanding (or re-understanding) of political

philosophy and of our own state of emergency, a state, which, as Agamben warns,

"continues as if uninterrupted" (*Remnants* 26).

The names beneath the horizontal bar at the bottom of each page continue for the

length of "Os"— from *Zong!* #1 to *Zong!* #26. In "Dicta," the second and most austere

section of the book, the bar remains, but the limbic space is left blank, a blankness which

we might construe as a space for the "unforgettable oblivion" (Agamben) as opposed to

Os' space of fashioned commemoration. Philip's inclusion of the names, many of which

she drew from the Nigerian philologist Modupe Oduyoye's *Yoruba Names*, are meant as

a rejoinder to the archive's discursive violence of un-naming; "*The Africans on board the*

Zong *must be named*," insisted Philip in her process notes that are excerpted in

"Notanda" (*Zong!* 200). We might understand this gesture of naming as an act of

surrogation, which is, according to Joseph Roach, an attempt to "fit satisfactory

alternates" "[i]nto the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure"

(2). While this is a reasonable reading (and despite Roach's useful concept in the context

of performance studies), such an approach might shortchange *Zong!*'s ambition and

misunderstand the peculiar phenomenology of Philip's writing process; according to

Eichorn: "Of course, there is no record of the actual names of the men, women and

children who were on board the Zong so these names are merely evocative of the names

these subjects may have held" (37). To see such names as "satisfactory alternates" that are "merely evocative" of ones the Africans on board the Zong may have held is, in my mind, to concede too much to the realm of positivist fact and, moreover, to miss Philip's complex and complicated stance toward authorship. I prefer to follow Evie Shockley's clever suggestion that the "named figures…[are] *underwriters* of the text" (814). (The legal term *underwriters*, which derives from the *Gregson v. Gilbert* decision, occurs, with its variant *underwriter*, four times in "Os.") *Zong!* is a book that, on the title page, is attributed to Philip "as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng." According to the acknowledgments, Philip calls *Zong!* a work "apparently authored by one person" (xi).

The hedging that the word "apparently" indicates should not be taken as a mere "evocation" of an oral tradition; rather, I suggest that we read the host of "underwriters" as examples of the multiple desubjectifications that Philip survived through her procedural process of writing, as 228 Muses that enabled the existence of Philip's polyvocal poem. *Zong!* is a bearing witness of the impossibility for the "underwriters" to bear witness. Agamben explains:

> To speak, to bear witness, is thus to enter into a vertiginous movement in which something sinks to the bottom, wholly desubjectified and silenced, and something subjectified speaks without truly having anything to say of its own ("I tell of things…that I did not actually experience"). Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking, the inhuman and the human enter into a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish the

position of the subject, to identify the "imagined substance" of the "I" and, along with it, the true witness. (*Remnants* 120)

The pages of *Zong!* present this very "zone of indistinction." The names—such as Lipapwiche, Aziza, Chipo, Dada, and Nomsa—are the drowned, those who have been "wholly desubjectified and silenced" by the trauma of the Middle Passage, "those who were demolished and who touched bottom" (*Remnants* 59).[120] Yet the drowned are the ones that make the ululating utterance that is *Zong!* possible; they allow Philip to "not tell" the story that she "did not actually experience." In "Notanda," Philip refers to the existence of two poems—"*the one i want to write and the one writing itself*" (192)—and highlights the fact that she was "*not even using my own words*" (193); "*some poems*," she notes, "*just seem to offer themselves up*" (196). These experiences are comparable to the desubjectifications which Pessoa endured in submitting to the non-existences of his heteronyms; the poems offered themselves up as if by "miracle" (to use Rabinowitz's word).

But here, once again, it is important to differentiate between different types of desubjectifications in order to more clearly understand why *Zong!* is a remarkable book of witnessing. As Catherine Mills observes, since "desubjectification is a constitutive condition of subjectification and the subject's taking place in language…bearing witness to the impossibility of speaking is one of the definitional capacities of the subject" (96). And as I have already discussed, there is a slippage in Agamben's theory of testimony between what we might call—following Gayatri Spivak—a subaltern unspeakability and an unspeakability that is proper to linguistic signification or subjectification within

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[120] We might connect Agamben's suggestive metaphorics of sinking and depth to, as Shockley reminds us, "Lorrie Smith's discussion of the surface/depths structure that literary critics have revealed and reinforced in 'mapping black cultural geography'" (814).

discourse. I am arguing that poetry—particularly poetry born out of the rigorous and desubjectifying crucible of procedural constraint—can forge a bridge between these two registers of unsayability. More particularly, we can say that Philip's writing creates a coincidence between the desubjectification of the drowned, those who were murdered by the crew of the *Zong*, and the desubjectifications that her constraint-based procedure demands. "[E]very testimony," says Agamben, "is a field of forces incessantly traversed by currents of subjectification and desubjectification" (*Remnants* 121). If so, the particular currents that traverse the linguistic field of *Zong!* are brought into motion by "the 'resurfacing of the drowned and the oppressed'" (*Zong!* 203).

The testimonial forces of *Zong!* have a high coefficient of glossolalia and thus a high coefficient of desubjectification.[121] We can take, as an example, a page (see fig 31) from *Zong!*'s third section, "Sal," the section in which Philip begins to "*fragment the words of the* [source] *text…to explode the words to see what other words they may contain*" (*Zong!* 200). Here on page 63, we have an oblique reference to an unnamed "she" that "died," that, to use Philip's euphemism, "fou // nd africa un // der water." Philip's decision to fragment the words of *Gregson v. Gilbert* gives her the opportunity to create an array of multilingual puns and surprising graphemic and phonemic correspondences. For example, the word cluster "fou" from the word "found" can be read as the French word for "mad." We thus might discern a ghostly micro-narrative of a "mad rose" who threw herself, because of "thirst and frenzy," into the sea (the phrase on the bottom of the previous page is "she falls falling") (62). The glossolalic breakdown of language presented here might be construed as a spectral channeling of this woman's

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[121] Philip observes that "the religious practice of speaking in tongues…fatally subverts the very purpose of language" (*Zong!* 197).

found   a rose fou

nd africa   un

der water

proved

justice   danger

ous   the law

a crime she

died es   es es

oh   es

oh oh   es es   oh

es   s   o

s   s   o

s   s

o s

os

os

os

bone

us us *os*

save us *os*

salve   & save

our souls tone

& turn the bo   nes

&

salve   our souls u

s souls

bo   ne souls

salve the slav

e *salve* to

sin *salve*   slave *salve*

63

Figure 31. Page Scan of *Zong!*

voice; indeed, the book's first epigraph, which comes from Dylan Thomas' "And Death Shall Have No Dominion," suggests a raising (and rising) of the dead: "Though they go mad they shall be sane, / Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again…" The word "oh," bookended by the syllables "es" (which might be the Spanish verb for "is"), sounds out, as it were, the distress call "SOS," a phrase which Philip immediately spells out and repeats on the page ("s o /s s o /s s/ os"), thereby creating a stuttering, homophonic play that, in a productive ambiguity, refers either to the voice of the conscience-stricken sailor (who is one of the dominant voices in the text) or the wailing "mayday signal" of the drowning woman.[122] Perhaps we are meant to hear the echo of the latter in the former or vice versa; in either case, we have a radical "zone of indistinction," to borrow Agamben's phrase, as opposed to the rigid distinction between slave and sailor that is apparent in *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Philip, in other words, is not only exposing the injustices that occurred on "the said ship" (to use the peculiar language of *Gregson v. Gilbert*), but she is also imagining what was *unsaid* on the ship.

But I want to suggest that Philip is going beyond a legal-juridical defense of the dead and enacting, *through noise*, an ethical intervention. According to Erin M. Fehskens, "The words that have traveled from the legal decision into *Zong!* remain in this final formation as a testimony to the unnarratable and too proximate experience of the *Zong* massacre" (422). I concur that *Zong!* is a bearing witness to the unsayable, a

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[122] Besides the words in Latin—*salve* and the modulation of "us" to *os*—and the possible words in French and Spanish, the glossary in the book's back matter, subtitled "Words and Phrases Heard On Board the Zong," points to a wider polyglottism: it lists terms in Arabic, Dutch, Fon, French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Shona, Twi, and West African Patois. This mobilization of varying dictions, what Aldon Nielsen calls "interdiction," is a key strategy for brushing history against the grain. Nielsen argues, "Interdiction has much to recommend it as a critical term. While the word intends a prohibition, it seems to seek an opening, an in-between space in which folk etymology might read a felt history of differing dictions brought into frictive contact. To interdict racism would appear to require a polyglot tongue-lashing, an interruption and eruption, a critical insertion of oneself in a dangerous space between people speaking in tongues" (xiii-xiv).

speaking for those who cannot speak; this is, for Agamben, an impossible act, and Philip is well aware of this impossibility. Her fifth section, "Ratio," is importantly prefaced by an epigraph that cites Paul Celan's signature poem from *Breathturn*: "No one bears witness for the witness." For Agamben, what Fehskens is calling "the unnarratable" *is* testimony and, as such, is irrecoverable; but it is testimony that founds the possibility of the poem and the possibility, I'd like to add, of a Celan-like "background noise." Even though any transmittable message is necessarily lost in this noise (as Primo Levi intuited when reading Celan's poetry), the noise honors what cannot be remembered as unforgettable. Noise is the maimed language of the unlost amid the losses—it tells the tale by not telling. Philip is able to generate such noise, and therefore ethically honor the dead, through what Nathaniel Mackey calls a "glossolalic scat," which, when scored on the page, creates such a high degree of graphemic disruption that any attempt at reading the text compels the reader to produce a fractured and stammering "phonotext" (to use the Victorianist Garrett Stewart's term), whether through subvocalization or enunciating aloud.[123] When reading *Zong!*, we experience the radical non-coincidence between sound and sense—the sound of sense fragmenting and the suspension of alternative senses within sound. Noise is perhaps most visually apparent in the last section of poetry called "Ẹbọra," in which the palimpsestic layering of grey words creates a dissonant field of static (see fig 32). As I suggested in my discussion of *Darkling*, to speak for those who were "sentenced to decomposed alphabets" requires sentencing the grammatical sentence to decomposition—this is what Philip spectacularly performs in "Ẹbọra." If, for Agamben, the strategy of poetry is to "let language finally communicate itself, without

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[123] Stewart says "[w]ith preternatural directness, the phonemic enactment of a text audits the voice of the other. Reading always with an alien ear, it brings the alien near" (32).

the seas
there is   with she
creed there is   fate the negroes
is oh   man   there is   negroesoracle
creedthere lord   there are   fate there
my liegelord   oh oh   oh oracle
asheshere are   my *deus*
ohmplus   over
my we   ashes *ifa*   my fate
my god   *ifa*   over
suffder crew from   *ifa i*
fa
fa   own from   *ifa i*
fa fa   slave   falling
fa   over   under from
fa   writer   fall   &
ing dfrom   over
the crew   mortality   touching there   &
is fate   owert   water parts
the crew   there   the *oba* stoichingrthereed
is fat *de mort*   there
le p'tismother   oh   is creedh
there   the sobmtsobmmortality
is   oh   oh the *ofiaifa i*
sobs   she   again   the
seven   falls   *ifa ifa ifa i*
seas *ifaifaifa*   over   the   *ora*
seven   fallithis time   *ora*   to
within   . . seas   port   *ora*
ora   *ora pro over*   time
this time&thin   *ora*
this is but an   over   within   *ora*   oration
my fortunes   time sandsalverloss
witha sin   you satime   in i am
video video video   this is   lord   but an o
who saysrationof loss   time
sands   i say visions   the loss   a rose
a rose for Ruthwith   over and over   in i am
and   lord of   the *oba* sobs
no provisions   forlossthisifrom is   o
ver and o   to was   sumpose truth   ver
finding a way   *ba* so   then   the o   water parts
found   visions from is   the *oba* sobbs no pro
to was   man   a port   sow   negroes

179

Figure 32. The phrase "asheshere are" in the upper-left hand quadrant reads as if it were a creative translation of Derrida's well-traveled phrase *il y a là cendre*—Philip seems to be linking her radical decomposition of the sentence, her "urn of language," with an "impossible tomb" for the dead (*Cinders* 53). In *Cinders*, Derrida writes: "you well know how solid a sentence is. By its very disappearance it resists so very many eclipses, it always has a chance of returning, it 'incenses' itself to infinity. This is so much more certain finally than placing the archive in a reinforced beam destined for our extra-terrestrial cousins. The sentence is adorned with all of its dead" (55).

remaining unsaid in what is said" (*The End of the Poem* 115), then *Zong!* takes this strategy a step further: it communicates, through noise, a "non-language…that has no place in the libraries of what has been said or in the archive of the statements" (*Remnants* 162). This is how *Zong!* bears witness for the witness, and this is why *Zong!* is a crucial long poem of testimony.

We might compare this ethical project with the pressing project of preserving the dead's dignity. In "Notanda," Philip discusses, through the forensic anthropologist Clea Koff, the importance "for bodies to be exhumed…[in order to] return dignity to the dead." She goes on to ask, "Does this mean that unlike being interred, once you're underwater there is no retrieval—that you can never [be] 'exhumed' from water?" (*Zong!* 201). Despite the apparent irretrievability of the remains of those who perished in the *Zong* massacre, Philip asserts, "I want the bones."[124] This desire, according to Agamben, is not strictly an ethical one. In trying to wrest ethics from the contaminating influence of law, he argues, "The idea that the corpse deserves particular respect, that there is something like a dignity of death, does not truly belong to the field of ethics"; rather it belongs, he says, to a "magico-juridical" heredity (*Remnants* 79). As I have already discussed, Philip is indeed interested in staging a magico-juridical intervention. The law, she notes, "approaches the realm of magic" in its ability to enact the "conversion of human into chattel" (196); therefore, she appoints herself the role of legal "censor" in deciding "what is allowed into the record and what [is] not" (in a manner resembling Metres' mock "document sanitization" of U.S. military files) as well as the role of "magician" to counteract and undo the dehumanizing magic of the law. Philip says,

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[124] We might compare this to Rabinowitz's concern with "bones / Denied ground" (67).

"This is the axis on which the text of *Zong!* turns: censor and magician; the told and the untold; the telling and the un-telling of what cannot, yet must, be told" (199).

In the illuminating interview entitled "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive," Patricia Saunders notes in Philip's work "a general distrust of the 'fact' of the artifact in the archive"; she goes on to speculate about "not taking the dead bodies and making them signify, making them symbols, but actually honoring the dead, which is a different thing." Saunders, in short, calls not only for "memory…aimed at producing knowledge about the slave trade" but memory that probes the "psychic or ontological" implications of it (70). Wanting the bones for proper burial is, I argue, tantamount to making the dead bodies "signify" through funerary commemoration. Yet Philip's practice of the exigency of the lost is resolutely *anti-memorial* despite the important work of memory that *Zong!* may perform. To put it another way, she is not solely interested in producing and transmitting knowledge about the slave trade but in investigating the aporia of historical knowledge (an extension of what Saunders is calling "a different thing.") A memory that probes the "psychic or ontological" implications of slavery can do so by acknowledging what has been irretrievably forgotten as unforgettable, which is, according to Agamben, "at work within us with a force equal to that of the mass of conscious memories, but in a different way" (*Time that Remains* 40). More specifically, Philip shatters a textual monument of history, the *Gregson v. Gilbert* decision, in order to release and liberate spectral voices that are legible through an immemorial noise: "the archive of the owner and the lawmaker…is in fact the only marker" of those aboard the *Zong* and "in shattering that gravestone the voices are freed"

(69)—"not," as Allen Ginsberg says, "history's bones, / but vocal tones" that "continue to resound and echo underwater…[i]n the bone beds of the sea" (*Zong!* 203).

Noise: "disturbance made by voices; shouting, outcry"; the sense development of the word "is perhaps from 'sea-sickness', the literal sense of classical Latin *nausea*" ("Noise, n."). We might indeed understand the noise of *Zong!* as the "homeopathic" antidote to the enduring nausea of the Middle Passage.[125] Philip, in fact, has described some of the noise of *Zong!* as nauseating: "There were things that came out of the text, phrases like 'nig, nig, nog,' and so on, that made me feel nauseous as they would surface" (qtd. in Saunders 75). This nausea is perhaps a specific symptom of the archive fever that pertains to the researcher venturing into the mortuary that is the archive of slavery.

In "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman suggests an alternative mode of writing, what she calls "critical fabulation" (11), as a way to construct "a history of an unrecoverable past" and "a history written with and against the archive" (12). Hartman continues: "Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law (12). *Zong!* would seem to conform to Hartman's proposed methodology in its emphasis on not-telling, in the way it is "[M]oan! Mutter! Howl! And shriek!" (*Zong!* 207). But Philip's project extends beyond critical fabulation, because, unlike Hartman, Philip does not "pledge…to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive" (Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 9). Archival infidelity is, of course, a privilege of poetry, but the privilege of the testimonial long poem can, as I have demonstrated, explore the unarchivable; this

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[125] This reading is indebted to Mackey's brilliant argument-by-blurb: "Fretful, possessed, obsessed, upset, curse and homeopath both, [*Zong!*] visits a breathtaking run of glossolalic scat upon historical trauma."

is the key difference between Hayden's "Middle Passage," which I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, and Philip's *Zong!*. "[M]y own writing," says Hartman,

> is unable to exceed the limits of the sayable dictated by the archive. It depends upon the legal records, surgeons' journals, ledgers, ship manifests, and captains' logs, and in this regard falters before the archive's silence and reproduces its omissions. The irreparable violence of the Atlantic slave trade resides precisely in all the stories that we cannot know and that will never be recovered. This formidable obstacle or constitutive impossibility defines the parameters of my work. (12)

Hartman's account shows with more intensity the disciplinary limit of history with which we began this chapter. If the cultural work of history cannot, as Carolyn Steedman suggested, offer us a passage from the place of archive to the space of memory, then perhaps the cultural work of poetry can show us the passage from the place of the archive to the non-place of testimony.

The poet, who has the freedom to set her own procedural parameters even if she is bound, like all of us, by the same parameters of impossibility of which Hartman speaks, is, I think, in a better position to respond to the exigency of the lost, to honor what is irrecoverable, and "to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead" (Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 4). In this sense, M. NoubeSe Philip and Anna Rabinowitz are like users of Oujia boards, who, in attempting to contact the spirit world, begin with a most limited text: the twenty-six letters of the alphabet.

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