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INCLUDE EVERYTHING:  
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY AND THE FEMINIST EVERYDAY

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Include Everything: Contemporary American Poetry and the Feminist Everyday

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This dissertation argues that women poets across post-1945 U.S. avant-garde movements shared an investment in creating new poetic forms that both valorized and critiqued the gendered conditions of everyday life. “The feminist everyday” designates a shared aesthetic tendency that consists of both the common impulse to “include everything” and the wide range of innovative forms that resulted from this inclusiveness. While previous narratives of U.S. feminist poetics have generally emphasized new content on the one hand or new forms on the other, the feminist everyday underscores how innovations in content and form can, and often must, go hand in hand, producing a poetics of personal experiment. The radical inclusion of women’s quotidian experiences produced poems that were everyday rather than lofty, improvisatory rather than carefully chiseled, or a series of modules rather than a continuous whole. Instead of excluding the ostensibly “unpoetic” (street slang, babies’ cries, nightmares, interruptions, complaints, chores, brand names), the poet invents new forms (sketch, pamphlet, transcription) that accommodate this new subject matter. While many later-20th-century women poets shared this aesthetic tendency, the feminist everyday appears most strikingly in the poems written from the 1950s to the 1980s by Diane di Prima,

Sonia Sanchez, Lyn Hejinian, Bernadette Mayer, and Alice Notley, poets whose brilliant experiments remain understudied even as their influence on subsequent generations of writers continues to grow.

“The everyday” here indicates the conditions of daily life that produce gendered identities and especially the temporal rhythms that correspond to these conditions, including repetition, interruption, and real-time lived experience. Theories of the everyday, beginning with Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau and continuing through a growing body of contemporary thought, provide ways of conceptualizing the ambivalent, overdetermined relationship between femininity and everydayness. As the poets simultaneously reclaim so-called trivial aspects of women’s lives and expose the forces that have required women to serve as custodians of the banal, they create poems of double-edged feminist revaluation and critique that hold together these contradictions, making women’s lives and work visible and valuable even as they necessarily critique the tedium of the everyday.

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## Introduction

*Much as it was also all of us, artists and makers, caught in the grind of economics, the various ugly requirements of our lives of choice, still it was most and most essentially the women. The writing of modular poems, that could be dropped and picked up, the learning to sketch when you used to work in oils.*

THE REQUIREMENTS (*all of them*) OF OUR LIFE (*simply, in many ways it is one and the same life, as the requirements are not plural, but singular, hence:*) IS (*not “are” there are no plurals here, the Requirements, a monolithic unsorted bundle of demands, formulated for the most part elsewhere, but acceded to blindly, somehow still we manage to make art “do the work” as we say*) THE FORM OF OUR ART.

—Diane di Prima

What I’m saying is that many women began to leave behind the issues of the movement and began to include everything—life—children, love, desertion.

—Sonia Sanchez

[...] I had an idea to write a book that would translate the detail of thought from a day to language like a dream transformed to read as it does, everything, a book that would end before it started in time to prove the day like the dream has everything in it [...]

—Bernadette Mayer

[...] the urge to be encyclopedic: to make a complete work. That is, to say everything. One could think perhaps that one’s own life includes everything one knows, and therefore if one could relate it in its entirety, one would have said everything—possibly even everything there is to say.

—Lyn Hejinian

[...] I often ally myself with all the women who were writing in my generation at that time: I have most in common with them as an across-the-board phenomenon, not with any school or poetics. I don’t have a poetics, except a need for inclusiveness and change.

—Alice Notley<sup>1</sup>

This dissertation argues that women poets across post-1945 U.S. poetry movements shared an investment in creating new poetic forms that both valorized and critiqued the gendered conditions of their everyday lives. This aesthetic tendency, which I call the feminist everyday, can be located in the work of many later-20th-century women poets, but appears most strikingly in the poems written from the 1950s to the 1980s by Diane di Prima, Sonia Sanchez, Lyn Hejinian, Bernadette Mayer, and Alice Notley, poets whose brilliant experiments remain understudied even as their influence on subsequent generations of writers continues to grow. Poetry of the feminist everyday reframes quotidian aspects of women's lives through formal innovation, revealing how everyday conditions both help and hinder poetic production. Women's everyday lives supply poetic subject matter while, at the same time, the gendered circumstances of those lives act as aesthetic constraints that affect formal structures and the writing process. These life circumstances are often related to the temporalities of gendered labor, especially routine and interruption. As the poets simultaneously reclaim so-called trivial aspects of women's lives and expose the forces that have required women to serve as custodians of the banal, they create poems of double-edged feminist revaluation and critique that reveal women's ambivalent, overdetermined relationship to the everyday.

I read the poets' early work within the context of the avant-garde movements in which they began their careers and in which they played key roles—the Beat movement, the Black Arts Movement (BAM), Language Writing, and the New York School. Grouping women poets across these post-1945 movements, which no book-length study has yet done, reveals a shared aesthetic strategy—the impulse to “include everything”—that is important to contemporary American poetry and to feminist poetics in particular. This strategy has been obscured by narratives of literary history that rely on classifications by school; in these

narratives, as we will see, women have often been treated as token representatives of poetic schools that are largely defined by men. Pulling the women out of received poetic groupings and identifying the concerns and methods that they share as women not only reveals an important feminist aesthetic strategy, but also demonstrates that Beat, BAM, Language, and New York School poets all participated in the pursuit of poetic inclusiveness in the second half of the 20th century. During this time, experimental poets were incorporating new poetic processes, language, and formal structures that challenged ideas of social and literary propriety while women poets, writing during the rise and height of second-wave feminism, were bringing their experiences, both revelatory and ordinary, into poetry.

Di Prima, Sanchez, Hejinian, Mayer, and Notley are important feminist innovators as well as influential, though in many cases understudied, contributors to their respective poetry movements. As Notley has remarked: “we did what we did most markedly, the women of my generation, across the lines of the movements. Our achievement has probably been to become ourselves in spite of the movements” (Foster 86). Although it is possible to think of the poets, all born between 1934 and 1945, as part of a single generation of women poets influenced by both feminist and avant-garde poetics, the timelines of the movements and of the poets’ individual publication records suggest that di Prima, who published her first book in 1958 at the height of the Beat movement, is a precursor to the other four poets, who all published their first books in a four-year time span in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>2</sup> While ten years may not seem like a significant gap, much changed for poetry and for women over the course of the 1960s. In 1960, Donald Allen’s influential anthology *The New American Poetry* was published, making visible the Black Mountain, Beat, San Francisco Renaissance, and first-generation New York School traditions; the anthology, however, only included four women, Helen Adam, Barbara Guest, Madeline Gleason, and Denise Levertov. In 1965,

LeRoi Jones, who was included in Allen's anthology, announced his split from these poetic traditions, which he viewed as apolitical, and inaugurated the Black Arts Movement, a cultural and artistic revolution with poetry at its center.<sup>3</sup> In 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a book widely credited with sparking second-wave feminism in the U.S., was released; in 1966, Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* was published in the United States, launching poetry's important role in the women's liberation movement.<sup>4</sup> In other words, by the time Hejinian, Mayer, Notley, and Sanchez were publishing their first books, the cultural and literary landscape had shifted in a way that fostered the possibility of feminist poetic innovation. These shifts also bring to light the radical nature of di Prima's poetics and lifestyle as a protofeminist figure in the 1950s. Mayer considered di Prima a "childhood hero"—Mayer was thirteen when di Prima's first book was published—and recalls: "When I was first writing we only knew of a few women poets, like Barbara Guest and Diane diPrima [sic]" (Jarnot 7).

While there were important forerunners such as di Prima, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that American women poets began in large numbers to challenge the literary and social prohibitions that discouraged them from writing about their lives. The inclusion of women's experiences in poetry was an important part of the larger second-wave feminist effort to publicly name and change the conditions of women's everyday lives, from domestic labor to workplace discrimination to reproductive rights. As Honor Moore recalls in her introduction to *Poems from the Women's Movement* (2009), women poets, encouraged by the feminist movement, "began to take up their experience directly, to gather for readings and in anthologies unified not by form or style, but by a common need to understand and change not only how women wrote poems, but how they used poems, and how they lived" (xvii-iii).

This opening up of poetry to women's experiences was bolstered by the formal experimentation that began in modernism and continued through the postwar period:

Aesthetically, what women poets did in the 1970s could not have happened without the fissure in poetics that Modernism had effected in the previous decades. [...] [T]heir enraged feminism and that of their daughters can be seen as a disruption analogous to Modernism and what came after. The Beats, beginning with Ginsberg's "Howl," exploded the boundaries even of free verse, allowing a full-bodied roar of emotion and protest; Black Mountain poets like Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov brought an intimacy of address to their poetry that enlarged the American vernacular that William Carlos Williams had introduced; and black poets like LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Gwendolyn Brooks (leaving behind the idiom that in 1950 won her the first Pulitzer Prize ever given to an African-American) made poetry a vehicle for political rage. (Moore xvii)

These post-1945 aesthetic innovators pushed the bounds of social and poetic acceptability in order to "include everything" in poetry.<sup>5</sup> The censorship trial of Ginsberg's *Howl* demonstrates how, in the 1950s, bringing taboo content into poetry was not simply an innocuous personal choice, but a decision with serious legal and cultural ramifications.<sup>6</sup> For Black Arts Movement poets in the 1960s and 70s, the impulse toward inclusiveness meant writing political poems using the urban Black vernacular; their revolutionary force meant that BAM poets, including Sanchez, sometimes had to face interrogations by the FBI.<sup>7</sup> The stakes might have been lower for New York School poet Frank O'Hara, who put the names of celebrities and consumer products in his poems in the early 1960s, but these details of low or mass culture certainly challenged ideas of poetic propriety.<sup>8</sup> Language writing's impulse toward inclusiveness can be understood through the notion, articulated in a wide range of poetics essays beginning in the 1970s, that a poem might include reflections on the social and material properties of language, as well as through the idea that a poem should include room for the reader to participate in the process of meaning-making.<sup>9</sup>

"The American way is to be inclusive rather than exclusive," Notley observes in an interview (Foster 76). The effort to be inclusive was, in some ways, a challenge for women

poets: “Too many people have always already been telling you for years what your life includes”—and what their poetry might include, as a result (Notley, *Heiresses*). At the same time, the urge toward inclusiveness was especially forceful at this moment in history, when women poets were entering a literary tradition that had excluded and devalued their experiences for most of history. For poets of the feminist everyday, the dual permissions to “include everything”—new content and innovative formal structures—provided by second-wave feminism and post-1945 poetic avant-gardism led to exciting poetic experiments that claimed women’s quotidian experiences for poetry and invented new forms adequate to these experiences.

I want to be clear that I am not recovering an unaccounted-for poetic movement known as “the feminist everyday,” especially when considering that some of the poets I study resist their associations with literary schools and camps. Rather, I understand the feminist everyday as a *shared aesthetic tendency*. This tendency includes both the similar impulse to “include everything” as well as the wide range of poems produced when women’s life conditions intersect with poetic content, form, or process. Naming a tendency instead of a school, movement, or tradition allows the poets to be grouped in a flexible, porous way that designates a set of aesthetic concerns especially important to women poets in the late 20th century. There are many poets who were contemporaries of those in this study whose work could be productively read as examples of the feminist everyday—Joanne Kyger, Elise Cowen, Carolyn Rodgers, Mari Evans, Maureen Owen, Eileen Myles, and Hannah Weiner are key examples—and many in the generations to follow.<sup>10</sup> Although the feminist everyday is not exclusive to the work of the poets in this study, neither are my selections of key figures arbitrary; on the contrary, it is notable that some of the most influential women poets to emerge from post-1945 U.S. poetry movements shared this tendency. The fact that this

commonality has thus far been overlooked points to the powerful sway of school-and-camp narratives of literary history—whether the movements known as Beat, Black Arts, New York School, and Language, or the “two-camp” notion of traditional versus experimental poetry discussed in the following section.<sup>11</sup>

I theorize the aesthetic tendency of the feminist everyday in order to assert that additional narratives of American women’s poetry await definition, and to show, as other critics and anthologists have begun to do, that there has long existed a tradition of women poets combining personal content with innovative forms. While accounts of U.S. feminist poetics have tended to emphasize new content on the one hand (mainstream feminist confessional poetry that seeks to bring new experiences into poetry), and innovative forms on the other (“language-oriented” poetry that experiments with fragmentation, disjunction, and multiplicity), the feminist everyday provides a way of linking these tendencies, underscoring how innovations in content and form can, and often must, go hand in hand.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the feminist everyday is a “both/and” poetics of personal experiment. Rather than treating personal experience as the site of the exceptional, heightened moment, as was the tendency of much mainstream 1970s feminist poetry, these poems focus on quotidian aspects of women’s daily lives. And unlike language-oriented feminist poetry, feminist everyday poetry retains an investment in autobiography, demonstrating that not only poetic content but also formal innovations can emerge out of the gendered daily life of the poet.

The radical inclusion of women’s quotidian experiences in poetry necessarily altered poetic form, diction, rhythm, and tone, producing poems that were everyday rather than lofty, in-the-midst rather than carefully chiseled, or a series of modules rather than a continuous whole. Instead of excluding the ostensibly “unpoetic”—street slang, household

chatter, babies' cries, dreams and nightmares, memories, interruptions, complaints, chores, drugs, brand names, friends' names—the poet incorporates this material as poetic content, and invents corresponding forms—poem as sketch (di Prima), pamphlet (Sanchez), year (Hejinian), day (Mayer), transcription (Notley)—that can accommodate this wide-ranging new content. The line between life and art blurs as poetry swells to hold what had traditionally been considered extrapoetic subject matter, including the way everyday life intersects with the act of poem-writing (lines of poetry give way to a grocery list, for example, or children's speech appears mid-poem).

As a result, poetry of the feminist everyday often foregrounds innovative processes, or the settings, situations, and constraints that inform the act of poetic production. The woman poet who chooses to “put it all in” often finds that the moment of writing itself offers up its own possibilities for, and limitations upon, inclusiveness. As Virginia Woolf wrote, quoting Florence Nightingale: “‘women never have an half hour . . . that they can call their own’—she was always interrupted” (66). In the late 20th century, most American women, and especially lower-class women, were still expected to perform what Luce Giard calls “the upkeep of household goods and the maintenance of family bodies,” recurrent tasks performed at the “level of social invisibility” and “cultural nonrecognition” (156). In feminist everyday poetry, this gendered labor is revealed to be both in conflict and in cahoots with the act of writing poetry, suggesting new subjects and forms even as these very conditions prevent, disturb, or otherwise alter the writing process. For example, the requirements of motherhood significantly shape the writing routines of di Prima, Mayer, and Notley; Sanchez's poetic diction is impacted by her public role as a poet-activist speaking directly to Black women about their lives; and the repetition Hejinian writes into her poetic “life” reflects the way routines and cycles have structured her life as a woman. While male poets,

too, experience interruptions, deal with time limitations, and perform labor, the fact that women's domestic work tends to be continual, recurrent, and "deprived [...] of visible completion" meant that women poets' need to address these constraints in their work was more dire (Giard 156). In many of the poems I examine, the specter of unencumbered, uninterrupted male literary production rears its head—men have access to privacy, solitude, and mobility while women cater to their needs—serving as a counterpoint to the women poets' positions and underscoring the link between gendered labor and poetic practice.

There is a relationship between the two central phrases in my title: The poets' common impulse to "include everything" produces poetry of the feminist everyday. Here, "the everyday" indicates the conditions of daily life that produce gendered identities and the temporal rhythms that correspond to these conditions, especially repetition, interruption, and "real-time" lived experience. I call these poetic renderings of the everyday feminist because they affirm the value of the quotidian realm while at the same time bringing to light the ways that, as Henri Lefebvre writes, "the conditions of everyday life bear heaviest" on women (*Everyday* 35). As we will see, theories of the everyday—beginning with Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau and continuing through a growing body of contemporary thought in feminism, cultural studies, and other fields—suggest methods for understanding the challenges and paradoxes of poetically capturing the everyday, and ways of conceptualizing the ambivalent, overdetermined relationship between femininity and everydayness. Because of these paradoxes and ambivalences, I have found it necessary to develop a double-edged critical approach that, like the poetry I examine, simultaneously valorizes and critiques the feminized everyday. The everyday is the realm of pleasure, creativity, and resourcefulness, but also the realm of drudgery, devaluation, and sometimes danger, in which women perform unpaid labor and negotiate gender roles enforced by oppressive power structures.

The poems illuminate and hold together these contradictions, making women's lives and work visible and valuable even as they necessarily critique the burdens women bear in their everyday lives.

“Include Everything: Contemporary American Poetry and the Feminist Everyday” begins in the mid-1950s, when Diane di Prima was writing her first poems and living an unconventional life of her own invention as young bohemian, poet, and mother. Di Prima was a key inventor and chronicler of midcentury U.S. bohemia, whose resistant, inventive subversions of dominant conformist culture di Prima incorporated into her writing. Translating lifestyle into aesthetic style, her early poems enact bohemian practices and stances such as “cutting a swath,” “the rule of Cool,” and the use of slang. In spite of her radical aesthetics and cultural politics, di Prima was also taking on a great deal of traditional gendered labor in the households and literary organizations that she managed in the 1950s and 60s. Both her aestheticized bohemian lifestyle and her daily routine structured by women's work taught her to approach life and art as coextensive: “THE REQUIREMENTS OF OUR LIFE IS THE FORM OF OUR ART,” di Prima's early poetics statement announced, indicating how the demands of women's recurrent daily tasks shape their aesthetic forms. This philosophy provides a feminist counterpoint to dominant male-centered notions of Beat aesthetics that emphasize visionary spontaneity as an escape from life's responsibilities. Di Prima's forms—modular, sketchy, and fragmented—reflect a life of constant interruption as much as they reveal di Prima's resourcefulness. Instead of letting the requirements of her life merely hinder her, di Prima translated an ethos of discipline and routine from life to poetic practice, and wrote poems that illuminated the inventive aspects of caretaking and homemaking. Feminist theories of everyday life that understand routine as

a crucial foundation for creativity and that cast domestic practices as artful and life-sustaining illuminate the ways di Prima was able to generate innovative poetry out of the gendered circumstances of her life. Di Prima blazed the trail for other women who sought to invent new lifestyles and poetic styles and to navigate the sometimes limiting, sometimes productive relationships between the two.

Sonia Sanchez's "poetic work" in the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 70s took the form of both innovative poetry and activism. Like her BAM peers, Sanchez rejected apolitical bourgeois aesthetics and wrote poetry capable of directly impacting the lives of a mass audience of African Americans. Sanchez was a leading innovator in the use of Black vernaculars in American poetry, which she used to attract the attention of audiences, to validate her message and credibility, and to affirm the worth of Black culture. Several of Sanchez's poetic methods—vernacular language, performance, and daily ritual chants—can be understood as tactics in de Certeau's sense, subversive everyday acts from below that seize opportunities to resist power. In the second half of the chapter, I read Sanchez's 1974 poem "Queens of the Universe," written while she was active in the Nation of Islam, as the culmination of her vernacular poetic tactics and as a fascinating negotiation of black nationalist and feminist concerns. While nationalist rhetoric instructed women to work in the home, have children, and inspire their "warrior" husbands, Sanchez encouraged women to play active roles in the movement, as she herself did, using her prominent position—the role of the "poet as creator of social values" that she understood as part of an ancient lineage—to make Black women's concerns visible on the revolutionary agenda. In "Queens," Sanchez speaks to and for Black women, addressing concerns specific to their lives, from relationships to drug addiction, and offering poetry as a tool for survival and change. Sanchez's effort to "include everything—life—children, love, desertion" can be read as a

feminist everyday approach that sought, like contemporaneous Black feminist thought, to address the interlocking social and economic forces impacting Black women's lives.

Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* (1980, 1987) and Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day* (1982)—two innovative, influential works of autobiographical poetry written in 1978—are the most conceptually ambitious examples of the feminist everyday that I examine. Mayer's use of temporal constraints in *Midwinter Day* directly influenced Hejinian's frequently anthologized essay "The Rejection of Closure," which theorizes the way formal structures can limit, and thereby make meaningful, the poet's encyclopedic urge to "include everything." Hejinian and Mayer employed this combination of inclusiveness and constraint, or what I call "formal inclusivity," as they filled their books with the fascinating minutiae of their lives. In *My Life*, Hejinian's foregrounding of repetition valorizes the routines that structure women's lives; at the same time, repetition, understood as monotony, critiques the way gender is constituted and enforced through habitual behavior. Through a reading of archival materials, I offer the first well-documented theory of Mayer's compositional process for *Midwinter Day*, arguing that she takes the challenge, for a poet-mother, of writing a book in a single day as a productive constraint that leads to innovative writing strategies. *Midwinter Day* asks to what extent it is possible to be a poet and a mother at the same time, a pressing question for women poets in the 1970s, when such a possibility was emergent. By zeroing in on the routines, tasks, errands of a mother's life, the book challenges ideas of what counts as poetically important; by rehearsing for the project and by using technologies that allow her to "see further," Mayer puts into question what counts as writing at all. Understanding Mayer's day as a composite of several days suggests, via the logic of formal inclusivity, all of the domestic and poetic work she produces outside the frame of a single day. Finally, I argue that Hejinian's and Mayer's formal innovations based on the quotidian conditions of

women's lives connect them to contemporaneous feminist conceptual artists, such as those in Lucy Lippard's women-only "numbers show" *c.* 7,500, who used constraint, procedure, and duration to test the boundaries between life and art and to challenge cultural and literary value systems.

Alice Notley, like other feminist poets in the 1970s, sought to bring the content of women's lives into the poetic tradition. Eschewing the earnest, epiphanic poetry of the dominant feminist confessional mode, she borrowed from the New York School aesthetic of dailiness to write poems that revealed the quotidian details of her life. But the poetics of dailiness presented its own limitations: She could not easily step into Frank O'Hara's *flâneur* footsteps, finding that her dissimilar content—errands, babies' cries—demanded a range of different tones—sullen, petulant, tender—which seemed to oppose the breezy humor required by New York School poetry. Notley's 1980 lecture *Doctor Williams' Heiresses*, which discusses and performs her poetics of inclusive, variable, intimate tones, links her early-1970s tonal experiments with her later-1970s efforts to incorporate others' voices into her poems. Her "feminist talk poetry" experiments began with polyvocal poems that borrowed from her sons' speech in order to explore the intersubjective space between a mother and her children. Later, when living with her family in a small apartment that served as a social hub for the second generation of New York School poets, Notley borrowed from all of the voices in her home in order to make these "salon conditions" poetically generative. Her witty ensemble talk poems from the early 1980s help demonstrate how innovations that arose out of motherhood, including Mayer's *Midwinter Day*, were central to the development of second-generation New York School aesthetics. Notley's early poetry addresses the related feminist social and literary problems of how women can write in the midst of demanding lives and how women can speak, and be heard, in a male-dominated poetic

tradition. Notley's solution, both practical and literary, was to invent a feminist poetic economy that enabled her to do the unpaid work of mothering and writing full-time, and to speak out of this position, deeply situated in everyday life, in a way that brought new feminist language into poetry.

### Critical Contexts: Feminist and Experimental Poetic Traditions

Of the five poets in this study, only Lyn Hejinian's work has received extensive critical attention. At the same time, I have been present in many rooms and online forums where poets lament, for example, "Why is there so little critical writing on Bernadette Mayer?" Or, as I have asked: As Alice Notley's poetry grows ever more lauded by all corners of the poetry world, why is there so little written on her early work? The answers to these questions are complex and bound up in questions of literary value that this dissertation investigates. Although the critical neglect can be partly explained by the fact that most of the poets were influenced by decidedly anti-academic poetry movements, there are nevertheless many books, articles, and classes that focus on the men who theorized and debated the poetics of their respective movements. As feminist poets, they do not fit neatly into the recognized narratives of either mainstream/lyric or experimental/language-oriented feminist poetry. At the same time, their influence is undeniable. Beyond the anecdotal evidence I can offer that younger poets have come to claim these poets as important predecessors, more official channels of recognition, such as prize committees and anthologies, have recognized them as well: Notley has been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and Hejinian's *My Life*, which I discuss in Chapter 3, has been called perhaps "the most popular work of contemporary experimental poetry" (Dworkin 58). While I was writing this dissertation, many of Mayer's early poems were republished or published for the first time, and documentary films about the lives and work of di Prima and Sanchez were produced.<sup>13</sup> Di Prima served as poet laureate of San Francisco from 2009-2011, and Sanchez was poet laureate of Philadelphia from 2012-2014. All of the poets except Sanchez are featured in the second edition of *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* (2013), edited by Paul Hoover, and all except

Hejinian are included in the Library of America's *Poems from the Women's Movement* (2009), edited by Moore.

This poetry has been understudied, therefore, not because it is unknown or unimportant but primarily because it is not fully legible through narratives of feminist or avant-garde poetry that have thus far been articulated. Research over the last fifteen years has shown how experimental women poets have been treated as secondary figures within their affiliated avant-garde groups and sidelined in dominant accounts of feminist poetry, and therefore have been doubly marginalized along aesthetic and gendered lines (and sometimes multiply marginalized along lines of race, class, sexuality, etc.).<sup>14</sup> In the first decade of the 21st century, many important critical studies and essay collections laid the groundwork for a more complex study of American avant-garde feminist poetry. Several books investigate the poetry of important women figures within the contexts of Beat, BAM, New York School, and Language poetry: Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace's *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (2002) and *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers* (2004); Cheryl Clarke's "*After Mecca*": *Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (2005); Maggie Nelson's *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (2007); and Ann Vickery's *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing* (2000).

Though the emphasis is different in each, all of these studies speak to the sense of double marginalization that the poets experienced as women and avant-gardists (or the triple marginalization along axes of aesthetics, gender, and race, in the case of Sanchez and other BAM women poets). As her title indicates, Nelson chooses to treat both of her central categories—"women" and "the New York School"—as "abstractions," pointing out that "many of the arguments against the unexamined use of literary or art-historical groupings or

labels have much in common with certain radical feminist arguments against the category of ‘women,’” and yet, these categories still have “real referents” and “pragmatic power” (xvii). In order to redress the critical tendency to treat women as “secondary participants” in or “passive benefactors” of Language writing (12), Vickery employs “a feminist genealogy” in order to “draw attention to the vicissitudes of cultural activity by foregrounding the exchanges of this activity rather than the objects that are part of it” (14), a methodology that draws women’s contributions into clearer view. Clarke, borrowing a spatial metaphor from Frederick Douglass, investigates “[h]ow black women poets configured themselves in relation to the Black Arts Movement from within, at the margins, and ‘without the circle,’” and asks, “Do black women poets create a counter-black counter-public? How do they mediate the masculine-centered poetics and gender politics?” (49). Johnson and Grace point out that women writers’ feelings of ambivalence toward the Beat movement “gave rise to critiques that were instantiated in second-wave feminism” (9). Often treated as token or second-class members of their respective movements, many women poets eventually found it necessary to move beyond narrow social groupings or aesthetic visions in ways that often strengthened their feminist politics. All of the poets I discuss went on to write poetry whose style and substance went far beyond the aesthetic tenets of their respective avant-garde groups, and the work of di Prima, Sanchez, and Notley has grown more explicitly feminist over the decades.

If the poets in this dissertation have been overlooked because they do not fit neatly into the aesthetics articulated by male leaders of their affiliated poetry movements, their poems also do not align with familiar narratives of feminist poetry. As Elizabeth Frost, whose *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (2003) charts the relationship between feminist and avant-garde aesthetics in women’s poetry across the 20th century, puts it, “these

writers position themselves in ambivalent relation to the predominantly male avant-garde movements with which they are often associated; further, they distinguish their work from that of feminist poets writing in more traditional forms” (xi). For the most part, the poets I study were not active in the feminist poetry movement that took place alongside second-wave feminism, and their poems are not cathartic confessions, anger-fueled diatribes, or what Kim Whitehead, describing the poetry that emerged alongside the women’s liberation movement, calls “a poetics grounded in women’s individual experiences, geared toward women’s liberation from gender oppression, and therefore involving the need for both subjective and collective expression” (xv).<sup>15</sup> Notley, for one, rejected the early models for feminist poetry in the U.S.: “when I was dealing with the problems of being a young mother and an aspiring poet—I decided the poems of Plath and Sexton were a genuinely negative force. [...] It was as if both men and women were showing you these poems and saying, Here, this is what it’s like to be a woman. Well no it ain’t. It wasn’t” (Foster 80).

I do not wish to draw a hard line between the work of more “mainstream” feminist poets active in the women’s liberation movement—such as Adrienne Rich, Alicia Ostriker, Judy Grahn, and Audre Lorde—and the poetry I discuss here, which is also “heavily invested in the details of specific women’s lives” (Whitehead xii). In fact, the impulse to “include everything” was taken up by a wide range of feminist poets who wrote about women’s experiences. Still, it is important to note that feminist everyday poetry does not look or sound like the poems collected, for example, in *No More Masks!: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Women Poets* (1973) or *Rising Tides: 20th Century American Women Poets* (1973). These are not well-crafted lyric-narrative poems written in earnest, angry, or revelatory tones, but instead poems that incorporate the seemingly unremarkable details of

women's daily lives in an experimental style that bends the rules of proper poetic structure, syntax, tone, and diction.

In the essay "The tradition of marginality ... and the emergence of *HOW(ever)*" (1985), Kathleen Fraser describes how she and other feminist experimental poets in the 1960s and 70s felt that they were "not pure: neither purely, categorically avant-garde nor purely one kind of feminist" (33), and therefore had "consistently been neglected by academic, mainstream, feminist, and avant-garde scholar/critics" (38).<sup>16</sup> She recalls that "Each poetics constellation or school had its token woman poet" and "each had male theorists setting forth the new aesthetic dogma" (30). The rise of second-wave feminism and the presence of poetry at rallies and meetings seemed at first to offer an alternative:

The women's movement came on strong, and poetry was at the center of it. Finally, one imagined, there would be a warm room where the multiple styles of women's minds and bodies and poetic languages could flower. But, in fact, something else happened. There were political needs—raw, bottled-up feelings wanting out—and a call for the immediately accessible language of personal experience as a binding voice of women's strength. Many women focused on the poem as a place for self-expression, for giving a true account, for venting rage, and for embracing sexual love of women. (31-2)

The event and publication venues associated with the women's liberation movement turned out to be inhospitable to the experimental poetry being written by Fraser and those she gathered around her journal, *HOW(ever)* (1983-1992). Fraser and her peers were investigating a "female experience of multiplicity and fragmentation" in their work as they identified a "tradition of marginality" going back to women modernists such as Stein, Woolf, H.D., Mina Loy, Laura Riding, and Lorine Niedecker (33, 34). The poets who edited and published work in *HOW(ever)* were loosely affiliated with Language writing; they were not necessarily part of the historical grouping of writers who came together around *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and The Grand Piano reading series in San Francisco in the late 1970s, but like these writers, they sought to challenge the social values they saw

embedded in mainstream lyric-narrative poetry, including the unified poetic voice. This tradition of feminist poetry has come to be identified by the term “language-oriented”: Influenced by poststructuralism, these women wrote poetry that “interrogates the patriarchal structures and assumptions that are embedded in language itself” (Sewell 110).

Like language-oriented feminist poetry, feminist everyday poetry pushes the bounds of what counts as avant-garde or feminist, and is therefore presents challenges for teaching, studying, and anthologizing. But just as feminist everyday poetry does not fully align with mainstream feminist poetry, neither does it fit into most definitions of language-oriented poetics.<sup>17</sup> Instead, poetry of the feminist everyday maintains an investment in autobiographical lyric subjectivity *and* uses experimental forms, styles, and tones to evoke women’s everyday lives. In this way, my study is part of the critical trend over the last decade to show that binary configurations such as “avant-garde vs. identity-based” or “language-oriented vs. lyric” do not offer a full picture of the range and complexity of feminist poetics in the U.S. In an effort to complicate these two-camp narratives, the inventive anthologies and edited collections *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women’s Writing and Performance Poetics* (2002), edited by Cynthia Hogue and Laura Hinton; *Innovative Women Poets* (2006), edited by Frost and Hogue; *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002), edited by Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr (and its “sequel,” *Eleven More American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics Across North America* (2012), edited by Rankine and Sewell) bring together feminist writing from various aesthetic camps in order to demonstrate that the line between “traditional” and “experimental” women’s poetry is not always clear nor useful.<sup>18</sup> *Innovative Women Poets*, for example, contains work by Notley, Sanchez, and Ostriker, among others, in order to bring poetry of innovative “formal attributes” and “cultural stance” together (4). Hogue and Hinton’s stated editorial intention

is to reveal “the contiguities and interconnections among cross-generic women’s avant-garde writings” (3).<sup>19</sup> *American Women Poets* challenges the false dichotomy of “lyric” and “language” writing, revealing “a variety of ways that modernist techniques are being used within lyric contexts” (11), and ten years later *Eleven More* affirms that “it has become more and more difficult to assign specific labels or rubrics to particular poets” (2).<sup>20</sup>

Recently, Lynn Keller’s *Thinking Poetry: Readings in Contemporary Women’s Exploratory Poetics* (2010) and Amy Moorman Robbins’s *American Hybrid Poetics: Gender, Mass Culture, and Form* (2014) have shown how a two-camp narrative of contemporary American poetry (in which the “experimental vs. traditional” framework applies to poets of all genders) is not only reductive, but worse, serves to erase the particular contributions of women. Keller argues that “the mainstream/Language binary was from the outset being complicated or even collapsed from within, particularly by women writers” (7). Robbins, aiming to intervene into women poets’ erasure from the development of the 21st-century aesthetic known as “hybrid poetics” (a term often used as shorthand for the collapse of the mainstream/Language binary), demonstrates that hybrid aesthetics are not new but in fact “have a firm foundation and a distinct history in the work of radical women poets from throughout the past century, poets who have created such mixings as part of a resistance to being fixed in any particular school or camp, sometimes (as in the case of Alice Notley) on the grounds that such camps are most often dominated by male poets” (1).<sup>21</sup> A version of this argument was made as early as 1989, when Marianne DeKoven pointed to the dangers of women’s experimental writing, in particular *l’écriture féminine*, allying itself with male-dominated postmodern writing, which “appropriates women’s writing to an ostensibly genderless but actually male discourse” (97). These “female-obliterating tendencies” resulted

in women's avant-garde writing being "simply too subversive to be supported or recognized by hegemonic institutions such as the academy or mainstream publishing" (97, 96).

In 2015, with the anthologies and critical studies of the last fifteen years stacked beside me in a tall pile, it is possible to assert that the academy is beginning to recognize women's experimental poetry as an important subject of study. These recent projects at long last paid attention to the previously overlooked women poets of post-1945 avant-garde groups, or brought together a variety of feminist poetry, from lyric narrative to formally experimental to everything in between. My choice to link women poets across avant-garde groups by defining a shared aesthetic strategy depends on the poetic investments these earlier projects made visible. It is only now, after such critical groundwork has been laid, that I am able not only to study experimental women's poetry at the intersection of feminist and avant-garde traditions, but also to define the specific aesthetic tendency of the feminist everyday. While scholars and editors of innovative feminist poetry have, perhaps wary of accusations of essentialism, largely avoided focusing on poetic methods shared by certain women poets, choosing instead to examine "a broad scope of feminist concerns and of formal or aesthetic strategies" (Frost xii), and while I agree that there are a variety of concerns and strategies to attend to in contemporary women's poetry, at this point, under the threats of erasure and indecipherability that Keller and Robbins identify, it is important to name and articulate methods shared by women poets. My decision to focus on a shared aesthetic impulse runs the risk of either insisting too much on difference (the perception that I might be saying that there is something essentially feminine about this writing, which I am not) or of flattening out difference (conflating varied poetic experiments). I take these risks because it is important to examine the methods of American women poets whose work continues to significantly influence contemporary experimental and feminist poetic practices.

The idea of “the everyday,” which I will explore further in the following section, is an especially useful framework in this endeavor because it is a broad concept that manifests poetically in particular, individual, and varied ways.

It is important to point out that although the term is mine, the concept of the feminist everyday is actually a synthesis of the poetics articulated by the poets themselves in essays, letters, and interviews (and even in poems, at times), as well as by innovative women writers who were their peers and precursors. Theories of women’s writing that resemble what I am calling the feminist everyday have existed for decades, most notably in essays by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Virginia Woolf, and Alice Walker, essays that also help illuminate the larger systems of literary and social values that might have rendered this work invisible. DuPlessis’s essay “For the Etruscans” (1980)—whose experimental form could itself be read as an example of the feminist everyday—is cautious about its attempts to define “the possibilities of a ‘female aesthetic’” (viii). DuPlessis was writing at a moment when theorists of women’s writing such as *l’écriture féminine* regularly had to defend themselves against accusations of essentialism. Reacting to the idea that women’s writing might have a biological link to women’s bodies, DuPlessis writes that she does not want “to consider the body as some absolute” but instead to think through “the ‘body’ of psychosocial fabrications of difference,” arguing that the social construction of gendered difference produces aesthetic differences (2, 3). If “these differing experiences do surely produce (some) different consciousnesses, different cultural expression,” then “there is female aesthetic, but not *a* female aesthetic, not one single constellation of strategies” (3). DuPlessis’s description of one possible manifestation of “female aesthetic” corresponds to my notion of the feminist everyday:

The holistic sense of life without the exclusionary wholeness of art. These holistic forms: inclusion, apparent nonselection, because selection is

censorship of the unknown, the between, the data, the germ, the interstitial, the bit of sighting that the writer cannot place. Holistic work: great tonal shifts, from polemic essay to lyric. A self-questioning, the writer built into the center of the work, the questions at the center of the writer, the discourses doubling, retelling the same, differently. And not censored: love, politics, children, dreams, close talk. The first Tampax in world literature. A room where clippings paper the walls. (10)

This type of writing is “new,” DuPlessis argues, in “that use of the word ‘new’ which, for centuries, has signaled antithesis to dominant values. And which coincides with the thrilling ambition to write a great, encyclopedic, holistic work, the ambition to get everything in, inclusively, reflexively, monumentally” (9).<sup>22</sup> In linking the urge to “include everything” to questions of innovation and literary value, DuPlessis points to some of the reasons this writing has been overlooked or devalued. It is writing that looks more like life than like art, that embraces the low more than the high, or that recombines art and life, high and low, in ways that are difficult to decipher: “blurring of all the elements we have firmly regarded as setting art apart: blurring between art and life, blurring between social creativity and ‘high’ art, blurring between one’s journal and one’s poem, blurring between the artifact and the immersion in experience” (12).

It is fitting, then, that DuPlessis turns to Virginia Woolf’s *A Writer’s Diary* for a further elaboration of “female aesthetic.” Woolf describes her intention for the diary: “Something loose-knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through” (qtd. in DuPlessis 9). For DuPlessis, the literary work, too, might aspire toward “[t]he form of the desk, the tote bag, the journal” (9). Here it is worth noting that the feminist recovery projects that began in the 1970s not only sought to bring recognition to the achievements of individual women writers who had been forgotten, but also to affirm

the literary value of forms and genres that had not previously been regarded as art. As Mary Eagleton writes in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (2007), “Simply asking the basic questions—where were the women writers, what did they write, how did they come to write—produced a mass of new material, complicated our understanding of literary history, impressed on critics the significance of gender in the production of writing and revitalised interest in more private literary forms such as letters, diaries and journals” (108). The feminist everyday can be understood at the intersection of literary and life writing, or the “blurring between one’s journal and one’s poem” that DuPlessis describes. Women poets were mobilizing the conditions of their lives in aesthetically radical ways, aiming to “include everything” as a deliberate challenge to dominant literary and social values.

It was Woolf, in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), who provided one of the first articulations of how literary value gets assigned along gendered lines, and the ways social and aesthetic value systems are linked:

And since a novel has this correspondence to real life, its values are to some extent those of real life. But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial’. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battle-field is more important than a scene in a shop—everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (73-74)

Everywhere, and subtly, and still in the early 21st century, the difference of value persists.<sup>23</sup>

For this reason, I put forth the feminist everyday as a way of naming and affirming the so-called “trivial”—subjects and styles that have traditionally been the domain of women due to the fact that women have been relegated to the mundane maintenance of everyday life—in

an effort to critique the literary value systems that would treat this writing as somehow lesser.

Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1972) describes the ways in which these revaluations of what counts as art are central to the task of the feminist critic, who navigates inherited categories and values even as she tries to shine a light on what has gone undescribed. As for where and how to look, Walker writes: "We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high—and low" (406). Walker describes how black women artists, having no leisure time, often used the materials and tasks at hand as outlets for their creative impulses. Looking low means treating gardens and quilts as works of art; these "low" mediums and forms become objects of critical attention. *Where* to look is one way of thinking about looking low; *how* to look is another. Ways of looking low at women's poetry might include paying attention to what has been deemed unimportant or unpoetic, and describing how it functions as art. When reading feminist everyday poetry, I aim to look low and to describe what I see in order to imbue it with value. If this implies some sort of elevation, some "rescuing" from the low, I only intend this to a certain extent. I believe this work is important to American poetry and to feminism, but I also think that we should stay low—approach the work on the level of the everyday—in order to best understand it. In the following section, I turn to theories of everyday life as further guides for "looking low" and for understanding the complex relationship between women and the everyday.

## Feminist Theories of Everyday Life

Liesl Olson, in a 2011 essay reviewing seven recently published books that investigate the various bodies of thought on the concept of everyday life, announces that “the field of everyday life studies can now be said to have its own canon” (175).<sup>24</sup> The origin of everyday life studies is usually located in post-1968 France, in the writings of Henri Lefebvre, the Situationists, and Michel de Certeau. These theories made their way to the United States in the 1970s and 80s, when Lefebvre’s *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1971) and de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) were published in English translation. In 1987, *Yale French Studies* further introduced these thinkers to English-speaking audiences through an “Everyday Life” issue that included essays by Lefebvre and Maurice Blanchot, and about the Situationists and Roland Barthes. But it was not until the first decade of the 21st century that everyday life theory became the subject of, or critical lens for, numerous studies in a wide range of fields such as cultural studies, history, philosophy, sociology, and literary studies.<sup>25</sup> Although the term “the everyday” is often defined in an intentionally vague way, and has been employed for a variety of purposes in each of these studies, most often “the everyday” refers to the most habitual, familiar aspects of daily life, which paradoxically go unperceived because they are so near. We are enmeshed in the everyday, which can be a realm of cultural domination and colonization—the ruses of bourgeois ideology, from advertising to gender roles—as well as a site of resistance and subversion.

I put the feminist poetry in this dissertation in conversation with theories of the everyday for two main reasons. First, because this body of thought, especially when read alongside feminist theory, illuminates women’s ambivalent and overdetermined relationship to the everyday, and this is the relation that many of the poems explore. When I say that feminist everyday poetry is both shaped and warped by the conditions of women’s everyday

lives, and that this amounts to a simultaneous feminist revaluation and critique, I am pointing to the ambivalence that results from women's overdetermined relationship to the everyday. Theories of everyday life, and feminist extensions of and interventions into those theories, help clarify the ways that femininity and everydayness have been (over)associated with one another. Secondly, everyday life theory suggests a methodology that supports my effort to "look low," or to approach the poems at the level of quotidian experience, including the experience of poetic practice. Because they understand the everyday as practice and process, theorists and critics of the everyday provide ways to think about the relationship between women poets and everyday life that avoid reductive biographical readings even as they account for real lives, including the authors' real lives, in poetry.

Lefebvre's project over the course of many books was to articulate the relationship between modernity and everyday life, and especially the dialectic of domination and transformation embedded in the experience of everyday modernity. Lefebvre emphasizes the centrality of women's relationship to everyday life even as he struggles to define this relationship in unambiguous terms. Women are "sentenced to everyday life" ("Everyday" 10); they "are the subject of everyday life and its victims or objects and substitutes" (*Everyday* 73). On the one hand, everyday life imprisons women with its routinized monotony; on the other, as "subject of" and "substitutes" for everyday life, women are embedded in—even indistinguishable from—everyday life. Because women have positive, negative, and neutral relationships to the everyday, and because women "are" everyday life (as subject and substitute), their relationship to the everyday is both ambivalent and overdetermined. In *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (France 1968; U.S. 1971), Lefebvre further underscores this ambivalence by proposing a "contrasting diptych" of the "*misery of everyday life*" and the "*power of everyday life*" (35). The "tedious tasks, humiliations" of the former are

reflected in the lives of the working classes and especially of women, upon whom the conditions of everyday life bear heaviest—child-bearing and child-rearing, basic preoccupations with bare necessities, money, tradesmen, provisions, the realm of numbers, a sort of intimate knowledge of things outside the sphere of material reality: health, desire, spontaneity, vitality; recurrence, the survival of poverty and the endlessness of want, a climate of economy, abstinence, hardship, repressed desires, meanness and avarice. (35)

This sketch of the “misery of everyday life” is so all-encompassing as to seem to describe life itself. It is useful for enumerating all of the “conditions of everyday life” outside the realm of paid labor: here we might recall di Prima describing the “Requirements” of women’s lives: “*a monolithic unsorted bundle of demands, formulated for the most part elsewhere, but acceded to blindly*” (227). These demands include tasks such as childcare, housework, and money managing, but also less concrete concerns such as “health, desire, spontaneity, vitality”—which, in fact, have very little to do with “misery” at all, but instead name the life forces that women’s work sustains. When Lefebvre describes the “power of everyday life,” he only seems to reassert women’s misery: “the power of woman, crushed and overwhelmed, ‘object’ of history and society but also the inevitable ‘subject’ and foundation” (35). Rather than illuminating the source of, or potential for, this power, Lefebvre decides, elsewhere in *Everyday Life*, that women’s powerful-miserable relationship to the everyday makes it impossible for them to comprehend it: “Because of their ambiguous position in everyday life—which is specifically part of everyday life and modernity—they are incapable of understanding it” (73).<sup>26</sup>

We can, however, use Lefebvre’s formulations to draw a very different conclusion. Women’s relationship to the everyday, precisely because it is ambivalent, is loaded with information. Because they are intimate with the conditions, requirements, and rhythms of everyday life—those that victimize them as well as those that affirm their power—they are uniquely capable of understanding the potential of the everyday. As Ben Highmore points out, “the very logic of Lefebvre’s dialectical approach to everyday life *should* suggest that

women are going to be at one and the same time the most ‘alienated’ of individuals and the most active ‘resistors’ of such alienation” (*Cultural Theory* 126). Indeed, when the women’s liberation movement emerged in full force—at the same time *Everyday Life in the Modern World* was published—women became active resistors of their own alienation. Through consciousness-raising groups, meetings, rallies, political actions, and poetry readings, women analyzed the ways in which they were “sentenced” to everyday life and used this knowledge to enact widespread social change. Second-wave feminism’s ground-up, personal-is-political approach to social change corresponds to the ways Lefebvre approached the everyday dialectically, as the realm of both alienation and resistance: While the “character of the everyday has always been repetitive and veiled by obsession and fear” (“Everyday” 10), it is also the site of cultural transformation: “Where do the genuine changes take place? In the unmysterious depths of everyday life!” (*Critique* 137). Lefebvre correctly identified women’s centrality to the critical concept of the everyday, and named everyday life as a crucial site of cultural change, but could not grasp or predict the radical critique and transformation of everyday life that women would undertake.

These critiques and transformations are ongoing, and Lefebvre’s sense that women are bound up in the everyday can help us understand how women’s overdetermined relationship to everyday life continues to place somewhat contradictory demands on feminism. Much feminist thought is wary of suggesting that the everyday (along with the personal, autobiographical, and domestic) is the “natural” realm of, or subject for, women’s art, even as studying that art often means confronting the ways these concepts function in individual works. How can we value the experiences and cultural contributions of actual women, from housework to artwork, while at the same time critiquing the forces that insist that women conduct so much of the labor that keeps everyday life running? Feminist

thinkers and activists have been negotiating this conflict for decades, and it has often been framed in terms of a debate that pits “feminist” against “feminine.” As Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd point out in *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife* (2004)—whose title references Lefebvre—second-wave feminists’ attitudes toward the gendered conditions of everyday life often produced a narrative that pitted “feminists and the feminist intellectual in particular” against the figure of “‘the housewife’ as ‘Other’” (2). In this feminist “narrative of oppression-then-liberation,” “[t]he figure of the housewife and all that she represents can only be rescued, liberated, abandoned or left behind” (12, 17). For Johnson and Lloyd, the “fantasy of a feminist subject as fully unified and coherent, able to define herself and her world unambiguously [...] is a problem for young women today, not the housewife” (17). The idea that women can simply choose to opt in or out of traditional gender roles is an illusion in a “post-feminist” world in which women in fact have no choice but to define themselves ambiguously in relation to traditional ideas of femininity.<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon makes a similar point, arguing that “feminist” has been understood “as an identity for women which transcended—and by implication, put an end to—traditional femininity” (378). But this narrative of feminist identity oversimplifies the complex relationship between feminism and femininity: “Femininity, instead of being a difficult and contradictory psychic, historical and cultural formation, to which feminists have been historically ambivalent, becomes an explanatory factor” (373).

The feminist recuperation of femininity is now regarded as a central, though disputed, project of third-wave feminism, as young women in the 21st century “actively play with femininity” as “part of the younger generation’s project of reclamation” (Snyder 179). But rather than simply reaffirming traditional femininity, “Third-wave feminism has identified that femininity in late modernity is far from unproblematic and presents both

opportunities and challenges” (Budgeon 289). Third-wave feminists have complicated the second-wave narrative that pitted feminism against femininity, and instead acknowledge the conflicted position of the feminist subject: “By refusing to deploy straightforward codes to designate contemporary gender ideals in terms of simple binaries such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, third-wave feminism insists on the necessity of straddling binaries and working with the contradictions that result” (Budgeon 280). Feminist thought is still grappling with questions of value important to this dissertation—that is, questions about how to both reevaluate and critique behaviors, attitudes, and concerns that have been coded feminine.

Feminist thinkers who have extended and intervened into everyday life studies help further clarify the tangled relationship between femininity and everydayness. If, for Lefebvre, women were so enmeshed in everyday life as to be indistinguishable from it, for feminist critics such as Naomi Schor and Rita Felski, particular understandings of the everyday can be associated with femininity or masculinity. Schor helpfully differentiates between a “feminine or feminist” and a “masculine or masculinist” everyday: the former “links the everyday with the daily rituals of private life carried out within the domestic sphere traditionally presided over by women” and “is made up of the countless repetitive gestures and small practices that fall under the heading of what the existentialists called the contingent”; the latter “sites the everyday in the public spaces and spheres dominated especially, but not exclusively, in modern Western bourgeois societies by men” and “is made up of the chance encounters of the streets; its hero is not the housewife but the *flâneur*” (188). Maurice Blanchot, in one of the essays that introduced everyday life theory to English-speaking audiences, defines the everyday in this masculine sense: “The everyday is not at home in our dwelling-places, it is not in offices or churches any more than in libraries or museums. It is in the street—if it is anywhere” (17).

Felski locates the masculine everyday in Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City," whose "image of the agile pedestrian, adeptly weaving a distinctive textual path across the grid of city streets, has become a resonant symbol of the contemporary subject" (23), arguing that an idea of the everyday based on the heroic modern subject "often loses sight of the mundane, taken-for-granted, routine qualities that seem so central to its definition—the very everydayness of the everyday" (18). Thinking of the everyday as "negative or residual" has often meant aligning it with women: "Women, like everyday life, have often been defined by negation. Their realm has not been that of war, art, philosophy, scientific endeavour, high office. What else is left to woman but everyday life, the realm of the insignificant, invisible yet indispensable?" (18, 17). Everydayness, then, is not only coded feminine but actually constructed in opposition to ideals of modern subjectivity. Because it is mundane rather than exciting, static rather than progressive, stay-at-home rather than adventurous, it gets devalued, and femininity gets devalued along with it. The ways these value systems have translated to poetry can be seen in the way, for example, Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*—poems that, as discussed in Chapter 4, show the poet as "agile pedestrian" weaving through midtown Manhattan—have been canonized, while Alice Notley and Bernadette Mayer's poems of domestic dailiness remain largely ignored.

Felski's intervention is to define and valorize the "time, space, and modality" of everyday life: "the temporality of the everyday, I suggest, is that of repetition, the spatial ordering of the everyday is anchored in a sense of home and the characteristic mode of experiencing the everyday is that of habit" (18). Drawing largely on the philosophy of Agnes Heller, Felski characterizes these aspects of the everyday in positive terms: "Repetition is one of the ways in which we organize the world, make sense of our environment and stave off the threat of chaos"; home's "familiarity is an everyday need"; "Habit is the necessary

precondition for impulse and innovation” (21, 22, 27). Acknowledging that repetition, habit, and home are traditionally feminine concepts, Felski gives them value not through a celebration of the feminine or the domestic, but rather by showing how these concepts are aspects of modernity experienced by most people. Her choice to universalize the terms leads her ultimately to argue that “everydayness is not an intrinsic quality that magically adheres to particular actions or persons (women, the working class). Rather, it is a lived process of routinisation that all individuals experience” since “men are also embodied, embedded subjects, who live, for the most part, repetitive, familiar and ordinary lives” (31). At the same time, she underscores the implications of her discussion for feminist thought: “Feminism has, of course, traditionally conceived itself as a politics of everyday life,” which has meant that some feminists wish to expose “how the most mundane, taken-for-granted activities – conversation, housework, body language, styles of dress – serve to reinforce patriarchal norms,” while others treat women’s connection to everyday life as a source of “value” and “strength” (30). Although the everyday must be regarded ambivalently in relation to feminism, Felski demonstrates that “this ambivalence has a history, that everyday life has long been subject to intense and conflicting emotional investments” (30).

While I agree with Felski that both men and women experience the facets of everydayness that she investigates, I would argue that we can find value in traditionally feminine aspects of everyday life without universalizing experiences of everydayness. Valorizing the everyday does mean valuing femininity to a certain extent—which, after all, has been just as culturally constructed as, and in tandem with, the everyday. At the same time, Felski provides a helpful model of a feminist critical stance that finds worth in the everyday without resorting to a conservative affirmation of traditional women’s roles. She suggests a way of framing the relationship between femininity and the everyday that does not

merely assume there is a given category of people called “women” who have some relationship toward “the everyday,” but instead points to some of the ways that everyday conditions (repetition, home, habit) produce gendered identities. In this sense, repetition is central for Felski: “It is a key factor in the gradual formation of identity as a social and intersubjective process. Quite simply, we become who we are through acts of repetition” (21).

The idea that gender identity is produced by repetition on the level of the everyday lines up with ideas of gender performativity that have prevailed in the academy and in the wider culture since the publication of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990):

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*. (179; italics Butler’s)

What looks like the stable gender identity called “woman” is actually an effect produced through repeated acts in everyday life. While the body is central for Butler, time (“*stylized repetition of acts*”), space (“instituted in an exterior space”), and the everyday (“the mundane way”) are key concepts for thinking of gender as a “constituted *social temporality*” rather than as an expressed identity. If we extend Butler’s theory of stylized bodily rituals to recurrent acts of gendered labor, we can begin to see how the gender category called “women” is constituted when certain bodies perform certain types of work repeatedly.

Butler’s and Felski’s theories, when considered together, shed light on the fact that some of the complexities surrounding women’s relationship to the everyday—Lefebvre’s surfeit of relational terms, feminists’ reluctance to equate femininity with everydayness—

emerge from the fact that both gender and the everyday are constituted through repeated acts in social times and spaces. Bringing theories of gender performativity to bear on notions of the everyday suggests that there are not preexisting people called “women” who interact with a sphere called “the everyday.” Instead, the everyday is the realm where women are produced: Feminine gender identity is constituted through mundane, embodied repetitions in time and space. By reconfiguring the terms in this way, we can start asking different questions about women’s ambivalent relationship to the everyday. Beyond asking why women seem embedded in or identical to everyday life, we might also ask: What are the stylized mundane acts that, when repeated, create the illusion of gender? What are their temporal and spatial qualities? How are they enforced? And, even more germane to the questions of this dissertation: What does it mean for poets to write in a way that makes visible the ways gender gets constituted mundanely? How might poetic form, style, and tone reflect this process? In this light, the poems become fascinating enactments of the minute workings of gender in everyday life. Approaching feminist poetry in this way might provide a way to hold onto the feminine qualities of the everyday in order to study women’s quotidian experiences without thinking of the everyday as the natural realm of women.

## Critical Methods and Poetic Practices

Many critical opportunities await to put theories of everyday life into conversation with feminist and experimental poetry.<sup>28</sup> I want to conclude not by suggesting further subjects of study, but rather by reflecting on the critical methodology suggested by the poetry I have studied and the theoretical approaches, everyday and feminist, that I have taken up. I have tried to meet these poems from down below, at the level of the everyday, with the knowledge that many would argue that poetry, and especially the academic study of poetry, is invested in privileged, symbolically resonant moments. I have continually asked myself: What might it mean to read these poems by greeting them at the level of their own everydayness, rather than trying to rescue them from the everyday? Here I confront a paradox intrinsic to the critical examination of the everyday, noted by many theorists and critics: “How do we discuss the ordinary when by its very nature it should remain overlooked?” (Olson 176). As soon as we pay attention to the everyday, we not only reify it but also make it exceptional: “By making the invisible visible, by giving form and content to an experience so vague and seemingly natural that part of its significance is that its subjects cannot define it, by defining, or *theorizing*, the everyday, it is transformed into what it is not” (Langbauer 50). Does the poet or critic’s focus on what is “given only the most cursory of attention in daily life” constitute “an act of salvation” (Highmore, *Everyday* 24)?

Like other feminist scholars, I want to challenge “the view that the everyday exists only as something to be transcended, as the realm of monotony, emptiness and dull compulsion” in order to valorize what has been devalued in women’s lives and poetry (Felski 17). And yet, for feminist poets and critics, there is potential in the idea that making the everyday visible simultaneously makes it exceptional or important: In fact, this is the very logic through which many of the poets in this study make women’s everyday lives poetically

valuable. By training poetic attention on the everyday, they empty it of its banality and reveal it as fascinating or astonishing—as the “sublime / Everyday,” as Mayer writes (*Midwinter* 102). If rendering women’s everyday lives using innovative formal methods imbues these lives with significance, then the seemingly troubling paradox of paying attention to the everyday aids the work of feminist revaluation. In this way, feminist everyday poetry enacts its challenge of conservative literary values that deem its subject matter unimportant or its style unpoetic. At the same time, as soon as women’s lives are made visible, they become potential objects of critique, as feminist consciousness-raising groups revealed in the 1970s. As Highmore observes, making everyday life visible “has never been a simple act of calling on an already understood daily culture—in many respects it has needed to produce that culture (as problematic) in the first place” (2). By poetically producing the everyday as problematic, feminist everyday poetry enacts a critique as well as a revaluation of women’s lives.

Experimental poetry, understood as an everyday practice, is an especially fitting art form for producing the everyday as problematic. Everyday life theorists often emphasize that the everyday should be regarded as a practice, not as a concept.<sup>29</sup> Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* examines particular practices such as walking, eating, reading, and dwelling, but primarily focuses on “ways of operating”: not on what “users” do but on how they do it—how they “poach” culture for their own purposes (xi, xii). Similarly, Michael Sheringham characterizes the everyday as “adverbial” and “modal”:

The everyday cannot be reduced to its content. [...] Driving to work, getting the groceries, talking to friends are all objective phenomena—instances of which can be analysed in a wide variety of ways—but the everyday invokes something that holds these things together, their continuity and rhythm, or lack of it, something that is adverbial, modal, and ultimately therefore ethical, because it has to do with individual and collective *art de vivre*. (361)

Sheringham then wonders, “How can we grasp this modal dimension of daily actions?” (361) and determines that what is required is a sense of “our lived experience of it, our participation and immersion in its fields, the ways in which we make it part of our world” (386). Experimental poetic practice is especially capable of grasping this “modal dimension” of the everyday in that innovative formal structures are flexible enough to register our “participation and immersion in” the everyday. Portable and malleable, poetry can reveal “continuity and rhythm” and other temporal and modal elements that “hold together” the everyday, and can capture the lived particularities of everyday experience as they happen, or engage in “experimental studies in the experiential realm of the daily” (Highmore, *Reader* 31).

One way of approaching poetry as an “adverbial, modal, and ultimately therefore ethical” everyday practice is by asking how texts are written, or by emphasizing process. Thus, the everydayness of the poetry I examine is revealed through di Prima’s ethics of discipline; Sanchez’s interventions into the daily lives of her audience; Hejinian’s efforts to open her text to the reader; Mayer’s rehearsals, performances, and technologies; and Notley’s real-time writing strategies. The poets’ shared impulse to “include everything”—even commentary on the writing process, or the poet’s current situation in social life—reveals another “modal” element that identifies the feminist everyday as a practice. Regarding poetry as an everyday practice also highlights women’s ambivalent relationship to the everyday, an ambivalence that is especially acute for the artist who uses her own life as material, and who is both embedded in the everyday and standing apart from it with a critical and artistic eye. In feminist everyday poetry, we see how poetic form is capable both of bending to a life structured by gendered labor and of borrowing from the artful, resourceful aspects of this labor. Indeed, some of the poetic experiments in this chapter dissolve the boundaries between poetic and gendered labor entirely (di Prima’s lullabies, Mayer’s grocery lists).

Moreover, poetry is an art form well suited to holding and enacting these contradictory approaches—it can account for, rather than try to resolve, the complexities of the embodied social times and spaces in which everyday life is resisted and embraced.

Because poetry of the feminist everyday often includes marks of the life practices that helped and/or hindered its composition, many of the poems I examine present speakers who are not only women, but women *poets* in particular—poets deeply situated within family or cultural life, or in the midst of the act of writing itself. If the poet is a creator of social values, as Sanchez asserts, then we can see how complex poetic interpretations and enactments of women's relationship to everyday life can serve a social world that has, at least since the 1960s in the United States, been grappling with how to change the conditions of women's daily lives without devaluing the aspects of life that have been gathered under the banner of femininity. By writing about feminist everyday poetry, I aim to be one in a chain of feminist writers regarding women's everyday lives as valuable sites of critique, and I hope to valorize, for poetry and for feminism, brilliant poetic experiments that investigate women's ambivalent relationship to everyday life at a moment when this relationship was being examined and challenged in the culture at large.

<sup>1</sup> Di Prima's quotation can be found in *Recollections of My Life As a Woman* (227); Sanchez's in her interview with Wood (142); Hejinian's in a document called "Notes for a talk on My Life" in her archives at UC San Diego; Mayer's in *Midwinter Day* (89); and Notley's in her interview with Foster (84).

<sup>2</sup> Mayer's first book, *Story*, was published in 1968; Sanchez's *Home Coming* was published in 1969; Notley's *165 Meeting House Lane* in 1971; and Hejinian's *a gRRreat adventure* in 1972. It is worth noting that Sanchez and Hejinian, who were born in 1934 and 1941, respectively, published their first books after they had children, unlike Mayer and Notley, both born in 1945, who began publishing before having children; because of these differences, all four ended up publishing their first books around the same time although Sanchez was born the same year as di Prima, and Hejinian was a bit older.

<sup>3</sup> Jones was included in a fifth group at the end of *The New American Poetry*: "younger poets who have been associated with and in some cases influenced by the leading writers of the preceding groups" (xiii).

<sup>4</sup> In her introduction to *Poems from the Women's Movement*, Moore recalls, "The women's movement *was* poetry," and chronicles Plath's influence as "the avatar of a new female literary consciousness" (xx).

<sup>5</sup> The patterns of influence that Moore sketches are complicated by the fact that the 1950s Beat bohemian and civil rights movements were important precursors to the 1960s counterculture and Black Power movements, which, in turn, led to the growth of second-wave feminism when women found that their concerns were not being addressed by the cultural movements already in place.

<sup>6</sup> Di Prima, too, was arrested in the early 1960s, along with LeRoi Jones, for publishing "obscene content" in their literary magazine, *The Floating Bear*. See di Prima's *Recollections*.

<sup>7</sup> For details of the FBI visit to Sanchez's home in San Francisco, See Feinstein 155-6 and Chapter 3, note 14.

<sup>8</sup> Marjorie Perloff recalls the aesthetic climate when she first published her book on O'Hara: "In 1977, the age demanded a *raison d'être* for O'Hara's casual, improvisatory, nonmetrical and generally nonstanzaic 'I do this, I do that' pieces, pieces that hardly seemed to qualify as *poems* at all" (xiii).

<sup>9</sup> See *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, edited by Andrews and Bernstein, and my discussion of Hejinian's "The Rejection of Closure" in Chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> The feminist everyday tendency appears in the work of contemporary American women poets such as Laynie Browne, Brenda Coultas, Denise Duhamel, Geraldine Kim, Erica Hunt, Gina Myers, Hoa Nguyen, and Rachel Zucker, and others.

<sup>11</sup> My thinking on the idea of "tendencies" as opposed to schools or movements has been informed by the response to the *Gurlesque*, a tendency in feminist poetics first defined by Arielle Greenberg in 2002 to describe poems that "revel in cuteness, and use it to subversive ends, complicating the relationship between feminism and femininity." While Greenberg and her *Gurlesque* (Saturnalia, 2010) co-editor Lara Glenum defined the term as descriptive, not proscriptive, and not one that describes a social grouping, but rather an aesthetic, I have observed the ways in which many readers treat the term as a poetic school rather than as a product of editorial definition and organization. Why this happens is a question for another time, but I suspect that the male-dominated social groups that comprised 20th-century poetic movements are still the models of literary organization that hold sway, and it is difficult for some to consider literary labels completely outside of this context.

<sup>12</sup> In “Projective Verse,” Charles Olson, quoting Robert Creeley, writes, “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT,” a widely influential aesthetic concept in post-1945 U.S. poetic avant-gardism. Olson’s essay was first published in Allen’s *The New American Poetry*. For a catalog of post-1945 women poets’ responses to Olson, including statements from di Prima and Notley, see Ammiel Alcalay’s “What to Whom: A Document” in *A Little History*.

<sup>13</sup> See Mayer’s *The Formal Field of Kissing* (Monk Books, 2011), *Studying Hunger Journals* (Station Hill, 2012), *Sonnets and Please Add To This List: Teaching Bernadette Mayer’s Sonnets & Experiments* (Tender Buttons, 2014), *Eating the Colors of a Lineup of Words: The Collected Early Books of Bernadette Mayer* (Barrytown/Station Hill, 2015); *The Poetry Deal: A Film With Diane di Prima* (2011) by Melanie La Rosa; and *BaddDDD Sonia Sanchez* (2015) a film by Barbara Attie and Janet Goldwater.

<sup>14</sup> Although the poets in this study are all mothers and have all been involved in heterosexual relationships at some point, not all of them would exclusively identify as heterosexual. Di Prima, for instance, recounts her love affairs with women in *Recollections*, and describes her first marriage to Alan Marlowe, who was bisexual, as an arrangement of convenience and friendship (316-17). Both di Prima and Sanchez were single mothers for many years. Mayer’s relationship with Lewis Warsh was heteronormative but not completely traditional; they were living together, but not married, while Mayer was writing *Midwinter Day*. The life and work of a poet not included in this study, Eileen Myles, offers the possibility of examining feminist everyday poetics in a non-heteronormative context. I do not include Myles in my study because the New York School is already more represented here than any other poetry movement, and the identification of the feminist everyday across schools is important to my argument; further, Maggie Nelson’s book *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* already features chapters on Mayer, Notley, and Myles. Finally, the concept of the feminist everyday often becomes most apparent in poems that make visible the gendered labor performed by mothers and wives (or women in heterosexual relationships). At the same time, as women poets alternately take up and resist these everyday conditions in their poetry, they expose the daily work that reinforces gender and heteronormativity. While I do not want to suggest that only heterosexual women poets can write feminist everyday poetry, the examples I have chosen importantly correspond to concerns taken up by contemporaneous second-wave feminist analysis and activism concerning the distribution of gendered labor in heteronormative relationships.

<sup>15</sup> Sanchez and di Prima did, however, give poetry readings in explicitly political settings through their respective involvement with the Black Arts and counterculture movements in the 1960s.

<sup>16</sup> Fraser notes that she first presented the talk at a series curated by Charles Bernstein at the Poetry Project in 1985 (a curator/venue combination that points to Fraser’s own mix of New York School and Language writing influences). It was later published in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* (1989) and has since been anthologized.

<sup>17</sup> Hejinian is a seeming exception because she is a key figure in Language writing, but *My Life*, the book of hers that I discuss, is a multifaceted text that can be claimed by many traditions, and one that troubles the common narrative of Language writing’s supposed rejection of autobiographical subjectivity.

<sup>18</sup> The anthology *Poems from the Women’s Movement* (2009), edited by Honor Moore, whose title does not announce itself as invested in women’s experimental writing, in fact also brings together poets who have normally been separated along aesthetic lines. Di Prima, Sanchez,

Mayer, and Notley are all included, although none had a direct connection to mainstream second-wave feminism.

<sup>19</sup> Hogue and Hinton draw on Erica Hunt's notion of "contiguity," which she discusses in the essay "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics," which can be found in *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women* (1998), edited by Mary Margaret Sloan, one of the first anthologies to make visible a tradition of experimental women's poetry in the U.S. and U.K. On related questions of the problematic separation of identity-based and avant-garde aesthetics in African American poetry, see Harryette Mullen's essay "Poetry and Identity" (1996), which asserts that "the assumption remains, however unexamined, that 'avant-garde' poetry is not 'black' and that 'black' poetry, however singular its 'voice,' is not 'formally innovative'" (88), and Evie Shockley's *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011), which "highlight[s] and resituate[s] innovative poetry that has been dismissed, marginalized, and misread: first, in relation to the African American poetic tradition, because its experiments were not 'recognizably black'; and, second, in relation to constructions of the avant-garde tradition, because they were" (1).

<sup>20</sup> The first anthology was published in the wake of an April 1999 conference at Barnard called "Where Lyric Meets Language Poetry," but does not contain papers presented at that conference, many of which are collected in *Fence* 3, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2000) in the feature, "Barnard Conference: 'Where Lyric Tradition Meets Language Poetry: Innovation in Contemporary American Poetry by Women.'" Another important conference on innovative women's poetry, "Lifting Belly High: Women's Poetry Since 1900," took place at Duquesne University in September 2008.

<sup>21</sup> A notion of poetic hybridity that relies on a mainstream/experimental binary also contributes to the erasure of the innovations of many poets of color, such as the BAM poets who combined their politically revolutionary messages with experiments in spelling, punctuation, musical scoring, and more; or the work of bilingual writers such as Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa, whose book *Borderlands/La Frontera* exemplifies her "autohistoria-teoría" form, which blends "cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth, and/or other forms of theorizing" (Anzaldúa and Keating 319).

<sup>22</sup> DuPlessis's statement bears an uncanny resemblance to Hejinian's language from an unpublished talk on *My Life*, which was first published the same year as "For the Etruscans": "the urge to be encyclopedic: to make a complete work. That is, to say everything. One could think perhaps that one's own life includes everything one knows, and therefore if one could relate it in its entirety, one would have said everything – possibly even everything there is to say" ("MY LIFE").

<sup>23</sup> In the 20th century, we can hear it in descriptions, such as Theodore Roethke's in "The Poetry of Louise Bogan" (1961), that describe the "aesthetic and moral shortcomings" of women's poetry: "the spinning-out; the embroidering of trivial themes; a concern with the mere surfaces of life" (142). More recently we can see it in the "Franzenfreude" outcry by so-called "chick lit" novelists Jennifer Wieners and Jodi Picoult, who lament that their brand of fiction is derided while, when a male writer such as Jonathan Franzen turns to the domestic, his efforts are hailed as Great American Novel-level achievements. Recent efforts to count the number of women and men included in literary journals, such as Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young's "Numbers Trouble" (2007) and "The Count" statistics released by VIDA: Women in Literary Arts for every year since 2010, also point to the persistence of bias, conscious or unconscious, regarding gendered themes and aesthetics. It is perhaps

because these biases are so subtle and difficult to quantify that women writers and scholars, poets chief among them, have turned toward a quantifiable approach such as counting.

<sup>24</sup> Olson reviews books by Sheringham, Gardiner, Phillips, Randall, and Roberts, and two by Highmore. In a review essay of the same two books by Highmore just eight years earlier, Elizabeth Silva expressed skepticism over the possibility of a field called “everyday life studies,” which indicates the extent to which scholarship on the everyday cropped up quickly and all at once in the 2000s.

<sup>25</sup> See the introduction to Siobhan Phillips’s *The Poetics of the Everyday* (2010) for a list of special issues of academic journals devoted to everyday life studies in the 2000s. Since then, the 15th Modernist Studies Association conference (2013) was organized around the theme “Everydayness and the Event” and featured a plenary roundtable with Highmore, Sheringham, and others.

<sup>26</sup> For other feminist responses to this claim of Lefebvre’s, see Langbauer, who argues that he “blam[es] women for people’s unconscious relation to the everyday” (51), and Olson, who writes that Lefebvre implies “it is women’s inexorable fate to generate the phenomenon on which his theories are sustained” (179).

<sup>27</sup> Johnson and Lloyd also point out that the feminist focus on the housewife has “been in trouble for some time now”—and rightly so—due to critiques based on race, class, and generational differences (3).

<sup>28</sup> For recent books that read literature alongside everyday life theory, see Siobhan Phillips, *The Poetics of the Everyday: Creative Repetition in Modern American Verse* (2010), on “diurnal time” and “recurrent repetitions” in Frost, Stevens, Bishop, and Merrill (7, 8); Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009), on Joyce, Woolf, Stein, and Stevens, which focuses on the ordinary as “inattention or absentmindedness” (6); and Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (2007), on the everyday as a “mode of attention to content” and daily time as “temporal structure” in Virginia Woolf, H.D., Dorothy Richardson, and Gertrude Stein (2). Andrew Epstein also has a forthcoming book called *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture*, on contemporary American poetry and other art and media forms, which “argues that the aesthetic of everyday life which has exploded in recent literature and culture is fueled by profound concerns about the fate of attention in an age of distraction and increasingly mediated experience.”

<sup>29</sup> For the everyday as a “practice, not a style,” especially as this relates to the poetic use of ordinary language, see also Charles Bernstein’s “The Art and Practice of the Ordinary.”

**“The Requirements of Our Life Is the Form of Our Art”:**

**Bohemian Practices, Women’s Work, and Discipline in Diane di Prima’s Beat Poetry**

In 1953, at the age of eighteen, Diane di Prima dropped out of Swarthmore College and rented her first apartment in New York City, on 5th Street between Avenues B and C. Her parents—who lived in Brooklyn, where di Prima had grown up—were shocked and angry, and her new neighbors were unwelcoming, as she recalls in an interview: “I was the only woman living alone in that block that I know of. People thought I was a whore” (Meltzer and Lazzara 229). For di Prima, this newfound independence provided access to the artistic and cultural life she sought, and helped her continue on the path of the self-taught artist on which she had set out at Hunter College High School, where she and her classmates would show up early to school to share poems with one another.<sup>1</sup> As she began her adult life in Manhattan, di Prima took courses at universities around the city and befriended not only other writers, but also painters and dancers from the Arts Students League and the Ballet Theater, piecing together her own artistic education (Meltzer and Lazzara 229). Soon, she found herself among a group of “new Bohemians,” as they were called at the time.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1950s and early 1960s, di Prima was fostering this tightknit bohemian community, publishing her first books, raising several children, co-editing *The Floating Bear* literary magazine and Poets Press, and co-running the New York Poets Theatre. As her autobiography, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years* (2001), attests, she was doing all of this without any models to guide her and in defiance of many who told her it was impossible for a woman to choose such a radical artist’s life at all, let alone try to reconcile that life with the demands of motherhood. In fact, the gendered requirements of di Prima’s life not only presented obstacles to her life as a poet, but also enabled her to invent a

revolutionary poetics. Ann Charters, one of the foremost chroniclers of Beat literary history, recalls being struck by di Prima's intrepid spirit when first encountering her writing: "She appeared to live on her own terms completely in the present [...] I realized instinctively that di Prima's courage to be herself stemmed from being a woman" (Johnson and Grace xi). In opposition to the bourgeois conformism of U.S. culture in the 1950s and 60s, amidst the misogyny of male-dominated post-1945 New York artistic communities, and a decade before the women's liberation movement would take off in full force, di Prima was blazing a trail toward new ways of living and writing.

In her early work, di Prima developed a poetics of the everyday that imported bohemian subcultural practices into poetry and reflected the daily conditions of her life as a woman. An investment in everyday poetics—poetry whose content, form, and process is impacted by the conditions of everyday life—links the Beat and feminist aspects of her writing. Di Prima came to understand the way life conditions and aesthetic forms were interrelated from a range of influences: from the lessons she learned as a child to the aestheticized bohemian life she lived in New York to her experiences working as caretaker and provider for various households and artistic communities. On the level of content, di Prima's poems concern themselves with scenes from daily bohemian urban and domestic life, and can be "read as the record of life ongoing" (Libby 64). If Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* had made those bohemians "who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz" poetically visible for the first time, di Prima takes these characters out of Ginsberg's rapturous vision and places them in ordinary scenes where they sit up smoking and talking about jazz in 24-hour diners. The bohemian practices and stances that di Prima identifies in her autobiographies—such as the "rule of Cool," "Swinging," "cutting a swath,"

and the attitude of the “renunciant”—are documented and enacted through her poetry.<sup>3</sup> Poetic invention was an important aspect of the defiant, imaginative bohemian lifestyle for di Prima, and in her early work, she transmutes life practices into aesthetic practices, challenging dominant literary values just as the New Bohemians rejected the status quo in the culture at large. Using a mix of received lyric forms, invented free-verse poems, and prose sketches, di Prima developed a loose, streetwise style that incorporated bohemian slang and behavioral codes to capture the texture of the times. As her Corinth Books publishers put it in their introduction to *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961), “Di Prima strips away stylistic pretensions to evolve a prose that mirrors the language and attitudes of her youthful characters.”<sup>4</sup>

Di Prima is often referred to as the most famous Beat woman writer, but her relationship to Beat writing as a movement was born out of shared literary and cultural values more than social interactions.<sup>5</sup> Although she eventually developed friendships with Ginsberg and Kerouac, and shared with other Beat writers an interest in the “rebellious questioning of conventional cultural values during the cold war” (Charters 582), she developed her early style before coming into contact with Beat writers and writing. Beat literature, especially Ginsberg’s *Howl*, did, however, eventually validate for di Prima some of the poetic experiments she had been undertaking independently. Ginsberg infamously remarked of Beat women writers: “Were we responsible for the lack of outstanding genius in the women we knew? Did we put them down or repress them? I don’t think so. . . . Where there was a strong writer who could hold her own, like Diane di Prima, we would certainly work with her and recognize her” (qtd. in Peabody 1). Di Prima seems to be the exception to the rule—that is, misconception—that women Beats with “outstanding genius” didn’t exist. But in spite of the fact that poets and critics since the 1950s have “work[ed] with her and

recognize[d] her,” acknowledging her importance to the Beat movement, her poetry remains critically neglected and unincorporated into larger narratives of Beat writing.<sup>6</sup> Much of the scholarly attention di Prima has received has been focused on her life writing rather than on her poetry; while *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969) and *Recollections of My Life As a Woman* (2001) are deserving of this attention, the poetry she wrote during the years encompassed by these autobiographies, the 1950s and early 60s, merits further study—study that can be facilitated by an understanding of the life practices she describes in *Memoirs* and *Recollections*.

Di Prima’s poetry has been understudied, in part, because it is difficult to place into accounts of Beat writing that emphasize male-centered aesthetics. Charters has written of how, among Beat writers, “there was no shared formal aesthetic beyond their practice of experimental free-verse forms and their interest in poetry as performance” (582), but more recent criticism on Beat women writers, such as that written and collected by Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace, has shown that our ideas about what constitutes Beat writing emerge from the distinct aesthetics of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs: “Beat is spontaneous composition, direct expression of mind, no censorious revision, jazz-based improvisation; or factualism, cut-up, surrealism; or first-thought-best-thought, cataloging piled-up images, following breath line, prophetic utterance” (Johnson and Grace 2). As scholars have demonstrated over the last fifteen years, dominant Beat discourses emphasize spontaneous visionary experiences that are only possible for the writer, speaker, or character who is able to forgo everyday commitments, especially the responsibilities of domestic life, and who is therefore usually a man.<sup>7</sup> Considering the writing of women Beats reveals “a Beat literary discourse made of materials that male-authored Beat literature has defined itself in reaction against”—that is, the “materialities of women’s lives” (Johnson 26)—and expands

our definitions of Beat aesthetics: “Beat literature can derive from the domestic, not merely oppose it” (36).

Gendered everyday practices are central to this expanded conception of Beat literature. While critical efforts to “bring domestic discourses back into the Beat movement” have largely focused on the fascinating memoirs by Beat women such as di Prima, Hettie Jones, and Joyce Johnson (Grace 35), I demonstrate that di Prima deploys these everyday practices in fascinating ways in her poetry as well. Di Prima’s approach to the everyday demonstrates that not all Beat writing announces a “passionate revulsion against the mundane” or “a way to move beyond the quotidian and contingent” in favor of the visionary and ecstatic, as many Beat critics have supposed (Libby 62, Hunt 256). Like the memoirs that depict “women’s quotidian practices, as in keeping the pad or working to pay the rent” (Johnson 29), di Prima’s poetry shows how Beat literature emerges, too, from the process of a woman “transforming the material of her everyday life into art,” and proves that this aesthetic attention to the everyday is also “a practice fostered by the Beat movement” (Grace 50). One way to approach Beat aesthetics from a feminist perspective is to valorize women writers’ attention to the everyday as an important counterpoint to the bardic, visionary writing by Beat men, and to analyze the ways women, often denied access to transcendence, created equally fascinating literary experiments out of their everyday experiences. This shift in values brings attention to women writers such as di Prima who have been understudied because their resistance to literary and cultural values, which was also inflected by gender, took different forms than those chosen by their male counterparts.

It is this upending of received values—even those values connected to avant-garde writing already resisting the mainstream—that feminist thought has called for more broadly: “Feminist knowledges, on this model, are *not* competing intellectual paradigms, vying with

patriarchal knowledges for primacy. They are *different*, possibly even incommensurable, knowledges” (Grosz 103). Di Prima’s early poetry proposes new knowledges and new values, and its complexity only becomes legible through an understanding of the ethical and aesthetic codes she developed as she attempted to negotiate poetic work with everyday work, artistic practice with gendered life requirements.<sup>8</sup> Di Prima’s writing practice was rooted in disciplined routine (as opposed to spontaneous flight from commitments), and the understanding that “The Requirements of Our Life Is the Form of Our Art,” where “The Requirements” “is” the “monolithic unsorted bundle of demands” of gendered labor that is relatively uniform for most women and therefore singular (RM 227). Her poetry borrows, in form and content, from the textures, rhythms, pleasures, and burdens of her everyday life as a woman, allowing in cooking, cleaning, shopping, conversations, and other quotidian activities, many of them explicitly or implicitly gendered. The poems do not unequivocally affirm the mundane, nor do they express a “passionate revulsion” against it; instead, they suggest that everyday life is, for women, the realm of both drudgery and creativity. Di Prima takes pleasure in heeding “the day-to-day news” and tending to people and places—friends and children, pads and literary organizations (RM 254). At the same time, this work constrains her ability to make art. Out of this profound ambivalence emerges a poetics of the feminist everyday. Di Prima’s poetry is feminist for the way it reveals, and formally incorporates, the conditions of its production—a bohemian woman, mother, and poet’s everyday life—and at once valorizes and critiques these conditions, placing value on the quotidian details of her life by using them as content while at the same time demonstrating how these very life conditions (constant chores, tedious routine, distracting interruptions) impact the forms of the poems (fragments, sketches, nocturnes).

The everyday aspects of di Prima's poetics can be productively read through Michel de Certeau's notion of everyday practices.<sup>9</sup> The literary critic may inevitably invoke culture from above, but attempting to make visible and valuable illegible, devalued lifestyles and aesthetic styles is one way to approach literature at the level of the everyday. Here I attempt, with de Certeau, "to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline'": in this case, di Prima and her bohemian circle (*Practice*, xiv-xv). These "ways of operating," or everyday practices, have been "concealed by the form of rationality currently dominant in Western culture" (xi). They are inventive, surreptitious, low-to-the-ground tactics that resist institutional power, elude legibility from above, and insinuate themselves into the smallest details of everyday life. Therefore, they are especially useful to "the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile" (xii). Di Prima's poetry, neither "passive" nor "docile," is written from the position of the "dominated element"—that is, a socially marginalized bohemian woman. In her early work, lifestyles and aesthetic styles work in tandem to resist dominant cultural and literary values by imagining new ways of living and art-making. In treating di Prima's life and poetry as everyday practices, I aim to illuminate the resistant, inventive qualities of her aesthetic production.

Feminist theories of everyday life, such as those by Luce Giard, Rita Felski, and Agnes Heller, that valorize the creative, life-generating qualities of gendered labor and bring to light the seemingly paradoxical way in which discipline and routine make invention possible in life and art, also help illuminate how di Prima's aesthetic and domestic work are connected through their creative capacities. Although the valorization of gendered labor stands in stark contrast to the tenets of second-wave feminism that would develop in the following decades in the United States, which emphasized the discontents of housework and

caretaking, di Prima's radical life and work ask to be taken on their own terms. Di Prima was raised in a family and culture that valued the craft of women's work, and she was also a groundbreaking proto-feminist artist whose life offered a model of new possibilities for women. She understood that cultural forces, not an individual lack of "outstanding genius," kept women writers from becoming "strong writers": "I can't say a lot of really great women writers were ignored in my time, but I can say a lot of potentially great women writers wound up dead or crazy," she tells Anne Waldman in an interview, later acknowledging that her defiant attitude likely gave her the ability to survive as a woman and artist: "I was a brash little brat. Probably why I'm still alive!" (31).<sup>10</sup> Understanding di Prima's early poetry requires recognizing the conditions that she was up against and the ways she managed to succeed as an artist when many other women did not. During the years when she was first becoming a poet amidst a repressive, conformist culture, di Prima invented an eclectic life and poetics blending tradition and innovation, and her poems bear the mark of those limitations and freedoms, revealing the cultural constraints that even the most radical innovators must face.

## **“what don’t swing I don’t push”: Bohemian Everyday Practices as Avant-Garde**

### **Poetics**

In midcentury New York City, the New Bohemians invented new lifestyles; di Prima, in turn, imported these everyday practices into her early poems, in which diction, tone, and imagery evoke bohemian activities and attitudes. Because di Prima was a radical innovator in both life and art, her methods for inventing new ways of living were deeply interconnected with her strategies for creating new poetic forms: her lifestyle shaped, and was reciprocally shaped by, her poetic style. By situating my reading of her work within broader ideas regarding the relationship between art and life among U.S. postwar avant-garde movements, I hope to provide a rationale for the kind of biographical criticism I engage in throughout this chapter as I articulate the relationships between di Prima’s lived experiences and her textual enactments of those experiences in autobiography and poetry. Di Prima and her fellow avant-gardists were actively rejecting New Critical tenets that would hermetically seal off the text of a poem from a consideration of the poet’s biography, and in a similar spirit, my examination of her everyday poetics acknowledges the inextricability of art and life when treating the poet as a practitioner of everyday culture.

In an influential essay on postmodernism, Andreas Huyssen argues that “a reintegration of art and life” was the “major project” of the early-20th-century European avant-garde groups such as Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism (27). In contrast to the modernist mission “to salvage the purity of high art from the encroachments of urbanization, massification, technological modernization, in short, of modern mass culture,” avant-garde artists wanted “to subvert art’s autonomy, its artificial separation from life, and its institutionalization as ‘high art,’ which was perceived to feed right into the legitimization needs of the 19th-century forms of bourgeois society” (27). Huyssen further locates the

avant-garde impulse to reintegrate life and art in U.S. post-1945 experiments such as “Pop, happenings, Concept, experimental music, surfiction and performance art,” with the caveats that he regards this as “the closing chapter in the tradition of avant-gardism” (27), and that the postwar U.S. avant-garde effort ultimately failed, as the historical avant-garde had failed earlier in the century in Europe: “Art was not reintegrated into everyday life. The imagination did not come to power” (29). In an article that provides a helpful cultural contextualization of di Prima’s early work, Benjamin Lee also argues that U.S. postwar countercultures, and the artistic experimentation associated with them, qualify as avant-garde movements. Taking issue both with Peter Bürger’s notion in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that historical avant-garde movements were the last possible occurrences of the avant garde and with Marjorie Perloff’s schema of two modernisms in American Poetry (the first made up of early 20th-century modernists, the second made up of late-20th and 21st-century Language writers), Lee “sets out to recapture hipsterism’s initial force as an avant-garde practice and its full complexity as a felt, intellectual response to everyday life” (777). Lee’s characterization of hipsterism—or what I am calling “bohemianism,” after di Prima—as an avant-garde practice proposes that lifestyles can be understood in aesthetic terms.

With Lee and Huyssen I investigate the ways U.S. postwar avant-gardism, in the form of di Prima’s 1950s and 60s poetic experiments, works toward a reintegration of art and life. During this artistically and culturally groundbreaking moment in which Beat writing played an important role, di Prima was invested in artfully inventing new lifestyles and bringing everyday life into art. Whereas most accounts of this life/art division claim that high art institutions separated art from life (Bürger), or describe the assimilation of life and art in terms of mass culture (Andy Warhol’s soup cans, Frank O’Hara’s movie stars), here I approach “life” as “everyday life” as theorized by Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and

others who have contributed to the body of thought that has come to be known as everyday life studies. Several of the central ideas that emerge from this tradition—in particular, notions of resistant, subversive everyday practices—helpfully characterize what “life” means in di Prima’s avant-garde bohemia.

In *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, di Prima calls her bohemian circle “a tight little family with a life-style, a form, a jargon of our own” (MB 101), and recounts how they literally inscribed ideas about art into their living environments:

The very walls bore the marks of some of our struggles, some of the aesthetic and political battles we’d fought with each other and with ourselves. They read: SACRIFICE EVERYTHING FOR THE CLEAN LINE (an aesthetic ideal some of us were already growing beyond). They read: THE UNICORNS WILL INHERIT THE EARTH, and, simply: SWINGING (a reminder to stay psychic, and flexible, mobile, and yes, Cool). (RM 165)

Idealistic, funny, and mystical, these sayings suggest that the New Bohemians understood everyday life in aesthetic terms: a “clean line,” for example, is something to strive for in painting or poetry, but also in life, where it might represent a sense of integrity. The walls themselves, functioning as both canvas and living environment, announce that life and art are part of the same great experiment. The New Bohemians developed a guidebook to life in their tribe, written in a code of their own invention, and di Prima imported this code into her early poems—writing, for example, in the untitled opening poem to her first book, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward* (1958):

it is rumored  
that the unicorns  
have staked  
a large  
claim  
in the Rocky Mountains (2)

Di Prima imagines a reality where she and her band of bohemians will “stake a claim” in the culture (another way of saying “THE UNICORNS WILL INHERIT THE EARTH”), a vision that paints bohemian life as disenfranchised and oppositional as well as imaginative and fanciful.

These playful bohemian attitudes and slogans were, in fact, enacted in the face of real and routine danger. It is somewhat difficult to imagine the risks of choosing a bohemian lifestyle in the 1950s because these lives were romanticized almost immediately, as soon as the media started paying attention to Beat culture. Brenda Knight, for example, in the introduction to her anthology *Women of the Beat Generation*, glorifies the lives of the contributors: “Nothing could be more romantic than joining this chorus of individuality and freedom, leaving behind boredom, safety, and conformity” (3). The creative aspects of bohemian life certainly provided an escape from “boredom, safety, and conformity,” but life for di Prima and her friends was often far from freewheeling, and required mettle in the face of punitive forces. As the New Bohemians tried to disengage from mainstream culture, they were constantly breaching social proprieties, if not outright breaking the law, in order to live the lives they chose—and sometimes simply in order to eat or sleep:

The laws of the land were a hodgepodge of prejudice, fear, and bigotry. That much was clear. Homosexuality was illegal. It was illegal in many states to experiment in your own bed with your own “legal” partner: your own willing husband or wife. Married couples were being arrested for sodomy. Kids were (mostly still are) owned outright by parents. The dance we had all performed to keep parents and the law from ganging up on us when we were teenagers had not been lost on us. Nor had we forgotten the many friends who had disappeared: madhouses, deportation. (RM 203)

The New Bohemians “rejected cold war paranoias, button-down corporate conformities, consumer culture, sexual repression, and McCarthy-era gay bashing when it was far from common or safe to do so openly” (Johnson and Grace 2), and were daily dodging severe social and juridical repercussions that could land them in psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and other institutions.<sup>11</sup>

A series of prose sketches called “Nightmares” in di Prima’s second book, *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961), depicts the institutional powers threatening bohemian life with a mix of paranoia and humor.<sup>12</sup> “Nightmares” catalogs the sometimes surreal, sometimes mundane fears of a New Bohemian as she attempts to duck and deflect everyday threats. The thirteen nightmares include: the inability to pick up a package at the post office on a desert island without official identification; a roach who tries to haul off the speaker in the midst of an infestation; moths committing suicide in the flames of a “nonessential bohemian candle”; squashing a cat with a frying pan in a delirium of hunger after the cat eats “questionable meat” left out on the table; buying hydrofluoric acid from a druggist in order to melt off the lock on a shut-off gas meter; sleeping with a man who asks in the morning, “well babe now how much do you get?”; workers at the unemployment office handing out “twenty reasons for living”; a cop calling for “white attendants” to haul off a “catatonic tree” from the park for a week of shock therapy; the difficulties of using a vegetable brush as a face brush; a doctor who removes a patient’s eyeball as treatment for a foot injury; and “Get your cut throat off my knife” and “It hurts to be murdered,” the complete texts of “Nightmare 6” and “Nightmare 13,” respectively (41-50). Identity, pests, death, hunger, freezing, sex, unemployment, poverty, insanity, injury: These basic human fears are amplified in the face of institutions that control the speaker’s access to food, shelter, and other necessities.

“Nightmare 10” offers an especially telling look into the bohemian cultural position and state of mind:

I saw it man, I read it in one of their god damned trade journals:

“Open season on people over 21 in dungarees or ancient sneakers,  
men with lipstick,  
women with crew cuts,  
actors out of work,  
poets of all descriptions. Bounty for heads ten dollars.  
Junkies and jazz musicians five dollars extra.”

You can say I'm mad but that dont mean I'm crazy. Ask any cabdriver. (48)

Di Prima juxtaposes the street language of her speaker ("I saw it man," "that dont mean I'm crazy") with a description of bohemian subculture as seen through the eyes of the mainstream press ("trade journal") and of whatever forces of law, order, or vigilantism might participate in the "open season" of hunting down actors, poets, musicians, drug addicts, and sex- and gender-nonconformists. The speaker begins on the defensive, as if responding to skepticism: "I saw it man, I read it." Her insistence testifies to the extent to which institutional forces would prefer their disciplinary acts to remain hidden, and her paranoia reads as a symptom of the regular persecution that the dominant culture both enacts and denies. The speaker goes on to quote the written evidence that someone is calling for bohemians to be hunted down, then makes a claim for her relative sanity: To allow that she might be "mad" but not "crazy" implies that madness is the appropriate reaction to the times, while craziness might involve a more serious break with reality.<sup>13</sup> Finally, she encourages her interlocutor to seek further proof from that well-known expert on urban life, "any cabdriver." In this way, di Prima ends the poem by slyly shifting the locus of authority from the professional publication's printed word to the street's word of mouth. Playfully yet skillfully, di Prima proposes the value of everyday street knowledge over official narrative.

The dual nature of everyday life in "Nightmares," both oppressive and liberating for the bohemian, resembles the ways in which Henri Lefebvre defines the everyday more broadly. The everyday is, on the one hand, the realm of bureaucratic control and routinized fear: "the everyday constitutes the platform upon which the bureaucratic society of controlled consumerism is erected"; "[t]he character of the everyday has always been repetitive and veiled by obsession and fear" ("The Everyday," 9, 10). On the other hand, the everyday is the realm of potential transformation and resistance: "Where do the genuine

changes take place? In the unmysterious depths of everyday life!” (*Critique*, 137). The everyday is both the sphere of oppressive control and of creative invention. For di Prima’s bohemians, the “open season” society in which they live—Lefebvre’s “bureaucratic society of controlled consumerism”—and the unorthodox lifestyles they invent—“genuine changes [...] in the unmysterious depths of everyday life”—make up the two sides of the everyday. If Lefebvre highlights the everyday’s dialectical qualities, Ben Highmore provides a helpful way of thinking of everyday life as it applies to marginalized groups such as the New Bohemians:

Everyday life is not simply the name that is given to a reality readily available for scrutiny; it is also the name for aspects of life that lie hidden. To invoke an ordinary culture from below is to make the invisible visible, and as such has clear social and political resonances. To summon-up a specific everyday, or to call a group of people together so as to recognise a shared everyday life, has been an important step in bringing to visibility the lives of those who have been sidelined by dominant accounts of social life. But this has never been a simple act of calling on an already understood daily culture—in many respects it has needed to produce that culture (as problematic) in the first place. (1-2)

Di Prima’s nightmares “call a group of people together so as to recognise a shared everyday life” and make visible “the lives of those who have been sidelined by dominant accounts of social life.” They “produce” bohemian culture “as problematic” by making visible the everyday fears of a culturally marginalized group that resisted mainstream cultural values.

In the face of daily threats, the New Bohemians needed both defensive and creative stances. They protected themselves from persecution and opposed the dominant social order even as they devised new ways of living. In *Recollections*, di Prima names two stances—the role of the “renunciant” and the act of “cutting a swath”—that were especially important to the resistant, inventive bohemian lifestyle. Becoming a renunciant was “a vocation, like being a hermit or a samurai” (103): the choice required forgoing traditional cultural expectations and instead taking an artist’s vow: “choosing to be an artist: writer, dancer, painter, musician, actor, photographer, sculptor, you name it, choosing to be any of these things in the world I

grew up in, the world of the 40s and early 50s, was choosing as completely as possible for those times the life of the renunciant” (101). Di Prima and her circle found themselves in “a world one could not embrace with good conscience”—“the striving, get-ahead thrust of America 1950”—and decided to live on the margins of a society whose values they reviled: “To be an outcast, outrider was the calling. Not fame, or publication. Keeping one’s hands clean, not engaging. By staying on the outside we felt they weren’t our wars, our murders, our mistakes” (101, 102).

If the renunciant role demanded withdrawal from cultural expectations enforced by parents, school, and the law, then “cutting a swath” was the stance di Prima cultivated in order to propel herself forward through a social reality that threatened to hinder or punish her. In *Recollections*, she first uses the phrase when telling her parents that she has dropped out of Swarthmore and is leaving home: “no thought for the parents now, no thought for siblings. No thought I can afford, but to cut a swath. Move forward against all odds, toward what I love. An actual stance, a feeling in my flesh” (100). Cutting a swath means turning one’s back on family expectations and trusting one’s instincts. It is also “a feeling in [the] flesh”: not merely contemplated, but lived bodily. To cut a swath is “to clunk and barge through the world” (114), an image that underscores the daily strength necessary for a young bohemian, and especially a young woman, to forge a lifestyle according to her own standards. As di Prima remarks wryly in *Recollections*: “It takes a lot of energy to reinvent the world on a daily basis” (375). She expended this energy in the name of a personal and poetic quest to test the limits of possibility: “My right to experience everything possible. Right as a human, and again as a poet” (RM 90).

Renunciation and cutting a swath can be considered everyday practices in de Certeau’s sense in that they are furtive, creative ways of darting around and through the

dominant social order: they are “microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of ‘tactics’ articulated in the details of everyday life” and “clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals” (xiv-xv). Like di Prima’s stances, de Certeau’s “tactics” are ways of naming everyday acts and attitudes that “deflect” the workings of “technocratic structures.” It is precisely because everyday practices are “dispersed” and “makeshift” that they can proliferate without being subject to regulation or punishment; the logics of everyday practices remain illegible to and slip between the cracks of institutional rationality. This tactical position was crucial for di Prima as she tried to go undetected while cutting a swath through 1950s conformist culture.

Di Prima’s poems that enact renunciation and cutting a swath exude a sense of urban adventurousness mitigated by fear. In “December 1955,” one of the elegies from the “In Memoriam” section of *This Kind of Bird*, di Prima writes: “This town I roam, glorying in a nightless time where neons do a dayshift to the zigzag beat of my shoes. This town I own, hunted” (13). There is a sense of thrill-seeking freedom (“This town I roam,” “zigzag beat of my shoes”), even grandiosity (“glorying,” “This town I own”) as the speaker cuts a swath through the lit-up city. But at the same time, she is “hunted”: here again is the “open season” of “Nightmare 10” and the need to deflect, or “zigzag” through, threatening forces. In “July 1956,” another poem in the “In Memoriam” series, di Prima writes: “Hunting down hungers in this lording town we once broke rules for lightning” (14). The phrase “lording town” suggests the disciplinary forces (de Certeau’s “technocratic structures”) that di Prima evaded as she moved through the city “breaking rules” (“tactics” or “the microbe-like operations”) in her quest to satisfy literal and figurative “hungers.” “September 30, 1955,” from the same series, suggests a slightly different attitude: “At first in terror of corners,

slowed cars at menacing turn; now singing with no fear left and death a part of the song, and winter sunshine and breath a shape of beaten silver” (11). Having lost many friends to imprisonment, hospitalization, and more, di Prima has found a way to shed her fear by “singing [...] and death a part of the song”—that is, by writing the elegies that make up this series. Di Prima’s poems are her “clandestine forms” of “makeshift creativity”—perhaps even evidence that di Prima has, for the moment, joined what Knight called the “chorus of individuality and freedom,” though not without enduring loss, fear, and hardship.<sup>14</sup>

The bohemian everyday practice that di Prima worked hardest to incorporate into her poetics was the use of slang: “All my first writing was completely predicated on getting the slang of N.Y. in the period in the early 50’s, down on paper somehow or other” (Waldman 29). The use of slang was an important element of bohemian culture—of those “who raced about in Levis and work shirts, made art, smoked dope, dug the new jazz, and spoke a bastardization of the black argot” (*MB* 126). Di Prima understood the bohemian use of slang as an act of cultural and linguistic appropriation from African American culture, a phenomenon that Norman Mailer addresses in his essay, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster” (1957):

In such places as Greenwich Village ... the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the Negro, and the hipster was a fact in American life. If marijuana was the wedding ring, the child was the language of Hip for its argot gave expression to abstract states of feeling which all could share: at least all who were Hip. And in this wedding of the white and the black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry. (340)

In Mailer’s wedding conceit, white hipster/bohemian culture is indebted to Black culture for its use of “the language of Hip.” At the same time, if “all could share” the “abstract states of feeling” that the language provided, the use of slang “marries” these marginalized groups, made up of the hipsters who chose not to participate in, and the African Americans who were shut out of—the difference is significant—white middle-class culture. Calling this

language an “argot,” as di Prima does, suggests that it was meant to be decipherable only to those in the know—hipsters, bohemians, juvenile delinquents, African Americans, jazz musicians—and illegible to the local police, cold war surveillance operations, and other institutions of power. In this way, slang, too, is an everyday practice, one of de Certeau’s “clandestine forms” invented by “the dominated element in society” in order to deflect institutional forces of power (xiv, xii).

Ironically, di Prima’s bohemian friends who spoke this language on the street did not understand, and even passionately protested, di Prima’s decision to import it into her poetry:

I had been writing all this slang from ’53 on. I loved the street language. My friends who I lived with and other serious artists were saying, no, you can’t do that. Nobody’s going to understand it in ten years. [...] There was an argument about whether or not you could use the vernacular. [...] At one point, somebody got upset. We had a whole wall collaged full of photos of the artists and actors we loved. We all started tearing down all the photographs, yelling that we weren’t worthy of these people if we had these terrible ideas about art. (Meltzer and Lazzara 230)

It was the publication of Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956 that ultimately validated di Prima’s choice. In *Memoirs*, she recalls “an evening like many others” in the fall of 1956: She was making beef stew for a group of friends at her apartment on 59th Street and Amsterdam Avenue when a “priestly-ex-book-thief arrived and thrust a small black and white book into [her] hand, saying, ‘I think this might interest you’” (126). Di Prima tried to read *Howl* as she dished out stew, but eventually became “too turned on” to concern herself with hosting duties any longer. She left the apartment and went down to a pier on the Hudson River “to read and to come to terms with what was happening” (127). Di Prima realized in a flash that her bohemian social circle in New York City—“As far as we knew, there was only a small handful of us—perhaps forty or fifty in the city” (125)—was merely one pocket of a much larger subculture. Upon reading *Howl*, di Prima’s understanding of the reach of the group to which she belonged shifted radically:

The poem put a certain heaviness in me, too. It followed that if there was one Allen there must be more, other people besides my few buddies writing what they spoke, what they heard, living, however obscurely and shamefully, what they knew, hiding out here and there as we were—and now, suddenly, about to speak out. For I sensed that Allen was only, could only be, the vanguard of a much larger thing. All the people who, like me, had hidden and skulked, writing down what they knew for a small handful of friends—and even those friends claiming that it “couldn’t be published”—waiting with only a slight bitterness for the thing to end, for man’s era to draw to a close in a blaze of radiation—all these would now step forward and say their piece. Not many would hear them, but they would, finally, hear each other. I was about to meet my brothers and sisters. (MB 127)

The shock of recognition that di Prima experienced while reading Ginsberg’s poem for the first time was more than a feeling of expanding cultural belonging. It was, too, a sense of literary permission. Di Prima discovered that there were other writers experimenting with “writing what they spoke, what they heard,” the street slang aesthetic that she had been developing independently: “So in a way it was like oil on troubled waters to see *Howl* published. It legitimized things that were already happening in my work” (Meltzer and Lazzara 230). Di Prima’s 1950s poems were already invested in giving voice to the social underbelly—those who, as *Howl* puts it, “were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull”—by incorporating the diction and attitudes of the beat and the marginalized.

Not long after reading *Howl*, di Prima struck up a correspondence with Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who had published the book in his City Lights Pocket Poet series, and sent him the “Nightmares” poems (RM 133). Ferlinghetti wrote back, agreeing to provide an introduction for di Prima’s first book.<sup>15</sup> *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward* was published by Hettie and LeRoi Jones’s Totem Press in 1958, and is filled with poems dated as early as 1951 that use idiosyncratic capitalization and punctuation, experimental prose forms, and bohemian slang (“swing,” “uncool,” “dig,” “sneakthief,” “jailbreaks,” and “run a pad”). *This Kind of Bird* demonstrates di Prima’s ability to infuse more traditional lyric forms—requiems,

love poems, songs to spring, persona poems—with the language of the street, as in the elegy “August 1955”:

Damn you ghostface sounding  
quietus now, I thought we’d dig a  
coupla sets in hell. Won’t say I didn’t  
love you dad back when long hands  
and dirty tore a breathless blue  
good morning blues guitar and that  
junkriding face went coolly wild.

You know the games swing wide in  
hell there’s riffs behind my teeth  
could keep you flying. But now it’s  
small fun digging long gone songs  
while you play square games never  
out of bounds.

Like man don’t flip, I’m hip you  
cooled this scene. But you can hock  
the jazz guitar, in limbo they play  
ballads. (10)

“August 1955” combines di Prima’s early influences—sonneteers such as Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Byron, and Millay<sup>16</sup>—with her interest in the poetic use of slang. The poem is in some ways a straightforward lyric: an “I” addresses a “you” in a short, songlike poem that contains a sonnet’s fourteen lines. On the other hand, the poem is decidedly untraditional, written in prose and incorporating slang in a way that suggests the benefits and the limits of poetic slang: language such as “junkriding face went coolly wild” is figuratively evocative, while the meanings of other phrases (“the games swing wide,” “never out of bounds”) get lost due to the passage of time or slang’s function as an argot.

Di Prima understood her poetic use of bohemian language and attitudes—her irreverent, loose, slang-filled poems—as a rejection of traditional literary values. She recalls that “the writing of the forties and the early fifties was very obsessed with the ‘well-wrought urn,’” while she and the writers, choreographers, and other artists she was learning from

were interested in “opening the form and opening oneself to one’s own consciousness”: “every form is real so you don’t have to manipulate your work to get it into shape” (90). As Tim Hunt writes of Beat women writers including di Prima: “Their work, and their lives as figured in their writings, demonstrate that being Beat was never about crafting well-wrought literary urns for New Critical analysis” but rather “was an attempt to recover, demonstrate, and (thereby) validate other, more individual modes of consciousness. It was both literary experiment and oppositional (often violational) lifestyle(s)” (252). In “Three Laments,” a poem in three brief sections from *This Kind of Bird*, di Prima’s speaker professes her self-identification as an oppositional or otherwise “non-great” writer:

alas  
 I believe  
 I might have become  
 a great writer  
 but  
 the chairs  
 in the library  
 were too hard      (18)

It is a mock-lament: The speaker knows that what gets acknowledged as great writing is the sort that aligns itself with libraries, academies, and even sitting still—the poetry of high modernism and the New Criticism—but those conditions will not suit her sensibilities. The antiestablishment attitude and short, enjambed lines of the first lament are, instead, in the lineage of the historical avant-garde—of F.T. Marinetti’s Futurist call to “destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind” (22)—and of early 20th-century American vernacular experiments such as William Carlos Williams’s “This Is Just To Say.”

But di Prima’s innovations were more than a rehashing of the early-20th-century avant-garde; her use of slang announces a specifically bohemian poetic experiment. The third section of “Three Laments” enacts what the first proposes, bringing an oppositional poetics to the halls of poetry through the use of “unpoetic” slang terms:

So here I am the coolest in New York  
 what dont swing I dont push.

In some Elysian field  
 by a big tree  
 I chew my pride  
 like cud.

(19)

As in bohemian everyday practices, resistance is coupled with invention: di Prima rejects “great writing,” the literary status quo, in favor of her own innovations, the poetic use of street vernacular. Di Prima’s speaker cannot be found sitting on a hard chair in the library, but instead posts herself on the street corner. She deals in words, only promoting the hippest things, and offering poems that “swing.”<sup>17</sup> The swing/push pun on pushing a playground swing suggests that this is a playful stance, but it is also one that finds di Prima taking on the role of the renunciant yet again—“I chew my pride / like cud”—as she stands in stubborn defiance of dominant cultural values, including literary values. She has made it to the afterlife for gods and heroes, but she refuses transcendence, instead holding onto her streetwise demeanor, affirming bohemian attitudes and language. In doing so, she rejects the conservative values of the culture at large, those of highbrow or “great” poetry, as well as those of her own bohemian peers who considered her slang-infused poems unpublishable.

Because di Prima rejected traditional cultural and literary values, her early poems have been neglected or misread by those who disapprove of, or are unfamiliar with, the bohemian codes that they deploy. A more thorough understanding of these codes, and especially of the ways they intersected with gendered expectations, can illuminate the complex workings of her poems. In *Dinners and Nightmares*, di Prima illuminates the obstacles to abiding by the “rule of Cool” for a young bohemian woman living independently in the 1950s. As di Prima describes in *Memoirs*, the “eternal, tiresome rule of Cool” was a bohemian social code that mandated the concealment of intense emotion in order to maintain “a hard,

clean edge and definition in the midst of the terrifying indifference and sentimentality around us: ‘media mush’” (94, 126). This promotion of “terse expression and withheld emotion” can in many ways be likened to codes of conventional 1950s masculinity that required men to be strong and silent, as Grace and Johnson argue (38). For women, then, the code of cool “duplicated female powerlessness and objectification, the gendered silence under the reign of which the majority of women of the 1950s suffered politically and socially” (Johnson and Grace 8). In spite of its unconventional practices, bohemian culture was, when it came to the gendered code of cool, reproducing a version of the gender dynamics of the conformist culture that it ostensibly rejected.

Di Prima mocks the rule of cool in the poem “Short Note on the Sparseness of the Language”:

wow man I said  
 when you tipped my chin and fed  
 on headlong spit my tongue’s libation fluid  
  
 and wow I said when we hit the mattressrags  
 and wow was the dawn: we boiled the coffeegrounds  
 in an unkempt pot  
  
 wow man I said the day you put me down  
 (only the tone was different)  
 wow man oh wow I took my comb  
 and my two books and cut and that was that (*Dinners* 88)

What di Prima notes about sparse language is, first of all, that the lovers are only able to say “wow” to each other instead of communicating a range of emotion, so as not to break the rule of cool. Later, when the lover insults the speaker—“the day you put me down”—she has only this single phrase to fall back on once again: “wow man.” If a bohemian lover can only employ a limited vocabulary in life, the poet has a few more tools at her disposal in writing. The poem’s first stanza humorously juxtaposes its first line with its second and third, so that we can read “wow man I said” as an absurd understatement that does not at all

approximate the intensity of the kiss. The poet, on the other hand, is allowed to express passion using figurative language: “fed / on headlong spit my tongue’s libation fluid.” The irony of the first stanza derives from the gap between what is felt and what is said—between poetic language, capable of vividly expressing emotion, and a bohemian code that bars the speaker from expressing strong feelings in life. The phrase “and wow was the dawn” in the second stanza is not only figurative but also alliterative, funny, and even poignant. On one level, the phrase describes the beauty of the sunrise, and qualifies “Short Note” as an aubade. On another, “and wow was the dawn” suggests that, for the speaker, understanding the limits of the rule of cool—acknowledging “the sparseness of the language”—leads to the dawning of the realization that her relationship must come to an end. Intensity and poignancy, the emotions attached to the kiss and the dawn, are expressions of sentimentality that the speaker cannot approach without breaking the rule of cool, but the poet has a broader range. When the speaker tells her lover “wow man” in the final stanza, where she is now repeating the phrase in dismay, di Prima exposes the absurdity of using sparse language to express complex emotion, and at the same time shows how this social constraint forces the bohemian woman to become skilled at employing tonal shifts (“the tone was different”).

In a review of di Prima’s *Pieces of a Song: Selected Poems* (1990), David Baker criticizes “Short Note” through language that, in fact, characterizes the poem’s tone quite accurately:

The poem tries to attain the terseness of a Creeley poem, but I find the brief, nonchalant language merely tiresome, more pathetic than cool, more inexpressive than meaningfully “sparse.” It is bereft of any real figurative resonance; it suggests no special import in its sketchy details. Even more disappointing, the poem is a feeble literary paradigm, if indeed its purpose is to provide us with an acting-out of its arch, literary title. If its desire is to represent irony or to dramatize a certain Imagist aesthetic, its result is closer to mere sarcasm or flat happenstance. (239)

When Baker calls di Prima’s language “nonchalant,” “tiresome,” and “pathetic,” he actually verifies the extent to which she has succeeded in poetically enacting what she calls the

“eternal, tiresome rule of Cool.” Ironically, the fact that both Baker and di Prima use the word “tiresome” affirms that, decades later, the poem successfully manifests its bohemian attitude. Di Prima’s speaker in “Short Note” might respond to Baker’s elitist literary values (“wow man I said the day you put me down”): “Yes, that is precisely what the poem is trying to show, ‘only the tone was different.’” As Baker puts di Prima down, he makes visible the poetic values of “great writing” that di Prima’s poetry challenges.

## **Pads, Theaters, and Magazines: di Prima as Caretaker and Provider in Literary New York**

*Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years* is full of anecdotes about how di Prima and her friends—and later, her family—paid the rent, heated the apartment, dealt with household pests, or otherwise managed to make ends meet. All of these details add up to a portrait of di Prima’s life “as a woman” in particular, as she takes stock of the work she did to maintain households and literary communities. Although housemates pitched in with money and food whenever they could, di Prima was the one who rented the apartments that became crash-pads for an ever-shifting band of friends and acquaintances; she was the one who got up earliest, to take her shopping cart out to the street to scavenge for wood for the fireplace, and then to come home to make coffee and oatmeal (137); she was the one to put on a pot of soup every night for the starving artists who would inevitably stop by, as she was doing the night she first read *Howl* (163); and she was the one who worked to pay the rent every month (usually working in bookstores or offices, or modeling for painters).

At these pads, di Prima was assuming both the traditionally masculine role of provider and the conventionally feminine role of caretaker.<sup>18</sup> In *Recollections*, she does not separate the labor along gendered lines; she explains that these roles emerged out of the desire to take care of and provide for friends, and later children, without needing to depend on a man for support. She sought “people I could take care of. Give my salary to, my space, my desperate longing. Who *needed something*” (105). Though her motivation might have arisen out of desperation, she takes pleasure in these acts: In *This Kind of Bird*, she comments that “it’s nice / to run a pad” (34), and *Dinners and Nightmares* is dedicated to these homes and friends: “To my three pads & the people who shared them with me. . . .” (6).<sup>19</sup> She understood enough about postwar gender roles to realize that becoming financially

dependent on a man would mean giving up her freedom: “No one by ‘providing’ (I scorned the very notion) would buy the right to tell me what to do” (157). As a child, her grandmother had taught her about “the specialness and the relative uselessness of men” and that “it was the women [...] who attended on all the practical aspects of life” (2). Her mother would recite an adage that, di Prima speculates, most girls of her generation heard: “*A man’s work is from sun to sun / A woman’s work is never done*” (27). Di Prima learned early that for women, work was cyclical and perpetual: “*no free ruminating moments. Only the next task: dinner, dishes, sweeping. The laundry, ironing, continual stair-washing. Gardening, canning, sewing, mending*” (45). In her refusal of the devil’s bargain of the typical 1950s marriage arrangement, di Prima won her independence and satisfied her desire to care and provide for others, but she was also burdened with the traditional responsibilities of both the wage-earning husband and domestic-laboring wife, duties that made it difficult to focus on the work of writing poems.

“The Quarrel,” a poetic sketch from the “Conversations” section of *Dinners and Nightmares*, dramatizes the way that di Prima’s domestic labor conflicted with her artistic ambitions. It begins: “You know I said to Mark that I’m furious at you.” Mark is drawing a portrait of Brad, who is asleep. The speaker sits down by the fire and proceeds to silently rant to herself about how she is tired of doing dishes: “You know I thought I’ve got work to do too sometimes. In fact I probably have just as fucking much work to do as you do”; “I am sick I said to the woodpile of doing dishes. I am just as lazy as you. Maybe lazier”; “Just because I happen to be a chick I thought” (78-9). Meanwhile, Mark finishes one drawing and starts another. The speaker fumes for a while longer, and then goes to the kitchen to finish the dishes. She gives up on confronting Mark and decides that she will “never say anything because it’s so fucking uncool to talk about it” (79), demonstrating once more the ways the

rule of cool served to replicate stereotypical 1950s gender roles. She continues to fume from the kitchen, and the conversation ends with a punch line: “Hey hon Mark yelled at me from the living room. It says here Picasso produces fourteen hours a day” (79). The specter of uninterrupted male artistic production rears its head. Mark, after ignoring the fact that the speaker is furious at him, thinks he is changing the subject. But this *is* the subject about which the narrator has been ranting to herself privately in the meantime. The piece of Picasso trivia comically underscores the fact that the conditions of artistic production are distributed asymmetrically along gendered lines.

In the early 1960s, di Prima entered what she calls her “arts activism” period (Moffeit 101). As she co-edited the mimeograph literary magazine *The Floating Bear* with LeRoi Jones, and co-managed the New York Poets Theatre with Jones, Alan Marlowe, James Waring, and John Herbert McDowell, she found herself doing much of the day-to-day, behind-the-scenes work for both endeavors, attending to “the practical aspects” of running a magazine and a theatre (RM 255).<sup>20</sup> At the Poets Theatre, di Prima stopped acting as assistant director and stage manager at some point and “became the mostly invisible all-round person: printing the programs and flyers, writing copy, buying props, raising money, and taking tickets, and occasionally cooking for the crew or watching (in later years) the stage manager’s babies” (RM 278). The catalog of duties of the “mostly invisible all-round person,” an all-too-apt title, is long and thankless, full of menial tasks and, even in the theater, gendered labor such as cooking and childcare. Meanwhile, through *The Floating Bear*, which kept a mailing list of hundreds and was always free, di Prima and Jones were undertaking the historically significant work of fostering a national avant-garde poetry community (RM 382). The *Bear* was much more than a Beat magazine, and in fact put in dialogue all of the dominant U.S. poetic avant-garde groups of the early 1960s: “Between us

we managed to put people in touch with each other, and with the *Bear*, and kept the energy moving. Kept all these writers we cared about involved and informed. As the jam session continued” (RM 254).<sup>21</sup>

In the active first few years of the *Bear*, when Jones was co-editing, he “wove long, lengthy letters around important Literary Questions,” whereas di Prima “could never really rise to the Weighty Issues” (RM 254). Instead, she “wrote the day-to-day news and let the rest go by.” Their roles, which might be partly attributed to personal temperament, nonetheless match up with a larger, gendered trend that poet and editor Kathleen Fraser observed across poetic avant-garde movements at the time: “Through the Sixties, various movements emerged and ran parallel courses, all sharing two observable similarities. They each had male theorists setting forth the new aesthetic dogma, usually asserted in published correspondence or theoretical repudiation of others’ existing poetics. Each poetics constellation or school had its token woman poet” (30). Di Prima, of course, was this token woman among Beats, and at the *Bear*, Jones was the one “setting forth the new aesthetic dogma” in his letters. Di Prima reports this distribution of labor without judgment or regret; she simply characterizes it as a “working balance,” leaving us to assume that she preferred to do the work she did. By capitalizing “Literary Questions” and “Weighty Issues,” she even seems to poke fun at the heights to which Jones rose in his correspondence. In other words, rather than complaining about her tasks, di Prima suggests that she saw “the day-to-day news” as an important concern.

Another “conversation” from *Dinners and Nightmares*, “The Poet,” plays out the drama of a woman invested in the everyday while a man attends to “weighty issues.” It opens with a man’s melancholy voice: “You gotta love he said. The world is full of children of sorrow and I am always sad” (63). We learn that he is “watching this cat beat up his chick

on the street,” and then the speaker replies: “Sure man I said. The children of sorrow.” She undercuts his melodramatic world-weariness, but it is hard to know at first if she is being dismissively “cool” or is just distracted. She continues to narrate the scene out the window: “The chick had nothing on but her bra and pants and she was kneeling on the sidewalk.” The conversation continues, interspersed with the action outside, as the two couples experience separate but parallel conflicts:

All over the world he said the children are weeping. I weep with all the children in the world.

Great I said.

The cat kept saying get up get up you fucking whore but the chick just knelt on the sidewalk.

I weep he said and my tears are part of all the children’s tears.

A lot of people stood around watching. They didn’t say anything.

You don’t understand he said. Then he said you’re very hard. (64)

“The fuzz” comes down the avenue “to dig the scene,” and the man inside the apartment begins to interrogate the narrator: “Don’t you love he said. / Sure I said. I love all kinds of things. / And the children he said. Don’t you love all the lost children.” Outside, the police put the “cat,” still yelling “you fucking whore” at the “chick,” into the squad car. The woman gets up, picks up her clothes, puts on her coat, and walks away. All the while, the man inside is grilling the narrator about whether or not she loves the lost children of the world. “The Poet” ends with the man pressing her one more time: “That’s not enough he said. You gotta love. I love all the lost children.” She replies: “I know I said. And you weep.”

Di Prima is playing with several sets of binaries in “The Poet”: public/private, man/woman, weighty/everyday, cool/uncool. Although the conversation inside is not as volatile as the scene outside, their juxtaposition invites us to connect them. What could this

explosive street scene possibly have to do with the pseudo-philosophical rants of the man in the apartment, and the “hard” comments of the woman? Who, out of these four characters, is “the poet” of the title, and what is his or her role? If we presume that the man in the apartment is the poet, then from him we get a version of poetry that is interested in abstract, theoretical concerns—“the lost children.” That the man cannot see the debased woman on the street as an object for his attention speaks volumes: In di Prima’s dark comedy, he stands at the window, watching a woman get beaten up and called a whore, and goes on rhapsodizing about imaginary children. We have no access to the narrator’s thoughts in “The Poet”; there is no psychological interiority, only the inside and outside of apartment and street. What we do get is the sense that the narrator is fixated on the scene out the window: She gives a blow-by-blow account of the argument, and spends more words describing it than she spends on her clipped replies to the man. She does not see the practical purpose in “weep[ing] with all the children in the world.” This is not to say that she has no interest in serious issues; on the contrary, she is absorbed in a gripping scene of human suffering right in front of her. The woman speaker, di Prima’s proxy, is invested in the here-and-now over the hypothetical, the concrete over the abstract. In the man’s concerns, we hear echoes of the “Weighty Issues” that di Prima dismisses in favor of the daily when working on *The Floating Bear*. The answer to the question “Who is ‘The Poet?’” is that there are two: The man and the woman play the parts of two very different understandings of what poetic attention looks like.

In this way, the high philosophical gets coded as masculine and the low everyday as feminine. Any type of street commotion might have served the purpose of emphasizing the narrator’s investment in the everyday, but di Prima invents a scenario that requires feminist attention. The narrator of “The Poet” speaks for an interest in the life of a real (that is, not

theoretical) woman who is subject to public ridicule and violence. The “chick” on the street stands for the way women “are the subject of everyday life and its victims or objects and substitutes,” as Lefebvre puts it (*Everyday* 73). She is most visibly “subject” and “victim,” and within the framework of the poetics conflict of “The Poet,” she is, perhaps, an “object” and “substitute” of everyday life as well: she stands in for the narrator’s attention to the devalued feminine everyday: “The chick had nothing on but her bra and pants and she was kneeling on the sidewalk” (63). “The Poet” aligns an interest in the reporting of the “day-to-day news” in a tone of “flat happenstance” with the feminine. These concerns are all framed in a sketch titled to suggest that it is a statement of poetic philosophy, or a fable about the gendered positions di Prima took in her literary communities.

Eventually it dawned on di Prima that she was worn out. In 1962, the same year that her second child, Dominique, was born, di Prima decided to marry her friend, the actor and model Alan Marlowe, one of the co-owners of the New York Poets Theatre and a former longtime lover of di Prima’s closest friend, Fred Herko.<sup>22</sup> Marlowe was usually involved in relationships with men, but “wanted a wife, and the front that would give him, maybe a kid or two of his own” (316). With two children to raise, two literary organizations to look after daily, and her own writing to attend to whenever possible, di Prima hoped that someone else might finally help take care of her:

I wanted to be looked after a bit; it was long overdue. To have somebody else take care of some of the physical details for a change: where we lived, where to put the furniture, what it would look like. I was bone-tired, though I didn’t know it, and still hurting from giving up on my affair with Roi. So it seemed pretty clear right then that the only way for anything to work in the long term was for it to have nothing to do with “love” as such. [...] Best live with / be married to / a friend, someone who could comfort you in the vicissitudes of your love affairs, a partner of sorts, undemanding and without judgment. (316-17)

She hoped the family would live off the television commercial residuals that Marlowe received regularly in the mail, but these soon ran dry, leaving them both scrambling to make ends meet, and now with a third child on the way. *Recollections* ends in 1965, before di Prima and Marlowe's divorce in 1969, but it becomes clear throughout the remainder of the book that di Prima continued to look after most of the "physical details"—the daily tasks and errands of the household and theater—of her life with Marlowe. As she focused on taking care of her children, the remainder of the 1960s saw the "tapering off of [her] public arts persona," though she continued to edit *The Floating Bear* through 1971 (Moffeit 101).

Di Prima's other autobiography, *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), is in many ways a product of her continued roles as household provider and caretaker through the 1960s. As she describes in the afterword to the 1988 edition, "Writing Memoirs," the book was written for hire just after di Prima and her family—and "a crew of fourteen 'grown-ups' with all their accompanying children, pets, rifles, typewriters, and musical instruments"—moved into a big house in San Francisco in 1968 (*MB* 135). Di Prima had won a \$10,000 grant, but the money was not arriving as quickly as promised, so she set to work on *Memoirs*, agreeing to her editor's exhortations to include more graphic sexual content: "Gobs of words would go off to New York whenever the rent was due, and come back with 'MORE SEX' scrawled across the top page in Maurice's inimitable hand, and I would dream up odd angles of bodies or weird combinations of humans and cram them in and send it off again" (137). *Memoirs* contains scenes of lesbian sex, group sex, rape, and incest. It ends with an orgy involving di Prima, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and others, an account that many have taken to be true over the years.<sup>23</sup> Although the book is often regarded as a realistic portrait of the Beat generation from a woman's perspective, and although many of its details align with events mentioned in *Recollections*, the truth status of *Memoirs* is dubious.<sup>24</sup> Di Prima herself has

said that “[i]t is mostly accurate [...] except for the sex parts” (Lauerman). Some critics try to extract truth value from “the sex parts” of *Memoirs*—reading it, for example, as a parody of Beat sexuality “formulated by and within a masculinized model of Beat identity” (Carden 35). But even without the addition of the afterword twenty years later, there are clues in the text that di Prima is fabricating details. Near the end of the book, there is a section called “A Night By The Fire: What You Would Like To Hear,” whose two paragraphs begin with “Maybe”: “Maybe I would feel a hand in my cunt [...]”; “Maybe we all come once [...]” (106, 107). On the following page, there is a new section heading, this time “A Night By The Fire: What Actually Happened,” which begins “Or maybe not,” and shows friends lazily sitting around, smoking, talking, reading, painting, listening to music, playing drums with the fire poker, and finally curling up to sleep together for warmth.

In my view, “what actually happened” was that di Prima resourcefully profited from her image as a sexually liberated Beat woman by publishing *Memoirs* a year after the Summer of Love: *Memoirs* “bridge[d] the gap between the rebellion of the Beatnik generation and that of the Counterculture, appearing at the moment of the latter’s ascent into popular consciousness” (Farland 381). By 1968, di Prima was a much more public figure at a time when the hippie counterculture was eager to seize upon the tales of the beatniks who had blazed the trails to sexual and cultural liberation.<sup>25</sup> Di Prima cashed in on her reputation at the right time, certainly. But she did so in order to continue providing for her latest household of cultural outsiders, as she explains in “Writing Memoirs”: “Clearly the twenty-odd large and assorted small humans who graced the halls, balconies and bannisters of my pad had to eat” (*MB* 137). If the means look like exploiting her sexual image, the end was nothing less than survival. Looking back, di Prima affirms the writing of *Memoirs* as a smart decision: “It was the first and only time I’d ever written a ‘potboiler,’ and it was clearly the

course to take” (137). In some ways, the writing of sexually explicit material for hire resembles the nude artists’ modeling di Prima had done for twenty hours a month in order to pay the rent on her New York pads (RM 134). The stakes were higher by the time she wrote *Memoirs*, with di Prima taking care of her own children and a huge household. Still, it is remarkable that she was able to profit financially from her bohemian lifestyle, that vocation of the “renunciant” artist that she had spent so many years of her life living in poverty in order to invent, and that she was able to combine the roles of responsible caretaker-provider and emancipated woman in this way. Anthony Libby argues that this seeming paradox is key to understanding di Prima’s life and work as negotiations between “traditional values” and “a new voice of sexual power for women”: “She went her own sometimes contradictory way” (46).

Even today, di Prima’s combination of roles seems radical: She managed to be a poet, a young single mother, a sexually free woman, a caretaker for her circle of bohemian friends, and an editor and theater manager at once. When talking with Waldman in the 1980s, di Prima explains how little she understood her struggles in the context of gender at the time: “I didn’t distinguish which of these things is happening because I’m a woman, which of these things is happening because that’s just the way the world is, and there was a lot of that’s just the way the world is, don’t forget, in the air in the ’50s, too. We all expected the worst” (29). But eventually, the inequities did dawn on her, as she notes in a later interview with Jackson Ellis: “that was years and years later that it even *occurred* to me that I did all the work.” This realization was, in fact, a large part of her motivation for writing *Recollections*: “Part of it is about what women do that they don’t really have to, because they think they should” (Meltzer and Lazzara 235). The minute details of daily life cataloged in

*Recollections*, then, far from being “trivial,” are part of di Prima’s effort to make this gendered labor visible to women and others.

Beginning in the 1960s, second-wave feminism would challenge the accepted reality of women’s everyday lives, the belief that women should keep households running without thanks or compensation, and without the ability to choose other, potentially more fulfilling, occupations.<sup>26</sup> Women often identified as feminists by distancing themselves from “feminine” tasks such as housework and childcare, if they had the privilege of doing so. In this way, “feminists during the first few decades of second-wave feminism constituted ‘the housewife’ as ‘Other’ to themselves” (Johnson and Lloyd 2). In the 1950s and 60s, di Prima—never a typical housewife as a single mother or when married to her friend Marlowe—was not relieved of any of her housework or childcare duties. She also did not have the benefit of a close cohort of women with whom she could discuss shared inequities, as many women would begin to do in the following decades. As “one of the heroic precursors of second-wave feminism,” however, di Prima did offer a model for how women might invent new possibilities and navigate the challenges and contradictions of their lives (Libby 46). It is often noted that Beat bohemian culture, along with the civil rights movement, helped pave the way for the countercultural and women’s liberation movements that emerged in the 1960s.<sup>27</sup> Although di Prima’s choices do not necessarily line up with the feminist ideals articulated in the following decades, during which time she refused “to fit neatly into the progressive assumptions she herself played a major part in creating” (Libby 49), understanding the forces she was up against allows us to better comprehend the complex aesthetic codes she developed in response to these life conditions.

Two anecdotes in *Recollections*, in which di Prima confronts three canonical male writers—John Keats, Jack Kerouac, and Robert Creeley—dramatize the ethical and aesthetic

codes, rooted in discipline and the requirements of everyday life, that di Prima developed as she negotiated practical responsibilities alongside a dedication to her life as a poet. In 1957, when di Prima decided at the age of twenty-two that she wanted to have her first child, she was determined to raise the child without a man's help. This decision led to a negotiation with the spirit of Keats, who represented "the contract [she'd] made with poetry" at the age of fourteen (*RM* 164, *PS* 198). Lying on her bed one afternoon, she "conjured the presence, the 'feel' of him," and sought the advice of his "shadow-energy Presence" beside her: "He told me, as he often had before, that it was hard enough for a woman. That women didn't do it right, the art thing, we wanted too much of the human world besides. That no one had done the thing I wanted to do. At least in hundreds, if not thousands, of years. That I probably wouldn't succeed" (*RM* 164). Her friends, too, considered her desire to have a child "a form of insanity" (165). In spite of her poor chances at success, di Prima was determined to try: "Not at all sure it would work, sure only that I was putting the only thing I loved most in jeopardy. Because of some urgency I couldn't explain" (164). In *Recollections*, she does not return to address whether or not she succeeded, perhaps preferring to let her continual literary production speak for itself.

That same year, di Prima met Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Orlovsky in New York when they were passing through on their way to meet Burroughs in Morocco (*RM* 164). In *Recollections*, di Prima presents the sexual exploits of the night as considerably tamer than she does in *Memoirs*: "Allen announced that he wanted to find some lovers," so di Prima "took them to Freddie's new pad on Prince Street. Where he and his roommate and the four of us made out and slept fitfully in various combinations" (164). Later, di Prima returns to the incident when she recalls a lie that Robert Creeley told in a documentary about the Beats. Remembering a night when di Prima attended a party at Ginsberg's and announced that she

needed to leave in order to relieve her babysitter on time, Creeley confuses the incident with the fictional orgy in *Memoirs*, and explains that di Prima “quickly forgot about the babysitter and stayed for the orgy” (202). Di Prima’s memory of this evening, on the other hand, involves no sex at all, but instead a gathering filled with intoxicated “important intense talk about writing” (201). When she said she needed to go home because she had told the babysitter she would be back by 11:30, “Jack Kerouac raised himself up on one elbow on the linoleum and announced in a stentorian voice: ‘DI PRIMA, UNLESS YOU FORGET ABOUT YOUR BABYSITTER, YOU’RE NEVER GOING TO BE A WRITER’” (202). Although “at least part of [her] thought he was right,” she decided to keep her word and go home.

Kerouac proposes that di Prima live up to the myth of the Beat writer as spontaneous and reckless, and Creeley offers up a fantasy of gender in the Beat era, one that affirms Beat women’s sexual liberation while wishing away all of the gendered labor that continued to govern their time and constrict their art.<sup>28</sup> Di Prima is justifiably angry about Creeley’s false memory, especially since it is told on the record in a film: “Creeley tells it as a man would tell it, as a man would want to have it happen in fact, and I think it’s time I told it like it was” (201). As di Prima tells her version, she articulates another key piece of her poetics:

Now what I find so destructive, and so telling, about Creeley’s version is: *that if I had, as he put it, so “charmingly” opted to stay for the orgy, there would be no poems.* That is, the person who would have left a friend hanging who had done her a favor, also wouldn’t have stuck through thick and thin to the business of making poems. It is the same discipline throughout—what Pound called “a ‘man’ [read ‘woman’] standing by [her] Word”. (202; bracketed terms di Prima’s)

Di Prima does not frame the choice as one between children and art as two possible objects of attention. Instead, she defines the terms as discipline versus not standing by one’s word;

the emphasis is on the maintenance of a personal ethical code. In order to maintain the highly improbable ability to live the life she chose, di Prima had to stick to her code. The consistent upholding of this code, which adds up to discipline, builds a life structured enough to include all of the diverse objects of attention that di Prima's life held, including poetry. Rather than stifling spontaneous energies, discipline might, on the contrary, form the foundation for a writing practice. Interestingly, di Prima learned this code of discipline in part by observing the male painters for whom she modeled. Rafael Soyer taught her the value of keeping a routine even when inspiration was lacking: "Industrious, painstaking, careful, the routine itself was the support. What you built on. What sustained you" (RM 136). In his studio, she recognized the generative capacities of disciplined routine: "Power generated out of discipline. Out of doing the same thing, day after day at the typewriter. In the studio. At the piano" (148).

When she allows for the fact that Kerouac might have been somewhat correct, di Prima is not wishing she had made a different decision, but instead acknowledging the inequities of larger gendered conditions in which women are forced to put responsibilities toward others first, instead of "living in the moment." Erik Mortenson offers a description of the Beat conception of "the moment" that helps to characterize Kerouac's position: "returning to the moment entails a strict attention to immediate desires and conditions, and freedom requires spontaneous action as each successive moment unfolds" (11). For male Beats, the ability to "break free from constrictive notions of space and time" was a way of challenging the dominant culture in the 1950s, the "repressive spatial and temporal limitations derived from the workplace, the suburb, and the cold war" (11). Men's privilege to break free was, of course, dependent on the fact that someone was at home, running the household: We might recall the women of *On the Road*, the Camilles and Marylous who

stayed home, often with children. Meanwhile, the Beat man could head out on the road, or, as Kerouac put it, run “from bar to bar, pad to pad looking for everybody, shouting, restless, lushy” (qtd. in Johnson and Grace 6). Although the men felt licensed to indulge their impulses, “access to a liberatory temporality and spatiality is not available to all, at least not in the same form as it is to white, male Beats” (Mortenson 11-12).

In an essay on Beat women writers, Tim Hunt illuminates the ways these aesthetic ideals emerge from a historically masculine literary tradition: “the gendered character of the tradition from which the Beats drew much of their inspiration”—namely, Melville, Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau—“help[ed] authorize their emphasis on nonconformity, individualism, and transcendental vision” (255). Citing Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” in *Nature*, Hunt writes:

This formulation of vision isn’t explicitly male; it is available to anyone able to reject social conventions and, for a time at least, put aside human connections. Yet it is a small step from this to a sense that commitments to others—especially sexual, domestic, and parental ones—preclude or compromise visionary experience. From there it is a smaller step to a sense that those who seek vision should avoid or evade such commitments and that men can more plausibly or acceptably do this. Ironically, then, the nineteenth-century American writers that the early Beats saw as precursors and who offered a way to think of literature as a way to move beyond the quotidian and contingent also helped reinscribe or reinforce the gender bias of 1950s containment culture. (256)

When Kerouac told di Prima that she had to “put aside human connections” and “commitments to others” and instead “seek vision” in order to become a writer, he was describing the version of Beat writing that he and other men practiced. Further, this is the idea of Beat literature that is usually studied and taught. If the “story of Kerouac drafting *On the Road* in three weeks in the spring of 1951 by feeding a roll of paper directly into his typewriter and typing continuously for long stretches has become a figure for the Beat aesthetic—the risk of (or commitment to) speed, spontaneity, and improvisation yielding

discovery and vision” (Hunt 257-8), then di Prima’s account in *Recollections* offers a counter-figure for a type of Beat writing based on discipline and integrity—a woman standing by her Word. Di Prima’s oppositional cultural value system overlapped with Kerouac’s in many ways, but was also molded by gendered influences: as a caretaker and provider for a community and later a mother, she simply did not have the ability to “break free from constrictive notions of space and time.” It would be easy to note the inequities of di Prima’s situation and leave it at that, but her own attitude is much more interesting. While Kerouac claims that being a writer means blowing off responsibility and indulging “immediate desires and conditions,” and while Creeley affirms this philosophy by rewriting history, di Prima asserts, on the contrary, that discipline and integrity allow her to continue writing. The same code that encouraged her to keep her word to her babysitter allowed her to keep her commitment to poetry.

If Kerouac’s values leap from life into literature, translating into writing that moves “beyond the quotidian and contingent,” it follows, then, that by choosing connections and commitments—what the spirit of Keats called “the human world”—di Prima’s poetics would, too, embrace the everyday. In this way, we can see how life conditions affect aesthetic choices, and understand di Prima’s poetic attention to the everyday as a feminist exploration of these conditions, one that makes her life as a woman visible and valuable while still offering critiques of its gendered limitations. In the following section, I examine the way these ethical and aesthetic codes manifest formally in di Prima’s early poems.

## “Learning to Sketch When You Used to Work in Oils”: Feminist Everyday Forms

In keeping with di Prima’s preference for the “day-to-day news” over “Weighty Issues,” those looking to *Recollections of My Life As a Woman*’s 400-plus pages to find di Prima trumpeting her aesthetic theories will, for the most part, be disappointed. There is one key passage, however, that breaks this general rule. After “some important publication”—she does not say which—requests a poetics statement from her, di Prima replies with this statement: “THE REQUIREMENTS OF OUR LIFE IS THE FORM OF OUR ART” (226). In *Recollections*, she develops the idea further:

*Knowing for certain no one would know what I was talking about, what that meant. Or that the “us” was—the women.*

*Much as it was also all of us, artists and makers, caught in the grind of economics, the various ugly requirements of our lives of choice, still it was most and most essentially the women. The writing of modular poems, that could be dropped and picked up, the learning to sketch when you used to work in oils.*

THE REQUIREMENTS (*all of them*) OF OUR LIFE (*simply, in many ways it is one and the same life, as the requirements are not plural, but singular, hence:*) IS (*not “are” there are no plurals here, the Requirements, a monolithic unsorted bundle of demands, formulated for the most part elsewhere, but acceded to blindly, somehow still we manage to make art “do the work” as we say*) THE FORM OF OUR ART.

*I didn’t expect them to get it and they didn’t. It is only now, more than thirty years later, that I can speak this line as a “Poetics” and have an occasional friend or student nod in agreement. Get it. (227)*

For di Prima, the “monolithic unsorted bundle of demands” of daily life—the tasks, in her case, of raising children and of working for social and artistic communities—impact the formal qualities of poems and other works of art.<sup>29</sup> We might even read “THE REQUIREMENTS OF OUR LIFE IS THE FORM OF OUR ART” as the inverse of “UNLESS YOU FORGET ABOUT YOUR BABYSITTER, YOU’RE NEVER GOING TO BE A WRITER.” The former affirms the fact that women’s life requirements influence formal structures; the latter suggests that ignoring these duties will make a woman an artist.

The way di Prima learned, as a bohemian artist, to see art and life as coextensive translates into a powerful statement about the way gendered life constraints affect artistic

production. If di Prima had written this elaboration from the 1990s in the early 1960s, “THE REQUIREMENTS OF OUR LIFE IS THE FORM OF OUR ART” might have become an important second-wave feminist poetics statement. As it happened, the dominant tradition of feminist poetics that would emerge in the following decades, in tandem with the women’s liberation movement, favored the poetic presentation of women’s experiences in a transparent lyric-narrative style rather than a poetics that reflected how those life conditions impacted formal structures. Mainstream feminist poetry introduced content that had been considered taboo or “unpoetic,” and reflected “a poetics grounded in women’s individual experiences, geared toward women’s liberation from gender oppression, and therefore involving the need for both subjective and collective expression” (Whitehead xv). Di Prima’s early poems also included details of, and revelations about, her life as a woman: Her first book includes poems about childbirth and abortion that can be counted among the first poems published by a woman on these topics. Many of these poems, however, not only take women’s experiences as their subject matter, but also reveal the ways in which gendered life conditions produce particular formal qualities, such as “modular poems, that could be dropped and picked up” as well as “sketches,” or the lower budget, less time-consuming alternative to “working in oils.” The constraints on di Prima’s art are not only the repetitive, around-the-clock tasks of housework and caretaking, but also the challenges of interruption that force her to “drop” and then later “pick up” her modular poems. Working under these conditions, it makes sense that di Prima would “learn to sketch,” or to develop a method for quickly rendering poems. Further, it is possible to sketch in the midst of life—while having a conversation, or cooking dinner—while “oil painting”-level writing requires privacy, concentration, and dedicated time and space. In poems such as “The Quarrel,” which critiques the opposition between those who wash the dishes and those who make the art, we

can see how the poem's form is correspondingly affected by the conditions it describes: It is loose, conversational, and seemingly improvisatory or hurried, as if di Prima were writing it between or amidst chores.

In *Dinners and Nightmares*, di Prima's friends are always drawing, as if to demonstrate that it is possible to sketch anywhere: in their apartments (Mark in "The Quarrel"), on the walls and floors ("this orange face of a woman pete had painted on the floor [...] there had been no more walls to paint on so he had painted on the floor" (22)), and at late-night diners: "He was drawing illustrations for *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The table was covered with them" (60). As she borrowed from bohemian everyday life to write her poems, di Prima also adapted the bohemian artistic method of the sketch for her own purposes. The "Conversations" and "What I Ate Where" sections of *Dinners and Nightmares* share this sketch aesthetic. There are nine "conversations" in all, and each is a short vignette of a scene from bohemian everyday life written in a matter-of-fact style (that tone of "flat happenstance") with minimal punctuation. They are hybrid forms that combine the narration of a short story, the dialogue of a play, and the pithiness of a poem. The "What I Ate Where" series of episodes is organized around the seemingly unimportant details of what di Prima ate (Oreos, English muffins, Lipton soup, holiday dinners) and where (pads, diners, restaurants) that add up to a portrait of everyday bohemian life.

In one "What I Ate Where" episode, di Prima tells the story of a distressing meal with a family friend:

it was chinese food but so expensive you didn't know it was chinese, i mean there were no fried noodles or wonton soup, just all these strange things, and very good. then the Old Framily Fiend and i had an argument, which I will not mention by name, as it is sitting right here staring at me and it is bad manners to talk about a thing to its face. (21)

The “Framily Fiend” goes on to tell the narrator: “you are killing your parents, what right have you got to breathe out just because you breathed in, and there are already too many babies in ny” (21-22). In this way, we learn that the “thing” staring at the writer is, in fact, her baby. In semi-autobiographical writing’s version of breaking the fourth wall, di Prima lets us know that she, the writer, is the narrator of the anecdote. (We also know from *Recollections* that the conflict is one that di Prima experienced: How to explain to incredulous friends, family, and poet spirit-guides that she wants to raise a child on her own at twenty-two?) Di Prima-the-writer’s disregard for standard punctuation and capitalization belies the fact that she is deftly revealing both the resolution of the story (she went on to have her baby) and the conditions of its composition. Here di Prima sits, writing, with her child ready to announce her hunger or discomfort at any moment. Read in the light of this information, the paragraphs of “What I Ate Where,” breathless and messy, with white space between them, begin to look rather modular, and about the length that it might be possible to keep writing before being interrupted by a child’s needs. The baby’s presence is not just the end of the story, but also the context of the story’s writing, and a key determinant of its form. This is the only time in *Dinners and Nightmares* when di Prima mentions the baby, but it is all that is needed: the child’s presence can be extrapolated to the rest of the book.

Many women poets since di Prima, especially those who are mothers, have referred to an aesthetic of fragmentation that a life of constant interruption forces upon their poems.<sup>30</sup> In the midst of answering cries, wiping up spills, cooking, and making arrangements, there is little possibility of concentrating on writing poems for an extended period of time. The resulting “modular poems, that could be dropped and picked up” might take the form of fragments, such as those included in di Prima’s *Earthsong: Poems 1957-59* (1968). The book was printed by di Prima’s own Poets Press, and the cover page gives

editorial credit to di Prima's husband ("chosen by Alan S. Marlowe"), who writes in a brief introduction:<sup>31</sup>

In choosing the poems for this book from notebooks, my sole criterion has been to choose the poems that I felt were closest to the flow of the poet's personal life. These poems are early poems, young poems. Many are love poems. The hard line of the fifties, and the smell of New York winters, cold and grey. Miles Davis' jazz and a search for new forms are all present here in these lines. Some of the poems achieve a perfection that is uniquely Diane di Prima's, the mother, the lover, the woman.

*Earthsong* does indeed find di Prima seeking new forms that reflect her experiences playing all of these roles. The book consists mostly of short lyrics, all italicized. Some of the poems are titled, while others appear to be untitled fragments that Marlowe discovered in di Prima's notebooks. One fragment speaks directly to the circumstances of its production—to di Prima's discipline and dedication in the face of competing demands on her time and energy:

*I will stay here.  
white linen curtains  
and white walls  
but poverty,  
poverty. walls  
fall at a touch.  
will we never have a whole bathroom.  
I write. I do not  
often  
like what I write.  
dont dont mommy the child says  
reaching the desk the pen  
reaching. Here I stay.  
If I am slick I can at least avoid  
the outer trappings of slickness.*

In this fragment, we can hear the renunciant artist's vow ("poverty, / poverty"), the code of discipline ("Here I stay"), and the voice of the child who wants to pull her mother away from her writing ("dont dont mommy"). The choices di Prima has made as an artist and woman come into direct conflict, as she knew they would at the time of her Keats vision. The fragment straddles this ambivalence: She may be poor, but she is also resourceful, and

knows how to make a home pleasant (“white linen curtains / and white walls”) in spite of poverty. She might complain about the difficulties of her situation (not having a whole bathroom, not liking what she writes), but is deeply committed to her chosen life. The lines about writing are carefully broken: it is in this fragment within a fragment that we know di Prima is sticking to her practice (“I write”) although probably not always perfectly: “I do not,” we read, at first thinking the phrase refers back to “I write” (that is, “I do not [write]”). The next line break suggests that perhaps she is not writing as often as she would prefer: “I do not / often.” Even when she does write, discipline alone does not necessarily lead to great art: “I do not / often / like what I write.” The poem’s fragmented form comments on the conditions that its content reveals. In the final lines, di Prima suggests that it in spite of her cool bohemian reputation, she is living a disciplined domestic life as a mother. The poem, too, refuses “the outer trappings of slickness” and presents itself as a humble fragment.

I do not want to imply that di Prima’s domestic duties prevented her from writing more “polished” pieces. She certainly would have had time to fix her capitalization and run-on sentences before going to press if she had wished to. Di Prima’s choice to keep her sketches rough and to publish fragments reflects a feminist ethic to reveal the gendered conditions of her life, and simultaneously critique and valorize those conditions. Writing about her everyday life as a woman in a gendered everyday style, di Prima extends her critique of “great writing” and the well-wrought urn and puts forth her own feminist aesthetic values. As Johnson argues in a discussion of di Prima’s 1985 poem “Rant,” “Rejecting tendencies to separate everyday from existential or artistic pursuits, di Prima articulates a woman-centered poetics in which distinctions among self, labor, and aesthetics are erased” (30). And yet, by rendering her poems as sketches and fragments, di Prima risks

her poetic work being ignored for the same reasons her everyday labor is devalued. Indeed, there is a connection between the devaluation of gendered labor and the devaluation of the writing style I call the feminist everyday (in di Prima's case, the sketch, module, or fragment). Because they incorporate the meanderings and frayed edges of the everyday, di Prima's poems might, to some tastes, look too much like life in all its messiness to be called art. Literary critics have disparaged Di Prima's "sketchy" style and its corresponding tone of "flat happenstance," as we have seen. Even her Literature Online biography makes a similar judgment about her early style: "Other early collections, such as *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961), are striking for their honesty (a quality which characterises all of di Prima's work), even if there is a prevailing looseness that often fails to satisfy in terms of rhythm and structure." Looseness and flatness are qualities that oppose what is usually valued in a poem—whether the chiseled refinement of the New Criticism or the spontaneous vision of the male Beats.

But if "form is never more than an extension of content," as Charles Olson, one of di Prima's most important poetic influences, writes in "Projective Verse," then di Prima developed forms most appropriate for the content of her poems.<sup>32</sup> Marlowe's selection criterion for *Earthsong*, "to choose the poems that I felt were closest to the flow of the poet's personal life," suggests that di Prima and those close to her valued her poetry's ability to approximate the textures and temporalities of a life marked by both a bohemian "looseness" and the interruptions and routines of gendered labor. A comment di Prima makes in her interview with Moffeit about titling her selected collection of poems, *Pieces of a Song*, sheds light on the value of fragmented, modular poems in particular: "these are the pieces I managed to write down of a song that's much bigger, but the other parts, I was doing something else, I didn't catch, you know. So that jazz sense" (96). In thinking of her oeuvre

as “pieces” or fragments, di Prima does not see brokenness but instead an implied sense of wholeness, a larger song. The life requirements that had her “doing something else” are not to be lamented: the pieces might, paradoxically, suggest the richness of life, of all that could not be included.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, di Prima, like other women writers and artists, often had no choice but to ambivalently approach the gendered requirements of her life. Her early poems mark this ambivalence, not trying to resolve the contradiction but instead treating it as inevitable for a woman writer who borrows from her own life to develop the content and forms of her art. Theorists of everyday life have described the ambivalent position in which women find themselves in relation to work that is both oppressive in its monotony and foundational to the maintenance of life. Lefebvre proposes a “contrasting diptych” of the “*misery of everyday life*” and the “*power of everyday life*” in which “the conditions of everyday life bear heaviest” upon women, demanding their attention to material concerns, while at the same time women possess “a sort of intimate knowledge of things outside the sphere of material reality: health, desire, spontaneity, vitality” (*Everyday Life* 35). In other words, women maintain the basic forces that keep life running. This work might be understood in positive terms if only it were not taken for granted. This tension is what makes the everyday a contested concept for feminist thinkers, many of whom question “how the most mundane, taken-for-granted activities—conversation, housework, body language, styles of dress—serve to reinforce patriarchal norms,” while others see the everyday not as “a ruse of patriarchy but rather a sign of women’s grounding in the practical world” that is a “source of strength,” giving women “a more realistic sense of how the world actually operates” and allowing them to be “less estranged from their bodies and from the messy, chaotic, embodied realities of life” (Felski 30).

Di Prima's poetic forms reflect this ambivalence, embracing the messy chaos of the practical world even as they critique the life conditions produced by gendered labor. For example, the nocturne, or night song, is useful for the poet who finds herself with rare solitary time at night. In *Earthsong*, where elsewhere di Prima comments on the luxury of solitude ("*the house is deserted: this is almost a boast*" ("The Letter")), "Nocturne for Zella" finds di Prima reading, writing, and doing chores late at night while everyone sleeps:

*In the night, if I sit up reading  
a roach walks on my arm.  
(I like to hang clothes after midnite  
leisurely  
spreading them out  
using two pins for each)*

She seems to take pleasure in the act of hanging clothes, although it is not clear whether this enjoyment is relative—she might like to hang clothes after midnight more than she likes to hang them during the day, or she might simply enjoy hanging clothes late at night. There is also something potentially satisfying about the meditative quality of her "leisurely" method. She then explains that "the point of this" is that "it moves the clock around":

*wash rinse dry  
& the turning page  
the icebox goes on again  
& off, &c.*

The action of "the turning page" merges with the cycles of washing, rinsing, and drying and with the sound of the icebox shutting on and off, and all become part of a larger rhythmic movement. "Nocturne for Zella" depicts the endless cyclical motion of "A woman's work is never done." In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir links this repetitive women's time to personal and creative stagnancy: "time has for her no element of novelty, it is not a creative flow; because she is doomed to repetition, she sees in the future only a duplication of the

past” (599). In its desire to “move the clock around,” “Nocturne for Zella” reads in part as a critique of the tedious repetition of women’s time.

But di Prima’s code of poetic discipline also led her to value the importance of routine and repetition for artistic practice, and “Nocturne” inserts “the turning page” as one of the several cogs rotating rhythmically in the machine of the poem. Di Prima valued the “[p]ower generated out of discipline. Out of doing the same thing, day after day at the typewriter. In the studio. At the piano” (*RM* 148). As with the musician who plays scales every day, a disciplined artistic routine might increase one’s capacity for creativity.

Philosopher Agnes Heller theorizes the relationship between routine and innovation in everyday life in a similar way. Although work “must be done regularly every day, in a given time, and this has an eroding and wearing effect on our strength and capabilities,” at the same time, “if everyday life is to be successfully carried on, it is absolutely imperative that in certain types of activity our praxis and our thinking should become repetitive” in order to provide “the framework for heterogeneous creative activity and modes of cognition” (62, 259, 133).<sup>34</sup> Felski draws on Heller’s ideas to reclaim the value of repetition and routine, gendered life conditions condemned by second-wave feminist thinkers who critiqued “a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered” in their monotonous domestic roles (Friedan 57). Felski argues, on the contrary, that “everyday rituals may help to safeguard a sense of personal autonomy and dignity” (21).

Di Prima’s code of discipline indeed helped her maintain her “autonomy and dignity”: understanding the value of discipline and routine suggests an alternative value system of artistic practice that is especially useful for women artists, who have often been forced to find a place for creativity within the constricting framework of daily demands. Caught in a reality where “a woman’s work is never done,” di Prima found ways to make

those circumstances generative. As Charters has written, di Prima “possessed the necessary strength of character to go her own way and invent her own domestic space so that she could function as an artist” (Johnson and Grace xii). She found a way to “function as an artist” first by relying on a foundational routine, and also by affirming the inventive, life-generating aspects of gendered everyday practices such as mothering, cooking, cleaning, and homemaking. As she did when claiming the poetic validity of bohemian life practices such as slang, di Prima recuperates these practices for poetry in part by showing them to be artful in themselves. “The Requirements,” then, are more than just burdens that get in the way of poem-writing: they are artful everyday practices that provide an ethos that deeply informs di Prima’s poetics.

Di Prima learned as a child to equate aesthetic and everyday labor, and to value both. Di Prima recalls that her family “honored all the crafts people in our world very much,” and that watching a man plaster a wall in her childhood home, for example, taught her about the “constant interlocking of art and regular skills for daily life” (Moffeit 88). At the beginning of *Recollections*, she offers an account of the way she was taught to value women’s work in particular for its life-giving values:

In the turbulent 1930s into which I was born, my grandmother taught me that the things of woman go on: that they are the very basis and ground of human life. Babies are born and raised, the food is cooked. The world is cleaned and mended and kept in order. Kept sane. That one could live with dignity and joy even in poverty. That even tragedy and shock and loss require this basis of loving attendance.

And that men were peripheral to all this. They were dear, they brought excitement, they sought to bring change. (3)

Di Prima’s use of the passive voice—“are born and raised,” “is cooked,” “is cleaned and mended and kept in order”—underscores the way in which women invisibly fade into the background, in spite of the fact that their thankless chores are “the very basis and ground of human life.” The ambivalent attitudes of those who understand both the importance and the

burdens of this work arise out of this paradox. Elsewhere, di Prima describes the work of the artist in similar terms: “There have been billions of us making art and in some way we have been the leavening or the thing that made human life possible when it was full of death or plague or war, which it always was” (Moffeit 98). Women and artists both “make human life possible” in the midst of “tragedy and shock and loss,” “death or plague or war.” Di Prima never explicitly states the link between women and artists in this way, but her “Requirements” statement suggests a connection between “loving attendance” in life and art, and her poems enact the link. Aesthetic and domestic work are connected by their capacities to be artful; women’s work is not, or is not only, burdensome, but actually the force that generates and sustains life.

An untitled lullaby in *Earthsong* foregrounds this poetics of loving attendance as it fuses the role of the mother and poet:

*rockabye  
baby-o  
nothing is strange  
your daddy cut  
for Baltimore  
your mommy’s  
making songs*

In the second verse, we learn “*your mommy / doesn’t / cry*,” and in the third, “*nothing will change / your lunch is hot / your bed is made / your daddy / sends / his / love*.” In spite of the fact that her father is gone, the child is well cared for by her mother, who is the songwriter of the lullaby. Composing and singing a lullaby are acts of caretaking as well: the mother writes a song to help her child sleep. In combining writing with caretaking through the lullaby form, “[rockabye]” shows how gendered life requirements can affect poetic form in ways beyond interruption and fragmentation. Di Prima strategically takes up a form that allows her to play

the roles of mother and poet at the same time. This is a poetics of multitasking, where life requirements and poetic production merge in a shared goal.<sup>35</sup>

Luce Giard, one of the co-writers, with Michel de Certeau and Pierre Mayol, of *The Practice of Everyday Life, Vol. 2: Living and Cooking* (1994), investigates the life-giving qualities of devalued gendered labor.<sup>36</sup> In her analysis of “doing-cooking,” or cooking as an everyday practice, Giard understands the value of this work in terms of “[w]omen’s gestures and women’s voices that make the earth livable” (222), echoing back to di Prima’s “The world is cleaned and mended and kept in order. Kept sane.” Giard acknowledges, at the same time, that this labor is rarely appreciated or noticed at all:

At this level of social invisibility, at this degree of cultural nonrecognition, a place for women has been granted, and continues to be, as if by birthright, because no one generally pays any attention to their everyday work: “these things” must be done, someone has to take care of them; this someone will preferably be a woman, whereas in the past it was an “all-purpose maid,” whose title alone best describes her status and function. These jobs, deprived as they are of visible completion, never seem likely to get done: the upkeep of household goods and the maintenance of family bodies seem to fall outside the bounds of a valuable production; only their absence garners attention, but then it is a matter of reprobation. (156)

Giard’s “all-purpose maid” recalls di Prima’s “mostly invisible all-round person.” From the perspective of Giard and de Certeau, this level of invisibility and anonymity is, however, the source of the subversive power of the everyday: de Certeau even dedicates the first volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life* to this “anonymous hero” (v). As she affirms the creative practice of “doing-cooking,” Giard emphasizes that it is both unrelentingly tedious and deeply humane: “In each case, doing-cooking is the medium for a basic, humble, and persistent practice that is repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one’s self” (157). Women are usually the ones who, thanklessly, do what “never seems likely to get done,” and as they do, they find ways to be inventive, so that this

repeated task takes on some of the particular practitioner's "own style," as in musical variation (156).

The "What I Ate Where" section of *Dinners and Nightmares* is especially illustrative of the ways di Prima affirmed domestic labor—especially "doing-cooking" and her ability to "invent her own domestic space"—as artful. The book and section open as if a wise woman (perhaps the echo of di Prima's lovingly attendant grandmother) is reflecting back on her youth, rather than a young bohemian woman doing so a few years later: "the first i remember to tell of was the food on east fifth street. all kinds of food on east fifth street but the kind i'm remembering now to tell of we called menstrual pudding. it wasn't so bad really, was merely potatoes in tomato sauce and that's all no spices even and no no meat" (9). She goes on to explain:

how we came to call it that was this cat jack who was staying there at the time, he had that kind of mind, i mean he called things things like menstrual pudding. we ate it for three of four days as i remember, I was going to say for breakfast lunch and supper, but that wouldn't be true because we just gave up on those three, on breakfast lunch and supper i mean, and ate when we couldn't help it, and after a while the potatoes got mushier and mushier and finally the whole thing was almost only mush. (10)

The "what I ate" part of the anecdote connects to the "where" when the narrator explains how "it wouldn't have been so bad, menstrual pudding, if it weren't for the color of the walls, taupe, which just didn't go with tomato sauce, no, and especially not on grey days" (10). She had had the idea to paint her walls beige and black, which she thought "would be very chic and I wanted a very chic apartment" (10). She and her roommates buy four gallons of cheap, chalky paint and a tube of "paint tinter whatever you call it" and accidentally paint the walls pink: "now pink walls (i tried it out) are not chic and they make you want to vomit" (10). They try to mix the paint with another color that will turn the paint beige, but instead end up with taupe. The tale ends: "and it was within these taupe walls which rubbed off like

taupe chalk and were all runny of different shades of taupe that we ate our menstrual pudding on those four grey November days that year and how many of us there were i don't remember" (11).

The irony of the tale is that the bohemians sharing the pad don't have enough money to eat more than potatoes and tomato sauce for several days straight, but buying paint is a priority, at least for the narrator ("almost everybody else said [...] why paint them at all" (10)). She is determined to make the apartment "chic" or aesthetically pleasing, but her limited resources leave her with walls just as dismal and grey as the November days and the food they eat. Di Prima's narrator exemplifies the domestic aesthetic vision of the characters and personae created by Beat women writers who were "not only inhabitants/caretakers but creators of bohemian spaces" (Grace 48). The "menstrual pudding" and the walls are perhaps figures for di Prima's writing style in "What I Ate Where," which could be described as "runny" and "mushy"—that is, run-on and seemingly sloppy. The actions in the anecdote, eating and painting, are in service of communal caretaking and artful homemaking, the acts of gendered labor di Prima attended to in these years.

The menstrual pudding episode is an early life-art experiment—the "east fifth street" apartment was di Prima's first in New York City, where she moved in 1953 after dropping out of Swarthmore—and ultimately one about failure. The remainder of "What I Ate Where" carries us through various pads, restaurants, and workplaces of the mid-1950s: "Morton Street—mostly lipton's soup at home" (24), "winter 1955-56—english muffins 4 am at rudley's because no one could sleep" (20), "summer 1955—potato pancakes in the back of a bookstore where i worked" (19). In the last section, "TWO BIG DINNERS," di

Prima describes the shopping she did and the meals she made for Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve one year. She takes pride and pleasure in the activities:

there was at that time a vegetable market on east houston street, more expensive than the other east side vegetable markets, but very good, with everything very fresh, and i bought yams and mushrooms and fennel and millions of salad things and avocados and chestnuts to cook with everything. goodies, the olives, alici, and the spices my forty-eight of them in test tubes in test tube racks marshalled at home. (31)

She purchases high-quality, expensive food, and notes the “goodies” and spices from her Italian upbringing that she will incorporate into the meal. In order to accommodate her Thanksgiving guests, she reorganizes her home: “the whole of the livingroom which was a bedroom became a diningroom with extra tables and there was running back and forth to all the iceboxes and soon we started eating and we ate as i said for nine hours altogether,” during which time “i kept stopping everybody to tell them to eat more things” (32, 33). Here is di Prima as caretaker and provider, purchasing the food, cooking it, and fussing over her friends as they consume a seemingly endless, leisurely feast.

“What I Ate Where” ends with Christmas Eve dinner, “one of those nights people kept coming in at all hours and i cooked through it, but all the food disappeared” (37). Her friends bring “buttermilk curry” and “chinese firecrackers,” “and peter came in from the army, came in and i saw register in his eyes how everything had changed in the two years, the people were different the food was certainly different and i was being a hostess” (37). In the end, she realizes the roles of mother and “hostess,” perfecting her everyday works of art, an achievement that is the cumulating event of the series of anecdotes. We are left with a feeling of abundance, far from the poverty and failure of menstrual pudding and runny taupe walls. The “What I Ate Where” series sees di Prima experimenting with living an aestheticized bohemian life and treating the traditionally gendered aspects of that life as worthy literary subject matter. Meanwhile, her loose writing style carries her from messy

early experiments to the cornucopian feast that spills over into her language, validating the artful qualities of these gendered everyday practices while at the same time claiming them for poetry.

In the 1960s, as Beat bohemian culture gave way to hippie counterculture, di Prima would begin writing the poems included in what is perhaps her best known book of poetry, *Revolutionary Letters*. Originally published in 1971 by City Lights, *Revolutionary Letters* has been through several editions, with new poems appearing with each reprinting.<sup>37</sup> Before they were published in book form, the poems circulated via the underground press, and, as the last page of the 2007 Last Gasp edition chronicles, “They were also used as guerrilla theater. Diane read the early poems from a flatbed truck in New York City and later performed them on the steps of City Hall in San Francisco with Peter Coyote and the Diggers.” All titled “Revolutionary Letter #1,” “#2,” and so on, most of the poems are no more than a page or two long and are the sort of public political poetry that the book title, publication venues, and performance settings imply. But they also serve as an extension and culmination of di Prima’s early project of valorizing artful acts of caretaking, and in fact underscore how political di Prima’s emphasis on acts of “loving attendance” was all along. The *Revolutionary Letters* offer a women’s wisdom to the counterculture, passing along knowledge in service to oppositional politics. “Revolutionary Letter #3” tells citizens to keep their bathtubs full of water because “they turned off the water / in the 4th ward for a whole day during the Newark riots”:

store food—dry stuff like rice and beans stores best  
goes farthest. SALT VERY IMPORTANT : it’s health and energy  
healing too. keep a couple pounds  
sea salt around, and, because we’re spoiled, some tins  
tuna, etc., to keep up morale – keep up the sense  
of ‘balanced diet’ ‘protein intake’ remember

the stores may be closed for quite some time, the trucks  
may not enter your section of the city for weeks, you can cool it indefinitely

with 20 lb brown rice  
20 lb whole wheat flour  
10 lb cornmeal  
10 lb good beans – kidney or soy  
5 lb sea salt  
2 qts good oil  
dried fruit and nuts  
add nutrients and a sense of luxury  
to this diet, a squash or coconut  
in a cool place in your pad will keep six months (9)

“Revolutionary Letter #3” is an actual pantry list for the revolution. Di Prima brings her knowledge of “doing-cooking” and other artful everyday practices out of the kitchen and offers them up as a political tool. Her personal role had become a cultural role: As a spokeswoman for the revolution, di Prima could now bring her knowledge to a countercultural movement that, along with the civil rights and feminist movements, would bring widespread social change to the U.S. in the second half of the 20th century. In fact, di Prima had been making contingency plans since the “open season” on bohemians in the 1950s. What she knew then, and later began to teach, was that the invisible, thankless tasks of women’s labor were ways of producing “health and energy” that did nothing less than make artistic invention and cultural resistance possible. If, as Libby has remarked, “few writers or public figures lasted as long as di Prima in the difficult terrain of the counterculture, without burning out” (45), then the longevity of di Prima’s career, which continues to this day, stands as proof of the life- and art-affirming qualities of her deeply interwoven poetic philosophies and everyday practices.

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Abbreviations for Diane di Prima's books:

**RM:** *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years*

**MB:** *Memoirs of a Beatnik*

**PS:** *Pieces of a Song: Selected Poems*

**DN:** *Dinners and Nightmares*

<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde was one of these classmates, and di Prima went on to publish Lorde's first book, *The First Cities* (1968) under her Poets Press imprint.

<sup>2</sup> In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, di Prima points out that in the early 1950s "the word 'beatnik' had not yet been coined" (84).

<sup>3</sup> Di Prima uses the word "stance" at many points in *Recollections*, where it suggests an embodied attitude: stances were ways of approaching the world that produced particular social behaviors. Blossom S. Kirschenbaum suggests that the poetic evocation of bohemian "stances" was central to di Prima's early poetics: "she used 'hip' diction and laconic lines to practice stances and thereby evolve a mythos" (219).

<sup>4</sup> Di Prima's "characters" often share the names of the bohemian friends and "pad"-mates about whom she writes in *Recollections*, and her speakers and narrators are often identifiable as stand-ins for di Prima.

<sup>5</sup> Based on *Recollections*, di Prima did not seem to have any significant women writer peers in this period, which was typical of Beat women writers (Grace 51). She did, however, have women friends who were painters and other types of artists.

<sup>6</sup> Libby attributes di Prima's neglect to the following factors: "maybe gender is still an obstacle, as well as the admitted unevenness of her work as whole, to say nothing of her identification with the still not academically respectable Beats" (49).

<sup>7</sup> See also Hunt and Mortenson, and my discussion of both later in this chapter.

<sup>8</sup> While this could be seen as "using di Prima to read di Prima," she is a key chronicler of bohemian culture and lived so far off the beaten path that it is difficult to find cultural narratives that apply to her.

<sup>9</sup> In "Mapping Women Writers," Johnson also uses de Certeau to read Beat women's writing. Her emphasis is on the way this writing functioned as an "everyday practice" from within male-dominated Beat discourse, whereas I will be aligning specific bohemian social behaviors di Prima identifies with the concept of "everyday practices," and later will be considering gendered labor as an everyday practice through the "doing-cooking" research of de Certeau's collaborator, Luce Giard.

<sup>10</sup> Di Prima was one of the first American women poets to become a mother and maintain a long poetic career, along with H.D., Gwendolyn Brooks, Muriel Rukeyser, and Adrienne Rich, to name a few.

<sup>11</sup> *The Floating Bear* and the New York Poets Theatre both faced charges of obscenity; *Recollections* includes accounts of both incidents.

<sup>12</sup> Di Prima first published the series as "Thirteen Nightmares" in the 1960 anthology *The Beats*, and counts it as her "first-to-be-published 'beat' piece" (RM 133). When she puts "beat" in quotation marks, she reminds us that, at the time of the series' composition in 1955, Beat writing as such did not yet exist. And yet, in "Nightmares," there are echoes of the same terrifying institutional forces that William Burroughs lets run wild in his novel *Naked Lunch* (1959), and of the "starving hysterical naked" inhabitants of Allen Ginsberg's long poem *Howl* (1956).

<sup>13</sup> The idea that di Prima's speaker is "mad" or "crazy" anticipates an anecdote Bernadette Mayer includes in *Midwinter Day*, recalling a conversation with the painter Raphael Soyer, for whom both poets modeled: "Raphael once told me he thought Diane di Prima's work was difficult and somewhat crazy until he read mine, though he's sympathetic and sees our writing as a symptom of what he thinks of as the crazy times" (64).

<sup>14</sup> Notably, di Prima was writing several of the poems in the "In Memoriam" series the same fall that the famous Six Gallery reading took place in San Francisco. On October 7, 1955, Ginsberg read "Howl" in public for the first time and Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen also read their work.

<sup>15</sup> The introduction is called "A Non-Introduction By Way of Introduction" and emphasizes di Prima's innovative, unflinching approach to the urban underground: "I don't know her, never saw her, never heard her. In the middle of the street is a manhole with a portable iron fence around it. And a sign: Poet At Work. . . . Here's a sound not heard before. The voice is gutty. The eye turns. The heart is in it."

<sup>16</sup> During her high school years, di Prima had discovered, while wandering the Brooklyn Public Library, "Keats, Shelley, Byron, mostly. Shakespeare's sonnets. Later Millay's 'Renaissance' and a few of the British women" (RM 77).

<sup>17</sup> Di Prima's slang and lifestyle bible, Mezz Mezzrow's autobiography *Really the Blues* (1946)—which she describes as "one of the things we read that filled our heads with a way of talking and a way of being" (MB 97)—provides a brief history of the term "swing": "When we talked about a musician who played hot, we would say he could swing or he couldn't swing, meaning what kind of effect did he have on the band. This word was cooked up after the unhip public took over the expression 'hot' and made it corny [...]" (142). Mezzrow goes on to explain how the word "swing," too, was coopted: "Just look at what's happened to the word 'swing' in the last fifteen years, if you want an example. Now the term is slapped on any corn you want to sell to the unsuspecting public" (142). *Really the Blues* was published in 1946: fifteen years takes us back to the year Duke Ellington's song, "Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" (1931) was written, almost two decades before di Prima would publish "Three Laments" (1958). By the time di Prima was writing "Three Laments," then, the word "swing" was in wide circulation, but it had not yet made its way to poetry.

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, di Prima was experimenting with androgyny at the same time. She made the choice "not to be beautiful" (RM 115), cut her hair into a crew cut, wore jeans and men's shirts, and "tromped through the city as some strange hybrid: neither gay nor straight, neither butch nor femme" (116).

<sup>19</sup> In her interview with Moffeit, di Prima further characterizes this "pad culture" of caretaking as a response to the historical moment: "But there was a strong sense of—and this was true for most of the people I knew who were artists at that time in New York—there was a strong sense of us against the world. So it was very easy to form extended communities, that took care of each other. I think we may have all come from the dysfunctionality of post-Depression and then that crazy Second World War situation, but we all felt like we had to take care of each other" (87).

<sup>20</sup> I refer to Jones/Baraka as "Jones" throughout this chapter because he changed his name to Amiri Baraka in 1967, after the period I am focusing on. In *Recollections*, di Prima usually calls him "Roi." Jones was an influential presence in di Prima's life during these years, for approximately the span that he refers to as his "Beat period," 1957-1962. He was di Prima's publisher at Totem Press; her partner in editing the literary magazine *The Floating Bear* (1961-

1971) in its first few years, before it became a solo endeavor of di Prima's in 1963; her partner in running The New York Poets Theater; her lover and the father of her second child; and, based on the emphasis di Prima puts on their relationship in *Recollections*, a great love of her life. In 1965, Jones moved to Harlem and inaugurated the Black Arts Movement, a conscious rejection of what he saw as apolitical Beat aesthetics; that same year, di Prima moved to San Francisco, and would never again permanently live in New York.

<sup>21</sup> Contributors included poets associated with Beat, San Francisco Renaissance, Black Mountain, and New York School poetry, including Charles Olson, Frank O'Hara, Robert Duncan, Ed Dorn, and John Wieners.

<sup>22</sup> Three of di Prima's five children were born in the period I examine here: her daughters Jeanne (b. 1957) and Dominique (b. 1962) and her son Alexander (b. 1963) (*PS* 198).

<sup>23</sup> For example, Farland treats regards it as a true account in the opening paragraph of her article (381).

<sup>24</sup> Unlike most of di Prima's writing from the 1950s and 60s, *Memoirs* is still in print, and published by a major trade press. Penguin markets the latest edition as fiction, calling it on the back cover "a witty, sexy Beat novel from one of the movement's most accomplished writers," and the back cover of the 1988 Last Gasp edition lists its genres as "Ficto-Biography; Erotica." In addition to being one of di Prima's most popular books, it has also garnered much of the scant critical attention her work has received. It is also much shorter than *Recollections*, which was not published until 2001, and therefore perhaps more likely to be taught.

<sup>25</sup> Di Prima lived in Greenwich Village, the bohemian and beatnik epicenter, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, before moving to San Francisco in 1968, one year after the "Summer of Love" convergence in Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco, and a year before the Altamont Speedway Free Festival (December 6, 1969). After moving to San Francisco, di Prima also worked with the community anarchist group, the Diggers, delivering free food for a year and a half (*PS* 199).

<sup>26</sup> In the early 21st century, women in the U.S. apparently have the freedom to choose traditional roles—mothering, homemaking—alongside careers and vocations. But as the "opt-out revolution" of the 2000s showed—alongside all of those who cannot afford to opt out—"doing it all" is not always a privilege; it is a guarantee of near round-the-clock work. In an interview with Joseph Matheny, di Prima assesses the status of gendered labor in the 1990s, and concludes that not much has changed: "The younger women that I know are behaving pretty much like women have always behaved. Maybe they don't have so much of the middle class housewife dream, but they'll still be the one to get a job, while the man does the writing or the painting or whatever. I can think of example after example of this. I think that the internal control systems that have been put in place for women haven't been dented."

<sup>27</sup> See Charters 582; Johnson and Grace 9; Siegel 25.

<sup>28</sup> In a different context, Creeley seems to find value di Prima's real choices when he writes, in the introduction to *Pieces of a Song*: "Growing up in the fifties, you had to figure it out for yourself—which she did, and stayed open—as a woman, uninterested in any possibility of static investment or solution. Her search for human center is among the most moving I have witnessed—and she took her friends with her, though often it would have been simpler indeed to have gone alone" (vii).

<sup>29</sup> Although I focus on poetry for the remainder of this section, it is worth noting here that life requirements—the need for money to feed a huge household—also caused di Prima to experiment with new genres—memoir, fiction, and erotica—in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, the foreword by Alicia Ostriker and the introduction by Rebecca Wolff to *Not For Mothers Only*, eds. Wolff and Catherine Wagner; and the anthology *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood* (2003), eds. Patricia Dienstfrey and Brenda Hillman.

<sup>31</sup> There is no explanation offered for why Marlowe selected the poems, although the book's first-person-plural dedication to di Prima's first daughter—"for Jeanne, our angel in those years"—suggests that the book depicts an important time in the lives of both di Prima and Marlowe. We could also speculate that the ten-year lag in publishing the poems, combined with Marlowe's editorial hand, suggests that di Prima had not been focusing on publishing her own work in the midst of all her editorial and familial obligations.

<sup>32</sup> In the interview with Moffeit, di Prima names Olson, Creeley, and Robert Duncan as the most important "direct influence[s]" on her poetics (97). Talking with Waldman, di Prima mentions the "deep conversations" about poetry that she had with O'Hara and with Charles Olson, and hypothesizes that she was likely "one of the first women to break through" the old boys' club transmission of knowledge and tradition from man to man (31).

<sup>33</sup> In this way, di Prima's fragments anticipate the formal inclusivity of Hejinian and Mayer.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Sheringham, in a book-length study of many works central to everyday life studies, provides another way of thinking of how repetitive practices accrue, over time, into creative acts: "It is not just repetition that makes daily activities part of everydayness, but the endless variation and sedimentation which [...] turn the *quotidien* into a sphere of invention" (361).

<sup>35</sup> As Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate, Bernadette Mayer and Alice Notley will take up similar "multitasking" strategies of writing and living in the 1970s and 80s.

<sup>36</sup> A note on the origin of Giard's "Doing-Cooking" research: Giard noticed that the trio's research into everyday practices of the French did not focus on women's practices: "I made a remark that women were strangely absent from this concrete music. I protested, I argued (it was the time of feminist awareness [1976]), and I did so well that we decided to remedy this serious gap—as soon as possible" (xxviii). The "Doing-Cooking" section of the book—an analysis of cooking as an everyday practice, based on the interviews of many "women of all ages and backgrounds"—resulted from this intervention. Like the first volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the second aimed to uncover "the creative activity of those in the practice of the ordinary" (xxxv). In order to include women as agents of these creative practices, a field of practice had to be defined, and cooking was selected. Never blindly celebratory of women's cooking abilities, Giard instead tries to understand the ways women found ways to be inventive in the midst of this recurrent work.

<sup>37</sup> The latest, from Last Gasp in 2007, lists previous copyright years as 1971, 1974, and 1979.

**“Screeeeeams of Living”: Vernacular Tactics and Feminist Activism  
in the Black Arts Movement Poetry of Sonia Sanchez**

In March of 1965, several weeks after the assassination of Malcolm X, LeRoi Jones and a “small group of young black artists, led by Sun Ra and his then Myth Science Arkestra” marched from downtown Manhattan to Harlem “to seek permanent residence and to avenge Malcolm’s murder” (Baraka, “Black Arts” 498). This gesture marked the symbolic inauguration of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) as well as the founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater School in a brownstone building on West 130th Street, where the march came to an end: “We walked all the way determined to make a revolution” (498).<sup>1</sup> Jones, who would change his name to Amiri Baraka two years later, was exiting the downtown literary scene, where he had played a key role, co-editing magazines such as *The Floating Bear*, *Kulchur*, and *Yugen*; co-founding the New York Poets Theatre; and even making an appearance in Frank O’Hara’s manifesto “Personism.” Jones made a break from the Beat, Black Mountain, and New York School literary scenes in order to pursue a more politicized writing practice at this turbulent moment in American culture: “as the whole society heated up with struggle and rebellion and revolution, I suppose the most politically sensitive of us began to pull away from the bourgeois rubric that art and politics were separate and exclusive entities” (495).

Sonia Sanchez—born Wilsonia Benita Driver in Birmingham, Alabama in 1934—was already in Harlem in 1965, where she had been living since the age of nine after moving north with her family. Sanchez graduated from Hunter College in 1955 with a B.A. in political science, and began graduate work at New York University the following year, where she studied with Louise Bogan, whom Sanchez cites as “a very important influence” (Leibowitz 11).<sup>2</sup> Soon after, Sanchez joined an informal workshop with a group of students from Bogan’s class and met with them regularly until she, too, began to resist the separation

of poetry and politics: “I belonged to that workshop close to three years, until I had found enough of my own voice to start writing poems that were distinctly Black. The group wasn’t ready to deal with them. They became self-conscious. So it was time to move on” (Cornwell 4). Sanchez had already begun publishing her work in mainstream literary magazines such as the *New England Review* and the *Minnesota Review*, but she credits Jones, whom she met in Greenwich Village during this time, for initially allowing her to think of herself as a poet: “We went into the Five Spot one night and Baraka—LeRoi Jones—was sitting there, and he says, ‘Hey, Sanchez, someone said you’re a poet. I’m editing an anthology coming out of Paris, France; would you send me some of your work?’ And that was the first time I was called a poet” (Finch 42). She reflects: “So I was named, and in a sense, when you’re named, you become that which you’re named. . . . So I began to think of myself as a poet, and began that serious work of writing and sending work out” (Keita 280). After Jones sent Sanchez’s work to magazines aimed at Black readers, she began publishing regularly in *Soulbook* and *Journal of Black Poetry* (Cornwell 4). In 1969, Broadside Press published Sanchez’s first book, *Home Coming*, which contained poems she had written over the course of the 1960s.

The first poem in the book, “homecoming,” Sanchez’s own inaugural Black Arts gesture, stages her symbolic return to Harlem:

i have been a  
 way so long  
 once after college  
 i returned tourist  
 style to watch all  
 the niggers killing  
 themselves with  
 3 for oners  
 with  
 needles  
 that  
 cd  
 not support  
 their

stutters.  
                     now woman  
 i have returned  
 leaving behind me  
 all those hide and  
 seek faces peeling  
 with freudian dreams.  
 this is for real.  
                     black  
                     niggers  
                     my beauty.  
 baby.  
 i have learned it  
 ain't like they say  
 in the newspapers. (9)

Sanchez's "homecoming" is enacted not through a march, parade, or other grand gesture (she lived in Harlem during and after college), but through a series of shifts in perspective that allow her to move beyond her youthful condescension to the problems in her neighborhood ("once after college / i returned tourist / style to watch all / the niggers killing / themselves") and later to "leave behind" the abstract approaches of academia as well ("all those hide and / seek faces peeling / with freudian dreams"). Sanchez's return home is "for real"—the vernacular idiom both announcing and enacting the legitimacy of the poet's place in her reclaimed community. Her homecoming announces an embrace of Black culture and language, including a love of self ("my beauty"), and a desire to testify to local social conditions, beyond what "the newspapers" report.

Sanchez's first four books, which contain the poetry she wrote during the height of the Black Arts Movement—*Home Coming* (1969), *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), *Love Poems* (1973), and *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1974)—continue to take up the themes introduced in "homecoming." As Sanchez remarks in an interview, the books are meant to teach history, culture, and day-to-day survival tactics to an African American audience: "Let me tell now what it means to be black, let me tell you now what this has

meant to us, let me tell you now how we must survive, let me tell you some history, some herstory, and that was what it was about. The first, second, third, and fourth books were all directed toward that, because you had to say to people, who did not believe it, that they were human” (Julien et al. 122).<sup>3</sup> Through a range of poetic experiments, Sanchez confronted and encouraged Black audiences, balancing her desires to affirm African American culture and incite social change: “I think I am a writer who attempts to deal with what it means to stay human, with what it means to be a human being and sometimes I do it in a rough fashion. Sometimes I do it in a lyrical fashion. Sometimes I sock you in the eye and say, ‘Look up, look up. You must not walk this walk’” (Rome 65). Sanchez’s formally innovative BAM-era poems presented a “revolutionary didacticism meant to inspire a mass audience” (Baker 185): they sought to enable African Americans to enact change in their everyday lives, often taking up concerns, such as relationship problems and drug abuse, that particularly affect Black women and those who live in lower-class urban neighborhoods.

In its determination to speak to, for, and about Black people, and its insistence that poetry could be an effective tool for social change, Sanchez’s early work reflects the goals articulated by BAM artists in direct opposition to dominant Eurocentric literary values. As the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” (Neal, “Black Arts” 184), the Black Arts Movement understood art “as a process of personal and social liberation” (Bracey et al. 6). BAM poet, playwright, and essayist Larry Neal called for “art that opens us up to the beauty and ugliness within us; that makes us understand our condition and each other in a more profound manner; that unites us, exposing us to our painful weaknesses and strengths; and finally, an art that posits for us the Vision of a Liberated Future” (“Any Day Now” 56). Los Angeles-based scholar Ron Karenga, the leading theorist of Black cultural nationalism, instructed that the new Black art should be “functional, collective, and

committing,” and emphasized the need for a cultural component to the Black Power movement: “We stress culture because it gives identity, purpose, and direction. It tells you who you are, what you must do, and how you can do it” (qtd. in Collins 276). Sanchez and her peers wrote poems that spoke to everyday concerns that African Americans faced in order to “arouse the consciousness of audiences through the artistic treatment and portrayal of contemporary social realities with which they would presumably identify” (Phelps 128). As a poet, professor, and activist, Sanchez taught “that all art is political: either you maintain the status quo or you talk about change, that’s the bottom line” (Julien et al. 125).

Poetry played a central role in the Black Arts Movement—“arguably the most influential U.S. arts movement ever”—because it could “potentially reach masses of people”: “it was comparatively easy to present poems or plays at a political rally, on a street corner, or in a public housing project courtyard or community room” (Bracey et al. 8, 6). In print form, too, poetry “was particularly important because it could be easily circulated in Black-run journals, newspapers, broadsides, and small-press chapbooks in a way that was not possible with longer fiction” (6). These publications were tremendously popular: Broadside Press, the Detroit-based small press that published three of Sanchez’s first four books as well as books by Carolyn Rodgers, Johari Amina, and Haki Madhubuti, printed half a million books between 1966 and 1975 (8). The poets and presses made the books even more accessible to mass audiences by charging only a few dollars for each: “People don’t realize; when people say poetry does not sell, I always crack up, because Haki [Madhubuti], Gwen, Baraka, we’ve sold hundreds. That’s a lot of poetry. That was the whole point of selling our poetry for \$2.50 and \$3.00 and \$4.95 at most, because we wanted to make sure that people had access to our books. So it’s amazing that we have done that, that we were able to sell hundreds of thousands of copies of our poems. I love it” (Sanchez qtd. in Finch 32-33).<sup>4</sup>

Assessing the “poetic work” of Sonia Sanchez means not only examining the poems printed in her books, but also taking into account the labor she undertook as a “cultural worker” through poetry and other forms of activism (Madhubuti 420).<sup>5</sup> Sanchez reached the audiences she sought at official public events such as rallies and meetings, at guerrilla-style poetry readings in local neighborhood settings, and through print publication. Her poetic work, because it intervenes into the daily lives of readers and listeners, offering tools for survival, and because it names and resists oppressive forces against which African Americans struggled, can be understood as an everyday practice. Like Sanchez and other BAM writers, theorists of everyday life such as Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre understand everyday tactics of resistance as both artful and political. Lefebvre critiqued “the separation of ‘politics’ from realms such as the aesthetic and the everyday, necessitating a critical politicization of the everyday that is also (and dialectically) a critique of the political realm as one divorced from the everyday” (Highmore, *Cultural Theory* 130). Theories that examine the everyday as the realm from which social transformation emerges can illuminate Sanchez’s revolutionary poetic work in a way that purely textual criticism cannot.

Theories of everyday life emerged partly in reaction to the radical social movements of the second half of the 20th century: Lefebvre writes of the “self-revelation” experienced by “women, students, the colonized, the colonizers, the masters, the workers, and so on” when they come to terms with the “alienation” of their lived experience (qtd. in Highmore, *Cultural Theory* 131). For many theorists of the everyday, apprehending current conditions is the first step toward transforming them: “Everyday life harbors the texture of social change; to perceive it at all is to recognize the necessity of its conscious transformation” (Kaplan and Ross 4). At the same time, everyday life studies cannot fully account for the perilous conditions that have shaped African-American everyday life for centuries. In a 2015 essay in

*The New York Times Magazine*, poet Claudia Rankine testifies to the fact that these conditions persist.

We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here. Dying in ship hulls, tossed into the Atlantic, hanging from trees, beaten, shot in churches, gunned down by the police or warehoused in prisons: Historically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against.

Not only do these brutal quotidian conditions persist into the present, but they have also structured everyday life in the United States more broadly. Sanchez's approach to African American everyday life in her BAM poetry must be informed by an understanding of the pervasive racism of U.S. culture—that ubiquitous-yet-overlooked quality being characteristic of the everyday as it has been theorized: “everyday life seems to be everywhere, yet nowhere. Because it has no clear boundaries, it is difficult to identify” (Felski 15). Sanchez's poetic goal to teach survival tactics needs to be understood within the context of the dire everyday conditions in the United States for many African Americans: “The most fundamental truth to be told in any art form, as far as Blacks are concerned, is that America is killing us. But we continue to live and love and struggle and win” (Sanchez, “Ruminations” 416). In the 1960s and 70s, the Black Arts and Black Power movements played a crucial role in exposing this truth, thereby “opening the everyday onto history”: “This is what happens in moments of effervescence—those we call revolution—when existence is public through and through” (Blanchot 14).

Sanchez's poems functioned as day-to-day survival tools in large part through their innovative use of urban Black vernacular language, which legitimized their social messages among popular Black audiences and allowed them to become consciousness-raising tools in the lives of individual readers. Sanchez played a central role in validating the use of Black vernaculars in American literature. Her use of what she called Black English posed a

“challenge to standard English—attempting to break its rules and regulations, dislodge its cultural authority, and renovate the minds of those black Americans taught its ideology through a performance of difference” (Frost 74). What has been missing from criticism on Sanchez’s early work is a discussion of the complex ways her poetic experiments with Black vernaculars accomplished her social goals of teaching everyday survival skills: her poems incite audiences to address cultural problems such as racism, unemployment, drug addiction, and relationship issues; and encourage the love of self, others, and Black culture. Sanchez’s poetic tactics, rooted in vernacular language and scored for the page, allow her poems to be performed, embodied, and enacted by the readers whose lives she sought to change. By providing daily poetic rituals and employing a “collective ‘I,’” Sanchez invites readers to incorporate the poems into their individual lives in a way that ultimately impacts the larger movement.

According to Chicago-based BAM poet Haki Madhubuti (formerly Don L. Lee), Sanchez’s commitment to using poetry as a social tool has contributed to the fact that she has not gained the reputation that she deserves: “The major reason that she does not have the national celebrity that her work and seriousness demand is that she does not compromise her values, her art, or her people for fame or gold. She is, undeniably the poet-revolutionary whose sole aim is liberation, peace, love, and effective writing” (419-20). As Sanchez has put it: “the values in my work reflect the values I live by and work for” (“Ruminations” 417). In spite of the fact that Sanchez should be more widely read and taught in university settings, criticism on her work, especially by those who study innovative African American poetry and women’s poetry, has recently begun to appear more widely.<sup>6</sup> She won the American Book Award in 1985 for *Homegirls and Handgrenades*, and has received major literary awards from the Academy of Arts and Letters and the Poetry Society of

America, which presented her with the 2001 Frost Medal for “distinguished lifetime achievement in American poetry.” Sanchez has also been recognized for her contributions to African American and feminist causes: Notably, she was named the 2001 Ford Freedom Scholar by the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and won the 1984 Lucretia Mott Award, given to “an outstanding American woman of national prominence whose achievements open doors for women and girls, and whose life speaks of her commitment to equality.”<sup>7</sup>

Sanchez’s first four books reveal the ways in which she negotiated Black women’s concerns alongside the philosophies of the Black Arts Movement, which were usually articulated by men and sometimes reflected sexist attitudes. *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women*, Sanchez’s early book most explicitly directed at Black women, is also the book that most overtly endorses patriarchal Black nationalist doctrine. The fact that these competing concerns appear most strikingly in Sanchez’s final BAM-era book testifies to the culturally explosive moment during which she was writing, when the Black Power and women’s liberation movements were defining their agendas, and reflects the trend of the Black Arts Movement in general, which began as “relatively gender-egalitarian” but later fell under the influence of nationalist ideologies, as Sanchez and her co-editors discuss in their introduction to *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* (2014):

Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Margaret Burroughs, Margaret Danner, Johari Amini (Jewel Lattimore), Carolyn Rodgers, Jayne Cortez, Sarah Webster Fabio, Aishah Rahman, Barbara Ann Teer, Val Gray Ward, and Elma Lewis played leading and very visible roles as artists and as creators of new Black cultural institutions. In the late 1960s, however, Maulana Karenga proposed a clear and influential cultural nationalist model based on neo-Africanist principles that posited women as “complementary, not equal.” As Karenga’s Kawaia ideology circulated throughout the Black Power and Black Arts movements, patriarchal notions of art and culture gained increasing currency, although these views never characterized BAM as a whole. (2)

The influence of Kawaida also sparked feminist resistance, leading to “the rise of an explicit Black Power and Black Arts feminism, exemplified by Toni Cade Bambara’s landmark 1970 anthology *The Black Woman* and by the actions of women artists who literally fought their way onto stages with men” (2-3).<sup>8</sup> In addition to resisting Black nationalist ideas about gender, Black feminists were also responding to a largely white, middle-class women’s liberation movement that did not account for the needs of lower-class women and women of color, as Cade observes in her preface to *The Black Woman*: “I don’t know that our priorities are the same, that our concerns and methods are the same, or even similar enough so that we can afford to depend on this new field of experts (white, female)” (9).

Sanchez and other Black feminists understood that their needs were not fully served by either movement, and brought to light issues specific to African American women. Therefore, I read Sanchez’s early work in the context of writings by the male leaders of the Black Arts Movement, such as Baraka and Neal, and also in conversation with several of Sanchez’s Black feminist contemporaries, such as Frances Beal, Pauli Murray, Audre Lorde, and the Combahee River Collective.<sup>9</sup> From within the culture of Black nationalist thought that instructed women to serve the movement by tending homes for their warrior husbands and giving birth to warrior sons, Sanchez wrote poems that placed women’s concerns on the revolutionary agenda and urged women to play active roles in their communities. The second half of this chapter is devoted to a reading of the opening poem of *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women*, “Introduction (Queens of the Universe),” which provides a fascinating look into intersectional conflicts, demonstrates how social and poetic work intersect, and stands as a culmination of many of Sanchez’s early poetic strategies. As much as “Queens of the Universe” seems to toe the nationalist party line when it comes to gender

politics, it also addresses specific concerns that Black feminists were tackling at the time, especially regarding African American gender roles and relationship dynamics.

Because it insists that the issues affecting Black women's everyday lives are important subjects for poetry and politics, "Queens of the Universe" is an example of the "include everything" impulse that produces the feminist everyday aesthetic. From the start, Sanchez ensured that women were included in the new Black art that spoke to, for, and about Black people. Her first book *Home Coming* includes two poems titled "to all sisters," and all four BAM books contain poems directly addressing Black women. Other early poems consolidate the shared issues of Black women into a singular voice.<sup>10</sup> *We a BaddDDD People's* dedication page reads: "for blk/woomen: the only queens of the universe," and goes on to include a full-page list of the names of women who have inspired Sanchez, from poets to musicians to revolutionaries to family members. Sanchez affirmed the need for women's communities within the Black Arts Movement, groups based on self-love and mutual support: "I tried to write to these young sisters about what it was to love themselves" (Johnson-Bailey 75). Like other BAM women poets in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and elsewhere, Sanchez focused on the importance of strengthening relationships in order to strengthen the Black nation, and "expressed that love was just as much of a signifier of the revolution as any other subject" (Phelps 112).

Like Diane di Prima, Sanchez was raising three children, often on her own, in the years she was publishing her first books.<sup>11</sup> The conditions of Sanchez's everyday life, too, required her to adhere to a disciplined writing practice, mostly at night: "I washed the dishes, then sat down to start grading papers. Then, after I did that, I did my *own* writing, and would get to bed most of the time around three o'clock and then get up at six before the kids got up, to fix their breakfast. They were little. Aaaah, jeez. I don't know how you have the

energy to do that” (Kelly 684).<sup>12</sup> Sanchez’s poetics of the feminist everyday that I discuss in this chapter are, however, less concerned with the circumstances of her own life, and are instead centered on the ways she claimed the challenging conditions of Black women’s lives as important political-poetic subjects, and treated poetry as a social tool for intervention into those lives. Like other poets of the feminist everyday, Sanchez makes quotidian aspects of women’s lives poetically visible and valuable; at the same time, she critiques these conditions and seeks to alter them through poetry and activism. Through the effort to make “herstory ordinary”—the persistent acknowledgment of the historical roots of the brutal quotidian of life in the United States—and the feminist understanding that the personal is political, she developed a revolutionary poetics that fostered social change on the local level. Her early poetry leaves a record of her efforts to negotiate Black Power and feminist concerns at a critical moment for these social movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s, raising fascinating questions about the role of the public woman poet in the Black Arts Movement.

### **The Black Vernacular and Ritual Chant as Tools for Everyday Social Change**

Haki Madhubuti has written of Sanchez that “[m]ore than any other poet, she has been responsible for legitimatizing the use of urban black English in written form” (421). Sanchez’s BAM-era poems, with their use of slang idioms, phonetic spellings and abbreviations, and rhythmic line breaks and slashes, announce a total immersion in the project of claiming Black vernaculars for poetry. Sanchez and her BAM peers’ successful effort to take “black speech and put it in the context of world literature” (Madhubuti 421), remarkable for its breadth of influence, was motivated in large part by the Black Arts Movement’s mission to assert new artistic values that resisted middle-class, Eurocentric values disguised as “universalist”: “the universalism that governed the critical aesthetic models in which most Western writers were trained had to be refuted as did the assumed standards of beauty” (Spellman 24). BAM artists “vigorously questioned, and challenged, white supremacy and the Eurocentric World-view, and literary ‘canon.’ [...] Why was the narrow, parochial Eurocentric World-view defined as ‘Universal,’ while the radical views of Pan Africanists and Peoples of Color worldwide defined as ‘primitive,’ ‘backwards,’ or ‘childlike and naïve’” (Touré 28). In order to bring Black vernaculars into literature without being perceived as “primitive,” BAM writers had to do battle with centuries of racist biases regarding “the African’s supposed inability to master the ‘difficult’ European languages” (Henderson, “Form and Judgment” 174). This challenge was also bound up in the complicated history of “dialect poetry,” which Black and white critics alike understood as a way of catering to white audiences: “Perhaps the fear of Black speech in poetry comes from a too vivid recollection of the Dunbar School and the ‘minstrel’ tradition which preceded it” (Henderson, *Understanding* 32).

BAM poets defied this “intolerant, fearful, and sometimes ignorant criticism” in part by reconceptualizing the Black artist’s relationship to his or her audience and by demonstrating the beauty and the intrinsically poetic qualities of African American slang (Henderson, *Understanding* 32). As Sanchez has remarked, the success of the Black Arts Movement’s acts of artistic revaluation in the face of these deep biases is remarkable: “It’s truly amazing that after such an intense period of indoctrination, 4,000 years for Western whites and 400 years for African Blacks (regarding the myth of superiority and inferiority) that the Black poets in a short decade of the 60s could convince anyone that ‘Black is beautiful’” (“The Poetry of the BAM,” 247). The new Black art was not intended to entertain or to appeal to the sympathies of white audiences, but instead was “an art that addresses itself directly to Black People; [...] an art that validates the positive aspects of our life style” (Neal, “Any Day Now” 56). If BAM poets were going to speak directly to Black people, then it followed that they would do so using the language their audiences spoke: “Almost any Black Arts poem represented black regional, rural, urban, southern, northern vernacular speech—without apostrophes or apologies or glossaries” (Clarke 68). Sanchez and other BAM poets incorporated the “redundancies, jive rhyme, nonsense, fad expressions, nicknames, corruptions, onomatopoeia, mispronunciations, and clipped forms” of African American slang into their poetic experiments (Major xxx). In BAM poems, these stylistic innovations “registered a complete rejection of white American culture and of previous ‘Negro-writing’ that had been submissive to Anglo-European literary values” (Ford 174-75).

BAM poets demonstrated that Black vernaculars were intrinsically poetic, as Stephen Henderson argued in 1973:

[...] street language is not limited to hip phrases and monosyllabic obscenities—at least not the language that I hear in the streets, because often

when I hear a group of brothers or sisters talking I hear poetry—sometimes a very complete poetry.

Poets use Black speech forms consciously because they know that Black people—the mass of us—do not talk like white people. They know that despite the lies and distortions of the minstrels—both ancient and modern, unlearned and academic—and despite all of the critical jargon about “ghettoese” and “plantation English,” there is a complex and rich and powerful and subtle linguistic heritage whose resources have scarcely been touched that they draw upon. (32-33)

The “very complete poetry” of Black speech is what Zora Neale Hurston called the “will to adorn” in “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), where she asserts that “the American Negro has done wonders to the English language.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Clarence Major, in his introduction to *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African American Slang*, first published in 1970, argues that “African-American speech and slang form is, in a sense, one of the primary cutting edges against which American speech—formal and informal—generally keeps itself alive” (xxxiv), and James Baldwin, in a *New York Times* editorial in 1979 titled “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” describes the contribution of Black vernaculars to the vitality of American English in even more pointed terms: “it is late in the day to attempt to penalize black people for having created a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality” (133).

BAM poets understood the power of Black vernaculars to enrich and renew the English language, and claimed these forces for poetry. In interviews, Sanchez often identifies her grandmother, who raised her after her mother passed away when Sanchez was a year old, as the source of her love for the sounds, rhythms, and figurative language of Black speech: “I remember taking her words sometimes and repeating them. ‘Why?’ she would ask. ‘Because I like to float into words,’ I answered. Now that was a child’s way of saying that her words were beautiful and couched in interesting similes and images. I could really see them floating” (Leibowitz 8). It was a child’s way of saying it, but it is also a poet’s way of

luxuriating in language. Sanchez's father, who was a schoolteacher, instructed his children to speak in standard English: "We spoke very tactfully, very properly, no street talk" (7). When the family moved to Harlem, Sanchez "learned street talk because everyone else outside the house spoke it. I learned it consciously. I made mistakes initially and people would laugh" (7). After moving to San Francisco, Sanchez began her university teaching career as an instructor at San Francisco State College, where she taught from 1967-69 and where she co-founded the nation's first Black Studies program, which included a course in Black English.<sup>14</sup> She taught, and demonstrated through her poems, that the "language that people spoke, the masses spoke, the workers spoke, the revolutionaries spoke, the students spoke was also language that should be considered poetic" (Joyce 178). In everyday life, too, Sanchez has worked to affirm the beauty of Black English: "Now I hear some little kid out in the street acting tough and sassy and speaking black English, and I'll stop and talk to him and say, 'Isn't that pretty?'" (8). As in a Sanchez poem, language that is "tough and sassy" becomes, through more attuned listening, "complex and rich and powerful and subtle," part of a tradition of "beautiful talk," "of saying things beautifully even if they are ugly things" (Henderson, *Understanding* 33).

When asked about her role in reclaiming Black vernaculars for poetry, Sanchez speaks to her lineage, citing Langston Hughes's "jazz idiom" and Sterling Brown's use of Southern Black speech to portray "poor Southern black men and women, who sat on porches and smoked their corn-cob pipes, and smiled their purple-red gum smiles ... he put them in poetry and made them worthy of being poetic" (Kelly 682). Although Brown was overlooked in his day, Sanchez and others began to teach his work in university settings. She then began borrowing from urban Black vernaculars for her own writing, as she explains to Susan Kelly in an interview:

So what I did, then, was I took the whole idea of using black English and dealing with it in an urban setting, incorporating the hipness that was in that black urban setting, which means that the English is going to change, right? [...] This urban thing is a smart, take-no-prisoners kind of language, right? It has its own cadence and rhythm. It has its own way of looking at the world. [...] We made this poetic, which is fascinating to me, still, today. (682)

“It’s a very widespread poetic idiom, now,” Kelly remarks, and Sanchez replies, “Exactly” (682). Sanchez and her BAM peers expanded notions of what poetic language might include in ways that continue to be felt in a wide range of literary and musical art forms, from spoken word and hip-hop to traditions tied more closely to print culture and the academy. In her essay “unrecovered losses,” poet and playwright Ntozake Shange, an important inheritor of Sanchez’s vernacular innovations, powerfully describes the urgency of the literary use of Black English: “i cant count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language that i waz taught to hate myself in/ [...] i have to take it apart to the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/ leaving us space to literally create our own image” (qtd. in Ford 166). Shange underscores how, like other BAM innovations, the use of vernaculars was never simply an aesthetic choice, but one tied to the effort to create positive cultural identities for African Americans.

Sanchez and other BAM poets used these “elegant black linguistic gesture[s]” first of all to affirm the beauty of this language (Henderson 33). They also used them for practical purposes, in order to grab the attention of their intended audiences and validate the credibility of their messages. The use of profanity near the beginning of a poem initially captured the interest of listeners and readers, and the use of Black vernaculars throughout the rest of the poem legitimized the poets’ messages among the popular audiences they sought. BAM poets and artists made efforts, both large- and small-scale, to go into Black communities to deliver their art. For example, in the summer of 1965, Baraka and members of the Black Arts Repertory Theater School launched “Operation Boot Strap,” a public arts

and activism program: “For eight weeks, we brought Drama, Poetry, Painting, Music, Dance, night after night all across Harlem. We had a fleet of five trucks and stages created with banquet tables. And each night our five units would go out in playgrounds, street corners, vacant lots, play streets, parks, bringing Black Art directly to the people” (Baraka, “Black Arts” 501). In an interview, Sanchez gives another example of an effort BAM poets made to reach their intended audiences: Sanchez, Baraka, and Askia M. Touré asked the owner of a neighborhood bar in Harlem if they could return to read their poems later that night. He was skeptical, but they assured him: “We just want to read for a little while and engage people in this whole conversation” (Reich 81). When they returned that night,

Someone—I don’t know who—pulled the plug on the jukebox, and that got everyone’s attention. We said, “We want to read some poems,” and before the people in the bar could moan because the music’s gone, we started to go “pshom t-t-t,” staccato style, “d-d-d-d”—you know, like machine guns. And of course we used a couple curse words because we knew that would gather them. People stopped when they heard the curse words. After we got them, we didn’t use any more curse words, but we knew they were listening now. It must have taken all of fifteen minutes, and when we finished, they clapped and said, “Good, good, good.” (81-82)

BAM poets’ guerrilla-style efforts to seize the attention of popular audiences in neighborhood locations in Harlem can be understood as “tactics” in Michel de Certeau’s sense. A tactic “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety” (xix): Unlike a “strategy,” which has a *propre*, or “a spatial or institutional localization” such as that of “a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution,” a tactic has no *propre* and instead “depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’” (xix). As Sanchez, Baraka, and other BAM poets performed poems as part of Operation Boot Strap, in bars, or on street corners, they opened these everyday locales “onto history” (Blanchot 14), enacting “the effervescent, efflorescent resistance of the temporary locale” (Sell 243). Without a *propre* of their own, they



Once vernacular language had grabbed the attention of the audience, it could then serve to validate the credibility of the poet and “authenticate the lesson of the poem” (Clarke 68). In order to get Black youths to listen to her message in “a chant,” Sanchez needed to speak to them on their level, using their language. As she observes, the vernacular “goes out and says simply that ‘I am here. Deal with me.’ The interesting thing that I learned from this was that it also said: ‘I come as an equal. And I appreciate the language that I speak here in this urban setting’” (Kelly 682). Vernacular language could speak to the reality of Black people’s daily lives in a way that standard English could not: “I decided along with a number of other Black poets to tell the truth in poetry by using the language, dialect, idioms, of the folks we believed our audience to be” (“Ruminations” 416). The first section of *We a BaddDDD People*, “Survival Poems,” begins with a poem called “221-1424: (San/Francisco/suicide/number)” that dramatizes the Black vernacular’s ability to tell the truth in a way that challenges official power structures and the language that serves them. The poem is a dramatic monologue of a phone call from a Black person to a suicide hotline. Vernacular language announces the caller’s state of mind and cultural position: “i’m callen to say / that i’m fixen to / hang it up” (12). The call soon becomes a revelation not only of personal emergency, but also of wider social crisis. When the hotline worker asks the caller why she wants to kill herself, she replies:

ohhhh man. cuz  
i’m blk. liven in a  
wite/psychotic/neurotic  
schizophrenic/ society where  
all honkies have been plannen  
my death since. . . . (12)

We never hear the voice of the hotline worker, but the caller echoes the worker’s questions, and we soon infer that the worker suspects the caller of paranoia:

when did I first

feel that honkies?  
 [...]

were tryen to kill me?  
 well. man. it ain't  
 exactly my discovery.  
 but it's been happenen  
 for bout 400 yrs.  
 what's that?  
 can i au-then-ti-cate that? (12)

The caller mocks the hotline worker's official jargon—the demand that the caller “au-then-ti-cate” the history of the devaluation and brutalization of Black lives in America—by exaggerating the word's high Latinate diction. Pitted against this institutional-speak is the caller's vernacular language, which performs a different sort of authenticating act, telling the truth about “wite/psychotic/neurotic [/] schizophrenic/ society.”<sup>16</sup> By the end of the phone call, the caller begins to feel better and accuses the hotline worker, the representative of larger systems of oppression, of not sounding “so goood” himself. The poem dramatizes the way the humor and truth embedded in vernacular language can resist power structures, poetically signalling “victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’” (de Certeau xix). Indeed, the use of the vernacular itself can be understood as a “tactic,” as it insinuates the “illegitimate” language of the street into the institutions of the “other,” from the cultural discourse of the suicide hotline to the halls of the Western poetic tradition.

For Sanchez and other BAM poets, aesthetic tactics such as the use of Black vernaculars were tied to the work of social change: “The best of the sixties poets always went past mere translation of the streets to transformation” (Madhubuti 422). Sanchez borrowed the language of the streets and then returned it to the streets, recontextualized as poetry, in order legitimate the social messages underpinning her poems. In the opening lines of the poem “blk/ rhetoric,” Sanchez insists that the use of street language, however “beautiful,” must be used in the service of social and political work that “means something”:

who's gonna make all  
that beautiful blk / rhetoric  
mean something.  
like  
i mean  
who's gonna take  
the words  
blk / is / beautiful  
and make more of it  
than blk / capitalism.  
u dig? (*BaddDDD* 15)

Although Sanchez herself uses terms such as “truth” and “beauty” as she discusses her aims to affirm Black language and culture, she is also aware of the way slogans such as “blk / is / beautiful” get coopted by advertisers who dilute their messages and turn them into fashionable products (“blk / capitalism”). For Sanchez, “blk/ rhetoric,” including her own poetic language, cannot “mean something” until it is connected to action:

who's gonna give our young  
 blk / people new heroes  
     (instead of catch / phrases)  
     (instead of cad / ill / acs)  
     (instead of pimps) (15)

The litany goes on to include “wite / whores,” “drugs,” “new dances,” “chit / ter / lings,” and more; it is a list of fashionable, quick-fix replacements for the more impactful, lasting changes that “new heroes” might bring.

Sanchez's own "catch / phrases" serve a functional more than fashionable purpose. Her poems inspire and enable a mass audience to alter their everyday lives, from practicing self-love to altering destructive habits to strengthening relationships. In her essay "The Poet as Creator of Social Values" (1983), Sanchez articulates her understanding of how the poet's public role connects to the daily lives of her audience: "The power that the poet has to create, preserve, or destroy social values depends greatly on the quality of his/her social visibility and the functionary opportunity available to poetry to impact lives" (2). She goes on

to define “functionary poetry” in contrast to the more personal, private “poetry of ethos”: “Functionary Poetry dealt with themes in the social domain: religion, God, country, work, social institutions, social problems, war, family, marriage and death in the distinct context of that society’s perception” (2).<sup>17</sup> By tracing poets’ “social visibility” back to the poet-priests of Egypt, India, and Mesopotamia, Sanchez establishes a lineage for the direct cultural work she and other BAM poets were undertaking (3). As she attests elsewhere, the poetry that accomplished this work has often been dismissed as “unpoetic” in the context of Eurocentric literary traditions: “in my pieces about being black, in my pieces about drugs in the black community, in pieces about ‘let us organize and unite,’ critics were concerned about that content, and they could say simply, ‘Well, it’s not poetic’” (Reich 86). By taking her place in an ancient line of functionary poets, Sanchez validates her public role and political content in the face of contemporary Western values that do not acknowledge or accept this type of poetic work.<sup>18</sup>

The use of Black vernaculars not only enabled a direct connection between “socially visible” BAM poets and popular audiences in African American communities, but also made it possible for those without direct personal contact with the poet to integrate the poems’ messages into their everyday lives. By writing in the language of those she hoped to reach and using the page as a “musical score,” as many BAM poets did (Henderson, *Understanding* 61), Sanchez scripted poems that could be easily repeated in the minds and mouths of her readers. Certain poems contain explicit instructions asking readers to recite them as a daily ritual, as in the poem “blk/chant,” which is subtitled, “to be sed everyday. [/] slowly),” and begins:

we programmed to death /  
die/en  
each day the man /  
boy



u dig? (33)

Sanchez offers this chant as an antidote to a culture that conspires to keep part of its population numbed on drugs and unable to see the larger social contexts, both historical and ongoing, of their struggles. Sanchez's hope is that, if repeated every day, "blk/chant" might intervene in a way that could begin to break through the "programming." The use of the vernacular phrases and spelling enables the intended audience—invoked in the phrase "brothas & sistuhs"—to repeat the poem's message. In this way, written Black vernacular drives the work of chant, which functions via the power of repeated language, as described by Aldon Nielson:

Chant [...] in order to be *heard* as chant, must present itself to us as the at least vaguely familiar, the already heard, for it must have presupposed the possibility of reiteration, response, recall, re-rapping. It is not chant if not repeated, nor is it orature unless it is transmitted, remarked, redeployed. Each member of the inheriting chain of tradition repeats the chant in a different voice, replays it in a different register, alters its rhythmic patterns. (30)

Sanchez's readers/reciters, in repeating "blk/chant" to themselves daily, are replaying the "vaguely familiar," "already heard" language of the Black vernacular: Sanchez's use of language familiar to her readers augments the reiterative nature of chanting. This familiar language, however, carries a powerful new message. A creator of social values, Sanchez extends the poet's ancient ritualistic work to social issues affecting contemporary African American communities. Her use of vernacular language lends further power to the ritual by affirming Black culture and defying the "wite / castles / of [/] respectability." The daily ritual poem is especially capable of making "blk / rhetoric [/] mean something"—of creating social values—because it facilitates the process of its readers taking up this work themselves, using the poem as a tool for daily survival.

The idea of repeating a poem as a daily survival ritual recalls the conclusion to Baraka's "Black Art":

We want a black poem. And a  
 Black World.  
 Let the world be a Black Poem  
 And Let All Black People Speak This Poem  
 Silently  
 or LOUD (143)

The “Black Poem,” when repeated silently to oneself or aloud, calls a new “Black World” into being. Baraka god-like invocation “Let the world be a Black Poem” echoes the Biblical book of Genesis. For Sanchez, Black poetry’s power to remake the world happens not on the celestial sphere but instead in the body:

The kind of literature we were talking about in the sixties and the seventies and the eighties and the nineties and two thousand is that you read it and it goes into the brain, and, perhaps, it resonates there for a while, but within the literature that we’re talking about we see that it begins to make a movement, and it makes a movement into the bloodstream, down to the heart, down to the hands, down to the stomach, and down to the feet and the knees (is the flesh tender where the knees weep?). And you begin to understand that it is those words that will make you move. It’s those words that will make you live and become a part of some kind of action that responds to being human. (Joyce 188)

In this vision, someone hears, reads, or recites a poem, whose power travels through the body’s circulatory system, eventually inciting movement in the body and action in the social realm. Here again, “Black Art” reverberates: “We want live / words of the hip world live flesh & / coursing blood.” Sanchez’s understanding of poetry as a “subconscious conversation” that “is as much the work of those who understand it as it is those who make it” indicates that she considers the audience’s role as essential to the completion of the poem, a philosophy reflected in varying forms across post-1945 U.S. poetry movements (“Poet as Creator” 2).<sup>20</sup> For Sanchez and other BAM poets, however, the poem’s relationship to its audience was not merely an aesthetic experience, but directly linked to its potential social impact, or “the functionary opportunity available to poetry to impact lives.” Sanchez witnessed the ways her poems affected her readers’ everyday lives: “these words we

use do heal. I get letters from people who say, 'I am alive today because I found your book at a time when I needed to.' Then you look up and realize why you are doing this" ("Speak Easy"). Once that movement has begun in one person, Sanchez believes that it continues to gain momentum: "Someone once said I was an eternal optimist, and I said I am a scientist in that I know that once you initiate change it cannot be stopped. The law of physics tells you that when something starts in motion it will never stop. We have started the motion toward change in this country and it can never be stopped" (Tyehimba 116).

Sanchez's poetic work, which exists in the social world as much as on the page, can be illuminated by theories of everyday life, a field of thought that wants "to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals" (de Certeau xiv). We can read "blk/ chant" as a form of tactical creativity that enables the "clandestine form" of daily chanting. This chanting can be understood as an everyday practice, those "microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of 'tactics' articulated in the details of everyday life" (xiv). "blk/ chant" explicitly names these "technocratic structure[s]": they are the "wite / castles" of "programming" that the chant intends to "deflect" through its daily ritual of consciousness-raising and habit-transforming. Like Sanchez, theorists of the everyday see daily life as the realm from which broader social changes can emerge. Rather than understanding historical shifts through "lofty spheres," "sensational events," and "'significant' facts," Lefebvre argues that the "genuine changes" emerge from "the practical, effective transformation of things as they are" (*Critique* 137, 134). Philosopher Agnes Heller, who was influenced by Lefebvre, locates human consciousness as the foundation for all "macro-scale" changes: "change cannot be implemented on the macro-scale alone, and furthermore [...] the change in human attitudes is co-constitutive of every change, be it for

the worse or for the better” (x). Offering ways of analyzing lived experience, theories of the everyday can further our understanding of the use, value, and impact of Sanchez’s poetry, which was intended to “impact lives.” At the same time, Heller, Lefebvre, and de Certeau provide the theory, but do not often elucidate the praxis, of such an approach to social change on the micro-level.<sup>21</sup> Sanchez provides both a theory and practice of social transformation on the level of everyday life. Poetry itself becomes the everyday practice enabling change, a tool to transform the embodied consciousness of her readers, sparking movement on the most local level.

Poetry’s use as a daily reprogramming ritual provides one example of how this change can begin to carry over into the social realm. The same logic of recitation and repetition—of chant—can be applied to other poems that do not give explicit instructions for repetition. In *We a BaddDDD People*, the section “LOVE/SONGS/CHANTS” contains “blk / woocommerce / chant,” a poem written in the first-person plural, implying that Black woman might chant it simultaneously, or might recite it separately, but as if in unison: “we stand befo u [/] plain ol blk/woocomen [/] & what u gon do [/] with us” (45). Black women address Black men and demand to be treated with respect: “pro tect us [/] treat us rite [/] loooooVVVE us” (45). Sanchez suggests the possibility of other poems being taken up and repeated by readers by indicating a collective voice in other ways, as in “To All Brothers: From All Sisters” from *Love Poems*, a poem that encourages women’s self-empowerment: “each nite without you. / and I give birth to myself” (95). Although the poem is written in the first-person singular throughout, the title suggests that this usage is meant to be understood as what Sanchez calls the “collective ‘I’”: “Sometimes because I start a piece off with the ‘I’ then people assume it’s personal, but it is the collective ‘I’ I’m talking about” (Rome 64). Another example from *Love Poems*, “A Blk/Woman/Speaks,” uses a singular

voice throughout to stand in for many Black women: “I am deep/blk/soil [/] they have tried to pollute me [/] with a poison called America” (68).

By using the “collective ‘I’” to speak for Black women in particular, Sanchez brings women’s voices and experiences into the larger BAM effort to write poetry that speaks to, about, and for Black people. She understands this as a way to continue poetry’s “subconscious conversation” not only with the women who read her work, but also with those who have been voiceless throughout history, and with those who have not yet found voice: “I don’t speak singularly—for myself. I speak for the many, many women who, though physically dead, remain spiritually alive through me. And I speak for those women here on earth with me, like me. And I speak for the women yet to be born” (Highsmith-Taylor 18).<sup>22</sup> In this light, it becomes possible to read even Sanchez’s most apparently personal poems—such as those in *Love Poems*, and the “personal letters” in *Home Coming* and *We a BaddDDD People*—as instances of the collective “I,” of one Black woman’s experience offered up so that it might not only resonate with other women, but also give them words to repeat that allow them to affirm their worth and alter their cultural perceptions.

These first-person poems are examples of what Sanchez referred to as “poetry of ethos,” “meant to convey personal experience, feelings of love, despair, joy, frustration arising from very private encounter” (“Poet as Creator” 2). Like other feminist poets, Sanchez understood that the poetry of ethos, or lyric poetry, could be as political as functionary poetry: “So I have written what I call political poetry but the personal poetry that I write [...] is political” (Julien et al. 126). As Elisabeth Frost has argued, this “disjunction between public and private discourse” in Sanchez’s work is a false dichotomy that is better understood through feminist thought that recognizes the political possibilities of women sharing their individual experiences (67). The two modes work in tandem across

Sanchez's early books to demonstrate that the public poet is speaking out of a life of struggle in a way that ultimately further legitimates the functionary/political poems by indicating that these are hard-won lessons. Further, Sanchez's ability to let women speak through her, as she speaks through them—she channels many voices, and women readers repeat her poems in their daily lives—is key to understanding what “the collective ‘I’” means in Sanchez's work. In this way, even the “poem of ethos” can be thought of as many-voiced.

One of Sanchez's earliest poems, “Poem No. 1,” exemplifies this connection between personal and political modes. A short lyric that prefigures the way Sanchez's public role in the Black Arts Movement will alter her poetics over the next decade, it reads in its entirety:

my husband sits  
buddha like  
watching me weave my  
self among the sad  
young men of my time.  
he thinks i am going  
to run away.  
maybe i will. (*Love Poems* 2)

“Poem No. 1” apparently refers to Sanchez's first marriage to Albert Sanchez, and confesses the strain put on their relationship by Sonia's growing activism. The poem is dated 1964: In February of the following year, Malcolm X would be assassinated, and a few weeks later, Baraka, Sun Ra, and others would march to Harlem. Sanchez, ready for her “homecoming,” soon “woke up alone / to the middle sixties / full of the rising wind of history” (*Blues Book* 37). As “Poem No. 1” foretells, Sanchez's public role as one of the most prominent poets in the Black Arts Movement would come into conflict with the expectation that women should work for the movement only in the private realm. In the following section, I turn to a highly political poem that addresses itself to personal issues affecting Black women's lives, and examine how Sanchez used her visibility to make feminist contributions to a movement that

tried to relegate women to subservient, behind-the-scenes roles.

## “Queens of the Universe” and Gendered Poetic Activism in the Black Arts

### Movement

“Introduction (Queens of the Universe),” the ten-page opening section to Sanchez’s book-length poem in five parts, *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1974), represents a culmination of Sanchez’s early style in its use of Black vernacular language scored for the page—through idiosyncratic punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and line breaks—to affirm, instruct, and incite Black women. Written during the years Sanchez was active in the Nation of Islam (1972-75), “Queens of the Universe” interweaves feminist and nationalist politics, though never fully resolves the conflicts between them. The poem’s dual politics dramatize the challenge faced by Sanchez and other women in the Black Arts and Black Power movements as they dedicated themselves to the concerns of Black women within the strictures of a patriarchal nationalist program: “Women writers in the Black Arts movement were faced with the impossible task of being revolutionary poets, who were aggressive, irreverent, and menacing, while being supportive black women, who were submissive, reverent to black men, and feminine” (Ford 192). *Blues Book* reveals these competing concerns from the outset. The book’s title announces that it is for Black women, but its dedication page names additional allegiances: “This book is Dedicated with Love to / My Father, Wilson L. Driver / And to my spiritual FATHER, / THE HONORABLE / ELIJAH MUHAMMAD, / Messenger of ALLAH / who has labored forty-two years to deliver / us up from this western Babylon” (5). Sanchez’s dedication to her father and to Muhammad, who led the Nation of Islam from 1934 to 1975, signals the patriarchal politics that will sit in tension with feminist concerns throughout “Queens.”

The poem begins by employing some of the same tactics that Sanchez’s other BAM-era poetry uses, including the use of attention-grabbing language:

We Black/woooooomen have been called many  
 things: foxes, matriarchs, whores,  
 bougies, sweet mommas, gals,  
 sapphires, sisters and recently Queens. (11)

By invoking derogatory labels such as “whores,” “bougies,” and “sapphires,” Sanchez names the stereotypes that have cast Black women as sexually promiscuous, materialistic, overbearing, and more. Sanchez offers this list not merely to script a dramatic opening to her poem, but also in order to point out that cultural conditions have historically forced women into these roles:

i would say that Black/woooooomen have been  
 a combination of all these words because  
 if we examine our past/history, at  
 one time or another we’ve had to be like  
 those words be saying. (11)

Here Sanchez’s tone turns conversational, indicating that she is speaking as a peer, one who occupies both the “i” of personal opinion and the “we” that includes herself among those implicated by these conditions—the lowercase “i” suggesting, in this way, Sanchez’s status as an equal. Along with the references to recognizable stereotypes, these opening gestures validate the message that follows, in much the same way that Sanchez’s use of vernacular language and a collective point of view legitimized her ideas for audiences in neighborhood settings, announcing “this is for real” (“homecoming”). Sanchez’s use of the first person—which here reads as the “I” of the poet, teacher, and activist that she was—will disappear for most of “Queens” and appear again as a “collective ‘I’” at the end of the poem; in the meantime, she will usually use a public “we” meant to speak to and for Black women.

Characteristically, Sanchez does not want to deny the oppressive historical conditions that have brought about these stereotypes. It is important, instead, to acknowledge the past and allow it to be “ordinary”:

I bring myself into a group of people and they always know I come in, in a dignified fashion, in a humane fashion, that I bring my herstory with me not to damn them but because it is part of my herstory. [...] We have to learn how to make our herstory ordinary. Just everyday. And that comes, I think, with study, that comes with working at it, that comes with feeling comfortable wherever you are wherever you go. And it also comes with feeling as if you are an equal. (Dennis-Mahmood 106-7)

As she “examine[s] our past/history” in “Queens,” Sanchez names the historical conditions that have forced Black women into undesirable roles in a way that is not “damning” but instead “everyday.” Here everydayness refers to the matter-of-fact approach that Sanchez adopts as she continues to unflinchingly describe things as they are. By making even the most painful “herstory ordinary,” Sanchez points the way toward the possibility of a new set of everyday conditions in which Black women can cast off outmoded stereotypes:

but today, in spite  
of much vulgarity splattering us, there are  
many roles we can discard.  
there are many we  
must discard for our own survival for our  
own sanity for the contributions we must  
make to our emerging Black nation. (11)

The turn toward present conditions both acknowledges the lingering consequences of the roles to which Black women have been relegated and affirms that different conditions are possible. The transition “but today” also marks a shift in register from a matter-of-fact conversational approach to a more oratorical public stance. Sanchez speaks as a functionary poet who addresses the lives of Black women (“for our own survival for our / own sanity”) and then adds to those concerns the needs of the “emerging Black nation.” Throughout the remainder of “Queens,” Sanchez will continue to negotiate these allegiances: even the phrase “Black/woooomen,” where the slash both links and divides the two words, seems to announce the poem’s dual concerns.

Sanchez goes on to describe the difficulty of surviving and keeping one's sanity, using language that, in typical BAM style, is meant to bring her audience to consciousness regarding current social conditions:

and what/how  
we must moooooOOOVE to as the only QUEENS  
OF THE UNIVERSE to sustain/keep our sanity  
in this insane messed up/diet/conscious/  
pill taking/faggotty/masochistic/miss anne/  
orientated/society has got to be dealt with  
because that's us. You hear me? US.  
Black/woooomen.  
the only QUEENS OF THE UNIVERSE, even though  
we be stepping unqueenly sometimes, like it ain't  
easy being a queen in this unrighteous world  
full of miss annes and mr. annes.  
but we steady trying. (11-12)

Sanchez's strategy here is multilayered: She affirms Black women's status as "QUEENS OF THE UNIVERSE" and encourages them to "moooooOOOVE" toward social change; she once again acknowledges that there are social conditions stacked against them, this time dubbing them "insane" and "messed-up," among other descriptions<sup>23</sup>; and she also acknowledges that, within a culture that devalues Black women, it makes sense that "we be stepping unqueenly sometimes," or that women might not always behave in ways that reflect their worth. Again, Sanchez is careful to avoid condescension by opposing her "we" to the unrighteousness of "miss annes and mr. annes" and by employing the vernacular to announce her status as peer.<sup>24</sup>

Having already introduced the connection between the need for a reconceptualization of Black women's roles and the needs of "the emerging Black nation," Sanchez then begins to use Black nationalist rhetoric to describe the gendered hierarchy into which these roles must fit:

for the thing that  
Black/woooomen of today must understand

is that loooove/  
peace/  
contentment will never  
be ours for this crackerized country has dealt  
on us and colonized us body and soul and  
the job of Black/woooooomen is to deal with this  
under the direction of Black men. (12)

For instance we do not believe in “equality” of men and women. We cannot understand what devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals . . . nature has not provided thus. The brother says, “Let a woman be a wo-man . . . and let a man be a ma-an . . .” But this means that we will complement each other, that you, who I call my house, because there is no house without a man and his wife, are the single element in the universe that perfectly completes my essence. (8)

Baraka’s metaphoric link of “woman” and “house” reflects the Black Power philosophy that the family is the model for the nation: “So you are my ‘house,’ I live in you, and together we have a house, and that must be the microcosm, by example, of the entire Black nation” (8).

Because “the nationalist agenda typically relies upon gender norms and hierarchies in organizing the (‘domestic’) nation as a ‘home’ and its people as a ‘family,’” Black women were relegated to subservient gender roles in the revolutionary “family” and in their own homes (Shockley 5).

Sanchez echoes these nationalist philosophies in “Queens,” telling Black women that they “must support. / loooVVVE our warrior/Kings/Gods. / mussSST bear children” (15). She then extends the war analogy, figuring women and children as a “home base” to which men/warriors can safely return after waging battle:

[...] we are his core his base  
for him to move out against the white men  
who plot & connive our destruction each &  
every day. (15)

For both Sanchez and Baraka, by the logic of family-as-nation, women are not only relegated to working for the movement from within the private sphere, but actually *are* the home: “we are his core his base”; “So you are my ‘house,’ I live in you.” Baraka carries this equivalence further by insisting that women should “be” life and consciousness for the nation: “You inspire the man by creating with him, this new world we seek. By *being* this new life that must be provided for at all costs” (8); “To inspire is to *be* the new consciousness” (9). Nationalist philosophy proposed that Black women’s tasks were to inspire, to teach, and to work for

social change: “We say that a Black woman must first be able to inspire her man, then she must be able to teach our children, and contribute to the social development of the nation” (8). In “Queens,” Sanchez also affirms women’s roles as teachers and guardians of the social realm, and devotes several passages to issues surrounding children and schools. Avoiding the idea that women should inspire men, she chooses instead to affirm the positive aspects of these roles:

we Black/woomen  
are the first teachers.  
nurses, givers of life. teachers of all  
human things.  
we must be about building  
a strong nation since we are a nation.  
loooven. teaching our children, looooven.  
teaching our brothers, sisters. looooven.  
teaching them so they will be able to  
looove/livvvVVE when their time comes  
generations removed from whiteness. (14)

Sanchez’s naming of women as “givers of life” chimes with an exhortation of Baraka’s: “You must be what we *need*, to survive ... the strength, the health, the dignity, which is this *new*, millennia old, raging beauty” (9). In both cases, women are cast as the life force itself. Understood in this context, the rhetoric of “inspiration” also suggests an etymological link to the breath, or to the basic forces that maintain life.

The conflation of the category of “women” with the domestic sphere and the maintenance of basic life forces is, as I argue in the introduction, crucial for understanding women’s overdetermined relationship to everyday life, and for appreciating the necessary ambivalence with which women poets approach the everyday in their work. As Lefebvre argues, “the conditions of everyday life bear heaviest” upon women, who are required to have “a sort of intimate knowledge of things outside the sphere of material reality: health, desire, spontaneity, vitality” (*Everyday Life* 35). Responsible for basic life forces, women “are

the subject of everyday life and its victims or objects and substitutes” (73). Black nationalist rhetoric, in figuring women as home, health, and life-giving force, exemplifies the way the category “women” becomes a “substitute” for the concept of the everyday. Within the Black Arts and Black Power movements, women are responsible for fundamental work in families and communities, keeping life running behind the scenes while “warriors” go out into the world to do battle in more visible ways. In her public role as poet, Sanchez wants to highlight the worth of women’s overlooked acts in the private sphere; like other feminist everyday poetry, “Queens” makes this labor visible and valuable. Like di Prima, who learned from her grandmother at an early age that “the things of woman [...] are the very basis and ground of human life” (*Recollections* 3), Sanchez emphasizes the importance of these life-giving acts. If, as everyday life theorist Luce Giard argues, “the upkeep of household goods and the maintenance of family bodies seem to fall outside the bounds of a valuable production” (156), Sanchez instead highlights the value of this life-sustaining labor, spending the majority of “Queens” showing how fundamental women’s work is to promoting revolutionary movement. (Intriguingly, Baraka’s “Black Woman,” however misogynist it may be, also names and catalogues women’s labor and acknowledges how women’s “strength,” “health,” “dignity,” and “raging beauty” served to make men’s actions possible.) “Queens” reflects the ambivalence of a woman poet who wishes to validate this traditional gendered labor in spite of the fact that she did not believe women needed to be limited to it.

For Sanchez, then, women can play vital roles in the movement in both the private and public spheres. In their roles as nurses and teachers, however feminized these positions may be, they undertake public work that contributes, as Baraka writes, to “to the social development of the nation.” Some of the power of “Queens of the Universe” as a historical and poetic document lies in the way it valorizes and encourages Black women’s central,

active roles in their families, schools, and communities. Sanchez offers highly detailed practical instructions for feminist solidarity and everyday activism, from the encouragement to start “basement schools in our homes” to issues of addiction, sexuality, and relationships (14). She suggests that Black women’s alliances have produced an awareness of these needs:

we must be prepared for all:  
 gaming. rhetoric. poverty. empty beds.  
 death. sisters calling in the nite screeeeamen  
     an arethasong.  
         save me. somebody saaaAVVE  
 me. yeh. we be crying together from coast to  
 coast saying  
         somebody savvvvVVVE me.  
 yeh, save us.  
         savvvVVVE us all.  
                     did you hear us?  
 yeh. us. sisters.  
         your sisters. we be steady  
 calling each other and Black/woooomen  
 must organize/reorganize their groups to meet  
 answer these needs/screeeeeam of living.  
 i mean, sisters must be prepared to go out  
 to sisters homes to keep them out of bars,  
 off of quick relationships that will  
 eventually destroy them and their families.  
 & our nation.  
         we must preserve. prolong our  
 lives. we have to stop eating unhealthy foods/  
 smoking/drinking/leaning over bars elbowing  
 away our lives because we blue over some maaaAANN.  
 sisters. we beautifully Black. not blue.  
 ain’t no time for tears shed for one/single  
 maaaAAN. (13)

The image of “sisters calling in the nite screeeeamen / an arethasong”—a reference to Aretha Franklin’s song “Save Me,” whose lyrics Sanchez incorporates into the following lines—leads to a vision of women not just calling *out* to be saved, but instead calling *each other* and organizing groups—feminist, nationalist, or some combination. In this call-and-response interlude, women call out the song lyrics (“somebody savvvvVVVE me”) and then answer each other (“yeh, save us”). Sanchez invokes this traditional African and African American

form in order to invoke a vision of feminist solidarity among women “from coast to / coast.” “Queens” then identifies specific issues around which Black women might organize, including unhealthy drinking, eating, and smoking, and encourages them to take an active role addressing these behaviors in their communities.

The combination of practical instructions with more lyrical songs, screams, and calls in the above passage can be read as an example of what Carolyn Fowler calls “pamphlet/manifesto poetry” in an essay published the same year as *Blues Book*, “Pamphlet/Manifesto Poetry: A Contemporary Blackamerican Genre” (1974). Fowler identifies “survival [...] change, fluidity and movement” as key tenets of African American life and literature during the BAM era and then asks, “would such a survival ethos, with its values, be reflected in an aesthetic showing a predilection for certain forms? Would it perhaps create new ones?” (5). Focusing on BAM manifestos and pamphlets, Fowler notes their tendency to swerve from straightforward prose into poetic language, or “a lyric interlude within the body of a piece of discursive writing—writing whose aim is admittedly utilitarian, practical, most often highly topical, urgent, survival-oriented. Poetry somehow blooms in the writer’s involvement with his subject” (10). On one level, “Queens” is the inverse of what Fowler describes: Sanchez works topical content into a poem, while pamphlet/manifesto poetry weaves lyric, “rhythmic, metaphoric” writing into discursive prose (10). Fowler’s definition, however, is broad enough to include “Queens”: “The term ‘pamphlet poetry,’ therefore, seems to me applicable to any piece of writing or any speech which has specific, clear-cut utilitarian aims, but which alternates between a discursive, straightforward mode of presentation and an indirect, highly imagistic and rhythmic one” (10).<sup>25</sup>

In “Queens of the Universe,” lyric moments poetically texturize a poem that is “highly topical, urgent, survival-oriented.” Discursive lines offer utilitarian instructions (“sisters must be prepared to go out / to sisters homes to keep them out of bars”), while rhythmic line breaks, vernacular idioms, song lyrics, call-and-response, and drawn-out vowels that “scream” serve an affective purpose, motivating readers and listeners to undertake this work (“savvvVVVE us all. / did you hear us?”). In the lyrical moments, “Queens” inspires and incites as much as it instructs. While nationalist doctrine told Black women to inspire men, and while, in many BAM poems, “women symbolized a black femininity that procreated, nurtured, and inspired but did not write revolutionary poetry” (Ford 176), Sanchez wrote revolutionary poetry meant to inspire Black women to help themselves and each other. The image of women “steady / calling each other” and organizing is a vision of feminist unity and strength predicated on the idea that women can come together to work on each other’s behalf. This point of view is far from the instruction elsewhere in “Queens” that women should fall in line behind their men. Here, men are not warriors providing leadership, but impediments to women’s abilities to focus on love and respect for themselves and others, the basic message to which Sanchez always returns: “ain’t no time for tears shed for one/single / maaaAAN.” Giving too much energy to damaging relationships with men poses a threat to the family-nation and can potentially lead to self-destructive behavior, but women can help each other understand the roots of these problems and the connections between them, as in the fact that destructive behaviors—substance abuse and relationship problems—are linked: women are “leaning over bars elbowing / away our lives because we blue over some maaaAANN.”

As other feminists did at the time, Sanchez showed that relationships between men and women were political entities:

A woman writer might have talked about a woman in a particular situation with a man. A man did not tend to do that. Many women understood that you could not talk about a nation unless you talked about group relationships, that a nation could not evolve from people talking about what should be without involving the two of them, without acknowledging that what will be comes from their working together. [...] Because in order to be a true revolutionary, you must understand love. (Tate 143)

For Sanchez, there was an urgent need to put heterosexual relationships on the revolutionary agenda: “We’re not dealing with relationships. We’re not dealing to the point where we’ve seen people killing each other in personal relationships; I mean, literally and also psychologically and emotionally” (Gaither 51). The same logic that proposed the family as the model for the nation, then, prompted the challenge of strengthening interpersonal relationships in order to strengthen the larger movement. Sanchez’s efforts to get people to “deal with relationships” translated into poems that confronted social issues head-on as they used history/herstory to soften their harsh wake-up calls. Her claiming of relationship dynamics as an important issue for the Black Arts Movement reflects contemporaneous Black feminist thought that argued that men and women must be willing to examine and change some of their most deeply engrained attitudes and behaviors. Frances Beal, co-founder of the Black Women’s Liberation Committee, addresses these issues in her essay, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” which appeared in two important second-wave feminist anthologies, Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood is Powerful* and Toni Cade’s *The Black Woman* (both published in 1970):

This will mean changing the traditional routines that we have established as a result of living in a totally corrupting society. It means changing how you relate to your wife, your husband, your parents, and your co-workers. If we are going to liberate ourselves as a people, it must be recognized that Black women have very specific problems that have to be spoken to. We must be liberated along with the rest of the population. (Beal 100)

For Beal, change must emerge from the ground up, through the transformation of everyday routines and relationships. In the face of the patriarchal nationalist doctrines that summoned

warriors to perform heroic acts, Beal, Sanchez, and other Black feminists understood that “[t]o die for the revolution is a one-shot deal; to live for the revolution means taking on the more difficult commitment of changing our day-to-day life patterns” (Beal 99).

In “Queens,” Sanchez addresses the everyday revolutionary work needed to alter roles and relationships. After urging Black women to “bear children” and “teach them / their fathers are warriors” (15), she speaks to the particular need to cultivate loving relationships between fathers and daughters “so that young / sisters will know the strength, majesty of / Black fathers and smile” and then “mooooVVE / on to their husbands / with these feelings” (16). She goes on to historically contextualize the need to nurture loving relationships between fathers and daughters and husbands and wives:

it has be done.  
sisters. because Black men and Black  
woomen have a history of alienation in  
this country. the devil has superimposed  
on our minds myths about ourselves.  
we are busy calling each other matriarchs  
or no good bums  
because the devil has  
identified us as such. (16)

Calling back to the “matriarch” role she names at the beginning of “Queens,” Sanchez takes on two stereotypes that harm relationships and thus the nation: the breadwinning, domineering Black woman and the unemployed, emasculated Black man. These stereotypes were brought to national attention by the notorious Moynihan Report (officially, “The Negro Family: The Case For National Action”), published by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1965. This report, written by a white man, is likely “the devil” who identified Black women as “matriarchs” and Black men as “no good bums.” The Moynihan Report concluded that women held the more powerful position in Black families (“A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife”),

although it then goes on to cite statistics that state that the wife held the “dominant” role in 44 percent of African American families, compared with 20 percent of white families. The “problem,” then, is that Black families do not reflect the same gender power dynamics as white families: “In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.”

However absurd the suggestion that Black women’s powerful positions in their families hinder African American social progress, the Moynihan Report was correct in arguing elsewhere that Black families were “forced into a matriarchal structure” because of job discrimination against Black men. As Beal argues, discrimination against Black men placed a burden on Black women, who were required to work both inside and outside of the home and then treated as scapegoats for men’s struggles:

[...] capitalism found it necessary to create a situation where the Black man found it impossible to find meaningful or productive employment. More often than not, he couldn’t find work of any kind. And the Black woman likewise was manipulated by the system, economically exploited and physically assaulted. She could often find work in the white man’s kitchen, however, and sometimes became the sole breadwinner of the family. (90)

The widespread pattern of Black women working low-paying jobs and trying to find additional time to care for their families while their husbands could not find work deeply affected the roles of Black men and women in heterosexual relationships. The knowledge that Black women were often the ones working outside the home while men stayed home and looked for work helps to illuminate the fact that black nationalist rhetoric was, in many ways, proposing a role reversal, not seeking to maintain the status quo. Black feminists like Beal illuminated the economic roots of these gender roles, with the added insight of how the situation affected women: “Certain Black men are maintaining that they have been castrated

by society but that Black women somehow escaped this persecution and even contributed to this emasculation” (92). Beal argues, on the contrary, that the status of Black women is that of “the slave of a slave”: they are “socially manipulated, physically raped, used to undermine [their] own households” (92). While it is true that Black men have been “emasculated, lynched, and brutalized,” for Beal the roots of the problem lie in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal American culture: “the oppression of women acts as an escape valve for capitalism” (94).

Black Power and Black Arts theorists, most of whom were men, focused on the ways this dynamic hindered black men, arguing “that capitalism and racism deprived black men of their manhood. Within this dynamic, powerlessness became associated with femininity and homosexuality” (Pollard 176). To the extent that Black Power’s goal was to make “men” out of Black people to counter the effects of “The New World social castration” that had “feminized the ‘race,’” (Clarke 53), femininity and homosexuality had to be devalued and dominated in order for the movement to proceed: “Black Power emphatically reinscribed patriarchal relations within the new black order. Indeed, its united front was predicated on the subjugation of women” (Frost 75-6). Caught in this bind, Black women found it difficult, if not impossible, to define positive identities for themselves. This difficulty is manifested in the seemingly contradictory messages of “Queens of the Universe,” in which Sanchez valorizes Black women’s work in the family and community while still subscribing to the idea that they should undertake this work under the direction of men.

Sanchez’s focus on relationships in “Queens” was informed by an understanding of the historical conditions of race, class, gender, and sexuality that produced contemporary African American gender roles. While admitting that the stereotypes of “matriarch” and “no good bum” are based somewhat in reality—“listen, sisters, i’m not / saying that some of that



freedom is” (19). She sees this reclamation of freedom as an ongoing struggle to be waged daily with the help of poetry:

until you reclaim your own,  
perhaps this oath/poem to be said everyday  
will help you sisters:  
    i am a Black/woooOOOOMAN  
    my face,  
    my brown  
    bamboo/colored  
black/berry/face  
will spread itself over  
this western hemisphere and  
be remembered.  
                    be sunnnNNGG.  
for i will be called  
                    QUEEN. &  
    walk/move in  
            black/queenly/ways  
and the world  
            shaken by  
my Blackness  
            will channnNNGGEE  
colors. & be  
            reborn.  
                    BLACK. Again. (19-20)

As in “blk/chant,” Sanchez offers a tool for change in the form of an “oath/poem” to chant daily. In this case, however, the poem is directed specifically toward Black women, affirming their status as “queens” and claiming that this shift in self-conception will have powerful ripple effects that can remake the world. A hopeful vision, the oath/poem exemplifies the way Sanchez invents poetic forms that will allow her readers, especially Black women, to affirm their worth in a culture that has devalued them. At the end of a poem that twists and turns through many hard truths, Sanchez provides a hopeful landing point and a way to incorporate the mission of “Queens” into daily life. She returns to the use of the first person in the oath/poem, in the form of the “collective ‘I’” of chanting and ritual, implying that many voices might speak these lines separately or together, simultaneously or at different

moments, forming a chorus across time and space. That the daily work of affirming one's worth—shifting one's place in the world—might be part of the movement toward liberation reflects Beal's feminist philosophy of making “the difficult commitment of changing our day-to-day life patterns,” and also suggests that poetry has a place in the effort “to live for the revolution” each day. As Fowler concludes at the end of “Pamphlet/Manifesto Poetry,” “In the Blackamerican world, self-realization goes hand in hand with survival on every conceivable level. So the poets recognize, along with any Black man in the street, that the struggle must be waged daily, and in a multiplicity of concrete, specific, local instances” (19). In “Queens,” Sanchez proposes many such instances, from addressing substance abuse to going into people's homes to understanding the economic context of relationship difficulties. The struggle can be “waged daily,” too, through poetry—through the activism of Sanchez and other BAM artists, and through the “oath/poem to be said everyday” that urges Black women to incite the movement toward “channnNNGGEE” by starting with themselves.

Ending “Queens of the Universe” on such an affirmative note does not resolve the internal conflicts of the poem, but it does suggest, as Sanchez's attitudes about gendered labor do elsewhere, that she understands Black women's roles as foundational to the larger movement. At the same time, one of the final lines of the poem before the oath/poem consists of blatant proselytizing for the patriarchal Nation of Islam: “And you'll move to ELIJAH MUHAMMED” (19). Rather seeing the poem's internal contradictions as flaws, we can understand them as Sanchez's efforts to weave women's concerns in the politics of the Black Arts Movement. In an interview, Sanchez makes clear how this effort emerged out of the feminist conversations she highlights near the beginning of “Queens” (“we be steady / calling each other”):

But you see, women began to talk about everything: the sexism, the problems with children. There was no help at home quite often. Men were too busy with the movement. Women who were doing work for the movement also had to figure out a way to get these things done, too. There were a lot of issues that women began to raise. Certainly, sexism was a big one. But also the idea, sometimes, of men leaving the women, women who were highly political, just as bright as the men. [...] What I'm saying is that many women began to leave behind the issues of the movement and began to include everything—life—children, love, desertion. (Wood 142)

The impulse to “include everything” in private conversations and political organizing translates, in poetry, into a poem like “Queens” that incorporates discussions of relationships, work, addiction, children, and schools as well as practical instructions for roles Black women can play in their communities. Including everything produces an aesthetic of the feminist everyday that makes visible conditions of women’s everyday lives, claiming they are important politically and poetically in the face of a culture—Black nationalism, and American culture at large—that devalues them and in resistance to a mainstream literary culture that refused to consider such political content poetic. While claiming these concerns for poetry, Sanchez also critiques the conditions that subjugate women and force them into difficult roles. Including everything in “Queens” meant showing how the everyday concerns Black women faced were produced at the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and other concerns, and then addressing this “ordinary herstory” head-on, laying out a program for change. Dealing with this complicated social positioning required a view of the whole in “Queens,” whose “include everything” poetics reflects the social complexities out of which the poem emerges.

In this way, the matrix of investments in “Queens of the Universe” can be read as an early example of intersectional politics at work in poetry.<sup>26</sup> Sanchez and other Black feminists in the 1970s were among the first to articulate a vision of feminist intersectional thought, a philosophy that continues to guide much feminist thought and activism in the 21st century.<sup>27</sup>

Beal's "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," whose title names two of the multiple oppressions experienced by African American women, outlines several of the ways in which the middle-class women's liberation movement, as it was developing in the late 1960s, ignored the particular conditions of Black women's lives: "the white women's liberation movement is basically middle-class. Very few of these women suffer the extreme economic exploitation that most Black women are subjected to day by day" (98). While getting a job outside the home in order to earn financial and social freedom was a priority for white feminists, the same was not true for Black women, because "[m]ost Black women have to work to help house, feed, and clothe their families" (91). A feminism that grew out of the problem of women's economic dependence on their husbands could not address the concerns of the many Black women who worked inside and outside of their homes in order to support their families.

The insight that racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and other systems of oppression are linked emerged out of consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s and 70s in which women of color, lower-class women, lesbians, and others shared their experiences. One such group active in Boston from 1974 to 1980, the Combahee River Collective, provided an important early articulation of the ways systems of power are connected: "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (272). In interviews, Sanchez expresses similar beliefs: "we can make people understand that the issues of race, class, and gender are equal issues that should be addressed and that none take precedence over the other. They are all interconnected" (Tychimba 114). In response to those who argued in the

1960s and 70s that Black women should focus their energy solely on Black liberation and not simultaneously undertake feminist work, Sanchez asserts: “the women’s movement doesn’t stop other people from progressing, it just makes other things happen at the same time, and it causes people to look at themselves in a more human fashion” (Dennis-Mahmood 105).<sup>28</sup>

Always returning to this fundamental humanizing impulse, Sanchez saw that working intersectionally meant honoring a broader sense of human interconnectedness. She recalls a time when a white female student told her, “Your poetry saved my life.” Sanchez replied: “I know, it saved mine too.” She reflects: “You understand the connection that went on, so all the specific things about survival, by extension it was survival of other people too” (Julien et al. 123). Sanchez saw these connections as opportunities for alliances rather than as sites of irreparable difference, a philosophy that another Black feminist poet, Audre Lorde, articulated in the lecture “Learning from the 60s” (1982): “Each one of us here is a link in the connection between antipoor legislation, gay shootings, the burning of synagogues, street harassment, attacks against women, and resurgent violence against Black people. I ask myself as well as each one of you, exactly what alteration in the particular fabric of my everyday life does this connection call for?” (139). For Lorde as for Sanchez, “all the specific things about survival”—the strategies, actions, and attitudes that might be taken up or altered “in the particular fabric of [...] everyday life”—had the potential to have profound impact on others who were struggling to survive, be recognized as fully human, and achieve “social and psychological liberation and freedom from oppression” (Collins 273).<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the best testament to the wisdom of this notion is the massive social impact of the overlapping waves of liberation movements in the second half of the 20th century on the lives of women, people of color, colonized people, and gay, lesbian, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people.

In assessing the complex feminist work that Sanchez accomplishes in “Queens of the Universe,” it is also important to keep in mind her public role as a poet and activist, which continues to this day.<sup>30</sup> Because she was a visible figure at rallies, universities, and meetings in the 1960s and 70s, and because Broadside Press published her books, her poetry was able to reach a mass audience in a way that most poetry does not. Sanchez’s work as a poet must be considered within this activist social context in which her readings could spark intense emotional reactions. As Stephen Henderson argues, the value of BAM poems in general should be measured by their effectiveness in these settings: “one should judge these poems in historical context, even that of specific readings and performances where records are available. Did the poet ‘get over’? That was the criterion. That was all he was trying to do” (“Form” 176). In one anecdote that testifies to her poetry’s ability to “get over,” Sanchez recalls reading her poem “to all sisters” at a Black Power rally at San Francisco State. The poem begins with a line borrowed from a woman’s statement at an earlier meeting: “what a white woman got / cept her white pussy / always sucking after blk/ness” (*Home Coming* 27). When Sanchez read “to all sisters” at the later rally, she recalls: “People danced in the aisles, sent up hoots of approval, laughed/cried—went crazy. The meeting simply could not continue” (Baker 184). As Michelle Nzadi Keita argues, Sanchez’s poetry “unsettles the public silence black women historically employed as a survival tool,” revealing “inner stores of anger, abandonment, pain, celebration, love, and sexuality, qualities that African American women held in reserve [...] in an effort to embody responsibility, accommodate family and community needs above their own, and transcend the history of rape and exploitation they inherited through American slavery” (283). The “to all sisters” anecdote demonstrates how Sanchez was in a unique position to challenge this “public silence.” Using her public role to

give voice to private concerns, Sanchez's visibility allowed her to orchestrate a powerful release for Black women socialized to hold their emotions "in reserve."

At the same time, Sanchez was breaking social taboos by sharing these poems, and by appearing publicly at all. Her visibility presented a particularly intense conflict when she was active in the Nation of Islam. During these years—also the years when she was writing *Blues Book*—Sanchez understood her leadership role as a feminist intervention into nationalist culture:

It was not easy being in the Nation. I was/am a writer. I was also speaking on campuses. In the Nation at that time women were supposed to be in the background. My contribution to the Nation has been that I refused to let them tell me where my place was. I would be reading my poetry some place, and men would get up to leave, and I'd say, "Look, my words are equally important." So I got into trouble. [...] I fought against the stereotype of me as a black woman in the movement relegated to three steps behind. It especially was important for women in the Nation to see that. I told them that in order to pull this "mother" out from what it's under we gonna need men, women, children, but most important, we need minds. I had to fight. I had to fight a lot of people in and outside of the Nation due to so-called sexism. I spoke up. I think it was important that there were women there to do that. (Tate 139-40)

By characterizing this fight to be visible as a woman as a "contribution" to the movement rather than as a rejection of it, Sanchez demonstrates her commitment to intersectional politics: Her contribution is to help to make nationalist groups more gender-inclusive. She was able to fight for women's places as public figures in the movement in part because she was surrounded by examples of powerful Black women poets and activists. Sanchez counted poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker among her mentors, and Nikki Giovanni, Jayne Cortez, and Carolyn Rodgers were among her peers. She also, of course, knew her history and herstory. As Pauli Murray—the first African American to earn a law degree from Yale, and one of the founders of the National Organization for Women—points out in her essay, "The Liberation of Black Women," which first appeared in *Voices of*

*the New Feminism* (1970), “Throughout the history of black America, its women have been in the forefront of the struggle for human rights” (188). She goes on to name many well known examples, such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Rosa Parks, and points out that “to date not one [book] has concerned itself with the struggles of black women and their contributions to history” (188).<sup>31</sup>

Not only were major female historical figures ignored, but little attention was being paid and little documentation made of ordinary women’s local actions during the civil rights and Black Power movements: “Not only these and many other women whose names are well known have given this great human effort its peculiar vitality, but also women in many communities whose names will never be known [...] They are the mothers who stood in school yards of the South with their children, many times alone” (Murray 188). Like the women upon whom Sanchez calls in “Queens of the Universe” to go out into their communities and work for change, these unidentified women’s everyday acts of courage added up to a larger movement that changed the course of history. Here we might recall, too, the anonymous Black women artists whom Alice Walker makes visible in her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1972). Walker points out that looking for Black women’s artistic production in high art forms often means overlooking the ways they create art in daily life, in forms such as quilting and cooking: “We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high—and low” (406). She remarks of her mother’s gardening practice: “For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life” (408). The work performed by these Black women as activists and artists can be understood as everyday practices—“the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals” (de Certeau xiv)—that seize opportunities using the spaces, materials, and other resources at hand. These women are, too, the anonymous heroes

to whom de Certeau dedicates *The Practice of Everyday Life*: “To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets [...] this oracle whose voice is almost indistinguishable from the rumble of history” (v).

Sonia Sanchez’s contribution to the Black Arts Movement should be understood in the context of a long line of Black women artists who have fused artistic and everyday practices, locating possibilities for creativity, resistance, and change in daily life. By “looking low,” we can understand Sanchez’s work as a social activist as artful; doing so makes her poetic labor visible and valuable. If “[o]ne of the elements of the literary thrust of the sixties was the commitment of the Black woman writer to ground with the people, to move among the masses in the community” (qtd. in Phelps 75), recognizing this type of social-poetic work as gendered—as feminine, and therefore devalued—helps to explain why women writers such as Sanchez who “move among the masses” are less celebrated than men who proclaim manifestos, throw parades, launch “operations,” and position themselves as “warriors.”<sup>32</sup> Rather than making grand gestures, Sanchez has worked continually to address concerns affecting Black people’s, and especially Black women’s, everyday lives. As she puts it, she “brought issues of women and children, love and respect when men were always talking in general terms about changing the country” (Keita 285). The fact that Sanchez has not received a level of recognition that approximates her degree of impact as a poet and cultural worker is undoubtedly linked to the fact that she has committed herself to this type of poetic-activist work, and that her poetry encourages others to do the same. To undertake the everyday work of teaching people what it means to be human, as Sanchez has done in life and in poetry, meant changing the world through many significant yet unheralded everyday acts.

<sup>1</sup> Also in 1965, Dudley Randall founded Broadside Press in Detroit. Haki Madhubuti established Third World Press, another important publisher of African American literature in 1967; it is still running today as the largest independent Black-owned press in the United States. These founding gestures of the Black Arts Movement announced a separatist stance in the Black literary world that reflected Black Power's nationalist aims. The creation of Black-run theaters and presses announced a new self-determining, self-reliant literary establishment aimed at African American audiences. For more on the founding gestures of the Black Arts Movement, including histories of the Black Power movement, see Collins and Crawford's introduction, "Power to the People! The Art of Black Power" (1-19) and Clarke's first chapter, "'Missed Love': Black Power and Black Poetry" (7-21).

<sup>2</sup> Sanchez has continued to teach and write in the traditional poetic forms she learned from Bogan.

<sup>3</sup> This fundamental humanizing gesture, while so seemingly basic, is unfortunately still relevant in 2015, at a moment when people in the U.S. are marching, protesting, and organizing around the Black Lives Matter movement.

<sup>4</sup> My own copy of *Home Coming* lists a price of \$1.00 on the cover, and the copyright page states that the book was in its fifth printing in 1971, having been published for the first time only two years earlier.

<sup>5</sup> Madhubuti borrows the term "cultural worker" from Toni Cade Bambara.

<sup>6</sup> Chapters on Sanchez have appeared in several critical studies over the last ten years. See *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (2005) by Elisabeth A. Frost, *Post-Jazz Poetics: A Social History* (2010) by Jennifer D. Ryan, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011) by Evie Shockley, and *Gender and the Poetics of Excess: Moments of Brocade* by Karen Jackson Ford (2011). See also a chapter on Sanchez in *Innovative Women Poets: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry and Interviews* (2007), edited by Frost and Cynthia Hogue. An earlier study by Joyce Ann Joyce, *Ijala: Sonia Sanchez and the African Poetic Tradition*, appeared in 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Sanchez has also appeared on *Def Poetry Jam* multiple times and has influenced contemporary hip-hop artists such as Chuck D. In 2005, Art Sanctuary of Philadelphia launched "A Full Year of Sonia," a yearlong series of poetry readings, workshops, and musical performances, in the city where Sanchez has lived since 1977 (Joyce xxv). She was also Philadelphia's first poet laureate, and served in the post from 2012-14.

<sup>8</sup> *The Black Woman*, which contains mostly essays, opens with five poems by Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and Kay Lindsey. The final lines of Lindsey's "Poem" illustrate the resistance many Black women felt toward a movement that told them to play subservient roles: "But now that the revolution needs numbers / Motherhood got a new position / Five steps behind manhood" (17).

<sup>9</sup> Few efforts have been made to read Sanchez's work alongside the thinking of Black feminists writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, although Ford and Frost both include readings of Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978), which retrospectively assesses gender politics in the Black Power movement.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, "homecoming" and "personal letter no. 2" in *Home Coming*, "a poem for my father" and "personal letter no. 3" in *BaddDDD*, and almost all of the poems in *Love Poems*.

<sup>11</sup> Many other parallels can be drawn between di Prima's and Sanchez's early work. Both used poetry to name the semi-observed dominant cultural forces that necessitated an everyday struggle against social persecution. While the everydayness of di Prima's early



<sup>17</sup> The term “functionary” echoes Karenga’s notion that art should be “functional, collective and committing or committed,” which is itself a paraphrase of Leopold Senghor (Henderson, “Form” 168).

<sup>18</sup> In another public role as professor, Sanchez’s lessons are similar, as she asks her students to make connections between literature and daily life: “I teach my students not to be elitist but to apply what we learn to this real world out here” (Reich 91). Avoiding jargon and labels, Sanchez uses the classroom, too, to teach social tools: “I teach a lot of stuff, I never give it names. If someone asks me, I might say oh yeah, I guess you could call it that, but I don’t. I call it the best method for people to live and survive” (Tyehimba 112).

<sup>19</sup> Collins and Crawford link this notion of deprogramming to Baraka’s idea of “black magic” and his role as hypnotist in *In Our Terribleness: Some Elements and Meaning in Black Style* (1970), published the same year as Sanchez’s *We a BaddDDD People*.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Charles Olson in “Projective Verse” (“A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader”), or Lyn Hejinian’s concept of the “open text,” discussed in Chapter 3: “The ‘open text,’ by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader [...]” (“The Rejection of Closure,” 43).

<sup>21</sup> De Certeau is the exception, as his discussion of strategies such as “la perruque” in *The Practice of Everyday Life: Vol. 1* (and his cowriter Luce Giard’s study of “doing-cooking” in the second volume) define particular ways everyday strategies can subvert larger systems of power.

<sup>22</sup> The idea of writing for the unborn is reminiscent of Harryette Mullen’s later essay, “Imagining the Unimagined Reader: Writing to the Unborn and Including the Excluded.”

<sup>23</sup> The use of the slur “faggotty” should be understood within the context of the emasculation of Black men discussed later in the chapter, and is an example of a homophobic attitude prevalent during the Black Arts Movement that Sanchez would later renounce. For a discussion of homophobia in African American culture in relation to Sanchez’s later book, *Does Your House Have Lions?* (1997), see Shockley 55-81.

<sup>24</sup> “Miss Anne” is a term for a condescending white woman (the equivalent for men is “Mr. Charlie”), and was a label that circulated during the Harlem Renaissance to refer to white women who were active as editors, patrons, philanthropists, and so on (see Kaplan).

<sup>25</sup> Sanchez republished “Queens of the Universe” in *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* (2014), where it is included in a section titled “Gender,” full of prose essays that provide additional context for Sanchez’s negotiation of feminist and nationalist philosophies. *SOS* also includes a large selection of poetry, but Sanchez chose to include “Queens” alongside prose essays on gender, which suggests that she saw the poem, at least in part, as a pamphlet/manifesto—one addressed to women in particular. Although Sanchez’s *SOS* co-editors John H. Bracey, Jr., and James Smethurst may have helped make selections for the “Gender” section, it seems likely that Sanchez, as the only woman editor, played a key role in choosing the pieces to include.

<sup>26</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” (1991).

<sup>27</sup> For example, bell hooks’s term “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” frequently used in both academic and activist circles in the early 21st century, reflects the need to understand these oppressive systems as interconnected.

<sup>28</sup> In “Black Woman,” Baraka applies the separatist leanings of Black nationalism to his position on the feminist movement: “Black women understand that there is no future for the Black nation addicted to the integrated political consciousness” (11). He names the largely white, middle-class women’s liberation movement as a threat to the emerging Black nation: “The Leftists have reintroduced the white woman for the precise purpose of stunting the nation” (11).

<sup>29</sup> Collins offers a thorough catalog of the connections between the Black Arts and Feminist Art movements, identifying several significant shared concerns, such as the identification of unique histories, a collective ethos, the belief that black nationalism or feminism lay “latent” in those who had not yet been awakened to it, consciousness-raising and personal awareness, alternative or oppositional cultures, a reconceptualization of the role of the artist, and a reintegration of ethics and aesthetics. In the late 1960s, feminists were borrowing from Black Power rhetoric as they defined their own goals. For example, the introductory essay to one of the first anthologies of the women’s liberation movement, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), ends with the statement, “Like all oppressed people, we need, first of all, *self-determination*” (Morgan 30), borrowing from the rhetoric of Malcolm X and Black Power. Although male BAM artists and scholars understood the common plight they shared with the colonized and recently decolonized people of third world nations, they did not usually recognize (at least in writing) the liberatory ambitions that they shared with feminists.

<sup>30</sup> As of this writing, Sanchez’s website states that she has given readings at over 500 colleges and universities and on five continents, and describes her as a “National and International lecturer on Black Culture and Literature, Women’s Liberation, Peace and Racial Justice.”

<sup>31</sup> Sanchez also discovered this fact when she developed a class called “The Black Woman” in 1969 at the University of Pittsburgh. See Kelly for a fascinating account of the development of the course.

<sup>32</sup> I am, of course, especially referring to Jones/Baraka here, whose major contributions to the Black Arts Movement should be, and have been, recognized. His approach to BAM aesthetics and activism provides a useful counterpoint to Sanchez’s methods, as I have shown throughout this chapter. Jones’s focus on “Weighty Issues” when editing *The Floating Bear* scene also provided a useful counterpoint for di Prima’s focus on the “day-to-day.” I do not mean to have Jones/Baraka stand in for all men in these literary movements, but his connection to both di Prima and Sanchez makes him the likeliest candidate for illustrating a more masculine approach.

### Encyclopedic Urges and Gendered Constraints:

#### Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* and Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day*

On February 1, 1983, Lyn Hejinian wrote to Bernadette Mayer to tell her how much she had enjoyed Mayer's new book:

Dear Bernadette,

I thought I would write to tell you how much I like *Midwinter Day*. I made it briefly unavailable by buying the last copy at Sand Dollar and read it over the course of three days without ever losing my sense of its being all one day, with all the inconsistency and dislocation that any one day actually absorbs. I love the writing itself -- it seems very crisp, particular, fresh, and specific; not at all summery so therefore wintry, I guess, though that's probably stretching things. But also I love the project. Steve Benson and Ron Silliman are the two people out here who write "projects" -- and I tend to think in those terms (as in *My Life*) though much of my work is fall-out from failed or abandoned projects. ("Letter")

Two weeks later, Mayer wrote back:

Dear Lyn,

Thanks for your generous words about *Midwinter Day*. It's true I have always loved projects of all sorts, including say sorting leaves or whatever projects turn out to be, and in poetry I most especially love having time be the structure which always seems to me to save structure or form from itself because then nothing really has to begin or end. Also time's structure can be breathed into a little better than any of the more tacked-on forms. Of course I love new forms as well -- let me know what are they? I've been dreaming of one that has to do with colors and words, but I can't explain it cause I haven't dreamed it completely up yet. ("Letter")

These excerpts provide a snapshot of many of the concerns that this chapter will take up as it examines Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* (1980, 1987) and Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day* (1982), two ambitious autobiographical books of poetry written in 1978. Hejinian and Mayer draw their inventive poetic forms from the temporal structures of their own lives, letting "time be the structure": Hejinian writes one poem for every year of her life, and Mayer writes about, and in the midst of, a single day. By using these "life forms," or poetic structures derived from their authors' lives, the books bring the particularity of women's

everyday lives into view, revealing the textures of consciousness and the rhythms of routine in a way that had rarely been depicted in poetry before, and especially not on such a grand scale. Alice Notley's blurb on the back cover of *Midwinter Day* calls the book "an epic poem about a daily routine," and *My Life*, too, is a sweeping, intricate work about the habitual everyday. By framing aspects of women's experiences within formally complex structures, the books valorize the rhythms and activities of the feminine everyday.

According to its back cover, *Midwinter Day* "was written on December 22, 1978, at 100 Main Street, in Lenox, Massachusetts." Born in Brooklyn in 1945, Mayer had spent all of her life in and around New York City until moving to this quintessentially small-town-American address with her partner, the poet Lewis Warsh, and their two daughters, Sophia and Marie, who were one and three years old at the time of the book's composition.<sup>1</sup>

*Midwinter Day* is a book about an ordinary day in the life of poet and mother Bernadette Mayer, and its form and process are shaped by the gendered constraints of that life. The book's conceit is that Mayer is writing her day as it happens, in the present moment, including dreams, thoughts, stories, information about town life, and the details of a normal routine. Like literary experiments earlier in the century, such as surrealist automatic writing and modernist stream-of-consciousness, Mayer's writing attempts to poetically register the movement of her mind, or "translate the detail of thought from a day to language" (*Midwinter* 89). The book is structured in six parts, based on the "formidable ordinary order" of a day organized around family meals, children's naps, errands, and writing (*Midwinter* 32). In its interest in the vastness of the seemingly small unit of the day, *Midwinter Day* belongs in the company of much better known books that take place on a single day, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*.<sup>2</sup> Not coincidentally, the first word of *Midwinter Day*, "Stately," is also the first word of *Ulysses*. Like Clarissa Dalloway's, Bernadette Mayer's day is

full of errands and apparent trivialities, but contains the depth of an entire life. Mayer's *Dictionary of Literary Biography* entry notes that the book is considered by some to be "one of the unacknowledged masterpieces of late-twentieth-century writing in English," and quotes poet Andrei Codrescu: "Mayer's *Midwinter Day* goes directly into the exalted company of the ocean-makers, without any hesitation. Partly verse, partly prose paragraphs, this sweep through the consciousness of a mother, a woman, a writer, a dreamer, a citizen, goes as far and as deep as anything attempted on this scale" (Baker).

Just as Mayer's form points to a single day in December 1978, the form of *My Life* also indicates the time when Hejinian composed the book. The first version of *My Life* contains 37 poetic prose blocks of 37 sentences each, a number that corresponds to Hejinian's age in 1978. When Hejinian revised and expanded *My Life* in 1986, she added eight new poems of 45 sentences each, and interposed eight new sentences into each of the original 37 poems, bringing the total number of poems and sentences to 45.<sup>3</sup> This revised version is the one usually read and taught, and it is read and taught often: Craig Dworkin notes that *My Life* "may well be the most popular work of contemporary experimental poetry" (58) and Lisa Samuels structures an article around "eight justifications for canonizing" *My Life* as she illuminates why the book is "taught, apparently as an exemplar of contemporary experimental poetry, in so many American colleges and high schools" (103). While *Midwinter Day* remains an "unacknowledged masterpiece," beloved by poets but generally overlooked by scholars, critical responses to *My Life* have appeared regularly since the publication of the revised edition in 1987. *My Life* may be more popular and appear more accessible because Hejinian, unlike Mayer, has regularly given talks and published essays commenting on her own poetics, many of which are now collected in *The Language of Inquiry* (2000). The ordered, uniform structure of *My Life* may help to further explain why the book

is so appealing. *My Life* presents the visual illusion of being able to contain its own chaos, a formal objective that, as we will see, Hejinian discusses in her best-known essay, “The Rejection of Closure.”

The first edition of *Midwinter Day* was published in 1982; the first version of Hejinian’s *My Life* was published in 1980, and the revised and expanded edition appeared in 1987. Both books, however, were originally written in 1978, a year when debates surrounding women’s traditional gender roles in the United States were coming to a head around the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).<sup>4</sup> The ERA had passed the U.S. House and Senate in 1972, but, in 1978, the board of the National Organization for Women (NOW) declared a “State of Emergency on the ERA, committing almost all the organization’s resources to the state ratification campaigns” (“Feminist Chronicles”). NOW was reacting to the efforts of conservatives to block the ERA’s ratification by state legislatures, led by Phyllis Schlafly, who argued that the amendment “threatened the right of wives and mothers to financial support” and endangered labor laws designed to protect women (Critchlow and Stachecki). The debates surrounding the ERA were cast as “a gender war between homemakers and career women,” with the former group striving to hold onto traditional privileges that meant less to working women (Williams 147).

The debates surrounding the value and economics of traditional women’s work in 1978 help to frame the concerns of *My Life* and *Midwinter Day*, which locate social and poetic value in caretaking and housework while at the same time making this recurrent work visible as unpaid labor. *Midwinter Day*, in fact, contains a reference to debates related to the ERA:

I read in the papers that women live longer  
Because they don’t do all of this  
And as they begin to become like men  
In all these ways they’ll die equally soon (111)

The newspaper report reflects the position of Schlafly and her conservative allies, who argued that “equal rights” would only burden women with more work and less financial security. Mayer includes this report near a passage in *Midwinter Day*, discussed later in this chapter, where she assesses women’s ability, throughout history, to choose the roles of both mother and poet. As we will see, Mayer’s compositional process for *Midwinter Day* reveals both the costs and benefits for a woman poet who attempts to “do all of this” poetic and gendered labor.

By the late 1980s, Hejinian and Mayer were recognized within their respective poetry communities as important innovators in the poetics of the everyday. In 1988, there were two symposia on everyday life, one on each coast, with almost identical titles. From April 7-10 at The Poetry Project, the symposium “The Poetry of Everyday Life” featured Mayer, Notley, Ron Padgett, Lorenzo Thomas, and others reading poetry and giving brief talks. Mayer described the daily routines that she and her sister shared when growing up, and then read a poem titled “Everyday life lecture”:

So up to the house tops the coursers they flew,  
to the threshold the sublime more rapid than eagles  
there’s the recognition of astonishing things, I love  
you and daily life / what life isn’t daily? It’s good  
that there’s nothing to say, I feel so sorry for the  
city, what poetry isn’t everyday:  
    As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly  
    When they meet with an obstacle mount to the sky

Mayer juxtaposes her insistence that all life is daily and all poetry everyday with her “sublime” visions of flight, suggesting, as she will via *Midwinter Day*, that the everyday can be “astonishing” and perhaps even transcendent. In the fall of 1988, at a symposium called “The Poetics of Everyday Life” in Berkeley at Small Press Distribution, writers including Hejinian, Michael Davidson, Bill Luoma, Benjamin Friedlander, and Dodie Bellamy presented poetics lectures on everyday life. Hejinian presented a talk entitled “The Person

and Description”: In her introductory note to the talk in her essay collection, *The Language of Inquiry*, she references her approach to the everyday in *My Life*: “It is at the level of the everyday that one can most easily speak of ‘my life.’ It is at this level that one speaks most uneasily of it, as well” (199).<sup>5</sup>

This simultaneous ease and unease is a useful way of describing women’s ambivalent relationship to the everyday in both *My Life* and *Midwinter Day*. Hejinian and Mayer claim the so-called trivial details of their everyday lives as valuable poetic subject matter even as they critique gendered social constraints, especially the asymmetrical division of domestic labor. Of all the works I consider in this dissertation, *My Life* and *Midwinter Day* represent the most large-scale, sustained efforts to poetically render the gendered rhythms and textures of everyday life. By presenting the seemingly mundane aspects of women’s lives through the frame of conceptually ambitious book-length projects, Hejinian and Mayer imbue women’s everyday lives with social and literary value in the face of those who might balk that such subject matter is “against a poem or art,” as Mayer puts it (*Midwinter* 102). By making art out of women’s ordinary thoughts, feelings, sensory experiences, and daily work, Hejinian and Mayer valorize gendered experiences that had not been represented in poetry precisely because women had been occupied by, and often burdened with, the daily tasks that keep life in motion.

*My Life*’s and *Midwinter Day*’s poetics of the feminist everyday particularly emerge in the way their temporal structures reveal and enact gendered daily routines. On the one hand, depicting these routines in formally inventive ways demonstrates that this part of life matters. On the other hand, as Simone de Beauvoir argues, women are “doomed to repetition” (599), and it is necessary to critique the systems that tie them to monotonous cycles. Hejinian’s multifaceted use of repetition registers both the pleasures and the tedium

of her own and her mother's routines, and makes visible the extent to which gender itself is constituted and enforced through habitual behavior. Because it narrows in on a single day in the life of a mother of two young children, *Midwinter Day* pulls the minutiae of gendered labor into focus. Although Mayer depicts much of the work of her daily routine, *Midwinter Day* as textual object largely obscures the poetic labor that went into it, labor that is importantly related to Mayer's domestic work. Through a reading of materials found in the Archive for New Poetry at UC San Diego, I offer a theory of Mayer's compositional process—her inventive methods for working in and around the frame of the day—that proposes that the single day that appears in *Midwinter Day* is a composite of many days. Mayer's domestic life supplies the subject matter and routine that makes the writing of the book possible, and also generates obstacles to the compositional process, requiring her to employ various strategies and technologies in order to write a book while caring for two young children.

Although Mayer is typically thought of as a New York School poet and Hejinian as a Language writer, it is more productive for my purposes to consider them members of a generation of women, across schools and art forms, invested in bringing the everyday conditions of women's lives into art. Mayer, in fact, acted as an important link between the New York School and Language poetry communities.<sup>6</sup> Besides corresponding with Hejinian, she taught classes at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in New York—usually thought of as an important hub of second-generation New York School poets such as Notley, Warsh, Ted Berrigan, Joe Brainard, Ron Padgett, and Anne Waldman—that included several poets who would go on to be associated with Language writing, including Charles Bernstein. In "Bernadette Mayer and 'Language' in the Poetry Project," a title that makes Mayer's dual affiliations clear, Daniel Kane argues that, in the early 1970s, "Mayer, perhaps more than any

other poet associated with the Lower East Side, brought to the Poetry Project an outside discourse of critical thinking that earlier writers had cockily rejected as being ‘too serious’” (188).<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Mayer’s early work is most productively read in the context of both New York School and Language writing, as well as within the framework of the conceptual art world in which she began her career. Mayer herself is uninterested in identifying with a certain school, and allies herself simply with aesthetic variety: “I’m for all kinds of writing” (Jarnot 7).<sup>8</sup> Mayer locates her own early influences in the New York downtown artistic world more broadly: “I used to go to a lot of those avant-garde concert performance events with John Cage and Yoko Ono. [...] I think they influenced me much more than any of the writing” (6-7).<sup>9</sup>

Hejinian, too, understood her writing and editorial work outside of limiting school designations. Even a cursory glance at the Archive for New Poetry finding aid for her correspondence from the 1970s and 80s suggests that her poetic affiliations were wide-ranging. Looking only at her women correspondents, we can see that Hejinian was in contact with so-called New York School poets such as Notley and Mayer, so-called Language writers such as Susan Howe and Carla Harryman, as well as poets less strongly affiliated with either movement, such as Hannah Weiner, Erica Hunt, and Kathleen Fraser. As the letter that opens this chapter demonstrates, Hejinian observed aesthetic connections between Mayer’s writing and the projects of west coast writers. In a letter dated April 1, 1996, Hejinian expresses the affinity she feels toward Mayer’s work even more directly: “I have often wished that you and I had had opportunities and time to correspond in letters, since it seems that we have interests (philosophical, scientific, and perhaps personal) that correspond in spirit.” Hejinian’s and Mayer’s interests corresponded, further, to a wider movement of women artists in the 1970s who turned their own lives into art in formally inventive ways. I

conclude this chapter by sketching some lines of affinity between *My Life* and *Midwinter Day* and 1970s feminist conceptual art projects that developed similar techniques of temporal constraint, procedure, and duration, using “life forms” to draw women’s everyday lives and work into focus.

## Including Everything or Leaving All Out: “The Rejection of Closure” and Formal Inclusivity

Lyn Hejinian first presented “The Rejection of Closure” as a lecture at 544 Natoma Street in San Francisco on April 17, 1983, a month after she and Mayer exchanged the letters that open this chapter. Since then, the talk has been frequently republished and anthologized in essay form, and has become one of the best-known statements of Language writing philosophy (*Language* 40).<sup>10</sup> “The Rejection of Closure” takes up the problem—both philosophical and practical, for the writer—of how to use poetic form to constrain the desire to “including everything” in order to make a coherent text. In her introductory note to “Rejection” in *The Language of Inquiry*, Hejinian notes how form prevents a text from becoming too arbitrary or muddled: “What saves this from becoming a vast undifferentiated mass of data and situation is one’s ability to make distinctions. The open text is one which both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating. It is form that provides an opening” (41). By making formal choices, the writer makes visible certain aspects of that “vast undifferentiated mass of data and situation” known as “the world” while also indicating the limit of what the text will include, thereby implying all that lies outside the frame. Paradoxically, the closure of form “opens” the text onto “the vastness of the world.”

The idea of the “open text,” one of the most frequently cited concepts from “Rejection,” is opposed to that of the “closed text,” one “in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it. [...] In the ‘open text,’ meanwhile, all the elements of the work are maximally excited” (42-3). An open text is

open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes

total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. The “open text” often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification. (43)

Hejinian’s introductory note to “Rejection” in *The Language of Inquiry* observes that the essay gives no examples of a “closed text,” and provides two retroactively. The first is detective fiction, which Hejinian cites as a “positive model.” On the other hand, “The coercive, epiphanic mode in some contemporary lyric poetry can serve as a negative model, with its smug pretension to universality and its tendency to cast the poet as guardian to Truth” (41). The epiphanic lyric narrative poem was, and often still is, the type rewarded by book prizes and university hiring committees and taught as the dominant mode in poetry workshops. Hejinian and other Language writers, in conversation with Marxist and poststructuralist theorists, began a critique of this poetic mode in the 1970s: They challenged the transparency of traditional narrative realism, emphasized the materiality of language, and strove to create works that invited the reader to participate in the construction of their multiple, open-ended meanings.<sup>11</sup> Hejinian’s description of the open text touches on many aspects of Language writing that enact this critique. Instead of the poem ushering the reader toward a final epiphanic burst of knowledge provided by the poet, the text attempts to keep meaning unfixed and “maximally excited.”<sup>12</sup> Through a certain amount of ambiguity, open texts encourage the reader to generate his or her own meaning, which moves authority from writer to reader, destabilizing authorial mastery.

When Hejinian describes the open text as one that “emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers,” she seems to be thinking through *Midwinter Day* and *My Life* (43). In *Midwinter Day*, the compositional process of writing a book in a single day suggests that such a book will be

both “open” to whatever happens to arise during that time span, and circumscribed by that limited temporal frame. Mayer “relinquishes total control” over her text by choosing a formal constraint that makes room for the small chance encounters or currents of thought a day might bring. In *My Life*, the uniform structure—45 poems of 45 sentences each—announces “the process of original composition,” writing one poem to represent each year of her life, even as the gaps between sentences invite the reader to contribute to the poem’s meaning. Two contiguous sentences in *My Life* rarely relate to one another according to standard narrative or causal logic; instead, as in the work of several of Hejinian’s Language writer peers, such as Ron Silliman and Carla Harryman, the sentences in *My Life* have a paratactic relationship.<sup>13</sup> By finding ways to link the seemingly disconnected sentences of *My Life*, the reader might “overleap the endstop, the period, and cover the distance to the next sentence” (46). Take, for example, the beginning of the seventh poem:

spent in a	<i>Like plump birds</i>	Summers were
They were	<i>along the shore</i>	fog that rains.
		mirages, no
		different from
		those that camel-
		back riders
		approach in the
		factual accounts
		of voyages in
		which I per-
		sistently
		imagined my-
		self, and those mirages on the highway
		were for me both impalpable souvenirs
		and unstable evi-dence of my own
		adventures, now slightly less vicarious
		than before. The person too has flared
		ears, like an infant’s reddened with
		batting. I had claimed the radio nights
		for my own. There were more
		storytellers than there were stories, so
		that everyone in the family had a version

of history and it was impossible to get close to the original, or to know “what really happened.” The pair of ancient, stunted apricot trees yielded ancient, stunted apricots. What was the meaning hung from that depend. The sweet aftertaste of artichokes. The lobes of autobiography. Even a minor misadventure, a bumped fender or a newsstand without newspapers, can “ruin the entire day,” but a child cries and laughs without rift. The sky droops straight down. I lapse, hypnotized by the flux and reflux of the waves.

(27-28)

Although few of these sentences have an obvious relationship to one another, the poem provides its readers with many opportunities for possible connections, or words or images on which we can “hang” certain meanings (“What was the meaning hung from that depend”). For example, it is possible to move from the fog and rain of the first sentence to the mirage in the second to the sky in the penultimate, following an associative pattern of atmospheric phenomena. Throughout *My Life*, past atmospheres blur with present scenes, a process enacted in the second sentence, where the speaker remembers reading about mirages in “factual accounts of voyages” such as, perhaps, a *National Geographic* article. Because she “persistently imagined [her]self” into these accounts, on a certain level she “saw” the mirages; the imagined mirage became part of her own experience, now a memory. The second half of the sentence suggests that when the speaker later saw real “mirages on the highway,” they became souvenirs of her previous “adventures,” which were adventures in reading. But because they were mirages, they could only be “impalpable” and “unstable”: this is, after all, the nature of mirages, and the figurative meaning of the word. The mirage on the highway that Hejinian perceives with her own eyes is “slightly less vicarious” than the

ones she read about, but all mirages are too elusive and ephemeral to count as real “souvenirs” or “evidence” in the way we usually think of souvenirs as solid and stable.

In *My Life*, Hejinian is always accounting for the slippages between the material and the textual, the remembered and the imagined and the presently experienced, and enacts these crossovers in a playful way, passing along the pleasures of connection or missed connection to her readers. As critics have noted, by opening the text to the reader, Hejinian’s “life” opens itself to readers’ lives, which can enter the text through the meaning-making or daydreaming prompted by the gaps of parataxis: “Readers are invited to recognize webs of relations, to feel lost in the life and to feel numerous moments of connection. [...] To read Hejinian’s work is not to read a copy of her life, but rather to shape her life and one’s own with and/or against her work” (Spahr 70).<sup>14</sup> The ways that Hejinian has limited or “closed” her text (by only including 45 sentences for each year of her life, and by declining to fill in the gaps between thought and memory, present and past) suggests the “vastness of the world”—not only the other thoughts and experiences of Hejinian’s that might seep into the spaces between sentences, but also the readers’ memories, thoughts, and experiences, including their current experience of reading *My Life*. (Throughout the book, the act of reading is foregrounded as a significant part of experience, as in the “factual accounts” in the poem above.)

For Hejinian, the paragraph, too, is a formal device that circumscribes the vastness of the world and text, and especially the “undifferentiated mass” of consciousness: “In both *My Life* and ‘Resistance,’ the structural unit (grossly, the paragraph) was meant to be mimetic of both a space and a time of thinking” (“Rejection” 46). *My Life*’s 45-sentence paragraphs limit and structure the circuitous pathways of thought and memory that could easily exceed those bounds. It is at this point in “Rejection” that Hejinian names *Midwinter Day* as another

work that uses formal constraint to open a text. She understands her own use of the paragraph to be analogous to Mayer's use of the day: "In a somewhat different respect, time predetermines the form of Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day*. The work begins when the clock is set running (at dawn on December 22, 1978) and ends when the time allotted to the work runs out (late night of the same day)" (46). Hejinian then goes on to quote Mayer's letter, where she writes that using temporal constraints creates a text where "nothing really has to begin or end." Hejinian goes on to interpret and elaborate on Mayer's comment, describing how works that employ formally constraining structures paradoxically suggest the enormity of the possibilities that lie outside their frames:

Whether the form is dictated by temporal constraints or by other exoskeletal formal elements—by a prior decision, for example, that the work will contain, say,  $x$  number of sentences, paragraphs, stanzas, stresses, or lines, etc.—the work gives the impression that it begins and ends arbitrarily and not because there is a necessary point of origin or terminus, a first or last moment. The implication (correct) is that the words and the ideas (thoughts, perceptions, etc.—the materials) continue beyond the work. One has simply stopped because one has run out of units or minutes, and not because a conclusion been reached nor "everything" said. (46-7)

The work dictated by temporal constraints (*Midwinter Day*) resembles the work dictated by "exoskeletal formal elements" or " $x$  number of sentences, paragraphs" (*My Life*) because both use formal structures to gesture toward the vast "everything" that continues beyond the work. The books' formal structures announce the bracketing off of a portion of experience—whatever can be written in one day or in 45 sentences—and imply all that they have not included. Because *Midwinter Day* starts when the day begins and concludes when the day ends, there seems to be a discrete limit to what the book can contain. At the same time, the formal limit calls attention to the fact that Mayer's thoughts, dreams, and actions begin before the first page and extend beyond the last. In this way, other days that precede and

follow December 22, 1978 are implied. Hejinian offers the term “inclusivity” to indicate the paradoxical way in which poetic form both constrains and opens a text:

The writer experiences a conflict between a desire to satisfy a demand for boundedness, for containment and coherence, and a simultaneous desire for free, unhampered access to the world prompting a correspondingly open response to it. Curiously, the word *inclusivity* is applicable to both, though the connotative emphasis is different for each. The impulse to boundedness demands circumscription and that in turn requires that a distinction be made between inside and outside, between the relevant and the (for the particular writing at hand) confusing and irrelevant—the meaningless. The desire for unhampered access and response to the world (an encyclopedic impulse), on the other hand, hates to leave anything out. (41-2)

To be “inclusive” usually means to be comprehensive—to contain everything, or as much as possible. But the word also carries a meaning, most familiar from mathematics, suggestive of limits or boundaries (for example, when stating a range, one might say, “from 16 to 32, inclusive”). Formal inclusivity strikes a balance between these two meanings—between “unhampered access” and the “encyclopedic impulse” on the one hand, and “boundedness” and “circumscription” on the other. Poetic form is the mediating force between the twin impulses to include everything and to make a text that is coherent and meaningful, allowing the writer to exclude the “confusing and irrelevant” even as the text proliferates with memories, images, events, and so on.

The idea of formal inclusivity can help illuminate the challenges Mayer and Hejinian were negotiating as they wrote books that tried to “include everything” about their lives, whether over the course of 45 years or a single day. Hejinian writes, in an unpublished talk on *My Life*, of her “entirely grandiose ambitions” when writing her autobiography: “the urge to be encyclopedic: to make a complete work. That is, to say everything. One could think perhaps that one’s own life includes everything one knows, and therefore if one could relate it in its entirety, one would have said everything—possibly even everything there is to say” (“MY LIFE”). Mayer was grappling with similar urges. The poet Clark Coolidge, a close

friend and collaborator of Mayer's who also lived in Lenox, MA and who appears in *Midwinter Day*, has said of their shared encyclopedic desires: "We wanted endless works, that would zoom on & on and include everything ultimately, we'd talk about the 'Everything work,' which would use every possible bit flashing through our minds" (qtd. in Baker).

Although Mayer has been less likely than Hejinian to theorize her own poetics, she did make *Midwinter Day* capacious enough to self-reflexively comment on its own methods. In a characteristically breathless, comma-spliced sentence in the fifth section of the book, Mayer offers something of a poetics statement describing her motivation and writing process:

[...] I had an idea to write a book that would translate the detail of thought from a day to language like a dream transformed to read as it does, everything, a book that would end before it started in time to prove the day like the dream has everything in it, to do this without remembering like a dream inciting writing continuously for as long as you can stand up till you fall down like in a story to show and possess everything we know because having it all at once is performing a magical service for survival by the use of the mind like memory. (89)

By including dreams, memories, thoughts, events, objects, speech, and more, *Midwinter Day* records both the surfaces of a daily routine and the thoughts that move below that routine, "to prove the day like the dream has everything in it" (*Midwinter* 89). In Part Two, Mayer contemplates the way so many aspects of everyday life can coexist poetically: "I did put the rest of the clothes away though I did and didn't want to in straight regular rows in an arrangement of peace among a series of thoughts of the chaotic rank and still position of ourselves and where we fit in the system of the news of the day [...]" (32). The sentence rushes along, allowing the reader to experience Mayer's effort to "have it all at once" as the rhythms of domestic routine (the task of putting away clothes) intermingle with the processes of cognition ("a series of thoughts of the chaotic rank"). Throughout *Midwinter Day*, Mayer's use of run-on sentences and comma splices allows actions, objects, thoughts,

dreams, and memories to rush into one another, letting small moments in her day accrue the “everything” of the larger “system of the news of the day.” Just as, for Hejinian, poetic form can productively constrain “free, unhampered access to the world,” Mayer, too, struggles to negotiate the tension between chaos and order, the desire “to prove day like the dream has everything in it” and the need to formally circumscribe that day even though she, too, “hates to leave anything out.” Notably, Mayer uses a gendered constraint—that is, a domestic task toward which she feels ambivalent (“I did and didn’t want to”)—as a metaphor for this formal order (“straight regular rows in an arrangement of peace”).

In the final section of *Midwinter Day*, Mayer again addresses the encyclopedic urges that she finds herself seized by:

How preoccupying

Is the wish to include all or to leave all out  
 Some say either wish is against a poem or art  
I’m asking

It is an insane wish?  
To be besieged, beset with,  
 To have to sit with, to be harassed, obsessed,  
 To be possessed or ruled by  
I am confused by

Fear, perfection and love, this poem,  
 Order, mourning, vigilance and beer  
 And cigarettes and directness  
 Or clarity, words, truth or writing  
 Or the sublime

Everyday (102)

Mayer wonders if the wish for inclusivity is “preoccupying” or perhaps “insane,” recalling Hejinian’s description of her “entirely grandiose ambitions.” The list of verbs that follows suggests that trying to be inclusive leaves the poet in a tormented state: she is “besieged,” “beset,” “harassed,” “obsessed,” “possessed,” and “confused.” But the playfulness of these lines—their rhyming and humor—undercuts our likelihood to believe that Mayer is truly tormented. Instead, she seems to be enjoying juxtaposing high poetic concepts such as

“Fear, perfection and love” with ordinary, even profane, objects like “beer / And cigarettes.” (The fall from “vigilance” to “beer” is funny not only for the swoop from high to low, but also because beer usually has the tendency to make one a bit less vigilant.) She knows that some might say the desire to “include all” (beer and cigarettes) is unpoetic (“against a poem or art”): Poetry is supposed to be a place for the elevated moment, the chiseled image, and the flash of enlightenment, not for the “Everyday.” At the end of the passage, we first read “the sublime” as a noun phrase, a familiar concept from art and literature, and then move down to the next line to realize that “sublime” modifies “Everyday.” In this way, the “Everyday,” sublime and capitalized, is doubly elevated. Mayer wants to incorporate the everyday, normally understood as the opposite of the sublime, into poetry, while keeping all that is traditionally poetic, too—from themes of “love” and “mourning” to literary devices such as rhyme and careful lineation, all on display here. Her discussion of her wish to “include all” enacts some of its own multifarious desires.

Mayer’s reference to “the wish to include all or to leave all out” is an allusion to John Ashbery’s *Three Poems* (1972), a collection of three long prose poems that influenced the second-generation New York School poets. Mayer cites *Three Poems* in an interview with Adam Fitzgerald where she discusses her possibly “insane wish” to include everything:

AF: Your desire to include everything—how does that feel different from the other types of writing you’ve read or done yourself?

BM: I don’t know. John Ashbery says that great thing in *Three Poems*, “I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.” It sort of equals the same thing.

In “The New Spirit,” the same poem from which Mayer quotes, Ashbery writes: “But meanwhile I am to include everything: the furniture of this room, everyday expressions, as well as my rarest thoughts and dreams, so that you may never become aware of the scattered nature of it” (14). The imperative to “include everything,” even the most mundane details of

life, has been an important aspect of New York School poetics, as in O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems, which recount the daily, seemingly unremarkable activities of urban life, as in "The Day Lady Died": "I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun / and have a hamburger and a malted and buy / an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING" (*Collected* 325).<sup>15</sup> Although New York School poets had been putting this idea into practice for more than a decade, the phrase "include everything" likely originally derived from *Three Poems*.<sup>16</sup>

The idea of including everything or leaving all out, and the paradox that these might be the same thing, is—remarkably, but not entirely coincidentally—another way of approaching the idea of formal inclusivity that Hejinian explores in "The Rejection of Closure."<sup>17</sup> When the poet tries to "put it all down," she will paradoxically "leave all out": the limits of the text suggest the infinitude of what lies beyond the frame. The best way to suggest this vastness is to try, and fail, to "include all": by including a great deal, and restricting the poem "by temporal constraints or by other exoskeletal formal elements," the poet can "include everything" by implication. Ashbery, Mayer, and Hejinian all confront the problem of how to poetically render the chaos of "everything." Ashbery advises that the goal is to include everything in such a way that disguises its disarray. Hejinian goes a step further, describing the importance of poetic form, which can productively constrain "the scattered nature" of the poem that wants, urgently and impossibly, to include everything. Hejinian knows the desire to include everything is potentially unruly—an "insane wish" or "entirely grandiose ambition." If a text truly included everything, it would alienate the readers to whom it hopes to open itself: "The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would in fact be a closed text. It would be insufferable" ("Rejection" 56). Formal constraint fends off this chaos and confusion, making a text not only tolerable but inviting. For example, *My Life's* regularity—its paragraphs, with their clean edges and uniform

number of sentences, give off a sheen of measured order that exists in tension with the sentences they contain, which enact the much messier movement of a mind in the act of translating her life into language. The book's layout—short “chapters,” margins justified on both sides, and italicized phrases in the upper left corner of each section, which recall the convention of stylizing or enlarging the first letter or word in a chapter—suggests some of the seductions of the novel, radiating a familiar order that belies the profusion of the text.<sup>18</sup>

*Midwinter Day* achieves its balance between inclusiveness and boundedness in part by using a stricter temporal constraint than several of Mayer's earlier projects. Many of Mayer's early manuscripts have remained out of print, or have only begun to be published, likely because they are long, unwieldy, “unpublishable” texts. Maggie Nelson has used the term “logorrhea” to describe Mayer's encyclopedic urge, and accurately points out that “the largesse of Mayer's work so fiercely resists the ideal of the well-wrought urn that it can be difficult to publish, teach, anthologize, or even excerpt from it” (119, 128).<sup>19</sup> For example, the recently published unabridged version of *Studying Hunger*, for which Mayer recorded states of consciousness for one month, comes in at 460 pages.<sup>20</sup> She describes her process on the first page of the book:

I wanted to try to record, like a diary, in writing, states of consciousness, my states of consciousness, as fully as I could every day, for one month. A month always seems like a likely time-span, if there is one, for an experiment. A month gives you enough time to feel free to skip a day, but not so much time that you wind up fucking off completely. (1)

In her interview with Fitzgerald, Mayer remarks that she always wanted the book to be published in its entirety, but admits of *Studying Hunger* and other projects, “They're just impossible to read,” recalling Hejinian's notion of the “insufferable” text. Fitzgerald then asks her, “Why do you think you were so interested in writing things that were impossible to read?” Mayer's reply indicates the extent to which her own interests, and no thought of the

reader's "suffering," informed these projects: "Because of the desire to record everything in detail. Even if it was impossible to read, it was fun to record all those things."

While a month may be a "likely time-span" in which to undertake a writing project, a single day turned out to be the temporal constraint that could best contain Mayer's urges. By the logic of formal inclusivity, *Midwinter Day's* more constrained structure produces a more open text. Mayer further delineates *Midwinter's* limits by admitting that she cannot, or will not, include everything—that is, by weaving into the book information about what she is leaving out. Mayer occasionally remarks that she has inevitably left out significant details: "You'd find in your emotion to excite plain seeing / You'd probably left out the most important part" (110). Here emotion acts as a limiting force on the desire to include everything. Elsewhere, Mayer announces plainly that she is excluding something from the book because she does not want to share difficult memories. This begins to happen very early in the book, when she admits, while recounting her dreams, "this state of things in dreams / could kill friendship if I told all" (5). Later, she omits the content of a memory while still referencing its subject matter: "I clean the cutting board with a cloth and remember something so awful I can't relate it, now two things, not to ever tell them but just to say they have to do with jealousy" (69). By marking these absences, Mayer indicates other possible limits for the text, ones that do not have to do with time, form, nor exhaustion, but instead arise out of emotional and ethical concerns. Toward the end of *Midwinter*, Mayer announces, "There are some things we cannot say!" again paradoxically inviting the repressed material, and all that is outside the text, into the reading experience (112).<sup>21</sup> The admission of omission only opens the text further, suggesting all that has been left out in spite of the fact that "everything" has been included.

### **Routine, Repetition, and the Feminist Revaluation of Everyday Life in *My Life***

Although neither Hejinian nor Mayer claims feminist motivations for their “encyclopedic urges,” it seems likely that, besides artistic ambition, the overwhelming need to “include everything” in a poetic work was a response to a literary tradition that had historically included so few women’s experiences. Notley recalls the urgency she felt as part of a generation of women who were redressing this immense imbalance in the 1970s: “I was obsessed with the fact that there was no sound in American poetry that truly presaged mine; that there was no poetry that corresponded to my experience; that there was no poetry with motherhood as its subject ... I can’t overstate the case” (Keelan 15). Notley, Mayer, Hejinian, and other women poets who began to publish in the 1970s, enabled by the conjunction of second-wave feminism and post-1945 experimental writing practices, brought the previously taboo, unpoetic, or unsaid into poetry through the use of new formal approaches. Like the feminist poetic tradition that arose out of confessionalism and the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s and 70s, innovative feminist poetry brought women’s experiences into a wider poetic tradition that had largely excluded them.

Poets who were also invested in questions of form, however, challenged the epiphanic lyric narrative style some feminist poets used for sharing insights and delivering clear messages at rallies, readings, and other public forums, a style closely related to the mainstream lyric that Language writers rejected. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues, innovative feminist poets challenged this transparent style because “a naturalized set of language strategies, or nice, normal presentation of material seemed to partake of the same assumptions about gender that they would claim to undermine” (*Pink Guitar* viii). Language poet Rae Armantrout makes a similar point in an essay on feminist experimental writing:

I wonder, however, whether the nature of women’s oppression *can* be best expressed in the poem which, as Silliman put it, ‘looks conventional.’ The

conventional or mainstream poem today is a univocal, more or less plain-spoken, short narrative often culminating in a sort of epiphany. Such a form must convey an impression of closure and wholeness no matter what it says. It is, however, I believe, the core of woman's condition that she is internally divided, divided against herself. (8)

Innovative feminist poets used various formal strategies to represent gendered experiences, from "collage, heteroglossia, intergenres, and self-reflexivity" (*Pink Guitar* viii) to "the resistance and playfulness of dictions" and the structural representation of "multiplicity and fragmentation" (Fraser 32, 33). Hejinian and Mayer, like the other poets in this study, developed forms that emerged out of, and were particularly suitable to capturing, women's ambivalence toward the quotidian conditions of their lives—perhaps what Armantrout means when she describes a woman as "divided against herself."

In an interview, Hejinian claims attention to the everyday as one such feminist project: "feminism has taken on the recovery of interest in and attention to everyday life, validating the experiences of everyday life and discovering its structural milieu" (Georgeson 290). In *My Life*, Hejinian develops a poetic form that makes the "structural milieu" of her everyday life visible through her use of repetition to depict the routine nature of lived experience. *My Life* can best be understood as a feminist text in the way it "validat[es] the experiences of everyday life," although, as we will see, the book does contain moments of critique, especially in the sections covering the years when Hejinian was the mother of young children. *My Life* is structured by repetition on many levels: Because the poems have a uniform shape and relatively uniform length, the same poem seems to repeat page after page: All 45 poems are 45 sentences long and are made up of a block paragraph three or four pages long. The poem titles, or what Hejinian calls "pre-texts" (*Language* 185), also reappear sporadically throughout the book in the body of the poems. These phrases do not repeat according to any fixed number or logic: they seem to arise serendipitously. "Yet we insist

that life is full of happy chance,” one such phrase reads, in a characteristically self-reflexive moment that links the appearance of the phrase in the text to an auspicious event in life (103). Hejinian intended the repeated phrases to be particularly reflective of the way language repeats itself in ordinary consciousness:

But my use of repetition and permutation were motivated initially by observation of my own thought processes and my experiences of them. A person does rethink constantly, while at the same time the context for doing so is always changing. Certain “facts” (words or phrases) in a fixed vocabulary may be reiterated, but their practical effects and metaphysical implications differ from day to day, situation to situation. There is, as Gertrude Stein pointed out, repetition but not sameness.<sup>22</sup> (*Language* 166-67)

The repeating pre-texts structure the book, but at the same time open up further meanings as they recur in new contexts. In *My Life*, repetition is a language event: the movement of thought and memory is a large part of what “happens” in a book where very little happens in the ordinary sense of what takes place in life. Hejinian continually emphasizes seemingly trivial memories and repeated scenes instead of focusing on “important” milestones: “The years pass, years in which, I take it, events were not lacking,” she writes at one point, apparently referring to her choice to foreground small moments over events such as deaths, births, weddings, or trips (96). The reader can locate these “big” events—such as Hejinian’s move east for college, the births of her children, and the end of her first marriage—but the book does not privilege them.<sup>23</sup> Critics have pointed out how *My Life*’s emphasis on the mundane foils the traditional expectations for autobiography: The story of *My Life* “is not the rags to riches or the obscure to famous or the overcoming abuse, disease, or other trauma plot that usually justifies autobiographical attention” (Spahr 68). Instead of presenting a narrative of progress marked by turning points, Hejinian often foregrounds the recurrent details of daily life: “My father would say I’ve a ‘big day’ tomorrow” (68); “The T-shirts hanging from the line flapped like plump birds along the

shore” (85). In *My Life*, the repetitions of everyday life act as a force “regulating and limiting the range and degree of difference between things of one day and things of the next” (83). If life is “so much the same from one day to the next,” then it is difficult to remember any particular day at all, and easier to remember recurring habits or routines (28).

In this way, Hejinian develops a prose surface that reflects and then defamiliarizes the habitual nature of everyday life. As Hilary Clark has observed, “the point of repetition in *My Life* is both to establish familiarity through recurrence and to whisk it away, to make comfortable and to make strange” (327).<sup>24</sup> This sense of the everyday as both recognizable and foreign aligns with the way Henri Lefebvre, Maurice Blanchot, and other theorists have conceptualized everyday life. Right in front of us, but too familiar to be fully perceived, “The everyday is therefore the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden” (Lefebvre, “The Everyday” 9); “The everyday escapes. [...] It is the unperceived, first in the sense that one has always looked past it [...] the everyday is what we never see for a first time, but only see again” (Blanchot 15).<sup>25</sup> The everyday belongs to the most routine aspects of our lives, which can be imperceptible because they are always present, just under the surface of awareness.

If “the everyday is what we never see for a first time, but only see again,” then *My Life*’s pre-texts enact this reappearance in Hejinian’s consciousness and in the reader’s experience. Like the banal backdrops of everyday life, we do not know to pay attention to them until they have appeared for a second or third time. Often the phrases evoke the recurring sensory experiences of Hejinian’s childhood environment, as in “like plump birds along the shore.” Things that happen over and over are rarely the notable aspects of our lives. The more narrative memories recounted in *My Life*, although they are usually only a single sentence long, still imply this sense of recurrence. Hejinian generally uses the simple

past tense, avoiding the imperfect tense and words and phrases such as “would,” “often,” or “used to.” Her phrasing, however, still manages to suggest habitual actions, as in this one-sentence anecdote: “When I was a child, the mailman, Tommy, let us walk his route with him until we reached the busy streets, and then he sent us home, dragging the dog” (71-2). According to the grammatical logic of the sentence, it is possible that the children only followed the mailman once. But because of the opening phrase “When I was a child,” we assume that this activity took place repeatedly. Perhaps, too, there is something in the activity of the mailman delivering the mail, known to be a daily occurrence, that brings out the idea of repetition.

The pleasure, play, and order produced by repetition in *My Life* points to Hejinian’s investment in revaluating women’s everyday experiences and “discovering [their] structural milieu.” Because many of the aspects of everyday life that take place in the background, hardly noticed and hardly noted, are the actions of women who cook, clean, nurture and otherwise keep life running, the foregrounding of repetition and routine can be understood as an implicitly feminist gesture that valorizes overlooked acts of work and care. In the twenty-fifth poem, “*The greatest thrill was to be the one to tell*,” Hejinian writes: “She asked what were some of the other names we had thought of giving her when she was born, and what we would have named her if she had been a boy. We wanted a topic of our own for the occasions when the men talked sports” (90-91). The second sentence alludes to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* both through the phrase “a topic of our own” and the reference to men discussing sports: “Speaking crudely, football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial’.” And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room”

(Woolf 73-74). The “women in a drawing-room” in *My Life* discuss baby names while the men talk sports. Here Hejinian clearly signals that her investment in writing the so-called trivial is a feminist strategy with a lineage; like Woolf, she challenges social and literary hierarchies that belittle women’s experiences.

This act of revaluation was part of a wider effort by feminist writers, scholars, and artists in the 1970s to challenge the hierarchies that privilege certain subjects or modes of presentation over others, and to retrieve and interpret all that had been excluded from their respective bodies of knowledge through the devaluation, silencing, and erasure of women’s lives and cultural contributions: “Traditionally, it has been noted, history as one form of narrative has passed over everyday life, focusing on wars, coronations, and so on, investing these events with pivotal significance. This narrative has ignored the daily rhythms (particularly the lives of women) going on in the valleys between these peak events” (Clark 328). Because “[h]istory has been a record of male experience, written by men, from a male perspective” (qtd. in Clark 334), depicting the everyday lives of women as historically significant was and is a feminist act.

The section of *My Life* that includes “*The greatest thrill was to be the one to tell*” concerns the years when Hejinian was giving birth to and raising her young children, and includes poems in which motherhood and housework are depicted as recurrent tasks, as in the twenty-fourth poem, which begins:

*No puppy or dog  
will ever be  
capable of this,  
and surely no  
parrot*

This part of life  
is work. You  
replace the eggs  
with alabaster  
teasers. Imagine  
how the birds  
appear, how  
apparent the

tree in dirty  
snow. The  
apartment  
building  
enclosed an en-  
tire small city  
block and

we lived on the third floor of a corner  
entry, where, from the little laundry  
porch, like the other mothers, I could  
overlook the rectangular lot enclosed  
by the four arms of the building for  
tenant parking where a small group of  
children were playing—or rather  
fighting—and it was to enter these  
fights that the women shouted and  
cajoled from their porches at the  
children and each other. Then the  
mud cracks and the tadpoles turn in  
the nick of time to frogs. At twilight,  
as the babies cry. In those days I had  
the mistaken notion that science was  
hostile to the imagination. That kept  
me from a body of knowledge. The  
perpetual Latin of love kept things  
hidden. Now times have changed, and  
there are more men in the park with  
their kids. I never sweep the sand  
from where I am going to sit down.  
(87)

Toward the middle of the poem, Hejinian writes, “When the baby was born I lost considerable importance, surrendered it to him, since now he was the last of his kind” (88), indicating that this is the year when she gave birth to her first child. But even before that sentence arrives, other clues accrue to suggest that Hejinian is thinking about childbirth and caring for an infant. Hejinian focuses not on the significant event of the birth, but on the developmental arc of young creatures (the birds in the trees in the third sentence, whose eggs are implied by the previous sentence; the tadpoles turning into frogs; the puppy and dog in the title). She is also, from the start, focused on “work,” which soon becomes more obviously gendered labor at the sight of the mothers calling into their courtyard as a form of

childcare (and, apparently, a somewhat belligerent diversion) and at the mention of the way men “now” (in the 1980s, not the 1965 in which the poem is set) are more likely to be caretakers, at least in the public sphere. Hejinian’s comment “Now times have changed” calls attention to the poem’s setting in a pre-second-wave-feminist world, and to the traditionally feminine tasks (laundry, childcare) that fell to her during this “part of life” that was “work.” Notably, “No puppy or dog” is one of the more cohesive poems in *My Life*, perhaps because Hejinian’s activities as a young mother were uniform in their recurrence. While the middle section of the poem veers away from the subject of domestic labor, the end returns to it: “I was stocking counter-convention in the localized world of the kitchen steam and rain,” one sentence reads, playing on the idea of stocking kitchen counters with food and “counter-conventionally” resisting traditional gender norms (89). The final sentences of the poem read: “Sun, therefore laundry. The little ripple shall find waves. Longevity—or velocity” (89). These gestures reinforce a sense of repetitive cycles—every time the sun rose, it was time to put the laundry on the line—and call attention to time and motion. By tying the task of hanging laundry to the appearance of the sun, and by highlighting gestational and development periods, Hejinian emphasizes the way women get tied to natural cycles during the part of life that is “work.”

In the twenty-sixth poem, Hejinian states that she is pregnant with her second child: “I couldn’t join the demonstration because I was pregnant, and so I had revolutionary experience without taking revolutionary action” (93). The year in which the poem is set, 1967, saw both massive anti-Vietnam protests in Washington and nationwide demonstrations organized by NOW, which was formally incorporated that year, against sex-segregated job advertising (“Feminist Chronicles”). Hejinian could be referring to either or both, and is likely invoking the revolutionary culture of the late 1960s more broadly, filled

with feminist, civil rights, antiwar, and other protests. To be pregnant and a young mother was a “revolutionary experience” against the backdrop of these social and political movements that attempted to change the conditions of daily life in the United States for women and others. Hejinian may also be claiming pregnancy as a “revolutionary experience” in and of itself. As the poem goes on, Hejinian’s life is thrown into relief against the revolutionary environment. While public demonstrations happen elsewhere, she is tied to the traditional cycles of childcare: “On those first spring mornings on the front steps in the sunlight shining on the red brick apartment building, we see where we sat rocking the babies in their buggies while we kept the toddlers out of the street” (94). Spring’s arrival reminds Hejinian of previous seasons when it was warm enough to sit outside, and from the vantage of the present, she remembers and anticipates sitting on the steps with the other mothers again. Two poems later, we return to this scene: “The young women sat in front of the apartment building in the mornings, arranged on three levels of steps, like chorus boys on risers” (99). These acts of mothering repeat day after day, year after year, poem after poem in these years. The biological conditions of pregnancy make women, according to Simone de Beauvoir, “subject to the rhythm of the months, the seasons” as “the cycle of each pregnancy, each flowering, exactly reproduces the one that preceded” (599). Hejinian’s depiction of the cyclical temporality of childrearing recalls Julia Kristeva’s notion of “women’s time”: “female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations” (16). Thinking back to Hejinian’s emphasis on “revolutionary experience,” we can recall that the word “revolution” also suggests the idea of cycles—those of birth, days, seasons, and labor to which Hejinian’s young mothers are tied—as well as the notion of social uprisings. The two ideas of revolution are connected in

this part of *My Life*, in that the biological necessities and social codes that bind women to traditional cycles also prevent them from accessing a revolutionary moment that might help unburden them of this recurrent labor.

De Beauvoir argues that this labor deprives women of creative energy: “It is her duty to assure the monotonous repetition of life in all its mindless factuality” (604). Feminist theories of everyday life have reconsidered these habitual aspects of the everyday to which many women are tied, arguing that they are not only monotonous, as they certainly are, but as also potentially productive.<sup>26</sup> In her essay “The Invention of Everyday Life” (1999), feminist literary critic Rita Felski points out that “both feminism and cultural studies have questioned the view that the everyday exists only as something to be transcended, as the realm of monotony, emptiness and dull compulsion” (17). Felski argues for a feminist valorization of “the very everydayness of the everyday”—that is, the “mundane, taken-for-granted, routine qualities that seem so central to its definition” (18). Her critique is particularly useful for illuminating the temporal and experiential elements of the everyday: “The temporality of the everyday, I suggest, is that of repetition, the spatial ordering of the everyday is anchored in a sense of home and the characteristic mode of experiencing the everyday is that of habit” (18). While much feminist thought has dedicated itself to reevaluating everyday domestic spaces, less attention has been paid to gendered rhythms, cycles, and other temporal experiences. Felski argues that repetition and habit can be valued for their ability to lay the foundation for stable identity and a sense of security in the world: “Repetition is one of the ways in which we organize the world, make sense of our environment and stave off the threat of chaos. It is a key factor in the gradual formation of identity as a social and intersubjective process. Quite simply, we become who we are through acts of repetition” (21).

Hejinian's own definition of the everyday, which she offers in "A Common Sense" (1998), an essay in conversation with Lefebvre, place a special emphasis on the routine and the habitual as well: "The everyday consists of the play of effects, the play of life, over our quiddities, our things—the material things we have and the habitual things we do. They are our recurrences. They are that which is routinely happening. And as such they are what we take for granted. We take them as givens—gifts, in other words (though not always welcome ones)" (*Language* 360). Just as one speaks of "my life" on the level of the everyday both "easily" and "uneasily" (*Language* 199), here Hejinian refers to the way the "givens" of the everyday might be both welcome and unwelcome "gifts"—alternately pleasurable and monotonous, and fundamental yet dull. Like other feminist everyday poetry, *My Life* highlights women's particularly ambivalent position toward the everyday. In the ninth poem, Hejinian writes of her own mother: "She hated us to ask what's for dinner, since the planning and recitation of the menu bored her, though the thought of cooking it didn't, and all she replied was, 'Decisions, Decisions'" (36). Although planning and talking about cooking "bore her," the activity itself does not: this routine act of caretaking is repetitive and tedious, but also pleasurable and fundamental for the maintenance of life. As in Luce Giard's analysis of "doing-cooking," though the task itself repeats, the ingredients and steps involved make room for individual style "according to how to accent a certain element of practice, how she applies herself to one or another, how she creates her personal way of navigating through accepted, allowed, and ready-made techniques" as well as creative play, "composing, on given themes, *ne varietur*, music of variations that are never determined in a stable form" (Giard 156). Even Hejinian's mother's repeated elusive reply, "Decisions, decisions," implies a playful refusal of the banalities of routine.

For Hejinian, all recurrence, including the routines that structure gender, is “repetition but not sameness,” as in musical variation. One of *My Life*’s most repeated phrases, “the obvious analogy is with music,” the pre-text to the sixth poem, calls attention to the specifically musical qualities of repetition. On one level, this phrase comments on the movement of the pre-texts themselves, which act as leitmotifs that hold *My Life* together even as their meanings shift in different contexts. The phrase reappears eleven more times throughout the book, and in each case, a different concept is analogous to music: In “Collaborate with the occasion. The obvious analogy is with music,” the implication is that collaboration is an important part of musical composition (38). In another example, Hejinian highlights the social codes that instruct women to be modest and demure: “Women, I heard, should speak softly without mumbling. The obvious analogy is with music” (52). When read beside this traditional gender norm, the “obvious” in the phrase becomes less matter-of-fact and more condescending, perhaps the voice of a pedantic man from whom Hejinian “heard” that women “should speak softly without mumbling.” By linking this gender code to a pre-text that speaks to the nature of repetition, Hejinian highlights the ways in which gender is taught and enforced axiomatically through repeated language.

We can more fully apprehend *My Life*’s feminist critique by connecting its foregrounding of repetition, including repeated acts of gendered labor, to theories that understand these ordinary gestures as the very acts that produce gender. In her well-known theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler describes how the illusion of gender is produced by “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” through their repetition. For Butler, gender is a “constituted *social temporality*” rather than a “stable identity”: “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space

through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (179; emphasis Butler's). While readings of Butler usually emphasize the performative and contingent, as opposed to essential and stable, aspects of gender identity, I want to underscore the importance of everyday repetition in Butler's description. Gender is constituted through a "*stylized repetition of acts*" that are "mundane" or everyday. If gender is a "*social temporality*" that is "constituted in time," repetition is the force that, over time, produces "the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (179). The more we repeat "bodily gestures, movements, and styles" associated with a certain gender, the more we solidify the illusion that we "are" women or men. In other words, gendered routine and repetition produces the gender identity we recognize as "woman."

While Butler focuses on how gender is constituted in the social world via the stylization of the body, Hejinian explores the production of gender through cycles and labor. Throughout *My Life*, she also wonders how gender might get constructed textually: "What is the gender on paper" (106). Language might indicate gender—"Pronouns skirt the subject" (108)—but not always: "As such, a person on paper, I am androgynous" (150).<sup>27</sup> On the same page on which she claims to be androgynous on paper, however, Hejinian then reveals her body to be performing gendered acts in the social realm: "The movement of the poet's body as it goes down the street to its car telling its children to hurry." The clever juxtaposition of textual gender identity with social gender identity (she is both the poet and the mother-body interacting with "its" children) suggests that in her attempt to write the life of "a person on paper," Hejinian is forced to confront the body in its "constituted social temporality" as a pregnant woman on the steps, a mother making dinner every night, or a poet rushing her children along. *My Life* brilliantly enacts, through its use of repetition, the way gender is "tenuously constituted in time" as it validates the formal representation of everydayness as an important feminist poetic undertaking.

### **Motherhood as Inventive Praxis: The Compositional Strategies of *Midwinter Day***

Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day*, like Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, brings poetic attention to the ordinary experiences of the author's life, with a particular emphasis on routine. Mayer, too, characterizes her attention to the everyday in opposition to dominant ideas of autobiography and history that focus on "the exceptional moment: the battle, the catastrophe, the extraordinary deed" (Felski). "I always forget the most important part," Mayer admits in the book's first section, indicating that her writing reflects alternative values regarding what is worth telling and remembering (24). Later, she elaborates on this idea: "You'd find in your emotion to excite plain seeing / You had probably left out the most important part" (110). To "excite plain seeing" is to attend to what is hidden in plain sight and to capture it poetically—to transform it into "the sublime / Everyday" (102). Although she sometimes admits to the monotony of ordinary life—"it's bad enough in midwinter if nothing else happens" (23); "You've done all this before / Nothing happens" (49)—Mayer is more likely to regard everyday life's lack of eventfulness with interest, curiosity, and even awe. For, in spite of life's ordinariness, the mind of the poet is active in its search for that boundless, encyclopedic "everything": "there's no end to these dreams" (22); "There's no end to a narration of forms / From all the ways of looking eyes closed" (6). Toward the end of *Midwinter Day*, Mayer writes, "no one knows why / Nothing happens," infusing reverent mystery into the fact that she has thus far written almost 100 pages without any "important" event transpiring: The most out-of-the-ordinary thing that seems to happen on December 22, 1978 is that the poet Clark Coolidge comes to the Mayer-Warsh home with a bushel of apples (93).

The happenings of *Midwinter Day* include Mayer's narration of dream life, memories, thoughts, and anecdotes, as well as the details of the daily domestic and small-town life of Bernadette Mayer, Lewis Warsh, and their two daughters, Marie and Sophia. The book's 119 pages are divided into six sections: Part One consists of 26 pages of lineated poetry, sometimes rhyming, in which Mayer wakes up and remembers her dreams. She plays both analyst and analysand as she tries to tease out their meanings, connecting them to memories and to present life. Part Two is made up of nine pages of prose blocks that narrate a morning routine of breakfast, chores, getting dressed, and getting ready to leave the house. Part Three, which consists of 15 pages of long lines, follows the family's errands to the post office, library, and grocery store, and contains a catalog of "all the current books" (53). Part Four includes 21 pages of indented prose paragraphs, similar to Part Two. Each paragraph begins with a factual detail about lunch or naptime (e.g., "I chop onions for the sauce" (64)), and then Mayer launches into facts and anecdotes from memory, history, and myth ("St. Augustine hated the Greek language" (64)). Part Five shifts from prose paragraphs to lines as the sun sets and the family sits around the house, coloring with markers, dancing to the Talking Heads, and eating a meal of rye bread and cheese. Mayer includes in this section a long catalog of current events, people, and phenomena, from international political issues to art world figures. In Part Six, Mayer drifts off to sleep, dreams for a while, wakes up, goes to the store to buy diapers and beer, and then comes home to write. Part Six also contains several catalogs—a list of women writers spanning centuries; a list of the people on Mayer's Christmas list, including many poets; and two lists of 20th-century innovations, one scientific and one artistic. *Midwinter Day* ends with the sun rising after Mayer has written all night.

In a 1983 article on *Midwinter Day* in the local New York City newspaper *The Villager*, Mayer discusses how she and other women poets in the 1970s were bringing quotidian

aspects of motherhood into the poetic tradition: “According to author Bernadette Mayer, she and others like her are writing a kind of poetry that is being, ‘done for the first time in the world.’ Writing about the ordinary, by people who are poets but ‘are not rarified in other ways.’ ‘A person can be a poet,’ she said, ‘and an ordinary person—like a mother—at the same time’” (Baskin 15). To claim something is being done for the first time in the world is almost to invite counterexamples, and certainly, glimpses of mothers’ ordinary lives had appeared in poetry before the 1970s. Even so, this was a historical moment when a poet who was also a mother did not have many models to show her that these two roles could be compatible. In her foreword to *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood* (2003), Rachel Blau DuPlessis quotes Tillie Olsen, who wrote in 1971, “Until very recently almost all distinguished achievement has come from childless women” (vii). Olsen then “provided a stunning list of women writers (mainly writers of fiction) who had not been mothers,” effectively “reporting ‘childlessness’ as a fact of the conditions of ‘employment’ for many women writers” (vii). In the 1970s, when the possibility of being both a mother and a writer began to look “possible, plausible, emergent,” women began to ask themselves: “Was it possible? What made it difficult? Would one choice cancel out the other? On what forces did it depend? Would one passionate commitment sap the other—or transform it?” (viii). DuPlessis reports that the “major shift in consciousness and institutions” brought on by second-wave feminism “not only makes motherhood and writing possible to do in the same life but proposes motherhood as a source of deep and enriching meditations on the nature of poetry and the writing vocation” (viii).

Mayer was writing *Midwinter Day* in the midst of this sea change, and offers, toward the end of the book, her own list of women poets who were also mothers:

If only we could all get some sleep  
like Chaucer

Or a Latin Sabine or Etruscan mother  
 Who didn't have the time, chance, education or notion  
 To write some poetry so I could know  
 What she thought about things  
     There are some who did anyway,  
 There's Anne Bradstreet and Tsai Wen Gi,  
 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alice Notley and me,  
 Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton,  
 Elinor Wylie, Louise Bogan, Denise Levertov  
 There's Barbara Guest, H.D. and Harriet Beecher Stowe,  
 Maureen Owen, Nikki Giovanni, Diane di Prima,  
 Murasaki Shikibu, Fanny Howe and Susan Howe,  
 Muriel Rukeyser, Mina Loy, Lorine Niedecker,  
 Gwendolyn Brooks, Marina Tsvetayeva and Anna Akhmatova,  
 There's Rebecca Wright  
 And the saints (111)

Mayer's list includes mostly twentieth-century poets and many of her own contemporaries, and thus documents a turning point in literary history when poets who were mothers were able to observe a critical mass of models and peers who indicated that it was possible to choose both roles.<sup>28</sup> Mayer's casual comment that she wants to know what women throughout time "thought about things" understatedly reflects the fact that the knowledge and experiences of women had been excluded from the poetic tradition for most of history until the era in which she is writing.<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere in *Midwinter*, Mayer exhibits what DuPlessis calls the "suspicious, fearful, and hopeful set of emotions" (viii) shared by women writers at this time when she wonders if poetic language can represent the experiences of motherhood: "Can we trust words to hold the babies now?" (18). As Mayer wonders whether poetry can contain her subject matter, she suggests that poetic language will need to be able to reflect acts ("hold") and ethos ("trust") of caretaking. Looking back at the poetry of the last three decades of the twentieth century, DuPlessis concludes that "Motherhood leads to, demands, provokes, and excites innovations in poetry and inventions in poetics," including, for example, "understanding process in a new way" (ix). The intersection of motherhood and poetry writing—in generative, disruptive, or other ways—in *Midwinter Day* is revealed

through Mayer's negotiations between acts of caretaking and writing on the level of the everyday, negotiations both examined in the book and implied by her compositional process.

Mayer's role as a mother both hindered and enabled her ability to write *Midwinter Day*, and she expresses a corresponding ambivalence toward her role and its routines. For example, in Part Four, when Mayer is preparing lunch and cleaning the kitchen, her reactions to this highly repetitive, highly gendered part of the day vary. At first, she enjoys her role: "Now's the best time to be a mother, everybody's hungry when we first get home, Marie wants another orange, she asked for it three times before she got her coat off, Sophia needs lunch before her nap, Lewis coffee bread and butter, Clark and I want beers but I guess it's too early so we just share one" (61). This is the section of the book in which Mayer opens each paragraph with a flat description of the routine task she is completing, and fills the remainder of the paragraph with the thoughts that arise while she is performing the task. The paragraphs swerve, often comically, from outer to inner world. The paragraph that follows "the best time to be a mother" paragraph reads:

Clark hasn't taken off his coat and now he has to go. The bushel of apples has candy canes too and some honey and cheese. Anne Bradstreet had eight children, she lived in Boston around 1650 and the manuscript of her first book of poems was taken to England and published without her knowing anything about it. Her father was the governor of Massachusetts and after she died her husband was too. (62)

Although the tone of the Bradstreet anecdote is matter-of-fact, it is possible to imagine how Mayer, now in the midst of active mothering, might suddenly turn to the question of whether it is possible to be a poet in the midst of so much caretaking—which is, of course, the larger challenge that Mayer poses to herself by undertaking the project of writing *Midwinter Day*. Mayer is perhaps reassuring herself by thinking of an example of a poet with four times as many children who was able to write and publish her work. She may be

thinking, too, of how Bradstreet's class status likely allowed her assistance with both childcare and publication.

The "best time to be a mother" is short-lived. The next paragraph reads: "Lewis goes into his room to work. Someone said Harriet Beecher Stowe became quite crazy towards the end of her life and pretended she was selling matches on the street. Margaret Fuller was an egomaniac and said at one point she had at last decided she accepted the universe. Then Carlyle evidently said it was a good thing she did" (62). Mayer does not express overt resentment over the fact that Lewis enjoys the luxury of time and solitude while she makes lunch for the family, but her reference to the "craziness" of two prominent nineteenth-century women writers and women's rights advocates in this moment suggests that she, too, might be capable of being driven crazy, however mildly, by the social codes of a "universe" women are forced to accept. Two pages later, Mayer offers an anecdote in which someone named Raphael (likely the painter Raphael Soyer, for whom both Mayer and di Prima worked as models) compares her writing to di Prima's: "Raphael once told me he thought Diane di Prima's work was difficult and somewhat crazy until he read mine, though he's sympathetic and sees our writing as a symptom of what he thinks of as the crazy times" (64). As we have seen, di Prima quite consciously understood her "mad but not crazy" response as adequate to the times, and remarks of "the women on the Beat scene with [her] in the early '50s": "I can't say a lot of really great women writers were ignored in my time, but I can say a lot of potentially great women writers wound up dead or crazy" (Waldman 31). By referencing the "universe" Fuller found unacceptable and the "crazy times" that di Prima experienced just two decades earlier (times that are, according to Soyer, continuous with the present), Mayer implies that women writers' apparent madness is a fitting response

to social conditions that have denied them full personhood and required them to perform menial maintenance tasks while men are more likely to enjoy time, space, and privacy.

Mayer then makes lunch for the family, feeds Sophia and Marie, puts Sophia down for a nap, reads books with Marie, and puts Marie down—all while Lewis stays in his room working (presumably on his own writing, but perhaps on the small press that Mayer and Warsh edited together, United Artists). By contrasting her position with Lewis's, who is interrupted only to be served lunch, Mayer critiques the way heteronormative family structures reinforce the asymmetrical division of gendered labor. Early in the book, she indicates that the couple's days were structured around different routines until they had children: "Before we had children / We used to work all night, eyes open, then sleep / For the day, eyes closed to people's mornings" (7). A few lines later, she remarks that their days are now full of "normal parts"—that is, traditional routines. While Mayer does not tell us about the gendered distribution of household duties during the earlier years, knowledge of how things have changed nonetheless helps us see how the repeated tasks of motherhood produces gender, in Butler's sense. If we think of gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*," then *Midwinter Day* reveals how maternal femininity is constituted in the space of the Mayer-Warsh household during the years when the children are young. The routines of motherhood enforce gendered identities that did not exist when Mayer and Warsh would both work all night and sleep all day. Instead of only thinking of *Midwinter Day* as a book that shows the typical life of a young mother, then, we can also consider it a study of how the routinized acts that constitute a mother's daily routine have gendered Bernadette Mayer.

Mayer grows increasingly irritable after Clark leaves and Lewis goes to his room. She continues with her tasks:

Now there's so much to do for a while, alot [sic] of little things, getting the dumb objects out of the bag, peeling oranges, making some space to slice bread, washing the tray and to find a clean cup and to have to deal with the awful sink. I don't even look up, there is a window in the kitchen. Rudy Burckhardt says alot of his photographs are all looking down at an angle, maybe influenced by Yvonne who paints views looking down from way up in an airplane. He says his look down from about 5 feet 9 inches. (62)

Mayer is completing the same mindless tasks she performs every day, and she is bored and frustrated: The objects are "dumb," the sink is "awful." Earlier, she describes the demeaning effects of the drudgery of shopping and housework:

Daily taken to the market and all kinds of stores  
To be ridiculed and fooled, ignored and reduced  
Daily tested by the tedium of uncondensed routine  
Long mornings and lightless afternoons that exist in time  
Till the night for both our work and love (6)

As Mayer makes lunch and washes dishes, we observe her being "tested by the tedium of uncondensed routine." She opposes these "long mornings and lightless afternoons" to the nights spent writing and making love (Mayer and Warsh apparently continue to stay up all night in their new routine), claiming that the daytime "exist[s] in time" while the night seems to exist out of time, in the realm of creativity and pleasure. But the scene in the kitchen reveals that her imaginative life as a writer is not, in fact, so fully partitioned. She grumbles about her physical position as she completes her task—"I don't even look up"—but then juxtaposes her point of view to the perspective in Rudy Burckhardt's photographs and his wife Yvonne Jacquette's paintings, which suggests that Mayer does, in fact, recognize the artistic value of her point of view—that is, the perspective of a mother hunched over chores in the kitchen. Mayer chose to write a book about, and in the midst of, the day of a young poet-mother partly in order to validate this perspective. But poetically valorizing a mother's quotidian activities and thought processes does not mean validating the chores themselves—"including everything" means including the range of reactions Mayer experiences while

performing these tasks. A few pages later, Mayer has returned to the small pleasures of her routine: “I love chopping vegetables where you do something to make something that is one idiosyncratic thing into many things all looking the same or identical, much like the vegetables’ original seeds” (66). We can note not only Mayer’s pleasure in “doing-cooking,” but also the way her poet’s mind sees “idiosyncratic” forms in the everyday world. Late in the book, Mayer admits that she thinks “it’s petty to spend poetry complaining” (108): this admission of self-censorship, like Mayer’s other references to her omissions, only points to all the complaints she might have included, but did not. If she had included all of her grumbles, they might have taken up much more room than the few scattered lines that I have examined here.

Mayer’s vacillating attitude toward her daily routine reflects women’s “ease” and “unease” toward the everyday more broadly. Whether or not she enjoys this work, there is also a level, however, on which Mayer’s regular routine allowed her to undertake the ambitious project of writing *Midwinter Day* at a time when she was mired in the monotony of completing “exactly the same tasks every day” (23). Mayer says as much in a 2013 interview, when Stephanie Anderson asks her about the development of the idea for *Midwinter Day*. Mayer explains:

I had the idea forever, and I couldn’t figure out how I would ever do it. So what I had to do beforehand was figure out... I figured out I could probably do it there [in Lenox, MA] because I was more settled down in one place. And so I could plan everything ahead of time. And it seemed possible to do. But I had that idea hundreds of years ago. My life was always just so crazy that I never felt like I could really do it.

Being “settled down,” or having a relatively routine day-to-day life, provides the conditions in which the project becomes possible. If Mayer had written her day while she was childless and living in New York City a few years earlier, *Midwinter* not only would have been a completely different book, but it may have been impossible. A mother’s childcare routine

might compete with her writing time, but it also provides the framework that allows the writing of *Midwinter Day* to finally turn from idea to practice. The idea that repetition provides the ground from which “inventive praxis” can spring recalls di Prima’s discipline and philosopher Agnes Heller’s argument in *Everyday Life* (1984): “Repetitive thinking and praxis can be seen as disengagement in that our capabilities are thus liberated so that they can be applied to the solution of tasks which can only be tackled via inventive praxis (or thinking)” (129). The disengagement of routine frees up other “capabilities” that can produce inventive actions or thoughts: “Thus, repetitive praxis and thinking are not simply the basis for inventive praxis and thinking but also the framework for heterogeneous creative activity and modes of cognition” (133). In other words, innovation can only exist within the context of repetition, and creativity depends on a certain amount of stability.<sup>30</sup> In this way, Mayer’s “settled” small-town domestic lifestyle enables the “heterogeneous creative activity and modes of cognition” of *Midwinter Day*. If motherhood allows poets new understandings of process, as DuPlessis asserts, then Mayer’s routine as a mother, however tedious, provided the organizing structure for her compositional methods, as we will see.

Understanding exactly how Mayer realized the project of *Midwinter Day*, and to what extent she wrote the book in one day, depends on the idea that her routine was nearly identical from one day to the next at this point in her life. Mayer has offered various responses to the question of whether or not she wrote *Midwinter Day* in a single day. In a lecture at Naropa University in 1989, during which she explained the compositional strategies employed in several of her books, she remarked: “Nobody ever believes me when I tell them that it was written in one day, but it almost was” (“From” 100). At a poetry reading featuring Mayer and Lisa Robertson that I attended at poet and editor Lee Ann Brown’s Page Poetry Parlor series in New York City on May 4, 2014, Robertson asked

Mayer teasingly, during the post-reading discussion, “You mean you didn’t write *Midwinter Day* in one day?” and Mayer replied simply, with a laugh, “No.” The idea that Mayer both did and did not write the book in a day—that she “almost” wrote it in a day—opens up fascinating questions about what it means to for a young poet-mother to go through a daily routine and write a book at the same time. Mayer’s ingenious methods suggest how the work of mothering and writing might intersect and challenge the idea of what counts as “writing” at all.

Mayer’s Naropa lecture and her notebooks, journals, drafts, and other documents at the Archive for New Poetry at UC San Diego suggest that the compositional process for *Midwinter Day* extended over many months and employed various strategies and technologies, including prewriting, rehearsing, note-taking, saving newspapers, taking photographs, and using a tape recorder. Mayer describes some of these methods in the lecture: “I did rehearsals for the first part, which is dreams. I practiced for about two weeks before the December 22 date and tried to sort of fine-tune my dreaming so that when I had dreams on the 22nd I would be good at remembering them and they would be vivid and worth recording. So that was an extension over that day” (100). Mayer “also took photographs, and wrote about them later” (100). She shot one roll of film over the course of the day, for which the goal was “to take photographs as what you’re really seeing [...] to reflect what actual vision is,” and later took notes on the photographs: “I tried to describe what it was before I attempted to use it in the text. ‘1. Trying to see myself in the mirror over the typewriter as sea. 2. Breakfast at the bottle of milk, white light. Lewis in shirt jacket. Marie stripes putting oatmeal in mouth’” (101). Regarding these notes, she points out, “That’s more than you could write in a moment if you were sitting with a notebook. The other thing is that you don’t always see all these things when you’re looking with your eyes”

(101). Mayer understands the camera as a technology that extends her vision, which aligns with the goal she states at the beginning of *Midwinter Day*, where she writes of a dream: “I saw everything that was ever hidden or happening / [...] / But I wanted to see further” (2). Mayer “also made sure to keep copies of the newspapers for that day and whatever other written or visual material happened to pop up by accident. I’d keep track of it so that when I was putting the poem together later, I might want to intersperse some of that material” (101). Finally, Mayer notes that she began writing the final section of the book on the night of December 22: “The last part was the time at night when I would go to my desk and write. For the sixth part of the book, that’s what I did. The rest is regular daily doings. I was mostly taking care of babies, and entertaining friends” (100). Setting *Midwinter Day* on the winter solstice was also strategic: because Mayer wrote at night, the longest night of the year gave her more time to work on the book.

Archival materials further suggest that not only the dream section, but also some of the “regular daily doings” sections of *Midwinter Day* were rehearsed before December 22. A notebook from July 1978 labeled “Notes for a Big Book” appears to be full of early thoughts and plans about *Midwinter Day*. In an entry dated July 14, Mayer writes:

All outer “description” focused at different times of day — the “outside” of  
dreams, meals, & the schedule etc., then interspersed later with?  
—caressing the house  
—nouns  
\*  
thunder & lightning  
OR  
small fractions of days lengthened in evening & finished then, sharpened by  
memory later if it was morning, by anticipation before if later or by even  
prediction  
—  
tape recorder

Mayer is planning a book that attentively describes her everyday routine—“the ‘outside’ of dreams, meals, & the schedule.” But she also knows that she will not be able to capture

everything as it happens, and will need to “intersperse” more material later. A tape recorder could provide her with another way to gather material to adapt later. (In *The Villager* article, Mayer notes that she did end up using a tape recorder, but does not elaborate.) Mayer considers making notes about “small fractions of days” and then expanding them at night, when she has more time to write. In this way, she could slowly build up a full day by writing about, for example, half-hour increments for several weeks. A few pages later in “Notes for a Big Book,” Mayer writes: “2 weeks notes for each time of day, slowly advancing.” This seems to indicate that she will be rehearsing for each of the six sections of *Midwinter Day*, working on Part One for two weeks, then moving on to Part Two for the next two weeks, and so on. She plans to hone her attention at certain times of the day as a rehearsal method: “all I am doing is cultivating dreaming & turning everything ‘out’ of the journals into the air so I can breathe it there later so that there will be more at say 10 o’clock in the morning for me to say.” Mayer practices paying attention to her inner life and outer routine, sowing seeds of perception that she plans to reap on December 22. In order to notice all that goes unnoticed, she rehearses the act of attending to and describing the mundane aspects of her life, fine-tuning her grasp on the repetitive but ever-elusive everyday—“what we never see for a first time, but only see again” (Blanchot 15).

Mayer’s comments about sharpening her notes through the use of “memory,” “anticipation,” and “prediction” reflect her understanding of the way thoughts about the past and future are also part of what “happens” in the present. *Midwinter Day* includes similar reflections on the way the past is inevitably part of the present through memory (a theme that the book shares with *My Life*): the winter solstice is “A day halfway / Between fall and spring / To which I bring / The past [...]” (21). Elsewhere, Mayer explicitly refers to the

fact that she rehearsed for the book, as in this passage from Part Three, the “going to town” section:

There’s the gray sky  
 Above Lilac Park to the west where the weather comes from  
 Someone stole the lights from the town Xmas tree  
Often memory  
 Lends images to looking past the town close to the trees  
 Into the forest I saw while rehearsing for this narration,  
 It’s a piece or a dream or a story or book, exciting invention, (43)

Memory, like technology, seems to offer Mayer another way to “see further”: as she looks at the sky and the trees, she remembers “the forest [she] saw while rehearsing,” which “lends” an image to her current, more circumscribed, view. Understood in this way, Mayer’s rehearsals for *Midwinter Day* mimic the process of memory itself: The forest, previously seen with the eyes, is seen again in the mind’s eye in the present, through memory. Mayer rehearsed for the book so that she would be able to import past into present and “breathe it there later,” on December 22.

Materials in Mayer’s archive further suggest that she not only wrote parts of *Midwinter Day* after December 22, expanding on notes, recordings, and photographs, but also wrote several passages of the book beforehand, in the fall of 1978. In “Notes for a Big Book,” Mayer describes how she plans to organize the writing she does in advance: “Loose-leaf folder w. lined 3-holed pages that can be re-ordered.” A folder titled “*Midwinter Day* - Notes sent with notes from Joe Brainard, October 16, 1978,” is full of dozens of three-hole-punched pages, both typed and handwritten, that seem to be the loose-leaf pages that she mentions in the July notebook. As she notes in her Naropa lecture, she made extensive notes about dreams, which appear in the October folder as “Notes for dream section I.” By October, Mayer’s plan is more developed, and among the pages are several notes that indicate the extent to which she is prepping material beforehand. “Fix it as one day ‘proem’

on the 22nd of December...,” she writes at one point, suggesting that materials from before and after December 22 would be attributed to that date. She makes notes about which parts of the book she plans to write in advance:

beforehand:  
write the parts abt  
N. England  
sex & going out  
& staying in  
desc. of stores  
list  
town surrounding

The passages about New England appear in Part Three, when the family is out running errands in Lenox and Mayer lists the local stores—“Amoco Station, Dr. Tosk’s, Loeb’s Foodmart, Hagyard’s Drugs,” etc. (49)—and gives the town history—“Incorporated in 1767 / this town’s not very old like hot dogs and Pampers” (45)—including its literary history: “Nearby there are the former homes / Of Edith Wharton, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, / William Cullen Bryant and Edith Wharton’s mother-in-law / The birthplace of W.E.B. DuBois,” and so on (42). The October folder also includes the list of women writers that appears in Part Six, suggesting that Mayer compiled some or all of *Midwinter Day*’s catalogs in advance and interspersed them later. Mayer’s ability to think of names or recount historical details off the top of her head does not significantly impact the premise of the book. It is possible, however, that certain aspects of Mayer’s “regular daily doings” may have been fabricated or written in advance. One of Mayer’s notes from the October notebook reads “maybe I’ll say I took a nap & had these dreams”: The point at which she says she takes a nap and has dreams occurs at the beginning of Part Six in *Midwinter Day* (99), which means that the final section, the only one that it seemed possible she could have written in its entirety on December 22, likely includes imagined or prewritten material as well.

Mayer recorded the events of her life on December 22, 1978, using recordings, photographs, and notes. The notes, like the recordings, allow her to compile the details of the day without having to remember them, as an entry in the October notebook suggests (“I need material / I need notes / so I don’t have to remember anything”), and as *Midwinter Day* itself describes: “to do this without remembering like a dream inciting writing continuously for as long as you can stand up till you fall down” (89). In Mayer’s archive, a small, black-and-white, 59-cent drugstore notebook with “Midwinter Day” written on its cover appears to hold these notes:

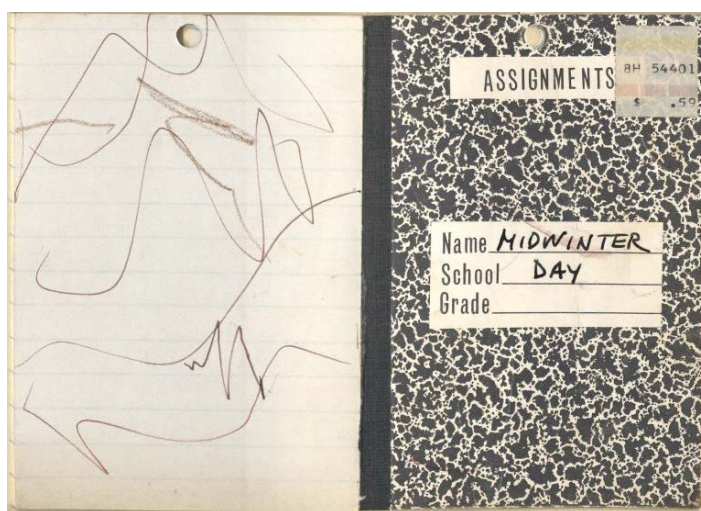


Figure 1. *Midwinter Day* notebook.

The notebook contains brief descriptions of events and thoughts that occurred to Mayer on what we can assume is December 22, 1978. The notes that Mayer took that day, of which there are surprisingly few, are the kernels of several extended passages in the book. For example, she records the clumsiness of Lewis and Marie at the post office: “M trips over own boots at post, hits head on brick / Lewis drops his glasses to open the mail drawer, lens falls out / he says ‘what’s the use’ // the sky above the park where the weather comes from.”

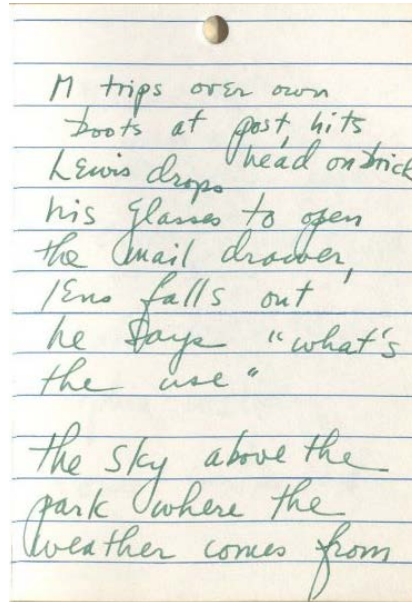


Figure 2. *Midwinter Day* notebook: “M trips over own”

*Midwinter Day* offers a longer, slightly embellished version of the post office episode:

Lewis closes the mail drawer and drops his glasses,  
 One of the lenses flies out, he throws up his hands  
 And says  
 “What’s the use?” Then Marie trips over her own boots  
 And hits her head on a brick  
 Sophia’s mittens come off,  
 The disappearing scene from a dream I’d remember is lost  
 To comparison of past exertion for the slight Main Street hill,  
 I blink at seeing, being seen a little  
 I wonder why we write at all  
 These trees have seen all this before  
 But they are glad of an encore  
 There’s the grey sky  
 Above Lilac Park to the west where the weather comes from (43)

Mayer perhaps adds the details about Lewis throwing his hands up and Sophia losing her mittens to enhance the air of clumsiness and exasperation surrounding this series of minor mishaps, one of the only external “incidents” that takes place in the book at all. Into this scene, Mayer interposes thoughts about dreams (“disappearing scene from a dream”), memory (“comparison of past exertion”), and writing (“I wonder why we write at all”)

before moving on to “the sky above the park where the weather comes from,” the line that, as we have seen, allows Mayer to even further the weave the past into the present scene.

Here is Mayer’s strategy to “excite plain seeing” in action, as she shifts from the external to the internal and back again, using a mix of rehearsal, memory, and present event.

While Mayer likely wrote most of *Midwinter Day*’s long catalogs before or after December 22, the black-and-white notebook contains two lists that she wrote that day. One compiles the titles of library books to return and check out, and another lists groceries to buy at the store:

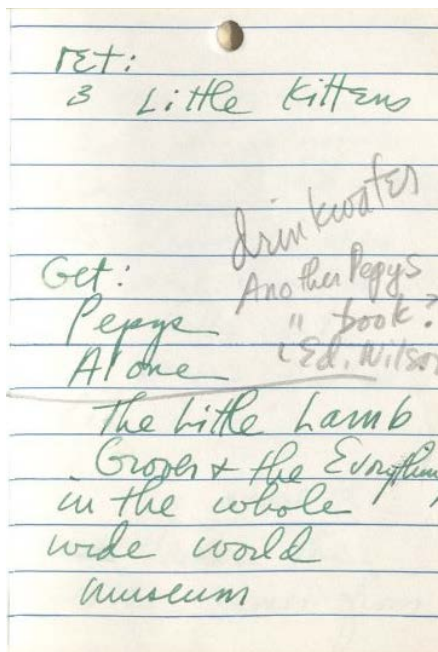


Figure 3. *Midwinter Day* notebook: library books.

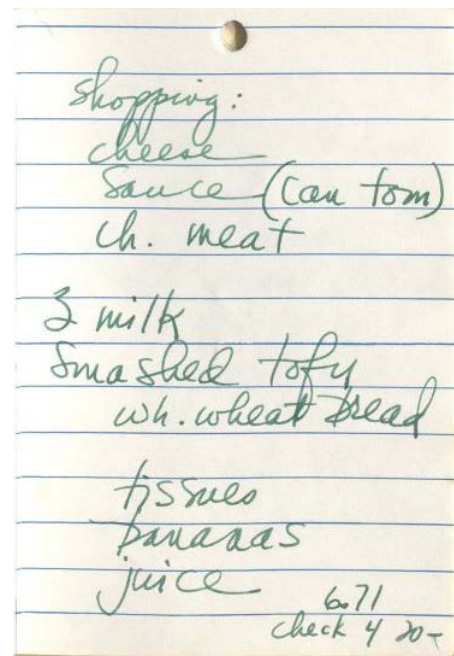


Figure 4. *Midwinter Day* notebook: grocery list.

In *Midwinter Day*, Mayer includes similar information as the family enters the library in Part Three: “*Three Little Kittens* / *And There’s a Wocket in My Pocket* are overdue” (43), and “We

borrow / Pepys' *Diaries* and Drinkwater's book on Pepys, / *Bit Between My Teeth* by Edmund Wilson, *Alone*, / *The Little Lamb* and *Curious George*" (44).<sup>31</sup> At the end of Part Three, at the grocery store, they "get spaghetti, oranges, juice, yellow peas and some cheese" and Mayer writes a check for \$3.34 (54). The items included on the notebook lists do not completely match up with the events of the book, but that can easily be explained—perhaps certain books or foods were not available. What is more interesting about these lists is the way Mayer uses her notebook for a practical purpose in a way that makes the mundane task of list-making coincide with the poetic task of writing one's life. This claiming of the everyday for poetry is further heightened by the presence of the longer catalogs, which gesture toward the epic, throughout *Midwinter Day*. Mayer claims these shorter, practical lists from a mother's life, suggesting that her acts are just as artful and important as, for example, the scientific and artistic inventions that appear in her other lists—"The digital computer, cloning, the cultivation of truffles" and "Body art, silverpoint, pop art, op art, nudes" (144).

In conversations about *Midwinter Day*, some poets argue that questioning Mayer's ability to write the book in a day lessens its achievement as a written text.<sup>32</sup> But even the hope that Mayer was "capable" of writing the book in a day smacks of a gendered notion of the writing process, as if to pull off such a feat of endurance would be heroic. This bias relies on a vision of the writer as the "hard-living Papa Hemingway type" who goes out into the world to court experience and then comes home to write about it (Nelson 110). Feminist and everyday life theorists, on the other hand, have argued "that there are other forms of heroism besides war or Oedipal conflict" as they challenge "the view that the everyday exists only as something to be transcended, as the realm of monotony, emptiness and dull compulsion" (Felski 17). Those who are mothers and writers themselves seem more likely to

doubt that Mayer could have written *Midwinter Day* in one day, without diminishing the power of its achievement. As Mia You writes:

It would be impossible to lead so full a life and to write so rich a book simultaneously, all in the span of a single day. Any parent who tries to squeeze their writing into naptime or during the night knows too well that passion and dedication still have their limits. [...] Mayer provides us with an opportunity to consider the unspoken labor and cost for a writer—especially a writer-mother—to produce one extraordinary poetic day.

For You, the impossibility of the book's conceit presents a different set of questions about the relationship between gendered and poetic labor. In one of her notebooks, Mayer reveals that she finds the process of working on the book over the course of several months exhausting: "then whaddo I do—give myself the benefit now on the looseleaf pages & then put it all together fast in one of my moments? Can't I be more deliberate like Clark? Couldn't I at least work on each section like dreams etc. as it's done, I must can't I get the daily energy for work into it?" Her comments suggest that writing a book in a single day, as taxing as that may seem, is in some ways an easier option—that way, Mayer would only have to work on it for twenty-four hours, and the book would not regularly be competing with the other demands of her life. Viewed in this light, her longer-term dedication to the project was, in some ways, more of a feat.

I present these theories of Mayer's compositional methods, then, not to disprove that Mayer wrote *Midwinter Day* in a single day—after all, Mayer herself has stated that she did not—but rather to highlight the ingenious strategies she devised in order to accomplish such an ambitious project at a point in her life when caretaking absorbed much of her time. The circumstances of Mayer's life meant that it would have been impossible to write the book without elaborate strategizing. Reading *Midwinter Day* as a feminist text means recognizing the innovative methods Mayer developed to pull off such a demanding task in the midst of other demanding tasks. If a regular daily routine provided her with the stable

foundation on which to launch this innovative project, such a uniform lifestyle from one day to the next also allowed her to rehearse for the book, and perhaps even prewrite certain passages, on days whose schedules very closely resembled December 22. In other words, the fact that Mayer is always doing the same things at the same time of the day, over and over, means that the material for the “regular daily doings” in the book might appear highly similar whether it came from December 22, October 16, or February 3. Every day, Mayer makes meals, goes to the post office or grocery store or library, puts her daughters down for naps, and finally writes her own work. Barring any monumental event arriving on December 22, Mayer knew that Midwinter Day would be very similar to most of the other days surrounding it, all full of their “normal parts.” I want to argue, then, that we can understand the day that Mayer calls “Midwinter Day” as a composite day, or as many days superimposed on top of one another. If she not only rehearsed, but also wrote passages of *Midwinter Day* in advance at particular times of day, this only underscores the routine nature of the life of a young mother, for whom every 10:00 a.m. looks basically the same. The gendered time constraints of her life required her to pre- or post-write certain passages, but the fact that the days are relatively interchangeable makes this a strategic aesthetic choice.

Mayer did not sit at her desk from dawn until dusk, typing away, because her body was otherwise occupied in the daily tasks of running a household. In Part Four, while she is making lunch, she describes the feeling of being a young mother in the midst of a routine: “It’s so automatic at this time of the day to do some of the same things I feel like a machine” (62). When understood in the context of her compositional strategies, the fact that Mayer feels “like a machine” suggests a certain kinship with machines and technology as the tools of the mother (as in kitchen appliances) and the artist (as in tape recorders, cameras, and typewriters). If taking notes and photographs, making recordings, and saving newspapers all

count as part of the writing process, then Mayer did a lot of writing on December 22. We can think of these technologies as prostheses that allow Mayer to extend her writing process beyond her own mind and body. In a similar way, as we have seen, she treated her physical and cognitive processes of perception as if they were machines that could be programmed, trained, and honed to pay close attention to, and record, experience.<sup>33</sup> Rather than griping about the gendered limits of her life (“But it’s petty to spend poetry complaining”), Mayer treats them as artistic constraints around which she develops strategies. Mayer’s understanding of writing as a process that might involve various strategies, constraints and technologies—an idea of artistic process that she likely learned from her involvement in the conceptual art world—is opposed to the vision of the solitary (male) writer at his or her desk, an image she also includes in her book as a counterpoint.

In this way, we can view not only the form of the day, but motherhood itself as the formal constraint of *Midwinter Day*. A “life form,” or a constraint borrowed from the temporal structures of everyday life, motherhood both enables Mayer to write the book (providing subject matter and the stability of a regular routine) and hinders her ability to do so (makes it impossible for Mayer to write for long stretches). Feminist everyday poetry emerges out of this paradox: quotidian life acts as a gendered constraint that, like other formal constraints, is both generative and limiting. The term “constraint”—a term that I have been using, that Hejinian uses in “The Rejection of Closure,” and one that is often associated with conceptual art—is especially useful when describing Mayer’s work because it is suggestive of this double bind. Mayer’s seemingly casual claim in *The Villager* article that “A person can be a poet [...] and an ordinary person—like a mother—at the same time,” read in the light of her compositional methods for *Midwinter Day*, becomes loaded. Her choice of temporal frame draws into focus the question of whether it was possible to play

the roles of mother and poet at the *exact* same time. *Midwinter Day* can be read as a personal investigation into the pressing question, for women writers in the 1970s, of whether it was possible to choose both roles. By superimposing these roles, Mayer reveals the possibilities and problems produced by their conjunction. Because Mayer cannot possibly “include everything” from her day, the form of the book implies all of the labor, poetic and domestic, that happens outside of the day-frame. This is the same paradox indicated by the notion of formal inclusivity: By including the “everything” of a single day, *Midwinter Day* implies all of the other days that surround it, further pointing to all of the work Mayer undertakes “outside the frame.” An understanding of Mayer’s compositional methods, then, ultimately reveals the extent to which gendered labor is invisible and outside of the limits of valuable production, both literary and economic.

### **Coda: Feminist Formal Constraint and 1970s Conceptual Art**

In the 1960s and early 1970s, Mayer was active in the New York conceptual art world as an artist and editor. She co-edited the journal *0 To 9* (1967-69), an influential mimeograph magazine that published a range of writing and visual material by downtown New York artists, with artist Vito Acconci, who was married to her sister Rosemary for a time.<sup>34</sup> One of Mayer's earliest and most celebrated works, *Memory* (1971), an important precursor to *Midwinter Day*, is best understood as a work of conceptual art. *Memory* was a visual, auditory, textual, and durational project: Every day for the month of July 1971, Mayer kept a journal and shot one roll of film, 36 photographs per day for 31 days. From February 4-10, 1972, she displayed the photographs at Holly Solomon's Soho loft at 98 Greene Street. Four-foot-high rows of photographs in chronological order lined the four walls of the gallery. Mayer also created a six-hour recording that played continually during the show; the narration was a combination of journal notes and Mayer's description of the photographs.<sup>35</sup> A handwritten note among her papers describes the improvised quality of the recording, which adds another performative layer to the project: "The Tape in 31 parts uses the pictures as points of focus, one by one, & as taking-off points for digression, filling in the spaces between. Tape follows pictures from the 1st to the 1,116th." The *Memory* show was glowingly reviewed by A.D. Coleman in the *Village Voice*, who saw in it many of the qualities that would be noted and respected about Mayer's writing: "The real significance of 'Memory' is that it comes to grips with the question of what photographs tell us about our experience and what they don't tell us, contrasts experience through images and experience through words, and hints throughout at the probably unverbalizable difference between what we remember, what we think we remember, and reality with a capital R" ("Latent Image").

*Memory* was published as Mayer's fifth book in 1976, but in truncated form—most of the photographs were not included, except for a few that were used as a cover image, and the narration was shortened to a more digestible length. Unlike *Studying Hunger* (composed in 1972; first published in 1975), Mayer's other month-long attempt to record states of consciousness, *Memory* has never been published in unabridged form, likely due to the expense of reprinting 1,116 color photographs.<sup>36</sup> A version of *Memory* was also included in Lucy Lippard's *c. 7,500*, the only group exhibition of conceptual art by women, which featured work by Laurie Anderson, Eleanor Antin, Adrian Piper, and Martha Wilson.<sup>37</sup> The *c. 7,500* show debuted at the California Institute of the Arts in 1973 and traveled to seven cities over the following year (Lippard xi). In the catalog for the exhibit, made up of handmade index cards, Lippard explains her reasoning for curating a women-only exhibition as the final in her series of "numbers shows": "this fourth show included only women artists, by way of an exasperated reply on my own part to those who say 'there are no women making conceptual art'. For the record, there are a great many more than could be exhibited here" (Lippard and Khonsary). Each artist was invited to contribute an index card to the show's catalog, and Mayer's card offers several possible subtitles for *Memory*, indicating her interest in undertaking a study of emotions, consciousness, and subjectivity:

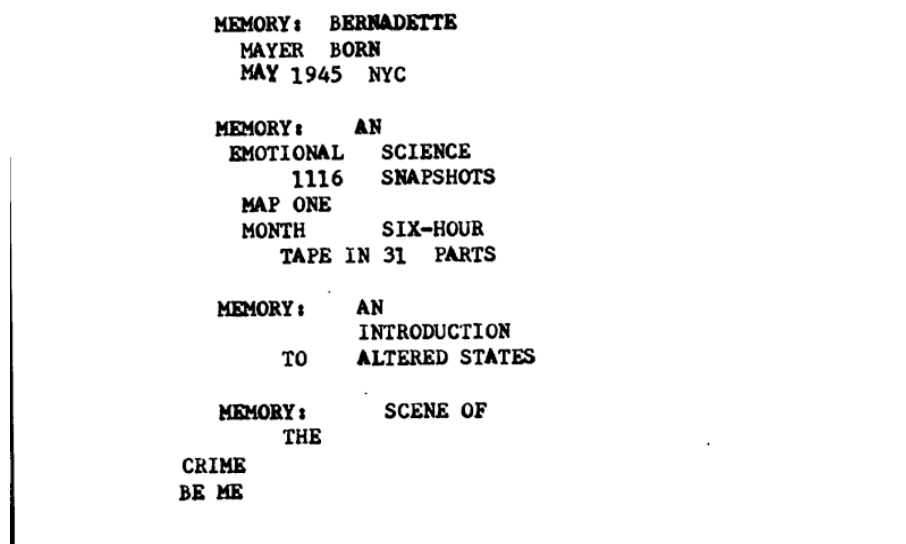


Figure 5. *Memory* index card in *c. 7,500* catalog

Mayer's playful assertion that the self is "the scene of the crime," her references to science and mapping, and her use of recording technologies suggest that she understood *Memory* as an empirical study of subjectivity. Mayer's interest in the linguistic and photographic investigation and documentation of consciousness and experience would carry through to several of her future book projects, including *Midwinter Day*.

*Midwinter Day*'s use of temporal constraints, durational performance, and documentation methods reflect the influence of conceptual art practices. Mayer's desire to write the book while "writing continuously for as long as you can stand up," for example, recalls the endurance performances of artists such as Marina Abramović and Ulay (who, in *Relation in Space* (1976) collided with each other over and over for an hour) and Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh, who performed *Art/Life One Year Performance 1983–1984* (*Rope Piece*) by remaining tied to one another by an eight-foot rope for an entire year. In Montano's *Home Endurance* (1973), the first in a series of performances "in which art and life

were linked in a direct, synthetic way,” Montano remained inside her San Francisco home for a week (Wark, *Radical* 96).<sup>38</sup> In her book *Art in Everyday Life*, Montano notes: “While at home I documented all thoughts, activities, foods eaten, phone calls. I photographed all visitors.” Mayer, like Montano, used notes, photographs, and other technologies to help her write without remembering. The act of writing *Midwinter Day* was a feat of endurance: the physical act of “translat[ing] the detail of thought from a day to language” demanded that Mayer be highly attuned to the present moment, to inner thoughts as well as outer experiences—a level of alertness that would eventually become exhausting. Knowing that *Midwinter Day* was planned and rehearsed for months only highlights the endurance aspect of the project, as Mayer strove to “get the daily energy for work into” the project.

Regarding *Home Endurance*, Montano laconically notes: “I wasn’t trying to be a housewife.” She does not elaborate, but it is easy to imagine how a domestic performance by a woman in 1973 would invite feminist readings. Other women conceptual artists located their projects at the border between art and life in a way that deliberately invoked gendered aspects of everyday domestic life. In Eleanor Antin’s *Domestic Peace* (1971), another piece included in the *c. 7,500* show, Antin documented the seventeen days in which she stayed with her mother in New York City by drawing graphs that represented her emotional states, including “Boredom,” “Calm,” “Artful & Pleasant,” “Agitation,” “Argumentative,” “Hysteria,” and “Provocation.” The project also contains summaries of the conversations that led to these states. Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s *Maintenance Art* performances, some of which were presented as part of *c. 7,500*’s stop at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, even more closely resemble *Midwinter Day*’s effort to record an artist-mother’s daily routine. After publishing her “Maintenance Art Manifesto 1969! Proposal for an exhibition ‘CARE’” in *Artforum* in 1971, Ukeles began work on projects such as *Maintenance*

*Art: Personal Time Studies: Log* (February 21-25, 1973), in which she “merged real life and artistic concept by systematically recording throughout the day her various actions as a housewife, mother, and artist,” and *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Come In* (1973), a visual piece in which “she made tender comedy of the extraordinary effort needed to accomplish the simple and frequently repeated tasks of preparing her three children to leave and return to the house during the cold winter season” (“Mierle Laderman Ukeles” 3).

Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79) is perhaps the best-known example of a feminist conceptual artwork that uses formal constraints based on gendered everyday life. *Post-Partum Document* is a large-scale visual and textual work that Kelly created over six years, from the time of her son’s birth until he learned how to write his name. The text of the project moves “between the voices of the mother, child and analytic observer” as it tracks Kelly’s son’s language acquisition (“Post-Partum”). By setting the end of the project as the day when her son learns to write his name, Kelly uses a constraint that grows out of her life, her son’s life, and their relationship. As a visual work, *Post-Partum Document* also included the objects, and even the refuse, of everyday life: Kelly famously included her son’s dirty diapers in the exhibition, an act that provoked “tabloid outrage” at its first exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1976. In the introduction to the book version of *Post-Partum Document*, Kelly comments on how her use of frames, as well as the project’s appearance in the context of official art institutions, allowed the “archaeology of the everyday to slip unannounced into the great hall and ask impertinent questions of its keepers” (xvi).

In these conceptual pieces, life becomes art by virtue of an artist naming and bracketing certain life practices as performances, by consciously living in an artful way, or by manipulating life to meet the needs of art. In their invention of new forms to capture and

critique gendered quotidian conditions, these projects are art-world analogues to the aesthetic of the feminist everyday. While much conceptual art uses procedure and constraint and tests the boundaries between art and life, artists such as Montano, Ukeles, Antin, and Kelly framed their projects in a way that claimed the everyday conditions of women's lives as significant subjects and structures for art. In the 1970s, the worth of this content was up for debate: "Conceptual art's denial of subject-centered inquiry and the downgrading of the personal was problematic for new social groups seeking to articulate their experiences and redress existing relationships of power and inequity" (Wark, "Conceptual" 48). Vito Acconci reflects this dominant attitude in the 2006 reprint of *0 To 9*, where he describes the dissolution of the magazine: "By this time, I could use words only to mark a place on the page, I could use words only so that they could be negated, I could write only what had been already written by somebody else. Bernadette, on the other hand, was becoming autobiographical. This was the parting of the ways" (10). Acconci and Mayer's "parting of the ways" was emblematic of the way conceptual artists and institutions questioned the inclusion of the autobiographical material important to feminist artists in the 1970s: "It is no coincidence that the advent of a behaviorist, autobiographical art coincided with the women's movement" (Lippard, *From the Center* 4). While Acconci had arrived at an impasse, Mayer had discovered, in her own experiences, an urgent new content. The intersection of conceptual art and second-wave feminism led to works of art that understood the inclusion of personal content as a powerful political act.

Considering these projects at the boundaries of art, life, and gender demonstrates that *Midwinter Day* and *My Life* were part of a larger effort by women artists in the 1970s to bring the everyday content of their lives into the "great halls" of the museum, gallery, academy, and literary establishment. These ambitious poetic experiments share with

conceptual art practices the use of procedural strategies and time-based constraints that bracket life into art. *Midwinter Day* and *My Life* are especially remarkable for the ways in which not only their content, but also their formal structures and compositional processes, arise out of women's everyday experiences. In her list of justifications for why *My Life* should be canonized, Lisa Samuels writes of how the book's "internal organic form" avoids the impersonality or meaninglessness sometimes produced by, for example, chance operations: "Hejinian's method, because its artifice is not inexplicable or (apparently) perverse, might well be more palatable to teaching and critical worlds in search of reasons, and wary, or weary, of the postmodern arbitrary" (108). Because Hejinian uses a form based on her own life (not only as it is measured in years, but also as it is experienced in consciousness), *My Life*'s influence has endured beyond the heyday of postmodern literature. The innovative content, form, and process of *Midwinter Day* produce an equally lasting appeal, as demonstrated by the increasing attention to Mayer's work in recent years. Hejinian's and Mayer's continued and growing influence is evidence of their success in demonstrating that women's ordinary experiences were fascinating in and of themselves, and also capable of generating brilliant poetic experiments.

<sup>1</sup> Mayer and Warsh were never officially married, and neither held a job while living in Lenox. Expats from the city, they were living a relatively bohemian existence that did not fully align with traditional small-town family life.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that December 22 is approximately halfway around the calendar year from Bloomsday (June 16) and “Dalloway Day” (mid-June). (In 2011, the poet Jessica Smith initiated the celebration of “Dalloway Day” via a Facebook event announcement.) Mayer seems to nod toward her modernist predecessors from the opposite end of the year.

<sup>3</sup> A related but separate project, *My Life in the Nineties* (2003), is composed of ten sections—one for each year of the titular decade—of 60 sentences each (Hejinian was 60 years old when she wrote the book in 2001).

<sup>4</sup> The ERA reads: “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”

<sup>5</sup> Hejinian published many of the contributions to this symposium in issue #9 of *Poetics Journal*, the journal she co-edited with Barrett Watten. One of these essays, Michael Davidson’s “Poetics of Everyday Life,” explicitly engages with the tradition of everyday life studies, and quotes Lefebvre and de Certeau. By 1998, Hejinian, too, had read Lefebvre, and refers to his ideas in her essay “A Common Sense” (*Language* 355-382).

<sup>6</sup> Critics who study women poets of the New York School and Language writing claim Mayer for both traditions: Maggie Nelson includes a chapter on Mayer in her book on New York School women poets, while Ann Vickery has a Mayer chapter in her study of women Language writers. Mayer is also included in Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein’s anthology *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984). Baker notes that Mayer’s influence on Language writing is disputed: “leading advocates of the movement have sometimes tended to minimize Mayer’s role in developing this particular style of experimental writing.” He implies that this belittlement may be the result of interpersonal conflict: “Mayer’s interactions with members of the Language group have been somewhat troubled.”

<sup>7</sup> Mayer recalls her teaching strategies at the time: “They would tell me what they needed to know about, I would go home and do a little research, and then I would teach them about it. Like Wittgenstein or Lacan, or even things they didn’t ask me to talk about. Like Dada” (Fitzgerald). The readings from philosophy, psychoanalysis, and historical avant-garde traditions that Mayer brought to her workshops complicate the idea that New York School poets avoided intellectualism, and at the same time name overlooked influences on Language writing. With the help of students in her first class, Mayer put together a list of writing prompts called “Experiments” that are still popular in creative writing classes today. The pedagogy suggested by the experiments perhaps has more in common with the “project” aesthetic Hejinian identifies and with conceptual art practices than with any particular New York School or Language strategy. For example, the experiments list includes this *Midwinter Day*-esque exercise: “Note what happens for a few days, hours (any space of time that has a limit you set); then look for relationships, connections, synchronicities; make something of it (in writing)” (Andrews and Bernstein 81). Bernstein included a version of the experiments list in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, and hosts a revised and expanded version on his website.

<sup>8</sup> She goes on to tell Jarnot, “I never knew Language Poetry would become so exclusive. I mean Language Poetry is fine, but it’s one kind of poetry” (7). Her attitude toward New York School aesthetics is just as ambivalent: “I had this incredible resistance to any New York writing. I really didn’t want to be influenced by it. So I wasn’t. I guess I am now, but I wasn’t then” (6).

<sup>9</sup> It is intriguing to consider the relationships between Mayer's early works, such as *Memory* and *Midwinter Day*, and Cage's temporally-constrained works, such as 4'33", or Ono's collection of Fluxus poetry, *Grapefruit* (which is filled with "instructions" that bear a resemblance to Mayer's writing experiments).

<sup>10</sup> "The Rejection of Closure" was first published in *Poetics Journal* in the "Women and Language" issue (May 1984). Hejinian notes in her introduction to the essay in *The Language of Closure* that she and Watten had just decided on the issue's topic and she wrote the essay with this theme in mind (40). The audio of the April 1983 talk is archived on the PennSound website. "Rejection" has since been anthologized in *Writing/Talks* (Southern Illinois UP, 1985), edited by Bob Perelman; *Onward: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* (Peter Lang, 1996), edited by Peter Baker; *Twentieth-Century American Poetics: Poets on the Art of Poetry* (McGraw-Hill, 2003), edited by Dana Gioia, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke; both editions of *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* (Norton, 1994 and 2013), edited by Paul Hoover; and in other anthologies. The full text of "Rejection" also appears on the Poetry Foundation's website.

<sup>11</sup> The list of contributors to *The Grand Piano*, "an experiment in collective autobiography" that emerged from a reading and performance series in San Francisco from 1976 to 1979, names many of the major figures in the Language writing movement: Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Tom Mandel, Ted Pearson, Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman, and Barrett Watten. Their critique of the mainstream lyric as the dominant poetic mode was in many ways successful. Or, at least, Language poetics have been incorporated into the academy: Universities and prize committees have increasingly embraced Language writing, judging by the fact that these writers have won national prizes and hold positions at prestigious universities (for example, Rae Armantrout's 2010 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, and Hejinian's and Bernstein's professorships at UC Berkeley and the University of Pennsylvania, respectively).

<sup>12</sup> In a letter sent to Mayer later that same year, in October 1983, Hejinian seems to perform this "maximally excited" state as she explores the problems of referentiality and indeterminacy. She articulates another idea central to the philosophies of Language writing—that is, the impossibility of language to match the world, which she understands as generative rather than problematic: "There are so many things to write to you about, to discuss, that I find myself tongue-tied, or whatever might be it's [sic] equivalent with respect to typing. I should select one, I suppose, and go for that, but always I have the impulse to talk about everything at once, maybe because all the inter-relationships and interfacing are of compelling interest. For example, I begin to think that an essential meaningfulness (neglected meaningfulness) lies in the gap between the word and its referent, as they say -- the incompleteness, or inadequacy, of the match between word and world is extremely potent, highly charged."

<sup>13</sup> See Bob Perelman's "Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice" for a discussion of the use of parataxis in Language writing.

<sup>14</sup> See also Mix.

<sup>15</sup> The "I do this, I do that" poem is a phrase and style coined by O'Hara in the poem "Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun)."

<sup>16</sup> One possible precursor to Ashbery's "include everything" comes, intriguingly, from Stein, who writes in "Composition as Explanation" of the connection between the "continuous present" and "using everything": "a groping for a continuous present and for using everything by beginning again and again." Hejinian and Mayer both look to Stein as a model

for tracking consciousness and registering perception in texts that blur the generic lines of poetry, autobiography, and the novel (e.g., Stein's *Tender Buttons*, *Everybody's Autobiography*, and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*). Stein's influence can also be felt on the sentence level in both writers' work, as in *Midwinter Day*'s run-ons and comma splices, and *My Life*'s tendency to end interrogative sentences with a period. Hejinian often thinks through Stein's work in her essays in *The Language of Inquiry*, most notably "Two Stein Talks" (1985), and several critics have read Hejinian's work in conversation with Stein's, focusing on ideas of repetition, description, wordplay, everyday life, and experimental autobiography (Mix 98). Of her own Steinian style, Mayer recounts: "I was taking Bill Berkson's course at the New School, and he said to me one day, 'You know, Bernadette, you sound a little too much like Gertrude Stein.' I had never read Gertrude Stein. So of course I read all of Gertrude Stein afterwards—all that I could get my hands on" (Fitzgerald). Asked what Stein meant to her, Mayer replies: "I'm afraid Gertrude Stein meant all too much to me. She meant like how you could actually be in the world and not be a fucked-up part of it. That you could actually change the world or be completely radicalizing again."

<sup>17</sup> Because Hejinian's "The Rejection of Closure" was influenced by *Midwinter Day*, it is possible to trace the development of the idea of formal inclusivity from *Three Poems* to *Midwinter Day* to "Rejection." However, since Hejinian was working on *My Life* before she read *Midwinter Day*, it is more accurate to say that formal inclusivity—the encyclopedic urge, the effort to constrain it, and the "everything" that gets included via implication—is an aesthetic impulse that spans Language writing and New York School poetry, two movements often understood to have competing agendas.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, the first edition of *My Life* listed its genre as "novel" on the back cover. My edition, published by Green Integer in 2002, lists "Poetry/Autobiography/Woman's Literature."

<sup>19</sup> Writing about Mayer's book *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* (a collection of unsent letters that Mayer wrote for nine months in 1979-80, while she was pregnant with her son Max), Nelson claims to "deeply appreciate its game, its gamble—its willingness to write without knowing where its audience may be, its willingness to go too far" (125). Her final assessment on Mayer's oeuvre is more ambivalent, however: "Work that depends on its larger gestures nearly always includes its failures as well as its successes. For this reason, Mayer's work nearly always feels uneven. Sometimes this unevenness carries the charge of excitement; at other times it undeniably feels lazy, dull, or simply impossible" (128). These characterizations again seem to link Mayer to Stein.

<sup>20</sup> The abridged version, titled *Studying Hunger*, was first published in 1975; the unabridged version, *Studying Hunger Journals*, was not published until 2011, as interest in Mayer's work among younger generations of poets was growing.

<sup>21</sup> This resistance to the confessional, which Notley also displays in poems such as "The Day," likely points to a corresponding reluctance to write a feminist poem in the "mainstream" mode.

<sup>22</sup> In "The Rejection of Closure," Hejinian quotes Stein, from "Portraits and Repetition" (48): "Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition." Hejinian returns to this idea of repetition as insistence but not sameness repeatedly throughout the essays collected in *The Language of Inquiry*.

<sup>23</sup> I was able to locate these events by comparing the details and dates of Hejinian's *Literature Online* biography with the corresponding year of each poem in the book.

<sup>24</sup> For Clark, *My Life's* use of repetition to evoke everyday life again links Hejinian to Stein. Clark quotes William Gass on Stein: "Life is repetition, and in a dozen different ways [she] set out to render it. We have only to think how we pass our days: the doorbell rings, the telephone, sirens in the street, steps on the stairs, the recurrent sounds of buzzers, birds, and vacuum cleaners . . . Everything, to the last detail, is composed of elements we have already experienced a thousand and a thousand thousand times" (327). And yet, as Stein and Hejinian knew, we might hear bird chirps and car horns every day, but we never hear them at exactly the same time or in precisely in the same way.

<sup>25</sup> These statements come from the 1987 "Everyday Life" issue of *Yale French Studies*, which introduced this body of thought to English-speaking audiences through essays by and about Lefebvre, Blanchot, the Situationists, and Roland Barthes. The definitions of the everyday included in the issue emphasize its paradoxical, elusive nature.

<sup>26</sup> The monotony and drudgery should not be underestimated, and these are the very conditions that women were identifying in consciousness-raising groups; writing about in articles, books, and memoirs; and challenging at protests and in court in these years. In France, Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*), published in 1949, had already been in circulation for almost 20 years. In the United States, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963. Friedan aimed to identify "the problem that has no name," or the everyday dissatisfactions of middle-class housewives, a project that corresponds to everyday life theorists' efforts to make the invisible visible.

<sup>27</sup> This is likely another allusion to Woolf, who discusses the androgyny of writers such as Shakespeare and Coleridge in *A Room of One's Own*.

<sup>28</sup> By the time Mayer writes *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, the book she wrote the year after *Midwinter Day*, she shrugs off the idea that she has accomplished anything special by being a mother and poet at the same time: "And now everybody acts as if, well if you can do it that's fine, you're extraordinary, if you're a woman doing it, that is having a man living with you and having children and, they say, still writing. So finally they've convinced me it can't be done, I'm going to give my children to the Museum Anti-Trust Home for Bigamous Mothers and Lewis will have to go too, to be cast back on the world where he isn't living now" (59).

<sup>29</sup> On the next page, Mayer comments on the fact that, although more poets who are mothers have begun to write, they usually share a temperament and social class: "idiosyncratic western women, / most from what they call / The privileged classes, / but not only those, / Are beginning to write enough" (112). As *Midwinter Day* details, Mayer had very little money; she belonged, like di Prima and Notley, to a class of "idiosyncratic" bohemian artists.

<sup>30</sup> These ideas resemble, and are perhaps based on, the philosophies of William James, who wrote in *Habit* (1890): "The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work" (54). James was Gertrude Stein's mentor at Radcliffe College, and Stein, as we have seen, influenced Hejinian's thinking on repetition and variation: "there is repetition but not sameness."

<sup>31</sup> Mayer is perhaps reading books about and by the famous diarist Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) as research for her own life-writing project. In the midst of the library trip, she playfully refers to Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography* as well: "Everybody's autobiography is in this library" (44).

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<sup>32</sup> I have participated in two of these conversations—one in a classroom and one in a book club.

<sup>33</sup> In the interview with Jarnot, Mayer describes a related fantasy: “There’s a project I’d like to do, but it’s not exactly a writing project. But I’d like computers to be able to record everything you think and see. To be like the brain, and to write that out. And apparently eventually computers will be able to do this. That Wim Wenders movie *The End of the World* is sort of like that. And somebody said to me ‘who would read it?’ But I’m thinking that I would read it. I would love to read it. Like if you had all these documents of everybody’s experience. It would be amazing” (9).

<sup>34</sup> In 2006, Ugly Duckling Presse republished all of the issues of the journal in one large tome, *0 To 9: The Complete Magazine, 1967-1969*. Rosemary, a post-minimalist and feminist artist, worked primarily as a sculptor using fabric, and was one of the founders of A.I.R. Gallery.

<sup>35</sup> See Mayer’s Naropa lecture for a description of how she created this narration.

<sup>36</sup> The complete set of *Memory* slides is available for viewing at UC San Diego’s Mandeville Special Collections & Archives.

<sup>37</sup> Lippard titled the shows she curated after the population of the towns in which they debuted; in this case, 7,500 was the population of Valencia, California.

<sup>38</sup> In perhaps her most famous performance, *Seven Years of Living Art* (1984-1991), Montano wore a certain color of clothing each year, spent several hours each day in a room of the same color, and listened to a particular tone; the colors and sounds changed annually. Montano continues to make long-term performances that have grown into spiritual practices.

**Alice Notley's Early Feminist Poetics:  
Dailiness, Women's Tones, and Talk Poetry**

In a 2003 interview, Alice Notley describes a realization that struck her during the writing of her best-known book, *The Descent of Alette* (1992): “not one thing in the world, not one object and not one practice or habit had been invented, as far as I could tell, by a woman” (Keelan 16). *Alette* stages a feminist intervention into the epic, a literary form invested in what Notley calls “the grand events of men” (*Grave of Light* 186). Her post-*Alette* books—mostly book-length poems that bear some relationship to the epic—continue to take up the problem of “how to enter a pervasively masculine discourse and have it reflect women’s particular and erased concerns and identities” (McCabe 44), holding out hope for this prospect, as in *Disobedience* (2001): “there are worlds awaiting exact definition / by a woman for the first time” (58). These later books have been read as Notley’s repeated efforts to realize the possibility of new feminist forms—literary, cultural, political—after centuries of patriarchy.<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of the last two decades, as Notley’s poetry has ever more explicitly condemned male-dominated literary culture and civilization, her work has, somewhat ironically, begun to garner many awards and honors. *Mysteries of Small Houses* (1998) was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize; *Disobedience* (2001) was awarded the Griffin International Poetry Prize; *Grave of Light: New and Selected Poems 1970–2005* (2006) won the Academy of American Poets’ Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize; and in 2015, Notley was awarded the Poetry Foundation’s Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize. Her books have appeared in the Penguin Poets series since 1996, when Penguin republished *The Descent of Alette*. The first conference dedicated to her work, *Alette in Oakland: A Symposium on the Work of Alice Notley*, took place from October 24-26, 2014, and testified to the fact that

not only the literary establishment, but also poets and scholars spanning many generations, regard Notley as one of the most important living poets. At the symposium, where I presented part of this chapter, the talks generally focused on Notley's later books—as most of the incipient scholarship on her work does as well—reading it in the context of many fields of thought, including ecopoetics, animal studies, and even Buffy Studies. The common thread through all of the talks, however, was Notley's feminism. While her poetry includes more overt feminist messages beginning in the 1990s—"Time is another manly construction," she writes, for example (*Disobedience* 69)—Notley's effort to wrestle back masculine forms for feminist purposes began, as this chapter will show, with her first book, *165 Meeting House Lane* (1971).

Maggie Nelson, in her sweeping reading of the first thirty years of Notley's work in *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (2007), notes the critical tendency "to mark a pronounced split between [Notley's] earlier, more readily identifiable 'New York School' style, and her more recent eremitic experiments in feminist epic" (134). For some, the earlier work reads as light and playful, and the later as more seriously political. Most recently, Julia Bloch claims, for example, when comparing Notley's lecture *Doctor Williams' Heiresses* (1980)—to be discussed in detail later in this chapter—to *Alette*: "This attitude of play contrasts starkly with Notley's later poetic critiques of 'male forms'" (2). While the *Alette*-and-after work presents its feminist politics explicitly—what Paige duBois characterizes as a "stunning intervention in a brutal present, connecting its details with a long history of poetry, insisting on particularity within generality" (95) and Amy Robbins calls a radical disavowal of "the debasement of Western culture through multinational capitalism and the endurance of fascism" (87)—the affirming of women's particularity in a culture and poetic tradition invented by men has been an enduring goal of Notley's poetics.

While her early work, with its emphasis on the personal and the domestic, might at first seem to have lower stakes, different times called for different interventions. When Notley began publishing poetry in the early 1970s, she was one of the first poets to introduce the particularity of women's lives into the poetic tradition in the first place. Moreover, in spite of its quotidian content, Notley's early work is far from merely playful. Nelson reads Notley's work from 1971-2001 in order to demonstrate how "Notley has, from the start, consistently recast and deepened the stakes of writing an urban, speech-oriented, personality-driven poetry that inherits and critiques the poetics of her male predecessors" (135). In this chapter, I focus on the first decade and a half of Notley's career (1971-1985), investigating the "speech-oriented" innovations—the experiments with tone and voice—in her early poetry, which adapted inherited poetic strategies to feminist purposes.

Born in 1945 in Arizona and raised in the Mojave Desert in Needles, CA, Notley attended Barnard College and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she studied fiction and met her first husband, the poet Ted Berrigan. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Notley was receiving, through Berrigan and her own reading, an education in the New American Poetry traditions—Beat, Black Mountain, and New York School—during the rise of second-wave feminism. These were also the years in which she became a wife and mother: In 1972, Notley married Berrigan and gave birth to their first child, Anselm. In her early-1970s books, Notley addresses the question of whether the New York School aesthetic of dailiness—the attention to quotidian detail exemplified by Frank O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems—could be applied to poems that explore the everyday life of a young mother. As Notley took up New York School dailiness, she soon discovered that, when filling her poetry with the details of her own life, it was impossible to achieve the ease and cheerfulness of an O'Hara poem. Like the other poets in this study, Notley was confronted with the fact that by

“including everything” in her poems—the quotidian details of her life—she was immediately confronted with the problem of gendered difference.

Notley has acknowledged that the everyday presented a problem for her as a woman poet beginning to write, explaining to Nelson that the quotidian had become “a little too fetishized by the time it was [her] turn to write it” (145). Her conflicted perspective illustrates the ambivalence that I identify as a defining quality of feminist everyday poetics. Notley’s ambivalence was amplified by the fact that first-generation New York School poets were already well known for their poems incorporating details of daily life, as in O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* (1964) and James Schuyler’s *Freely Espousing* (1969). If this group of poets had already “invented the quotidian” in American poetry, to use Michel de Certeau’s phrase, or fetishized it, to use Notley’s, how could she innovate upon New York School dailiness, as a woman poet of the second generation? This question led Notley to develop feminist innovations in poetic voice. Resisting the mandate that a New York School poem had to be light and humorous, Notley expanded the acceptable tonal range of poetic dailiness to accommodate her experiences. She deployed tones—droll, petulant, tender, and more—that allowed her to express a range of attitudes toward the quotidian details life as a wife and mother, which provoked frustration and despondency as often as it produced pleasure and satisfaction. Notley’s use of received forms prompted her to confront problems of gender and poetic voice, concepts she would consider in depth in *Doctor Williams’ Heiresses* and in later essays.

In the 1970s, the idea of feminist poetry generally indicated “the populist, voice-oriented poetics of the women’s movement” that allowed women to speak directly out of intensely personal feeling” (Russo 244-45). These feminist poetics, as Linda Russo points out, “were incongruent with ‘inherited’ experimental practices,” which resisted the

straightforward presentation of individual subjectivity implied by popular conceptions of poetic voice (245). Unlike her New York School and Language poet peers, Notley wanted to recuperate the concept of poetic voice; unlike the feminist poets associated with the women's movement, she wanted to claim for voice experimental poetic practice. For Notley, the elusive, contested concept of poetic voice indicated the poem's ability to capture the physical speaking voice of the poet. She claimed that speaking out of her ordinary experience as a woman, even when using received poetic forms, altered poetic history: "There's only one poetic tradition, and it's always changing. You change all of the history that went before you, and the moment I enter this tradition or this history, it ceases to be a male tradition, and its entire nature changes" (Foster 72). Her poems from the 1970s and early 80s demonstrate that a woman poet speaking out of the particularity of her life could alter poetic language.

Although at the beginning of her career Notley "imitated many men, exclusively men consciously" (*Coming After* 133), she chooses to situate herself in the context of her women poet peers such as Bernadette Mayer, Anne Waldman, Eileen Myles, Joanne Kyger, and Lyn Hejinian: "I often ally myself with all the women who were writing in my generation at that time: I have most in common with them as an across-the-board phenomenon, not with any school or poetics. I don't have a poetics, except a need for inclusiveness and change" (Foster 84). Notley links her role in this generation of women to her search for voice: "I consistently stood for 'women,' for a female voice and consciousness, that possibility—who knows if it exists? But the idea that I would have to stand as a different kind of voice from the ones who'd gone before me" (Foster 84). The women poets around her enabled her to write in that "different kind of voice":

In ways that are difficult to describe, I was probably most influenced of all by a kind of development of voice which took place "among" myself, Anne Waldman, and Bernadette Mayer, when we were very young ... Anne, Bernadette, and I heard some things in each other's voices that hadn't been

in American poetry before. We heard a way a young woman might sound—I'm talking about when I was 26 years old—without imitating the literary sound of the famous dead men ... I was obsessed with the fact that there was no sound in American poetry that truly presaged mine; that there was no poetry that corresponded to my experience; that there was no poetry with motherhood as its subject ... I can't overstate the case. So far I wasn't includable in American poetry, but I heard something in Anne's and Bernadette's work that might help me be included. (Keelan 15)

Notley's "need for inclusiveness and change" and her attention to poetic voice have been lasting qualities of her poetics, qualities that link her poetry to the feminist everyday impulse to "include everything" by bring women's experiences into the poetic tradition.

Notley's experiments with poetic voice began as efforts to represent gendered experience in poetry; she was speaking as "the new wife, and the new mother," as she puts it in *Heiresses*. Because her first book, *165 Meeting House Lane*, was published in 1971, and she got married and gave birth to her first child the next year, her new roles of wife, mother, and poet coincided. These circumstances not only affected the content and form of her poetry, but also shaped her writing process. As her friend Mayer did when writing *Midwinter Day*, Notley invented methods that allowed her to write and take care of her children at the same time; but unlike Mayer, whose book primarily investigated her own consciousness, Notley's poems of writing-in-the-midst culminated in experiments with voices, or what I call feminist talk poetry. When Notley's two sons learned to talk, her exploration of poetic voice broadened to include their voices, in the form of bits of conversation woven into poems. These complex, polyvocal expressions of selfhood and relationship often emerge out of ordinary domestic moments, such as a mother helping her children put on their hats and gloves to go outside. This strategy expanded her notion of poetic voice to accommodate a mother's intersubjective experience of daily life. By re-experiencing the world through her sons' perception, and re-encountering the functions of language through their imaginative, malleable speech, Notley invents a new kind of mother-and-child poem.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Notley-Berrigan apartment in New York City operated under what Notley calls “salon conditions”—an arrangement that allowed her to write, perform caretaking and housework duties, and participate in a poetry community from her home. During these years, Notley extended her investigations of poetic voice to include the talk of the many poets and artists who stopped by her home each day. I use the term “feminist talk poetry” to refer both to Notley’s mother-with-children poems and to the poems that capture the social life of her home salon in order to underscore the fact that this aesthetic developed out of, and eventually served, the requirements of mothering. When Notley invented new poetic forms to capture the conversational texture of life inside her home, a feminist poetics of motherhood became a key example of the second-generation New York School’s witty, sociable coterie aesthetic. Throughout this chapter, I raise questions about how women’s assignment to the feminine everyday sphere—the realm of errands, chores, caretaking, and resourcefulness—affects writing practices. Motherhood prompted Notley to develop new writing processes, as it did for her friend Mayer. In Notley’s case, questions of process are key to understanding not only her poems’ compositional methods, but also the larger aesthetic economy she and Berrigan built through their home salon, in which food, money, poems, caretaking, and poetic knowledge were all exchanged. Unable to write New York School poems of public urban life with the “correct” tone, Notley began bringing New York School aesthetics to bear on her private domestic life in the early 1970s. By the end of the decade, she was literally bringing the New York School into her home in order to take care of her children and gather poetic material at the same time. Her poems from this period are poised at a fascinating intersection of public and private; family and poetry are superimposed onto one another as domestic life intermingles with poetic scene. Notley’s resourceful combination of household and compositional

strategies enabled her to write poems that show how feminist innovation helped define second-generation New York School poetics and, judging by Notley's ever-growing influence, contemporary American poetry as a whole.

## The “I Do This, I Do That” Poem and the New Tones of Women’s Dailiness

Notley’s first book, *165 Meeting House Lane* (1971), takes up a New York School poetics of dailiness, exposing this approach to be necessarily problematic for a woman poet. Although it is regarded as an important characteristic of New York School poetics, the term “dailiness” is rarely defined; generally, it seems to indicate a poem’s attention to everyday life, usually the daily life of its author. The most extensive use of the term in Terence Diggory’s *Encyclopedia of the New York School of Poets* (2009) fittingly appears in the entry on Notley, which begins with a description of *165 Meeting House Lane*:

Notley’s sequence of 24 sonnets reads like a diary, and a sense of “dailiness” is the outstanding quality that reflects her New York School context throughout the decade of the 1970s. *Incidentals in the Day World* (Angel Hair, 1973) explores the specific challenges to “the form of the day” faced by a mother caring for a young child (“Three Strolls” 417), a source of anxiety in *Songs for the Unborn Second Baby* (United Artists, 1979), written while Notley was living in England (1973–74). The collection *For Frank O’Hara’s Birthday*, published in Britain (Street Editions, 1976), includes “Your Dailiness” (1973), which Notley describes as “possibly the most ‘inspired’ poem I’ve ever written, in that it came to me whole.” (348)

As suggested by Notley’s reverent direct address of O’Hara as poetic royalty—“Your Dailiness”—in a book titled after him, O’Hara’s influence on Notley loomed large in her early work. Berrigan introduced Notley to the poetry of O’Hara and many others when they met at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where Berrigan was teaching, in the late 1960s. Notley “began reading Frank O’Hara and Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso and Ted’s poems” (Foster 69), and recalls that during these years O’Hara’s work became “the most important poetic force in my life. It had been the poetry I studied and knew by heart and (confession no poet ever makes) measured my own against” (*Coming After* 3). One of Notley’s definitions of New York School aesthetics centers on O’Hara’s poetics: “I was in the first generation of poets to like O’Hara’s poetry without having known him and been influenced by, almost more than his poetry, his character, apparently extraordinary in both its charm and what you

might call moral force. So that the two qualities unite, which union, as I understand it, is the hallmark of the New York School” (*Coming After* 8).

165 *Meeting House Lane* reflects the influence of O’Hara and other first- and second-generation New York School poets. Notley dedicated the book to first-generation poet James Schuyler, among others.<sup>2</sup> Berrigan, a central figure in the second generation, published the book with his “C” Press, and it is composed of twenty-four experimental sonnets, the form for which Berrigan was known after the publication of his influential *The Sonnets* (1964).<sup>3</sup> The book’s title and final date-and-location note—“Southampton, NY / Winter, 1971”—indicate the place and time of its composition, where and when Notley and Berrigan were living in the painter Larry Rivers’s garage (Berrigan, *Collected* 22). Rivers was a friend of O’Hara’s, and *Meeting House*’s setting in Southampton also connects the book to O’Hara’s poems, many of which mention, or are set in, the Hamptons. In one such poem, “Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun),” which mentions its place of composition as “chilly Southampton,” O’Hara coins a phrase that will come to describe the form he used in much of his later poetry, the “I do this, I do that” poem:

and the house wakes up and goes  
to get the dog in Sag Harbor I make  
myself a bourbon and commence  
to write one of my “I do this I do that”  
poems in a sketch pad (*Collected* 341)

“Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun)” enacts the “I do this, I do that” form, arguably the form most emblematic of New York School dailiness, which presents a sequence of quotidian details narrated by a poetic speaker in the present tense, as if in real time. For O’Hara, an aesthetics of dailiness rejected lofty themes and important occasions in favor of the everyday, as his poetics statement in Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry* anthology (1960) suggests: “What is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to

avoid, goes into my poems” (219). Marjorie Perloff calls these “poems for emergent occasions”: “the occasion is not an important public one (or even a pivotal private event like a wedding or a bon voyage party), but an ordinary incident like a luncheon date or a weekend beach party” (146). Many of O’Hara’s most iconic poems, such as those included in *Lunch Poems*, are “I do this, I do that” poems that evoke the experience of strolling through an urban environment, as if O’Hara is writing and walking at the same time, as in “A Step Away from Them”—“It’s my lunch hour, so I go / for a walk among the hum-colored cabs” (*Collected* 257)—and “The Day Lady Died”: “I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun / and have a hamburger and a malted,” “I go on to the bank,” and so on (325).

There is no evidence that O’Hara wrote as he walked, but he would sometimes sit at his typewriter and compose poems while socializing at home, as Diane di Prima recalls: “He used to keep a typewriter on the table in the kitchen, and he would type away, make poems all the time, when company was there and when it wasn’t, when he was eating, all kinds of times” (qtd. in Perloff 115).<sup>4</sup> O’Hara’s fusion of writing and living inspired second-generation New York School poets, including Berrigan, who, when imitating O’Hara’s form, in fact misinterpreted it, as he recalls in the poetics lecture “On the Business of Writing Poetry”:

In 1960 and ’61, I wrote a bunch of poems saying “it’s 5:15 a.m. in New York City & I’m doing this & that & now I think this & this & this, & next this happens, that happens, & in conclusion I can say blank blank & blank.” I thought I was blatantly imitating Frank O’Hara. But I was wonderfully dumb, and thank god! It turns out that when Frank was writing his poem and saying it is 4:16 a.m. in New York City, he meant that it wasn’t 4:16 a.m. at all. It was a flashback. Whereas when I wrote my poems, whatever time I said it was, that’s what time it was. So, I wrote an entirely different kind of poem than he did, and not only that, but in the language of the critical periodicals, actually extended his formal idea into another place. (*On the Level Everyday* 67)

O'Hara's flashback poems, written in the present tense, and Berrigan's real-time poems might resemble each other as textual products, but in books such as *The Sonnets*, Berrigan's method depended on the process of attending to the present moment as it unfolded.<sup>5</sup>

If Berrigan's method "extended [O'Hara's] formal idea into a new place," Notley's version of the "I do this, I do that" form was an even more radical extension, one that incorporated the quotidian details of her life as a woman, thereby changing the form's subject matter and tone. When Notley wrote poems about "what is happening to [her]"—about the "this" and "that" that she was doing—she discovered that she could not approach the everyday with the same ease that O'Hara's poems seemed to achieve: "They have a serenity to them which seems to emerge from the rather strict borders of his work at the museum: the hours, the suit and tie, the office, etc., as if the fact of being a rather anonymous worker like that was the condition that lit up the poem" (qtd. in Nelson 142). She recalls thinking that she "didn't really have anything to put into the form of the I do this I do that, or any other form involving the details of going through the day" (142). Although I would argue that Notley does have material to put into the "I do this, I do that" form, her poems in this mode often accentuate the gap between O'Hara's approach to the everyday and her own less "serene" attitude in a manner that immediately foregrounds gender.

In *165 Meeting House Lane*, the "I do this, I do that" form "lights up" Notley's own condition as a "worker"—that is, a woman running errands for her male partner.<sup>6</sup> Whereas O'Hara's speaker sounds breezy and urbane as he strolls through midtown Manhattan, Notley is self-conscious and disgruntled about her reasons for going into town, as in sonnet 19:

A black-tree day grey may make white  
 Yellow burning a lady's car all color today  
 Becomes, passes, I don't know its make  
 Being the female, the male's in bed away.

Now it's copper, hair; she under it Linda  
 In a hurry "Antonio's going to Italy  
 To take care of property." Grey space  
 Yellow, red I cross; Post Office shadowed in  
 Locked. "Five dollars for it?" Drunk offers  
 Me, red shock.

He was grey-brown dissolving  
 I'm buying the *New York Post* for the male  
 From Miss Silver radiant today through black  
 Eyes & dress. Fur closer news together  
 I'm gathering, now breath from the weather

At the beginning of the walk into town, Notley sees a car and remarks that she does not know its make: She is perhaps especially self-conscious about the stereotypical gender role she is falling into—the assumption that women don't know about cars—because she is running an errand for her male partner while he is "in bed away." He is asleep and oblivious, but she is highly self-aware. At the same time, she seems to be poking fun at her ignorance, as the sardonic use of the generalized terms "male" and "female" suggests. Notley's self-awareness of the way her gender affects her experience in public space is further heightened when the drunk solicits her—"Five dollars for it?"—causing her to go into "red shock" (the red of blushing and of the red-light district), a force that breaks the tenth line of the sonnet in half. The drunk "dissolves" away and the speaker goes on with her errand: "I'm buying the *New York Post* for the male." The use of "male" calls back to the earlier lines, again underscoring Notley's heightened sense of playing a feminine role. The name of the newspaper is an allusion to O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died," whose speaker goes to "buy / an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING" and "a NEW YORK POST with her name on it" (325). Notley assumes the role of O'Haraesque flâneur-poet, buying a newspaper on the street and walking where O'Hara walked in Southampton in "Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun)."<sup>7</sup> But at the same time, she makes the difference between her speaker and O'Hara's clear. While O'Hara goes out excitedly to buy gifts for himself and his friends ("a

little Verlaine / for Patsy,” “a bottle of Strega” for Mike), Notley runs errands for her male partner while he sleeps and is sexually harassed as she does so.

By nodding to O’Hara through the reference to the *Post* and the poem’s “I do this, I do that” form while underscoring the uneasiness of her position as a woman on the street, Notley announces her critique of, and intervention into, New York School dailiness. Sonnet 19 dramatizes the impossibility of a woman stepping uncomplicatedly into the role of O’Hara’s poet-flâneur. The juxtaposition of O’Hara’s male flâneur moving autonomously through urban space with Notley’s female errand-runner buying things for “the male” first of all shows that the seemingly unmarked dailiness of O’Hara’s “I do this, I do that” poems was gendered all along. Although the two figures are parallel in some ways—both are poetic representations of the ambulatory consumer in public space—Notley lacks access to the buoyant dailiness of O’Hara’s “I do this, I do that” poems. This gap is expressed most strikingly through her self-conscious, uneasy tone, which stands in stark contrast to, for example, O’Hara’s poem “Steps,” where he exclaims “what a day,” “in a sense we’re all winning,” and “oh god it’s wonderful” (*Collected* 370). Notley’s journey through public space, colored by chores and objectification, takes on a correspondingly different tone.

As Nelson argues in her reading of the slightly later poem “Your Dailiness” (1973), while many think of Notley’s 1970s and 80s poetics as invested in the quotidian, even her early work expresses an “ambivalence about a poetry focused on the details of everyday life” (144).<sup>8</sup> Notley’s conflicted relationship with poetic dailiness reflects women’s ambivalent relationship to the everyday more broadly, and highlights the way conceptions of the everyday diverge along gendered lines. Women “are the subject of everyday life and its victims or objects and substitutes” (Lefebvre, *Everyday* 73), and have been identified with the private, domestic sphere in a way that makes femininity seem synonymous with everydayness

and serves to naturalize women's traditional roles. The association of the everyday with the feminine and the domestic is, however, one of two versions of the everyday in theoretical circulation, as Naomi Schor argues:

Two widely shared but diametrically opposed views inform what theories we have on the everyday: one, which we might call the feminine or feminist, though it is not necessarily held by women or self-described feminists, links the everyday with the daily rituals of private life carried out within the domestic sphere traditionally presided over by women; the other, the masculine or masculinist, sites the everyday in the public spaces and spheres dominated especially, but not exclusively, in modern Western bourgeois societies by men. According to the one, the everyday is made up of the countless repetitive gestures and small practices that fall under the heading of what the existentialists called the contingent. According to the other, the everyday is made up of the chance encounters of the streets; its hero is not the housewife but the *flâneur*. (188)

In life as in poetry, one of these versions of everyday life is valued over another; indeed, the figure of the housewife is rarely considered a “hero” at all. Other theorists of the everyday exclude the feminine and the domestic from ideas of the everyday entirely. For example, Maurice Blanchot writes: “The everyday is not at home in our dwelling-places, it is not in offices or churches any more than in libraries or museums. It is in the street—if it is anywhere” (17). As Rita Felski argues, it is the *flâneur*, the male urban hero, who “has become a resonant symbol of the contemporary subject,” as in Michel de Certeau’s “image of the agile pedestrian, adeptly weaving a distinctive textual path across the grid of city streets” (23).

It might be tempting to treat Notley’s housewife, who is moving through the public space of the street, as *flâneuse*—as an easily interchangeable counterpart to O’Hara’s city-walker—but the purpose of her walk belongs to the realm of the feminine everyday, “of the countless repetitive gestures and small practices” that women perform to keep everyday life running. In town, Notley does not escape this feminized realm, but rather extends “the daily rituals of private life carried out within the domestic sphere” into the street. (Here it is hard

not to think of that other woman running errands in the great novel of dailiness, Mrs. Dalloway buying the flowers herself.) Notley's dailiness belongs to the realm of the devalued or denied feminine everyday. While the "female" moves through public space, the "male" is at home, accentuating her out-of-place-ness. Although she is walking through town, she does not have access to "the public spaces and spheres dominated [...] by men": The figure of "Antonio," the mobile male landowner, who is "going to Italy / To take care of property," serves as a further reminder of the housewife's separate, circumscribed sphere.

Elsewhere in *165 Meeting House Lane*, Notley's tone in similar circumstances is resentful or sullen. In the first poem in the book, she writes that she "Woke not wanting to be in life," but manages to pull herself out of bed to go "to town for food and / Back for you, though I was still / A little sulky & grim." Although this "sulky & grim" mood cannot necessarily be entirely attributed to going to town on an errand, this is the event that Notley highlights. The desire not "to be in life" suggests a deeper resistance to the daily that goes beyond grumbles about chores, suggesting that these complaints are bound up in a deeper level of dissatisfaction. Sonnet 14 also depicts a mundane domestic task, one that is explicitly identified as an interruption in the speaker's creative process. Notley is at home working on her own writing when Berrigan asks her to bring him a soda<sup>9</sup>: "Then as usual you / Call me who's wanting to be gelling / Begun to write, the centers meld." The phrase "as usual" indicates that this type of disruption is typical, and Notley's tone accentuates her annoyance and resentment, which echo across the rest of the book. The fact that sonnet 14 is the poem in *165 Meeting House Lane* that foregrounds artistic process most directly makes this incident particularly potent. When Notley incorporates this labor into the "I do this, I do that" form, she indicates that performing this work is not merely an aggravation, but also a daily event that impacts her poetics.

Notley's tones in *165 Meeting House Lane* illustrate the woman poet's uneasiness in the "I do this, I do that" form. On one level, the form enables Notley to claim the activities of her life for poetry (she puts the "this" and "that" that fill her day into the poem), thereby valorizing the feminine everyday. But at the same, her inability to sound like O'Hara—her sulky, grim, self-conscious, shocked, resentful tones—identify the everyday as a site of feminist critique. This dual approach of revaluation and critique correlates to feminism's quandary regarding the everyday more broadly: Feminism, "as a politics of everyday life," has helped to reveal "how the most mundane, taken-for-granted activities [...] serve to reinforce patriarchal norms," while at the same time wanting to honor the "value" and "strength" of women's experiences (Felski 30). Notley's feminist ambivalence toward the everyday, then, comes into focus through her inability to "succeed" at the "I do this, I do that" form. Her vain attempts to fit the activities of her daily life into the form verge on parody as they remind us that many people walk through town not on pleasure sprees but on humdrum errands. These failed, parodic acts are emblematic of the "failure to become 'real' and embody the 'natural'" revealed by the "parodic repetition of gender" itself, in Judith Butler's sense (186, 187). According to Butler, "the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*" (178): By self-consciously amplifying the mundane acts that repeatedly gender her as a woman (chores, street harassment), Notley exposes gender as "an 'act,' as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural' that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status" (187). Stepping into the "I do this, I do that" form and self-consciously hyperbolizing her role as the "female," Notley ends up exposing the performative aspects of gender that link women to the feminine everyday realm.

By the time Notley wrote the poems in her third book, *Incidentals in the Day World* (1973), she had given birth to her first son and was beginning to develop her own forms of dailiness that could capture an everyday life filled with experiences that, as far as she knew, had never appeared in poetry before. In a note that accompanies her poems in *Not for Mothers Only: Contemporary Poems on Child-Getting and Child-Rearing* (2007)—an anthology that dedicates more space to Notley than to any other poet—she writes: “I began writing poems saturated with the details of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood sometime in 1972. I had no models for my subject—I worked entirely in isolation, in Chicago and in England. As far as I was aware, I was the first one to write such a poetry” (xv). Although they were unknown to her at the time, Notley did have predecessors and peers in this tradition. For example, in 1914, Mina Loy published “Parturition,” a poem about childbirth, in the magazine *Trend*; in 1945, Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem “The Mother” appeared in her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville*; and in 1963, Adrienne Rich’s *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, which addresses her roles as wife and mother, was published.<sup>10</sup> Alicia Ostriker was writing “Once More Out of Darkness,” a poetic sequence about pregnancy and childbirth, in the mid-1960s, although it was not published in book form until 1974. In her foreword to *Not for Mothers Only*, Ostriker notes that she, too, wrote “Once More” without any models to guide her, chafing against male professors who claimed love and death were the only sanctioned “universal” subjects: “I had never read a poem about pregnancy and birth. Was birth not universal? It took me a while to realize the topic was taboo. One did not mention female physical experiences in mixed company, much less try to make literature out of them” (ix). When Ostriker read from “Once More” in public, this taboo made itself visible: several men walked out of the room.

Ostriker’s and Rich’s work represented the dominant mode of feminist poetry in the 1970s, which grew out of the confessional poetry of the previous decade and encouraged the

revelation of difficult emotions. As Honor Moore recalls in her introduction to *Poems from the Women's Movement* (2009), for many feminist poets in the 1970s, Plath, “whose final poems uncompromisingly charted her rage, ambivalence, and grief in a voice with which many women identified,” served as an important influence (xvi). Although Notley read Plath, she rejected her as a model:

I seem to have given Sylvia Plath's poetry a moment's thought, since I bought her book, but I can't remember what that thought was. [...] I don't remember actively judging anything until I had the experience of reading a lot of the New York School poets, Beats, and Black Mountain poets for the first time [...] and especially a little later, when I was dealing with the problems of being a young mother and an aspiring poet—I decided the poems of Plath and Sexton were a genuinely negative force. I've thought for a long time that the usages people—men and feminist women—have made of them have been quite immoral. It was as if both men and women were showing you these poems and saying, Here, this is what it's like to be a woman. Well no it ain't. It wasn't. (Foster 80)<sup>11</sup>

Notley resisted the confessional mode of much mainstream feminist poetry, instead developing her feminist poetics by adapting New American Poetry aesthetics to her experiences as a woman. Because she had already encountered Beat, Black Mountain, and New York School poetry by the time she began writing poems about motherhood, Notley was able to incorporate the “humor,” “the sense of how people spoke on the street,” the “active particulars, and the insouciance of the poet” encouraged by these groups (Foster 80). New York School aesthetics in particular enabled Notley to bring the particulars of her daily life into her poetry, while at the same time restricting the acceptable range of poetic tones she could express toward this subject matter:

New York School in particular was against anguish and in favor of humor and the general light of day. This could be very liberating, but got to be a problem if one encountered anguish in one's life and wanted to write about it. You can see towards the end of *Phoebe Light* a little darkness seeping in, and a sense of a woman's problems and of feminist concerns. These felt a little forbidden, unless handled inside a certain tonal range. The message seemed to be Don't have those feelings and thoughts, because our poetics doesn't include them. (Foster 79)

The New York School's permissions forced Notley to confront its prohibitions. The poetics of dailiness enabled her to bring new gendered quotidian content into poetry—to write poems about “what is happening to me” in “the general light of day”; however, as we have seen, the daily events of her life did not always produce a cheery response. Notley could not address “a woman’s problems” in a purely humorous way; her experiences required the inclusion of a certain amount of “darkness” and “anguish” as well. Notley negotiates between New York School aesthetics, which expressly discourage the inclusion of negative emotions, and mainstream feminist poetics, which perhaps rely too heavily on—or even, according to Notley, exploit—these feelings. By writing poems about her quotidian experience that allowed in “darkness,” Notley expands the tonal range of both feminist and New York School poetry, incorporating dark and humorous tones, as well as many others in between. Notley identifies her second book, *Phoebe Light* (1973), as the starting point of her intervention into the New York School’s ban on darkness and anguish, but we can observe efforts to negotiate these concerns even earlier, in *165 Meeting House Lane*.

*Incidentals in the Day World* continues Notley’s search for a poetics of dailiness adequate to her experiences. Poems such as “The Day,” “Three Strolls,” and “Splashes of Yellow” reinvent “the form of the day” (a phrase from “Three Strolls”) in order to accommodate a tonal range that reflects a young mother’s ambivalent attitude toward her daily life. For Notley, as for Mayer later in the decade in *Midwinter Day*, “the form of the day” is particularly suitable for capturing a young mother’s experience of quotidian life in its particularity and peculiarity.<sup>12</sup> In “The Day,” Notley follows her stream of consciousness as it toggles between her inner and outer world, charting her mood as the day progresses. “The Day” is a two-page poem that begins with a dense nine-line stanza, moves into lines and short stanzas surrounded by white space, becomes a lineated letter, and finally concludes,

after an important ellipsis, with a sonnet-like series of twelve short lines. As in Notley's "I do this, I do that" poems, "The Day" resists the daily as soon as it announces dailiness as its subject. The poem opens: "The day always seems over with the book / Pleasurable massive slow novel" (n.p.). Finishing a book *feels* like the end of a day, but this moment is only the beginning of Notley's poem, which is "post-daily" because the day "seems over" and because Notley has the sense of approaching New York School dailiness belatedly.

The speaker next turns her attention to the outer weather ("A windless thunder- / storm going on outside") and then toward her own inner weather, calm for the moment as she contemplates the act of observation itself ("Watching I think is / some sort of cartoon in which everything is white"). After following Notley's stream of consciousness for a few lines, the poem comments on its own writing process: "Fussing experimentally right / now." "Fussing"—or being excessively concerned about trivial issues—in the name of poetic "experiment" is precisely Notley's intention. Her mind wanders to an obscure joke ("Apple paper, fol de rol / But I forget all the jokes"), and then she notes:

The baby's talking  
upstairs, a characteristic mournful ditty  
soon to be harangue:  
WHERE'S MY WHITE MILK?

When they  
get it they seem to leave imitable life.

After lightly musing for thirteen lines, Notley's tone turns as soon as her baby's voice enters the scene, reminding her that she has not only a poem, but also a child, over whom she should be fussing. But Notley does not, in fact, go to check on her baby. Instead, while ignoring his "talk" in the real world, she attends to it poetically, interpreting its tone ("mournful"), then translating it drolly for use in her poem: "WHERE'S MY WHITE MILK?" Her tone then turns musing once more as she anticipates her baby's response to

getting fed. After he eats, he will “leave imitable life” (Notley seems to be referring to the idea of the “imitable lives” of spiritual leaders, which can be imitated because they are ordinary, not divine), thereby exiting the scene of the poem, which seeks to portray such an ordinary life.

Because Notley is an experienced mother and a good interpreter of tone, she can discern her child’s needs based on the quality of his “talk.” The ease of this knowledge lets her continue observing her surroundings for a while longer, presumably while the “ditty” continues in the background. She looks out the window again (“A squirrel / hatches a nut, the nettle blinks radiant”) and then begins to feel anxious:

I’m waiting for a few obsessive thoughts to arrive away  
(at the depot) or derail:      Dear Dark Continent:

Please  
let me not be thinking of  
(blank) the rest of this evening  
But (blank) might be the rest  
of this evening

Please  
let me not be thinking of (blank)  
Just colors

When she hopes her train of thought “derails” so she can stop thinking “obsessive thoughts,” Notley seems to be consciously working against the confessional impulse, refusing to tell the dark content of her thoughts while suggesting possibilities through her addressee.<sup>13</sup> The “dark continent,” as Nelson points out in her reading of Notley’s early poem titled “Dear Dark Continent,” is Freud’s troubling phrase for female sexuality. But the poem “Dear Dark Continent” is less an exploration of sexuality and more a poem about the identity crises of a young wife and mother: “I’m a two / now three irrevocably / I’m wife I’m mother I’m / myself and him and I’m myself and him and him” (*Grave* 8). Whether she is obsessing over sex, identity, or something else, in “The Day,” Notley is determined to

banish these thoughts: “Please / let me not be thinking of / (blank) the rest of this evening.”

By evoking repressed content through these “blanks,” Notley is able to combine feminist-confessional and New York School impulses, gesturing toward “dark” aspects of women’s experience but doing so playfully by chanting her wish and toying with the phrasing (“But (blank) might be the rest / of this evening”). In order to distract herself from these troubling thoughts, she starts focusing on “Just colors” by listing the household objects around her:

blue rattle  
orange peels  
scenting tarnished earrings  
cream (papaya)  
from the BODY SHOP  
sexy white foam  
Supreme aspirin tablets  
That I might be at ease with my garbage

• • •

Whatever “(blank)” Notley is trying to suppress, fixating on colors as they appear in objects around the house only further allows concerns about identity (all of the objects seem to belong to either Notley or her son), sexuality (“sexy white foam”), and the mother and son’s bodily needs more broadly (cream, aspirin). Perhaps warding off a headache, too, Notley wishes for “ease” amongst the “garbage” strewn about her house and amidst her unsettled thoughts on this stormy day.

The baby does not appear again in “The Day”; there is, however, an ellipsis or section marker in the center of the page, perhaps marking the moment when the baby’s “ditty” has become a “harangue.” Just as Notley marks where she censors her dark thoughts (“(blank)”), she indicates her absence from the scene of writing. The ellipsis registers, in the middle of an effort to be all-inclusive—to write the day as it happens, to put in stray

“garbage”—the fact that she has excluded something. The remainder of “The Day” after the ellipsis is a sonnet-like series of twelve short lines in which Notley turns her attention back to colors, and even more clearly indicates her despondent mood: “Of blues / I’m wearing the dark.” The tone in these final lines is more contemplative and the language more traditionally poetic. It makes sense that the poem’s sense of anxiety would ratchet up into “obsessive thoughts” while the baby cries in the background, and that Notley would return to the poem, minutes or hours later, in a completely different state of mind after feeding and comforting her son. Notley might have chosen to end her poem with the wish “That I might be at ease with my garbage” and to leave out the moment of interruption altogether. But the wish to be at ease with her garbage is a wish for the poem to continue to chart “the form of the day” and to include whatever arises, including disruptions and mood swings. As she lets in the clutter of her life as a mother, she hopes to accept the way these details appear in the poem; but the “ease” of dailiness, again, is not immediately accessible to her.

Notley’s most successful experiment in adapting the poetics of dailiness to the circumstances of her life as a mother is the poem “Three Strolls,” whose title and premise cleverly twist the poet-flâneur’s strolls through urban space into a depiction of the mother-poet’s walks while pushing her baby in a stroller. The first line of the poem—“I take the baby for a stroll in the pre-storm”—can be read as an allusion to O’Hara’s line “I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun” from “The Day Lady Died”: both lines refer to walking and weather, contain the same number of syllables, and share similar syntax. As in her errand-running sonnets, Notley clearly marks the gendered difference of her speaker: her strolling “I” is a young mother pushing a baby in a stroller. But “Three Strolls” quickly becomes less an observation on the external world than a meditation on Notley’s observation of, and relationship to, her child. The poem is several pages long and divided

into three sections, one per stroll. The short first section recalls the previous “wide-awake night,” and both the frustration and the dreamy quality that pervade the first two sections might be attributed to sleep-deprivation. The second section opens: “the stroller collapsed the calendar / obscured by what the stroller comes in,” suggesting that Notley’s sense of the day—even what day it is at all—is “obscured” by activities as a mother. Several lines down she tries to describe her sense of dailiness—“my day is all little birds & bees / swarming colliding collapsing”—referring back to the collapse of the stroller and the way her days collide into another, in the blur of what she calls “black sleep.”

After two attempts to begin sections with the act of strolling outside—false starts, in that the textures and rhythms of Notley’s day remain “obscured”—the long third section begins at home, first thing in the morning:

First I woke up & realized  
the baby wasn't awake yet & had slept  
for almost 8 hours  
wondered if  
he was really dead jumped up poked him  
a little he belched or something  
then  
I got back into the bed grateful for it  
and then he began his morning yelling  
that's how much of what goes on gets stopped

After two sleep-deprived days, Notley wakes up alert, her rushed, jagged lines and lack of punctuation expressing her anxiety. She checks to make sure her baby is still breathing by poking him, and anxiety gives way to relief and to gratitude for the chance to go back to sleep. But she has woken up the baby herself in the meantime, sabotaging her own attempt at rest by being over-solicitous. The epigrammatic punch line exudes both humor and self-reproach, the ordinary way one beats oneself up over minor mistakes and then laughs at them.

At the beginning of the third section of “Three Strolls,” the reader, too, wakes up, alert to the sound of Notley’s jittery, wry, and intimate voice. By locating her day/stroll in this moment that could belong only to a mother-poet and not to a flâneur-poet, Notley paradoxically achieves the “charm” and “moral force” that she understands to be hallmarks of the New York School. “Three Strolls” goes on for ten more subsections divided by horizontal lines that indicate, like the ellipsis in “The Day,” the way Notley’s brief bursts of writing time “collapse” around the interruptions of active mothering. These breaks score the third stroll into smaller movements that allow us to hear subtle alterations in tone, from irreverence to tenderness, as in the seventh and eighth sections:

Mommy won’t get up & do any  
succouring or work she finds it important  
to do the crossword puzzle—as many as possible—  
all day

furthermore

she hopes the family doesn’t  
acquire a car monster

because she doesn’t want to learn  
how to drive it in terror of life & death

she wants to do the crossword puzzle all day

Mommy will never solve the problem  
of her liberation that way

until she will

---

Shall I go look at him?  
I like to look at him  
I like to wake him up & hold him

and then he cries & and won’t stop & there’s  
something else I have to do something about

but I will, & do

Notley refuses to perform acts of caretaking (“succouring”) and other “work,” or refuses to perform this work properly, as in the second subsection, when she wakes up her son again. She is making a confession here, however minor: She is admitting her cranky refusal to be both a “good mother” and a “good feminist.” She does so humorously, using petulant and self-mocking tones as she declines to play the role of mother and housewife and teases herself about that choice. Her “confession” that “Mommy will never solve the problem / of her liberation” by doing crossword puzzles and neglecting her child suggests that she is rejecting “appropriate” feminist strategies quite consciously. Avoiding the earnest, solemn tones of mainstream feminist poetry, she seeks another way to approach feminist concerns in life as in poetry. At the same time, she knows that her ordinary avoidance does not equate an act of meaningful political protest: on this level, the statement “Mommy will never solve the problem / of her liberation that way” is sincere. But that does not make Notley’s strategy meaningless: In the context of feminist poetics, these lines are remarkable first of all because, in 1973, poems about motherhood had hardly been published at all, let alone poems that examined such everyday failures to live up to the demands of mothering and feminism. “Three Strolls” is also notable for its refusal to treat the experience of motherhood piously, and its interest, instead, in intimately capturing a mother’s ordinary resistance and irreverence. Notley does not try to recuperate her confessions in service of an epiphanic, transcendent poetics, but rather lets them remain ordinary, flawed, and in some cases perhaps irredeemable. Ideas of proper feminist activities and poetics, Notley seems to say, impose their own sets of restrictions.

As the second subsection above demonstrates, the form of “Three Strolls”—its uneven lines and section breaks—allows her to quickly swing from one tone to the next, from sarcastic irreverence to warm, even overeager, affection: “I like to look at him.” In the

seventh section, Notley directly addresses the challenges of trying to find a structure to represent the rhythms and moods of her mode of dailiness:

The form of the day keeps slipping away  
from my control  
                    and he wants food & play awake at  
constant irregular intervals  
                    the day now it's him now it's me again him  
  
what is this with babies anyway?  
all this for the pleasure of holding this?

Yes Why Don't know Animal Magic

“The form of the day keeps slipping away” first of all because Notley’s day cannot fit neatly into received New York School forms. But it slips away, too, because she has very little “control” over how she spends her time. Her life is subject to the needs of a baby who announces his desires for “food & play” at “constant irregular intervals,” a phrase which in fact nicely describes the overall movement of “Three Strolls” on the page. Notley constructs her form of the day around her tonal shifts, which, in turn, react to the activities of mothering, the ways she tends to her child’s needs or her own: “the day now it’s him now it’s me again him.” In this way, she includes both mothering and not-mothering in the poem—the latter also reminding us that the moments when she is writing the poem are, too, moments of not-mothering.

“Three Strolls” ends with Notley responding to the self-interrogation that appears in the seventh subsection, ultimately affirming the “pleasure” of her bond with her child without being able to explain its “Animal Magic”:

You go through everything just to get  
something to hold to look at it  
                    you go through everything just to get  
something to look at to hold

Perhaps Notley ends on this tender thought because she needs to redeem “Mommy” from seeming callous or neglectful. Or perhaps Notley is, again, bending New York School rules by risking sentimentality and not ending the poem on a humorous moment. More likely this is simply an accurate account of her feelings at the end of the day, holding her son, and the form of the day dictates that the poem end here. The ending matters less than the entire range of “Three Strolls,” whose feminist poetics of dailiness are defined in large part by the ability to track and register a multifaceted ambivalence toward ordinary demands and pleasures.

## “That Exact Register of Annoyance”: *Doctor Williams’ Heiresses* and Feminist Poetic Tone

Initially invested in developing poetic forms that allowed her to explore a tonal range adequate to her individual experiences, Notley began, in the mid-1970s, to incorporate the voices of others—her children, Berrigan, friends, neighbors, strangers on the street, dead movie stars, and more—into her poetic voice. *Doctor Williams’ Heiresses*, the only early poetics statement that Notley published, is an experimental lecture that uses many forms—including poetry, prose, letters, and conversations—to explain how William Carlos Williams’s influence enabled Notley to develop an intimate, polyvocal feminist poetics. *Heiresses* sheds light on Notley’s early exploration of gendered tone and is both an discussion of, and an experiment in, her incorporation of multiple voices, enacting many of the questions about poetic voice that it raises. I read the talk as both a poetics statement and a literary work in its own right, and as an important hinge between Notley’s poetry of dailiness that infused new tones into first-generation New York School forms and her “talk poetry” forms, to be discussed in the following section, that helped define second-generation New York School poetics.

Notley delivered *Doctor Williams’ Heiresses* as a lecture on February 12, 1980, as part of a four-day residency at 80 Langton Street in San Francisco; in July of that year, Lyn Hejinian’s Tuumba Press published the lecture in a letterpress-printed edition.<sup>14</sup> The talk begins with a mythological genealogy of American poetry: “Poe was the first one, he mated with a goddess. His children were Emily Dickinson & Walt Whitman---out of wedlock with a goddess” (n.p.). As the lines of descent branch out, more male poets mate with goddesses to produce “male-females,” and Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams get married and produce legitimate (Frank O’Hara) and illegitimate (Charles Olson) children. Then, Notley

lands on “a second wave of children of which there were many females”: the titular heiresses.<sup>15</sup> The genealogy ends with the mystery of the birth of these women:

These females could not understand how they came to be born---they saw no one among their parents & brothers who resembled them physically, for the goddesses their fathers mated with were evaporative non-parental types. As a matter of fact these females couldn't even believe that their fathers *were* their fathers. They came to indulge in a kind of ancestor worship---that is they each fell in love with a not too distant ancestor. One of them, Bernadette Mayer, fell in love with Gertrude Stein. And the one named Alice Notley fell in love with her grandfather, William Carlos Williams.

The remainder of *Heiresses* contains the text of several Williams poems, Notley's discussion of what she learned from him, conversations between Notley and Berrigan, excerpts from Notley interviews, excerpts from Williams interviews, a letter from Mayer to Notley, and a letter from Notley to Williams.<sup>16</sup> The poems and conversations in the lecture are not attributed to speakers or sources, so that part of the reading experience involves figuring out who is speaking, partly by listening for variations in tone and voice.

Near the beginning of *Heiresses*, Notley is preparing to write her talk, and worries aloud to Berrigan: “I can't remember anything about what I was thinking about Williams & women writers 2 years ago. It was just a crackbrained theory so I could write some works then.”<sup>17</sup> Berrigan reminds her that Williams helped her “consolidate” her speech-based poetic strategies: “What Williams did for you—he consolidated a lot of what you knew already, but he allowed you to be fast, perky, sassy, talky, all these different ways that had to do with talking, in one poem. He helped you to be as fast as you are. And to consolidate these voices you were hearing in your head & in the house & on the street & put them in one poem.” Notley's poetic voice could be as varied and inclusive as a single person's actual voice (as in her poems of dailiness), or as one person's experience of all the voices around her (as we will see in the following section). It is through ideas of variation and inclusiveness that Notley understands Williams's concept of the variable foot.<sup>18</sup>

We still haven't caught up with what Williams meant by the variable foot, which has to do with scoring for tone of voice, which is part of your music & your breath, but maybe even more. Variable foot is maybe about the dominance of tone of voice over other considerations—I do my poems this way 'cause I talk from here—haven't you ever talked to anyone? I'm not an oracle or a musical instrument or a tradition or a stethoscope or a bellows or even a typewriter: I am a tone of voice, warming, shifting, pausing, changing, including, asserting, exulting, including, including, turning & including. I break my lines where I do, as I'm being as various as my voice should be in our intimacy.

As Notley asserts that a poet should be, above all, a “tone of voice,” she dismisses a series of Western poetic concepts from antiquity to the present. The poet is not the Oracle at Delphi or the Aeolian harp or a tradition (perhaps a reference to Eliot's “Tradition and the Individual Talent”) or a stethoscope (perhaps an alternative version of Dr. Williams), “or a bellows or even a typewriter” (references, most likely, to ideas of breath and field composition in Charles Olson's “Projective Verse”). The poet is “a tone of voice, warming, shifting, pausing, changing, including, asserting, exulting”: poetic voice is temperature and pace and force and intention and personality. The act of “including,” repeated four times, is the primary function of this tone: the voice will “shift,” “pause,” “change,” and “turn,” and writing with an emphasis on tone means that the poet will follow her intimate voice as it shifts. In “Three Strolls,” for example, we can see how Notley's intimacy—her willingness to risk both sarcasm and sentimentality—carries her voice through these sharp turns. In *Heiresses*, Notley notes that line breaks help relay this variety, as in Williams's variable foot (his splitting of one line into three lines, each to be considered one foot). “Three Strolls” demonstrates how not only line breaks but also the overall form of a poem, jagged and many-sectioned, might allow these tones to emerge.

In later interviews and in the essays collected in *Coming After*, especially “Voice” (2000), Notley further defines her idea of poetic voice as a speech-based physiological phenomenon: “The voice is the personality that shapes the sounds that come out of the

throat” (Foster 73); “An author’s voice is existence and presentation in time. And it’s existence that is her and is later of her: it comes, came, directly from her body” (*Coming* 147). Her poems from the 1970s that spoke with a voice that came distinctly from a woman’s body—“Three Strolls,” “The Day,” sonnet 19—were contemporaneous with other feminist efforts to reclaim the body as an important source of women’s writing, such as Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976): “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes” (886). But unlike the feminist poets whose concept of voice was centered on “searing personal revelations” (Whitehead 30), Notley did not regard poetic voice as a direct revelation of feeling. Aware that this was the common understanding of the term “poetic voice,” she differentiated her own view: “Voice is not a pseudonym for Emotion or Character, Voice is very close to being Voice” (*Coming* 15). In other words, for Notley, a poet’s tone of voice derives from her actual speaking voice. This is, in fact, one of the oldest ideas of poetic tone, going back to the notion in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* that “the human voice, and indeed the body, is a musical instrument that expresses the emotions tonally” (Greene et al. 1441).

This is a particularly useful idea of poetic tone of voice for a poet like Notley, who was “motivated by the urgency of making sound accurate to previously unpoeticized aspects of life” (*Coming* 143). For Notley, attention to voice was a way to gather “previously unpoeticized” material, to bring into poetry the speech of a woman situated in everyday life—running errands, pushing strollers, and trying on clothes—experiencing a range of attitudes and surrounded by others’ voices. Williams gave Notley permission to include these voices and to attune her attention to the conditions of her everyday life more broadly:

He also made it so I could write about the kids, or not always about, but just include the kids. It’s because of Williams that you can include everything

that's things---& maybe everything that's words, is that going too far?---if you are only up to noticing what your life does include. Which is hard. Too many people have always already been telling you for years what your life includes...

Theorists of everyday life have noted how difficult “noticing what your life includes” turns out to be. The everyday is both what is most apparent, obvious, and accessible, and what is most hidden, obscured, and unknowable, as Maurice Blanchot observes: “In a first approximation, the everyday is what we are first of all, and most often: at work, at leisure, awake, asleep, in the street, in private existence. The everyday, then, is ourselves, ordinarily” (12). The everyday should therefore be graspable, but because we are saturated by it, it is difficult to perceive:

The everyday escapes. This makes its strangeness—the familiar showing itself (but already dispersing) in the guise of the astonishing. It is the unperceived, first in the sense that one has always looked past it; nor can it be introduced into a whole or “re-viewed,” that is to say, enclosed within a panoramic vision; for, by another trait, the everyday is what we never see for a first time, but only see again, having always already seen it by an illusion that is, as it happens, constitutive of the everyday. (14)

The act of “noticing what your life does include” means apprehending the everyday, what one has “always looked past” because it is so familiar and near. While Blanchot argues that the everyday cannot be “re-viewed,” I would suggest, on the contrary, that poetry has a unique ability to “re-view” the everyday—to allow it to be seen again—by using forms that foreground the act of perception itself. As poet Charles Bernstein writes, a successful poetics of the ordinary would be “a kind of writing that tries to break down the relationship between seer and seen, the observer and the observed” (177). Notley’s experiments with voice accomplish just this breakdown: As she incorporates the voices of others into her own poetic voice, Notley becomes what she hears, allowing her to “re-view” her everyday life in a way that makes it observable for the first time.

The act of noticing “what your life includes” is, further, an intrinsically critical gesture that has been central to the feminist effort to make power structures visible. Ben Highmore, in his introduction to *The Everyday Life Reader*, sheds light on the way feminism “struggles to name an everydayness that was all too readily seen at the time as both unproblematic and to a large degree simply invisible” (2). Acts of attention were the crucial starting points of feminist transformation: “Feminism had to actively register and name American women’s everyday life, and as such the revolutionary agenda of second-wave feminism was to ‘raise consciousness’ about women’s daily life as an arena of domination” (2). In the 1969 article “The Personal is Political” (the earliest published appearance of that phrase), Carol Hanisch describes the process of consciousness-raising in terms that correlate to Notley’s comments on the challenges of everyday perception: “It is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I’ve always been told to say.” In the 1970s, feminist poets applied these same forms of attention and revelation to their work: “For those of us who were writers, aspects of our lives hidden from us were illuminated, becoming material for our writing” (Moore xx). While Notley’s poems formally differed from mainstream feminist poetry, her experiments with poetic voice are motivated by a similar process of attention, revelation, and inclusiveness. By noticing and naming what her life includes, “tell[ing] it like it is” and resisting what she has “always been told to say” by the dominant culture or literary style, Notley develops her poetics of the feminist everyday.

As Notley pieces together her ideas about Williams over the course of *Heiresses*, she recalls thinking of her relationship to him as a dramatic role related to the changing social conditions for women in the U.S. in the 1970s: “I’m the character of the new wife, & the new mother. It’s a speech actually, a sort of a dramatic speech ... And this character is

making a speech on a stage like a character in Shakespeare, & the stage is sort of dark except for the light around the person talking[.]” Williams “sets himself up to be this character of the American male,” and Notley responds by developing a poetic voice that can play “the woman, the typical American woman character. He made himself be this character, so you can make yourself be this other character, the polar opposite of him, & it enables you to have access to his secrets & to his diction & to his ways of thinking”; “you could use him to sound entirely new if you were a woman. It was all about this woman business.” Notley did not attempt to write like Williams, but instead wrote as if speaking back to him.<sup>19</sup> The role she played was not the “typical American woman character” of 1930s Paterson, New Jersey, but the typical American woman who was gaining feminist consciousness in the midst of the women’s liberation movement. Notley’s self-conscious gender performances when casting herself as “the female” and “Mommy” were perhaps generated out of this poetic role-play. “Mommy” is the character of “the new wife, and the new mother,” frustrated with her inability to “solve the problem of her liberation” on a personal level.

In the text of *Heiresses*, Notley talks back to Berrigan’s character, too, as she teases out the finer points of Williams’s influence. Berrigan explains how Williams enabled Notley to develop new feminist tones: “Well he made you feel like you could talk about your tampax without feeling tragic about it or even daring, just getting the exact register of annoyance or non-annoyance or whatever.” Here, “talking about your tampax” stands in for the entire range of new content entering poetry as women began to write about the previously “unmentionable” in life and literature. If discussing pregnancy or menstruation in a poem in the 1960s was enough to make men walk out of the room, then putting tampax in a poem a few years later—not only a women’s subject but the brand name of a “feminine product” that women were socialized to hide away, even in their own homes—was even

more improper. For Notley the question is not only about including the tampax—that is, new feminist subject matter—but also about how to include it—about “tampax tone.” Whereas a confessional-leaning feminist poet might have struck that “tragic” or “daring” tone of reverence and revelation, Notley is more interested in “getting the exact register of annoyance or non-annoyance or whatever”—poetically capturing her attitude about tampons in an ordinary moment. Here we might think back to Notley’s attempt to “be at ease with her garbage” in “The Day,” where the scraps and products lying messily around her house produce a feeling of irritability that she incorporates into the poem.

Kathleen Fraser, the founder of the influential feminist poetics journal *HOW(ever)* (1983-1992), was in attendance during Notley’s four-day residency at 80 Langton Street, and wrote an extensive account of the three nights of poetry readings and the evening of the *Heiresses* lecture. Noting that a Q&A was the norm for the artist-in-residence evenings, and that the program indicated that there would be a discussion after *Heiresses*, Fraser reports that “there was only one occasion, on the second evening of poems, on which any kind of follow-up discussion took place” (62). Of the evenings of poetry, Fraser wonders whether “the constant shifting of identities and her poems’ insistence on keeping the tone intimate prevented a post-performance switch to a less personal dialogue in which the dilemma of ‘Alice’ could be placed in a larger social/historical context” (63). Unable to make sense of Notley’s performance of poetic voice using familiar literary and theoretical tools, the audience said nothing. Of the *Heiresses* night, Fraser writes: “The cumulative effect of her Williams talk again seemed to have a quieting effect on the audience, reducing a normally argumentative crowd to silence.”

It could be argued that this was a case of East-meets-West, of the personal, informal style of the New York School clashing with the more theoretical approach of Language

writing. Poet Bob Perelman, who also attended Notley's lecture, reflects back on some of these differences 25 years later: "*Doctor Williams' Heiresses* can be read as an initial articulation of a basic difference in tendency between the second-generation New York School and Language Writing, between [...] writing that foregrounds the fact of the poet writing in real time and writing that foregrounds textuality" (196).<sup>20</sup> Fraser's explanation of the audience's silence relies less on New York School-Language writing aesthetic debates, and instead emphasizes Notley's circular style and intimate tone: "Notley had not assumed the conventions of linearity or academic distance in the construction of her lecture but had chosen to circle around and move in on the subject again and again from very intimate sources of thought and feelings." The terms of Fraser's assessment are coded feminine: in *écriture féminine* and experimental feminist poetics of the time, women writers were challenging distance and linearity, and emphasizing intimacy and the body. For Luce Irigaray in "This Sex Which is Not One," for example, women's speech "sets off in all directions leaving 'him' unable to discern the coherence of any meaning" (28), and must be understood "*within the intimacy of that silent, multiple, diffuse touch*" (29). In order to understand this language, "One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing *an 'other meaning' always in the process of weaving itself*" (29).

Understood in the context of its delivery at 80 Langton, *Heiresses* seems to have called into being the very issues of women's poetic voices that it seeks to investigate. Although the lecture self-reflexively addresses its own methods ("I'm being as various as my voice should be in our intimacy"), the audience found it difficult to engage with the talk on those terms. The best explanation for their silence is likely offered by *Heiresses* itself, where Notley writes, chiming with Irigaray: "Being a woman the poet? Well it's a tone of voice that people aren't used to. You have to hit these tones of voice that people are going to say are

this or that, strident or shrill..." As deliberate as her tonal strategies were, Notley was aware that poetry audiences might not be able to hear these ways of "sounding entirely new" by summoning tones of voice from quotidian experience. The fact that the audience lacked access to a critical vocabulary appropriate to Notley's work is, ironically, evidence that Notley was succeeding in introducing new tones.

As she stared down the long history of a poetic tradition dominated by men, Notley understood the search to find her voice as a feminist mission: "It's just that I knew I wasn't that, that male-ish tradition as I'd been given it; and I did and do want to find my real voice (sorry, Ron Padgett poem 'Voice') and my real self (sorry, Postmodernism) and make them in some way coincident with my poem" (*Coming* 133). Notley's parentheticals refer to the fact that the concept of "poetic voice" was criticized or dismissed by most of her experimental poet peers of the time, from New York School poets like Padgett to the Language writers who critiqued "the poem dominated by a single image or trope and a trustworthy (authoritative) narrational voice" (Armantrout 9). But Notley saw this rejection of voice as unhelpful and ultimately impossible: "I'm disappointed that some contemporary women poets might want to give up 'voice,' as if that were possible or good" (*Coming* 152). Although she does not want to give up on her search for voice, she recognizes it as a fraught effort for a woman poet: "Not many people like me—if any—had published poetry before: how could I assume a sound? I never have, the problem has never been solved for me" (*Coming* 132). Again, Notley echoes contemporary feminist thinkers—those who were asking whether it was possible for women to escape language's phallogentric order, the way "woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man" (Cixous 887). Notley found herself asking similar questions in different terms: Within a poetic tradition in which no one had yet sounded like her, how could she locate her own voice?

Although women's poetic voices began, finally, to be widely heard in the late 20th century, this does not mean that they were understood, accepted, respected, read closely, or studied critically. In the essay "Voice," Notley considers how women's poetic tones have been heard, or misheard, historically. She points out that readers' and audiences' inability to interpret women poets' tones of voice sometimes leads to a response more insidious than silence—an active criticism that employs the language of excess:

As we all know both literature and the male world at large have complained a great deal about women's voices. Since in poetry women's voices don't sound the same as men's, we are told our voices are quirky, nervous, or guarded, dry, or "too" something: flat, strident, emotional. Stein's is too coy, H. D.'s is too quaint, Moore's is pedantic, or Gwendolyn Brooks's schoolmarmish. Kyger's isn't ambitious enough, Myles's is too self-centered, Scalapino's is both opaque and odd, etc., etc. All of which makes me think that poetry's essence and flow is voice; and that women with their "flawed" and blatant, in whatever way, voices, will carry American poetry into its next stage. (*Coming* 152)

If women poets will carry American poetry into its next stage—and some would say they already have—Notley suggests that this evolution will be a result of these singular tones being heard in poetry on their own terms, not from within a masculine tradition in relation to which women's voices sound excessive, odd, or distorted. As Notley attests, her own community of women poets allowed her to begin to hear possibilities for her own voice. At the same time, their position within male-dominated culture might allow women poets to develop distinct poetic voices: "If one isn't allowed a sense of one's importance in the world, if one can't participate fully in the literary and political struggles of one's times, perhaps one's voice becomes not diffuse or secretive but even more pointed and characteristic than a man's, who must always sound a little like the other men he has discourse with, both the live and the dead great" (*Coming* 151). In the face of a male-dominated literary, social, and political world, women poets' feelings of marginalization might actually be freeing instead of stifling. Less concerned with sounding like the voices emanating from the canon because of

the impossibility of ever truly sounding like them, certain women poets might feel free to inhabit the strangeness, the never-before-heard-ness, of their tones, hearing themselves in relief against all the voices that have come before.

When Ed Foster, in a 1987 interview, questions Notley about the dramatic poetic conversations with Williams that she describes in *Heiresses*, she says simply, “I don’t do that anymore” (71). Even in the text of *Heiresses* itself, Notley explores her own ambivalence regarding developing the poetic voice of “the new wife, and the new mother”: “I don’t really want to be a character that way [...] I’m not all that interested in being a woman, it’s just a practical problem that you deal with when you write poems. You do have to deal with the problem of who you are so that you can be a person talking.” This “practical problem,” as it turned out, was not all that easily remedied. Notley has arguably been trying to solve the problem of how to be a woman poet speaking in a male-dominated culture—the challenge of feminist poetic voice—for the remainder of her career. In the next section, I examine the inspired solutions to the practical problem of being a woman talking that Notley invented in her poetry of the late 1970s and early 80s, a period when her roles as mother, wife, and poet overlapped intensely and productively.

### Feminist Talk Poetry and the New York Home School

In 1976, after living in New York, Chicago, England, Bolinas, and elsewhere for the first half of the decade, Alice Notley and Ted Berrigan settled with their sons, Anselm and Edmund, who were four and two years old, into apartment 12A at 101 St. Mark's Place in New York City (Diggory 347).<sup>21</sup> Notley describes their lifestyle at the time: "Then I was the person who had the babies, and then we came to New York and lived inside this little tiny space, and sometimes Ted worked, and sometimes he didn't, and I hung around and wrote poems, and we were always surrounded by these babies, who grew up" (Foster 70). Notley was presented with the "practical problem" of how to use her position as a wife, mother, and poet writing in a small apartment full of people to inform her evolving poetics. In an essay on poetry and motherhood, Notley describes how the "salon conditions" of these years inspired new forms:

After we moved to New York in '76 I became fascinated with the sound of talk. As I do keep saying, we lived in the tiniest of doorless apartments under salon conditions so I was constantly bathed in conversation, including that of my sons. I invented forms which included all this talking as much to keep writing as for any other reason: I had to write while people were around. And in the midst of active mothering. I invented conversational poetic narratives and diaries spun out of outer talk and inner mental narration in prose-like verse and verse-like prose separate and mixed. I wrote down what people said, but also improvised sayings for them and also turned visually apprehended events like dreams into conversation; everyone and everything seemed to be talking. ("Doublings," 140-41)

While Notley was forced to write in the midst of many distractions, the setting simultaneously provided her with a type of poetic material she was attracted to: "I thought at the time I was being practical about writing in a crowded apartment, though also I was in a state of fascination with the voices of others" (*Coming* 148). Indeed, Notley's efforts to write while mothering and socializing led to some of her most fascinating, inventive, and beloved early poems. These poems from the late 1970s and early 80s share an aesthetic that I call

feminist talk poetry, which expanded her earlier experiments with poetic tone and the forms of dailiness in order to incorporate the “outer talk and inner mental narration” of her home salon. As with her poems of dailiness, Notley invents new forms out of a life of gendered labor, including its many “distractions.” In feminist talk poetry, these “interruptions,” usually in the form of other people’s voices, become innovative poetic material that allow the quotidian aspects of a mother’s life to be more fully perceived.

As Mayer was doing during these same years in *Midwinter Day*, Notley turned the gendered constraints of domestic life into new formal possibilities. In a book on O’Hara and coterie poetics, Lytle Shaw characterizes Notley’s method as a “poetics of distraction that emerges, now, not as in O’Hara from the irruption into consciousness of midtown signage [...] but rather from children’s requests—‘Can we go outside? It’s still light time’—during writing and phone conversations—from the oscillation, that is, between domestic and writerly labor” (46). Her process incorporated both “domestic and writerly labor,” but was not so much an “oscillation” between the two but an incorporation of the former into the latter: The more she could poetically incorporate her life as a mother, the more poetry could remain a constant part of her life. I use the term “incorporation” to suggest that Notley was pulling these voices into her body, an approach that grows out of her understanding of poetic voice’s close relationship with the poet’s physical speaking voice. Attention to poetic voice allowed her to do the work of “including” that she describes in *Heiresses*: She gathers and channels voices through her own, “consolidat[ing] these voices you were hearing in your head & in the house & on the street & put[ting] them in one poem.” By the early 1980s, the “distractions” and “interruptions” of other people’s voices become the very materials out of which Notley’s poems are constructed.





In “January,” as in *Heiresses*, it is not always clear who is speaking. How many children are there? When are they imitating their mother, and when is she talking like them? It seems likely that the mother says, “What?” and “Eat what?” and “What do you mean?” She probably says, “No, it’s gold, they’re gold mittens”: This is the mother playing a reality-explaining role (the rain falls downward; that color is called gold). It is less clear who speaks the stanza that begins “On myself”: This is probably the same child who has found his silver/gold mittens, and is putting them on along with his black hat. But it is also possible that this is the mother speaking back to the child, borrowing the rhythms and syntax of kid talk for her own statement. The repetition of “myself” and “my” calls attention to the ambiguity: Whose “my”? At a moment in the poem when it is unclear who is speaking, Notley ironically scripts a speaker who insists on ownership and autonomous selfhood.

It is not until the second page of “January” that we come across a voice that sounds like Notley’s usual poetic voice, in dialogue with only herself. Still, the transition from kid talk to poetic voice is murky:

I touch the purple petals  
She says Hey!

The flower says, we are purple

together  
they touch purple it keeps purple  
purple means us, here.  
The air moved a person. I like people  
because they’re as serious  
as I am. Being purple is very serious.  
It’s dense and still. (22)

Again, it is not clear who speaks the first two lines, or if indeed the same person is speaking both lines. In the third and fourth lines, and perhaps for the remainder of the excerpt, the flower speaks, narrated by the poet who imagines this speech. In *Heiresses*, Notley quotes herself from a past interview: “I love flowers, I identify with them,” and also quotes Williams



can't tell if they're / me or not. They think I'm their facility. We're all about / as comprehensible as the crocuses" (23). A mother-child bond, starting from the biology of pregnancy, puts an idea of separate selves into question. Beyond this, small children might see their mother as an extension of themselves, a person who fulfills their needs—"their facility." Notley acknowledges the mystery of these overlapping selves, and compares them all to crocuses via simile, calling back to her nearly *incomprehensible* speech as a purple flower, and to her investigation of figurative language as a useful but still limited way to describe the self in relation to others.

There are still more voices that fill "January." There is a voice that recalls the "Mommy" voice in "Three Strolls," humorously cataloging everyday failures as a woman, wife, and mother: "I didn't lose any weight today / I had clean hair but I drove / Ted nuts and spanked Anselm on / the arm and wouldn't converse / with him about the letter C" (25). There is also a stanza in the voice of what seems to be a doll that comes pre-programmed with sayings:

I walk.  
I am big.  
I can say  
what they  
say. It's  
fun to  
sound. I  
walk. I am  
big. I finally  
get the blue  
and red container  
of . . .  
sneezes! (24)

At first glance simply amusing, this doll talk complicates the question of who is speaking throughout "January." The doll's statements are ostensibly meant to teach young children basic sentences, but the doll is also a stand-in for a child. When the doll says, "I can say /

what they / say,” he is “playing” a child, and “they” refers to the adults from whom children learn language. The doll, in other words, reminds us that children learn to speak by mimicking their parents. Notley is borrowing words from her sons for her poems, but they originally learned many of these words from her. Further, she is adjusting their speech and perception of the world as they go (“No, it’s gold, they’re gold mittens”), aligning their language with official reality in the social realm, even as she prizes kid talk’s ability to see the world through a “pure” perspective. The poem foregrounds the feedback loop of a mother teaching her children to talk and to understand the world, and then borrows their language back for a poem that enacts this very process.

“January” uses the mother-child relationship to complicate the question of who speaks in a poem. The question remains unsettled throughout, but the poem articulates an understanding of selfhood and identity through the social exchange of talk, a perspective that will inform Notley’s poetics in the following years. Fraser, in her account of the 80 Langton residency, describes the effect of hearing Notley read another poem from the same period aloud:

Again, the movement was one of loosely constructed voices, overlapped and juxtaposed, a largesse of detail, including and naming a half dozen local lexicons and private geographies. It was Alice talking, sitting in her jeans (which developed a large rip as the poem continued), then it was her children chattering: “I need a glass of holy splinter water / There’s a nice glass of cigarette butt water” . . . Actually, one wasn’t sure *who* was being heard, when, and which words were spoken by “Alice”, because of the constant allowing of the children and women contained in herself to find voice. (58)

Fraser calls attention to Notley’s body in the room, perhaps in order to emphasize the way that her polyvocal poetics allow for the physical incorporation of other voices into her own: “These voices give her a chance to embody—to feel in and through her body—another’s biological dilemma or metaphysical perception” (57). Because Notley understood poetic

voice as bodily and speech-based, reading her poems aloud further dramatizes the way others' voices are embodied in her and channeled through her.

In the essay "Doublings," Notley considers the ethics of her decision to use her sons' speech in her poems, and the everyday domestic conditions that formed the context for this choice: "I don't believe I intruded on their privacy; though in our apartment there was no privacy, only manners, and I think we had good manners" (141). She points out that Edmund began writing his own poems at age six, and that her voice sometimes appeared in them as well. In other words, Notley's one-way appropriation quickly became part of an exchange that her sons participated in, as illustrated by the doll in "January." The act of mothering not only supplied Notley's early work with language, but also ended up impacting her work for decades as she interacted with her adult poet sons, whose poetic sensibilities were formed in part by the language they shared with their mother: "We are now all practicing poets, and are liable equally to be present in each other's works" (142). Notley concludes: "Thus mothering's culminating effect on my poetics has involved the emergence of new poetry colleagues for me to interact with and to be influenced by. I've produced a 'double' generation, persons and poets, and am as a good poetry mother, real mother, and older poet, interested in the work of my sons' poet friends as well as their own" (142).

The fact that Notley's mothering furthered her writing makes particular sense in the context of the Notley-Berrigan household, where poetry was a part of everything. In her introduction to Berrigan's *Selected Poems*, Notley describes the totally immersive poetic environment that the couple cultivated: "My life with Ted Berrigan consisted of a continuous involvement with poetry: It was all we talked about; everything we did or said became part of it, as atmosphere or literally as phrase or fact in a poem" (vii).<sup>24</sup> Perhaps

because poetry was always in the air, the Notley-Berrigan home also served as an important social hub for the second generation of New York School poets from the time the family settled in the city until Berrigan's death in 1983. While most would agree that the first generation of New York School poets included Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch, and Barbara Guest (though Guest was a late, and sometimes contested or ignored, addition), the second generation is less defined. One way of identifying it is by looking to the poets who were congregating at the Notley-Berrigan home and at the St. Mark's Poetry Project a few blocks away, and who were publishing each other in magazines and small presses such as *Angel Hair* (edited by Waldman and Lewis Warsh from 1966-78), United Artists (founded by Mayer and Warsh in 1977 and still active today), "C" (edited by Berrigan from 1963-80), and Notley's own *Chicago* magazine (1972-74).<sup>25</sup> Berrigan was a leading figure in the second generation and an important transitional figure between generations: He moved to New York City in 1960 with his friends from Tulsa—the poets Ron Padgett and Dick Gallup, and the poet and painter Joe Brainard—and knew Frank O'Hara in the early 1960s, but also served as a mentor for younger poets.<sup>26</sup>

In the past, Notley has dismissed the New York School designation as part of a broader rejection of poetic schools and movements: "I don't accept any labels or placements even for the 'early work'" (Foster 84). More recently, she has accepted the label with caveats: "I was probably part of the New York School until the mid 80's and I remain of it, to some extent, through friendships and certain interests. [...] I changed after Ted died, and then again after some other deaths in the late 80's, and I needed to become my own school, if you wish" (Keelan 17). Certainly Notley was always more than a New York School poet; at the same time, she was actively learning from O'Hara's work when she began writing, and later became one of the most influential poets of the second generation. Notley's standard

biographical note now includes a reference to her central role in this community: “For sixteen years [on New York’s Lower East Side], she was an important force in the eclectic second generation of the so-called New York School of poetry” (*Culture of One* 145). The terms “eclectic” and “so-called” indicate how this large, shifting group of poets treated the idea of a poetic “school” as a joke even as they formed a significant coterie whose aesthetic methods continue to shape American poetry.

Notley’s most recent definition of New York School poetics is simply geographical: “I would define the New York School in terms of its relation to New York City” (Keelan 17).<sup>27</sup> Poetry that comes out of New York is talkative, open, and somewhat intrusive: “Anyone might talk to you in New York, anyone does anything right in your face, everything is in the open, and a poetry adequate to New York is *open*” (Berrigan, *Selected* ix). Notley’s late-70s and early-80s poems evoked the close proximity and chatter of the city—the sense of people living and talking on top of one another. The books that comprise her most important contributions to New York School poetics—*How Spring Comes* (1981), *Waltzing Matilda* (1981), and *Margaret and Dusty* (1985)—are filled with what the back cover of the 2003 Faux Press reissue of *Waltzing Matilda* calls Notley’s “experiments with voices, inside and outside.” In these collections, the principal voices are Alice, Ted, Anselm, Edmund, and poet friends. Other voices appear as well—neighbors, parents from the children’s school, and invented characters, especially personified elements of nature (the sun, mountains, flowers). Some of the poems read more like short plays: *Waltzing* contains six, as well as the transcript of a 32-page interview that Notley conducts with the painter George Schneeman.

The poems in these books reflect the intensely social qualities of Notley’s daily life in these years, when she was in continual contact with poet peers, as she describes in a poem

from *Mysteries of Small Houses* (1998), “Place Myself in New York (Need One More There),” which takes this period as its subject:

Who am I I’m really social  
For the first time in my life and for years (that’s  
Over) there are these craftsmen craftspeople everywhere  
To find out from. (56)

The poem “Bob & Simon’s Waltz” from *Margaret and Dusty*, which is made up entirely of dialogue attributed to poets, paints a scene of “craftspeople” socializing with each other. The six-page poem is dated May 9, 1982, and reads as a transcript of the repartee of a single evening that American poets Notley, Berrigan, Eileen Myles, Bob Rosenthal, and John Daley spent with British poets Tom Raworth, Doug Oliver, and Wendy Mulford.<sup>28</sup> By labeling the poem a waltz, Notley calls attention to the sound and rhythm of the poets’ voices, as if they are instruments in a musical composition. But more than anything, “Bob & Simon’s Waltz” seems to exist in order to show off the witty conversation of Notley’s friends:

“You’re so beautiful, that I’m saying goodbye.”

John Daley

\*

“You married a guy because he was alive.”

Ted Berrigan

[...]

“I brought you some flowers.”

“I need some.”

Wendy Mulford  
Alice Notley (48, 49, 51)

Throughout the poem, there is a running joke about the fact that, while the New York poets are mostly interested in joking around, their British visitors want to talk about poets and poetics. Raworth offers a brief account of meeting Joanne Kyger: “Joanne . . . How was she?

I only spent time with her / once; she & I & Anselm Hollo went walking on the / beach at 4 o'clock in the morning" (47). Oliver, who would later become Notley's second husband, remarks, "I'd like to write these poems in which I say right out, / 'I'm really very naïve'" (49), and then asks, "Do you ever think about technique?" (51).

Meanwhile, the American poets tease each other and gossip. Myles remarks, for example: "When I'm with him I feel like I'm with this complete social outcast. He says all he does is have fights at home & go out & get drunk" (48). A self-aware New York School poem, "Bob & Simon's Waltz" pokes fun at the fact that New York School poets across generations have been accused of anti-intellectualism and have been reluctant to theorize their poetic philosophies in a traditional manner, as in the opening phrase of O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto": "Everything is in the poems" (498). Daniel Kane, in his reading of the second-generation New York School's "poetics of sociability," notes that the group was "defined in part by extreme whimsy and a refusal to engage overtly with its own poetics" (346). Although Kane does not use Notley's work as an example, "Bob & Simon's Waltz" and most of her other talk poems fit his definition of the "intersocial text": "poems drenched with the proper names of those writers in the 'scene' and/or serving as initiative rites welcoming new poets into the community" (334). With the exception of interviews and the generically complex *Doctor Williams' Heiresses*, Notley did not provide commentary on her early work, but her apparent casualness often belied quite purposeful, complex aesthetic aims. "Bob & Simon's Waltz" is one part "Everything is in the poems" and another part coterie initiation rite, "drenched with the proper names" of poets. "Everything is in the talk," Notley seems to insist, as she documents the conversations of her peers, speech that enacts what is meant by those who refer to New York School aesthetics as "chatty" or

“talky.” “Bob & Simon’s Waltz” offers a portrait of a poetry community that amuses itself and defines its poetics through its own clever conversation.

Notley developed her version of the “intersocial text” out of her position as a mother in her home salon. By extending the term “feminist talk poetry” from Notley’s mother-with-children poems to her poet-among-peers poems, I highlight the fact that Notley’s most important contributions to New York School poetry developed directly out of the everyday conditions of her life as a mother. When borrowing her sons’ speech for earlier poems, Notley would intersperse kid talk amidst her inner reflections. Later, the voices of others begin to overwhelm her poetic voice, effectively becoming it. Notley saw this incorporation of multiple voices as an extension of the desire for poetic inclusiveness:

The American way is to be inclusive rather than exclusive, isn’t it? You know, you have to find new words and new things to say and new ways to sound. You get tired of your own voice, but the other voices you use, you’re still the organizing intelligence, and those people never get to be themselves in your poem. They always end up being projections of you, poor things. Ted used to yell at me about that all the time. “You think that you’re using my voice, but it’s just you! It’s always just you!” (Foster 76)

As Berrigan-via-Notley notes, Notley claimed the voices of others as her own poetic voice, inevitably altering them as she did so. It is worth emphasizing that, when Notley pulled voices into her work, this was not an act of pure transcription: As she writes in “Doublings,” she “wrote down what people said, but also improvised sayings for them” (141). Even when she attempted to exactly record talk as she heard it, she transformed this language simply by claiming it for, and reframing it as, poetry. As Bernstein notes, the conversion of everyday speech into poetic style has a long history:

Any attempt to reduce speech to a particular literary style of representing speech, in order to claim that style as ‘ordinary,’ is always a move away from the ordinary. Indeed, such an “ordinary” poetic diction has fetishized as ordinary what is in fact a literary style. The tension between the spoken—the vernacular or dialect—and the literary representations of it, going back to Dante and earlier, produces new poetic dictions but never the erasure of

poetic diction, never an absolutely “ordinary” diction. This dialectical movement is one of the most important features of English poetry, not just since Wordsworth’s “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, but going back to Old English. (174)

Notley’s contribution to this tendency in poetry in English was to bring ever more voices into poetry—“Not the speech of English country people, which would have something artificial about it; not that, but language modified by *our* environment; the American environment,” as Williams puts it in a 1962 *Paris Review* interview when describing his aims for the variable foot. Notley’s “American environment” was that of a mother and poet in New York City, and the ideas of inclusive poetic voice that she learned from Williams allow her to claim the speech of this environment for poetry.

Notley’s most ambitious group talk poems, “My Bodyguard” in *Waltzing Matilda* and “As You Like It” in *Margaret and Dusty*, record the scene of their composition at 101 St. Mark’s Place. Their titles, which refer to a 1980 Hollywood film with a large cast and to Shakespeare’s play, emphasize ensemble drama. Both poems are approximately the same length, fourteen and fifteen pages long, and composed almost entirely of lines of unattributed ambient conversation that is a mix of kid talk, aesthetic discussion, and ordinary chatter. Here is an excerpt from “My Bodyguard”:

We have two of A Change of Hearts. Should we sell one or give it to someone we know?  
 Give it to someone we know. There’s a moth flying in circles about an inch above the floor. Will you get the buzzer? I have nudes and paper-doll clothes all over my lap.  
 Hi.  
 Hi, what do you have for me?  
 Here’s four home runs and eight base hits.  
 How about a few more home runs?  
 What are you doing in there?  
 I’m perfecting my new speech defect. How do you like them?  
 [...]
 Good. Got any valium?  
 Oh Fuck. Well I can’t spare too many. I’m trying to develop a new mental apparatus to deal with the fist of dark depression.

You've been on them for years.  
 So obviously I have to develop it on them.  
 I always tell it I'm on vacation. (57)

Several lines down, another friend stops by:

I wrote myself a note, get the happiness part into your work again.  
 Are you guys really still supposed to be it? How can I face a lifetime of you?  
 Hi.  
 Oh hi.  
 I almost called you to borrow a dollar last night.  
 No we don't have anything. Why don't you offer him a poem for the money  
 you owe him? A nice lesbian love poem mysteriously dedicated to him.  
 Ha Ha.  
 I'm really sorry we don't have anything today.  
 Bye. (58)

The scene is Alice Notley and Ted Berrigan at home, Alice with collage materials on her lap, while the buzzer rings and friends drop in and out, looking for pills or money or, finding none, settling for jokes and companionship. In the lines above, the discussion ranges from baseball to poetry to depression; elsewhere, the conversation includes the plots of books, the scene out the window, minor bodily discomforts, and more. The topic of poetry is never far from anyone's lips, although the discussions are not usually about poetics per se. The line above in which someone reminds herself to "get the happiness part into your work again"—perhaps Notley, again thinking of the New York School's emphasis on "humor and the general light of day"—is as close as we get to straightforward conversation about poetry. Just as often, in typical second-generation style, the topic of poetry seems to be taken up for amusement: "Why don't you offer him a poem for the money you owe him? A nice lesbian love poem mysteriously dedicated to him." Although this is a joke, it is a double-edged joke that also suggests that, in a home economy in which poetry is always in the air, poems accrue value as currency.

Poets came to visit the Notley-Berrigan residence for various reasons: They had an open-door policy with their friends; it was place where people were always talking about poetry or simply talking; Notley was looking after young Anselm and Edmund; and Berrigan was ill and often in bed toward the end. The discussions of money that appear in “My Bodyguard”—often in the form of someone asking for it—point to another important aspect of the open-door policy at 101 St. Mark’s Place. Many of the visitors who fed Notley lines for poems also provided her and her family with their subsistence—with the ability to eat or make rent without having to work steady jobs, so that there would be more time for writing poetry. Edmund Berrigan, in his essay, “Growing Up Unrented on the Lower East Side,” recalls:

Both my parents essentially only accepted work related to poetry, which tended to be teaching jobs or occasional residencies that never lasted very long. So we were mostly late with rent, and the generosity and friendship of others was crucial. If a younger unfamiliar poet wanted to come to the apartment, the price of admission was generally a quart of milk or a loaf of bread. (231-32)

In her introduction to Berrigan’s *Selected Poems*, Notley explains that this was a deliberate strategy: “Ted famously believed that being a poet was a 24-hour-a-day job [...] Does a doctor or lawyer have another job? This is where ‘poverty’ entered in, but we were careful not to call it poverty because it was a choice” (vii).

In order to be full-time poets, Notley and Berrigan opened their home to visitors and gifts, offering community in exchange for money and food. Not only the family’s livelihood but also some of the communal life of the second-generation New York School was sustained by this arrangement. Notley recalls: “Ted later used to tell people that he was in charge of the New York School and that anyone could join it if they paid him five dollars—at some point ten for inflation; no one ever joined this way” (*Selected* x). A few paragraphs later, she recollects the way visitors would come to their apartment to hear Berrigan discuss

his poetic philosophies, which were “traditional and offbeat, phrased in a basic and unacademic way that was also very catching”: “All of this conversation had been an education for me, and became one later for the younger poets who visited us at St. Mark’s Place. We never had any money, but if a visitor made us a small loan—5, 10, 20 dollars tops—she or he could stay awhile and get some of this education” (xi). In other words, although Berrigan may not have been completely serious about young poets “joining the New York School” and playfully exploited this idea for money, there is a level in which Berrigan did hold New York School “classes” and charge money for them, however casual this exchange may have been.<sup>29</sup>

In a poem from *Mysteries*, Notley links acts of undervalued domestic and poetic labor: “motherhood—I call it unpaid work like poetry” (54). If Notley’s two jobs were to raise children and write poems, but she did not get compensated in either case, her solution was to cultivate a lifestyle that would make room for both and still allow the family to eat and make rent. Although her role as a mother kept Notley somewhat restricted to her apartment, by welcoming poets into her home and accepting their gifts, Notley invented an feminist poetic economy that was reflected in her poetry: The visitors whose voices fill her poems are also the economic forces that make the poems possible. This feminist arrangement allowed a poet-mother to fully participate in a “public” poetic realm from which she might otherwise have had restricted access because of her domestic duties.

We might think of this domesticated poetic scene as the New York Home School, a name that indicates how the family’s home was opened up to a poetic community (and perhaps even the way Anselm and Edmund Berrigan were “homeschooled” in poetry by virtue of its inescapability). The co-location of home and school also recalls Naomi Schor’s classification of the two dominant notions of the everyday, feminine and masculine, where

the former describes “the daily rituals of private life carried out within the domestic sphere” and the latter refers to “public spaces and spheres dominated especially, but not exclusively [...] by men” (188). By drawing the public life of the second-generation New York School into the domestic sphere, Notley collapses these distinctions in a way that serves her roles as poet and mother. If, as Felski argues, “A feminist theory of everyday life might question the assumption that being modern requires an irrevocable sundering from home, and might simultaneously explicate the modern dimensions of everyday experiences of home” (26), then we can see how Notley, by nurturing a familial-poetic community at home, fostered the “modern dimensions” of the second-generation New York School. This arrangement does not validate the domestic over the public, but superimposes the two for distinctly feminist ends—that is, for the production of Notley’s poems and the livelihood of her family.

Notley took pleasure in this innovative arrangement, as she recalls in another poem from *Mysteries of Small Houses*, “The Trouble with You Girls,” that flashes back to this time:

So, happy, open a blackbound notebook.  
 Ted pulls on one of his colored T-shirts,  
 “The trouble with Jackoff is . . . no the trouble with *you* is”  
 (Because I’m not listening) “you’re stuck in that chair”  
 It’s true. I sit, wait for the greatest  
 Poem I’ll write . . . “Just want  
 To drink things and write rocks off.” What else? (57)

Next, Notley’s friend rings the buzzer: “Marion, / She comes over daily, before everyone else.” Notley recalls, “I’ve become content this year,” and the poem ends with Ted’s tirade about, and request for, money:

“The trouble with you girls . . . you think it’s all  
 Sunshine and coffee. It’s money, lots of it  
 Everything’s money. My ass is money, yours too  
 Even if your asses aren’t as ugly as mine . . . Got any  
 Money for cigarettes, Marion?” Marion and I  
 Cleaned this apartment, when I first took it and  
 It was small, before everyone came in.  
 “How about a little extra, for a pepsi, and the paper?”

How about some doughnuts for us all?" (57)

Beyond the glut of visitors and dearth of money, we see, in "The Trouble with You Girls," the conditions that made this lifestyle deeply enjoyable and hospitable to the writing of poetry: Notley sits in a chair and writes her "rocks off," waiting for "the greatest / Poem [she'll] write." Through Ted's speeches, Notley reenacts her enthrallment with the voices of others during this time and also supplies an implicit feminist critique. Although Alice and Marion are apparently not worried about money as they sit and have coffee in the sun, they were also the ones who made this living situation possible to begin with: Alice found the apartment, and she and Marion cleaned it together and made it useful as a gathering space. In spite of Berrigan's admonishments, Notley is well aware of the worth of her unpaid domestic and poetic labor: In retrospect, "The Trouble with You Girls," makes it visible and affirms its value.

Notley's other great work of feminist talk poetry, "As You Like It" from *Margaret and Dusty*, figures Notley as satisfied poet in the midst of daily life. "As You Like It" follows much the same format as "My Bodyguard," but contains a passage in the middle that breaks off from group conversation. Instead, Notley's voice inserts itself back into the scene in order to take stock of her position in the midst of her life and her poem:

This is a tale inside your tale. You sat down & wrote this.  
 You are on Holy Ground.  
 How do I propitiate them?  
 Heaven is like being in the middle of writing this poem & it's only itself,  
 heaven.  
 A cup & wine, they'll tell you.  
 I can't buy *my* voice telling me about *my* poem.  
 It's almost the time.  
 Everything I say here is true because I see it, when  
 I'm here.  
 I'm going to be the tutelary deity of here. That's one part.  
 Devotion. This is something you have to know. You  
 don't stand for it, you demand it. Of yourself & them.  
 Then you can rest in the arms of the god & they can suffer

& suffer like you did & then. You gave them love. Your  
 end is sweet. You give your body to the place is very im-  
 portant too.  
 All those anecdotes about how somebody was good somewhere.  
 It's time to make dinner.  
 You don't even get a cup of coffee for intention. (27)

When Notley writes that “Heaven is like being in the middle of writing this poem” we hear the contentment, even bliss, she feels from being in the middle of writing her poem—page seven of fifteen—and in the midst of life, perhaps sitting in her chair, drinking and writing and talking with her family and friends. In “Voice,” Notley recalls the times she hovered on this line between poetry and daily life: “When I wrote while people were in the room, [...] and conversed with others as I wrote and wrote down things I myself said, I was also conscious of the border between art and life: I seemed to inhabit the two simultaneously but they were very distinct from each other, like two stories of a house” (*Coming* 155). In “As You Like It,” we glimpse Notley in this mode, reflecting through art on the life in front of her, which she deems “Holy Ground” as she experiences her role as “the tutelary deity of here,” or the one whose job it is to protect the current environment. Notley tends both to her poem and to the immediately pressing practical concerns of “here”: “It’s time to make dinner.” She “give[s] [her] body to the place,” both by using it to make dinner and by undertaking the work of incorporating many voices into her poem. Dialoguing with herself, she remembers “All those anecdotes about how somebody was good somewhere,” implying that mothers do not get the same amount of recognition for their ordinary good deeds: “You don’t even get a cup of coffee for intention.” She situates these grumbles on “Holy Ground,” however, and makes her own role divine as well. Her ambivalence regarding her role remains, but—perhaps because of her happiness in these years—she briefly allows the everyday to become transcendent.

We can understand Notley's feminist talk poetry as one in a long line of innovations, both practical and literary, that women writers have employed in order to seize upon, and make aesthetically generative, the life conditions that might have hindered their writing. Notley's arrangement recalls Virginia Woolf's description, in *A Room of One's Own*, of Jane Austen's writing conditions:

If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room. And, as Miss Nightingale was so vehemently to complain,—“women never have an half hour . . . that they can call their own”—she was always interrupted. Still it would be easier to write prose and fiction there than to write poetry or a play. Less concentration is required. Jane Austen wrote like that to the end of her days. [...] Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting-paper. Then, again, all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room. (66-67)

While Woolf speculates that it would be easiest to write “prose and fiction” rather than “poetry or a play” in the common sitting-room, Notley is able to sit in her living room and write her talk poems, somewhere between poetry and drama, as the culmination of a decade of experiments with poetic voice. Fascinatingly, Notley's New York Home School is in many ways the opposite of Woolf's well-known recommendation “that it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry” (105). Although Notley was summoning her resourcefulness in a way that women have done for centuries—“making do,” creating meals or clothing or games or art out of whatever is at hand—Woolf could not have foreseen the social and aesthetic shifts that allowed Notley to create poetry directly out of living in poverty and writing in her living room.

Like her friend Mayer, Notley develops a highly pragmatic and poetically inspired method in response to the age-old problem of how women can make art in the midst of, and out of, the work they do to keep life running. In this second-generation New York School, second-wave feminist moment, their poetry was emblematic of what Kane calls, in his

introduction to *Don't Ever Get Famous: Essays on New York Writing After the New York School*, “the remarkable shift from a male-dominated poetic community to one informed by innovative feminist consciousness” in the New York School (xvi-xvii). In these years, women poets held important leadership roles in the community, from Notley’s station in her home salon to Mayer’s position, from 1980 to 1984, as director of The Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church a few blocks away. Waldman had served as director for ten years before that (1968-78), and, as Linda Russo notes, quoting from interviews with Notley and Maureen Owen, “The Poetry Project had a ‘matriarchal kindness and openness to all poets, women and men,’ and has ‘stayed woman-strong’ because Waldman’s influence ‘lasted a long time both literally and imaginatively’” (qtd. in Kane, “*Angel Hair*” 355).<sup>30</sup> Waldman’s enduring impact, combined with Mayer’s and Notley’s positions of authority in official and unofficial New York School hubs, created an environment where women’s poetic innovations could flourish with the respect of the larger community and in the context of other exciting experiments by women peers. Notley’s early feminist innovations in poetic voice are best heard within the context of the New York School generation that these “heiresses,” who “could not understand how they came to be born,” came to define.

<sup>1</sup> Much of the criticism on Notley's work thus far has addressed itself to these questions, investigating how Notley "execute[s] a poem in a way that the content is not co-opted into a series of masculine gestures and signifiers" (Glenum).

<sup>2</sup> Besides "Jimmy Schuyler," Notley also dedicates the book to poet Tom Clark, a poet and the poetry editor of *The Paris Review* at the time, and to Anne and Fairfield Porter (Anne was a poet and Fairfield a painter who painted portraits of his friends Schuyler, O'Hara, and John Ashbery).

<sup>3</sup> Some editions of *165 Meeting House Lane* contain a second cover page with the title *Twenty-Four Sonnets*.

<sup>4</sup> See the documentary short *USA: Poetry, Frank O'Hara* (1966), directed by Richard O. Moore, for film footage of O'Hara in this mode. As of this writing, a clip of the film is available on YouTube.

<sup>5</sup> Berrigan also developed a related form, the "Things to Do" poem, which lists things to do in a particular place (e.g., "Things To Do in New York City"), perhaps a way of extending the "I do this, I do that" poem into an anticipation of the future.

<sup>6</sup> Notley was with Berrigan in Southampton that winter, but they were not married until 1972, hence my use of "male partner." I sometimes refer to the "you" in the poems as "Berrigan," which I do with the usual caveat that the male partner based on Berrigan who appears as "you" or "he" or "the male" in *165 Meeting House Lane* is a poetic construct.

<sup>7</sup> Another poem of Notley's, "In the Palace Gardens of Midtown" from *When I Was Alive* (1980), also appears to be about walking where O'Hara once walked: "August & mountains of bright / Flashing windows / I crossed each Avenue / And rejoiced where he had walked."

<sup>8</sup> Nelson reports being "startled by the phrase 'the despised daily' on the back cover of *Disobedience*" (134). Notley explains her use of the phrase in an email to Nelson: "I do utterly despise dailiness as it stands. I can't abide what the world has become, the frozen-ness of our product this evil thing that we kiss the ass of every hour" (134). Nelson's surprise at Notley's repudiation of the daily makes sense, since many of Notley's most beloved early poems derive pleasure from the quotidian, but Notley's harsh characterization of dailiness also lines up with her later, more radical critique of patriarchal culture.

<sup>9</sup> The soda marks the requester as Berrigan, who was known for drinking Pepsi constantly and including this detail in his poems; it is, therefore, a New York School allusion, as well.

<sup>10</sup> Male poets, too, wrote poems about parenthood in the 1950s, such as Robert Lowell's "Home After Three Months Away" and W.D. Snodgrass's "Heart's Needle."

<sup>11</sup> Plath and Sexton undoubtedly wrote poems that certain women could recognize themselves in, but two poets should not have to bear the burden of representing the experiences of all women; what Notley found lacking in their work motivated her to write poems that broadened the formal and tonal range of the poetry of motherhood.

<sup>12</sup> Notley's poems in *Incidentals* that explore the form of the day are precursors to *Midwinter Day*, but Mayer was already experimenting with day and month units at this time in *Memory*, which was created in 1971-72 and published in book form in 1976.

<sup>13</sup> See also Mayer's indication of omissions in *Midwinter Day*.

<sup>14</sup> Hejinian published *Doctor Williams' Heiresses* as #28 in her Tuumba Press series in an edition of 500. The lecture has long been out of print and is not included in *Coming After*, but a web search will usually produce a PDF copy.

<sup>15</sup> Notley names only Mayer in the text of *Heiresses*, but in essays and interviews in which she refers to this generation of women writers, she mentions Waldman, Hejinian, Joanne Kyger, Eileen Myles, and others.

<sup>16</sup> In the letter from Mayer included in *Heiresses*, her debt to Williams is tied to the idea of formal inclusiveness and variation: "I've always been very grateful to him for resuscitating the prose mixed with poetry form which is a form I like and seems like a good form to be in a hurry in." *Midwinter Day* is a good example of how Mayer used the "prose mixed with poetry form" to write in a hurry. Mayer's letter is dated January 27, 1980, and was therefore composed during the time she was writing *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, a book full of unsent letters written during the nine months of pregnancy; *Desires*, then, could be productively read alongside *Heiresses*.

<sup>17</sup> The conversation takes place between two unnamed speakers, the lecture-writer and someone who talks to her about Williams and her own poetics in an intimate and funny way—and someone who sounds a lot like Berrigan sounds in Notley's poems—and so it is safe to assume that the conversation is between Notley and Berrigan.

<sup>18</sup> In a 1962 *Paris Review* interview, Williams discusses his use of the variable foot in his poem "The Descent" in a way that lines up with Notley's understanding of it as a measure that can accommodate American speech: "I couldn't speak like the academy. It had to be modified by the conversation about me. As Marianne Moore used to say, a language dogs and cats could understand."

<sup>19</sup> At this point, the playful genealogy at the beginning of the lecture, at the end of which Notley marries her grandfather, William Carlos Williams, begins to make sense. This is not the anxiety of influence, the male poet trying to overthrow his father, but the woman poet falling in love with her grandfather. Notley's play with ideas of familial lineage in *Heiresses* is perhaps a reference to, or parody of, Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973).

<sup>20</sup> Perelman notes that "in hindsight the talk now reads like a statement of poetic principles that didn't conform to those of a good number of the audience," but does not "want to give the impression that the occasion was freighted with melodramatic opposition. This was not the Capulets and Montagues circling with the scent of blood already in the air. [...] Notley was friends with audience members—she was staying with me and Francie Shaw during the residency; and the atmosphere at 80 Langton was one of respect for, and interest and pleasure in her work" (195-96).

<sup>21</sup> For a list of the places Notley lived in the early 1970s, see the chronology in *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan* and Notley's interviews with Foster (70).

<sup>22</sup> "So does your garden grow" is a reference to "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary" and "silver buttons / down her back" is from "Miss Mary Mack."

<sup>23</sup> Throughout *Heiresses*, Notley weaves in a discussion of Williams's "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" and writes of her own Williams-influenced book-length poem, *Songs for the Unborn Second Baby* (published in 1979 by Mayer and Warsh's United Artists Press): "& it is held together by flowers, as 'Asphodel' is—we had a bewilderingly luxuriant garden there—& by the presence of the opposite sex 'you' & by the will to write poetry."

<sup>24</sup> In interviews, Notley explains that Berrigan's manner of speech influenced her more than his poems did: She "found it difficult to be influenced by his style" (Keelan 15), but "was influenced by the way he spoke, very heavily by his speaking rhythms" (Foster 71). Besides the previously quoted conversations in *Heiresses*, Berrigan seems to speak through Notley in the poems "September's Book" in *How Spring Comes* (1981), "Nights in the Gardens of Spain" and "My Bodyguard" in *Waltzing Matilda* (1981) and "Bob & Simon's Waltz" and "As

You Like It” in *Margaret and Dusty* (1985), to name a few clear examples. Although the quotations are not always attributed to Berrigan, and not always set off with quotation marks, it is possible to begin recognizing his brash humor across Notley’s books from the early 1980s, as in this excerpt from “Nights in the Gardens of Spain”: “You’ll say, ‘Many years later I / found he was a ne’er-do-well poet / living with a slutty vixen in / Boulder, Colorado”’ (*Waltzing* 34).

<sup>25</sup> Add to these publications Padgett’s Full Court Press, Eileen Myles’s *dodgems*, and other journals and presses, and an even larger picture of the second-generation New York School begins to get filled in, including poets such as Maureen Owen, Lorenzo Thomas, David Shapiro, Joseph Ceravolo, Charles North—and the list could go on.

<sup>26</sup> See *Nice to See You: Homage to Ted Berrigan* (1991), edited by Waldman, for accounts of Berrigan’s influence.

<sup>27</sup> By this definition, her poems written in Southampton and Chicago in the early to mid-1970s would not qualify; as I have argued, however, this work can be considered exemplary of a New York School poetics of dailiness.

<sup>28</sup> The “Bob & Simon” in the title likely refer to Notley’s poet friends Bob Rosenthal, who is named and quoted in the poem, and Simon Pettet, who is not.

<sup>29</sup> Although Notley does not mention this, there were also younger poets who came to visit her, rather than Berrigan, during these years. David Trinidad recalls a visit to the Notley-Berrigan home in October 1982, where he met both poets: “I really wanted to meet Alice Notley, [Berrigan’s] wife, whose poetry I knew and admired more than his. A mutual friend, Tom Carey, gave me their phone number (they lived on St. Mark’s Place in the East Village—so bohemian) and said to give them a call. If the phone wasn’t unplugged, he informed me, someone would pick up. I dialed several times before Alice answered. I gushed. She said that I could visit them the following afternoon.” Trinidad brings books for Berrigan and Notley to sign, and, at Berrigan’s behest, leaves to get Pepsi for Ted and beer for Alice. As he and Notley “sat in the front room of their railroad flat and shared that six-pack of Bud,” Ted “yelled to Alice from the other room: ‘I told you someday they’d come to see you.’”

<sup>30</sup> Eileen Myles then served as director from 1984–86. Besides “heiresses” Waldman, Mayer, and Myles, Notley’s son Anselm Berrigan later held the Poetry Project directorship from 2003–07 (Diggory 383).

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