

1-1-2012

Writing the self: feminist experiment and cultural identity

Jill Darling
Wayne State University,

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/oa_dissertations



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Darling, Jill, "Writing the self: feminist experiment and cultural identity" (2012). *Wayne State University Dissertations*. Paper 431.

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wayne State University Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

**WRITING THE SELF:
FEMINIST EXPERIMENT AND CULTURAL IDENTITY**

by

JILL DARLING

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2012

MAJOR: ENGLISH

Approved by:

Advisor

Date

DEDICATION

*This dissertation is for Fran and Dave,
my support and counsel.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the encouragement, support, and assistance of a number of people. First and foremost I would like to thank my advisor, Barrett Watten, for his unending patience and support of my project in particular, and for his excitement regarding student projects in general. His classes helped me to broaden my knowledge and ideas about avant-garde art and literary practice in the twentieth-century. His insights, editing skills, counsel, and enthusiasm have been invaluable to my success with this project.

Additionally, I have taken challenging and intensely instructive courses while in the graduate program at Wayne State, and I would especially thank Jonathan Flatley and renée hoogland for introducing me to texts and ideas in modernism, literary studies, gender and cultural studies in ways that I had not thought about previously. Their classes and conversation helped lead me further into the realms of poetics, gender, and culture and toward the completion of this project. Thanks also to Cannon Schmitt and Dana Seitler for helping me think about history and memory through seminar papers that worked as beginning points for some of the chapters in this dissertation. Thanks especially to my MFA advisor, Laura Mullen for introducing me to this path through my own writing and reading, to Rachel Blau DuPlessis for her time and patience in participating in the endeavor of getting a dissertation finally to the defense, and to Carla Harryman and Christine Hume for giving me the opportunity to bring my research, creative writing, and teaching interests together as an instructor in the creative writing program at Eastern Michigan University. I have learned so much from my classes and students at both Wayne State and EMU over the past few years.

I would also like to thank the Bavarian American Academy, and especially the organizers of the summer seminar in American Studies: Meike Zwingenberger, Heike Paul, and Barrett Watten, as well as the student participants, for the financial support and dissertation insights and encouragement I received while participating in the seminar for the past three summers, in both Germany and Detroit. Thanks also to the Wayne State Humanities Center for the dissertation award I received in fall 2010, and the Wayne State Graduate School for awarding me a summer dissertation fellowship for summer 2011.

Further, no thanks are complete without mention of the important personal support and encouragement I have received over the past six and a half years. Thanks to my fellow grad students from the first seminar to the last, and especially to my fun and friendly office mates: Ryan Dillaha, Justin Prystash, Selmin Kara, and Kim Lacey. Thanks to my awesome friends, confidants, and team of undying encouragement: Sara Kern, Sarah James, Kristine Danielson, Judith Lakämper, Vicki Abboud, Jessie Jones, Michael Schmidt, Laura Wetherington, Michelle Pierce, Veronica Corpuz, Jen Krafchick, Katie Godfrey, Drew Cory, Julie Raulli, Jean Leonard, Jennifer Dick, Jennifer Rupert, and Karen Farrelly. Thanks also and especially to my family: Nicki Rose, Ann Rose, Gretchen Rose, Rita Rose Zyber, and Martha Shue for taking me to the beach, feeding me, and keeping me grounded in the real world when other parts of my world were going in other directions. Thanks to my other teachers and mentors Emily Hoskins, Heidi Rohrbeck, and James Abney, who have taught me about the importance of “one breath one movement” and how to let things go and move on, starting with the (continuous) present tense.

And finally, thanks to my companion and dog, Tasha, for keeping me on my toes and making sure I get out of the house regularly, and to most especially to my parents, Fran and Dave

Darling, for their quiet and rational support of my professional endeavors. They are in the first and last place the ones who taught me to follow my instincts and do what I love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction. Writing the Self: Feminist Experiment and Cultural Identity	1
Chapter 1. “I Am I Because My Little Dog Knows Me,” or, The Intertextual Self: Gertrude Stein and Lyn Hejinian	44
Chapter 2. Third-Person Self (Narrated): H.D. and Beverly Dahlen	93
Chapter 3. The Text-Subject in Social Context: Pamela Lu, Renee Gladman, and Claudia Rankine	157
Chapter 4. “Possibility is not a luxury”: (Re)presentation and (Re)identification in <i>The Transformation</i> , <i>Borderlands/La Frontera</i> , and <i>Dictee</i>	208
References	237
Abstract	249
Autobiographical Statement	252

INTRODUCTION

Writing the Self: Feminist Experiment and Cultural Identity

This dissertation examines how twentieth-century experimental women writers construct non/narrative texts whose text-subjects mediate identity and call for increased possibilities for subject-identification in the world. The use of innovative formal strategies and experiment with narrative, combined with the content of identity critique, make these texts political projects that variously explore gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity in relation to contemporary American culture. In this project I bring discussions of identity into the theorization of formally innovative writing. I work to move away from the kinds of essentializing practices of identity politics—in which subjects are fit into specific identity categories—and toward more complicated, contextualized, and historical understandings of identity formation. I begin with the notion that identity categories, or markers, play out in different contexts and are, at different moments: simultaneous, fluctuating, overlapping, and spatial (instead of hierarchical). I then continue toward readings of literary texts that function as new models of identification for spatially contextualized subjects. This project is significant for the way in which it brings together a diverse selection of non/narrative writing by women in the twentieth-century, and combines textual and cultural analysis to think through identity issues in relation to contemporary social subjects.

This project is grounded in literary modernism and moves into work by contemporary American women writers at the end of the twentieth century. I begin by pairing the work of Gertrude Stein and Lyn Hejinian in chapter 1, and that of H.D. and Beverly Dahlen in chapter 2. As modernists, Stein and H.D. are key figures who negotiate identity and non/narrative writing, and are important influences for Hejinian and Dahlen. The paring of modern and contemporary

authors in the first two chapters illustrates a correlation between writing styles and practices as well as how these diverge from the early to late part of the century. Hejinian's body of work, beginning in the 1970s, can be read as coming out of Stein and thinking avant-garde practice through her own contemporary politics as a Language poet. Dahlen seems to pick up H.D.'s Freudian project, and additionally incorporates deconstruction and feminist criticism of the 1970s and 80s in her work. Hejinian and Dahlen also serve as intermediaries between the modernist and later contemporary writers—many of whom have been influenced by modernists such as Stein and H.D., as well as subsequent avant-garde authors and practices. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on contemporary prose and hybrid works by Pamela Lu, Renee Gladman, Claudia Rankine, Juliana Spahr, Gloria Anzaldua, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. These writers, to different degrees, use a variety of formal strategies and problematize narrative autobiographical writing to simultaneously focus on language as instrumental to subjectivity and to represent “experience” as cultural content. They negotiate practices of avant-garde experimentation and writing that explores identity-as-process through examinations of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and history. Their text-subjects become witnesses to the discrepancies in culturally inscribed norms, and call for expanded possibilities for narrative and social representation; and the texts become new models for representing contemporary subjectivity. Reading the primary texts through theorists including Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Susan Stanford Friedman, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Kelly Oliver, among others, offers me ways to show how textual practice and cultural critique in this literature lend toward theorizing expanded possibilities for personal and social subject identification—how subjects identify—in the world. This project is invested in continuing to open spaces of possibility for textual practice and social subjectivity, as well as the feminist political impulse to dissolve margins and bring those

“marginalized” voices into spaces with greater potential for personal and social identifications and politics.

Famously and repeatedly, Gertrude Stein writes: “I am I because my little dog knows me.” What may be less well known about Stein is that her dog Basket (and later Basket II) played an important part in Gertrude and Alice Toklas’s life together. Gertrude went on daily walks with Basket as part of her domestic and social routine, and one famous photo shows Gertrude, Alice, and Basket (who was not a little dog but a large white poodle) walking down the street of what looks like a small French village. This image further conveys the importance of daily habit and domestic life to Stein, whose work is infused with the personal and domestic, as well as the work of her artist contemporaries (she had an extensive collection of modern art) and her regular salons and intimate conversations with her contemporary writers and intellectuals. The quote above represents the fusion of Stein’s form and content, and the relation between her personal life and her experimental writing practice—which could not always be explicitly separated. A subject is in relation (to others, within society), and it is these relations that are simultaneously in need of examination. Setting one’s identity in relation to one’s dog maintains this sense of self in relation to other, while shifting that relation so that we take notice. We begin to participate in the journey that is Stein’s *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, a journey that examines self in relation to other, to society, from within a context of misunderstood modernist writer and eccentric literary celebrity. This text is written after Stein’s famous American tour in the early 1930s—through which she gained a fame and notoriety that she had not experienced before—which I discuss in chapter 1.

Reading *The Geographical History*, through the personal and textual, sets a foundation for this dissertation as a political interrogation of identity through the experimental feminist text and its cultural function and theorization. Stein destabilizes “identity” through linguistic play, repetition, analogy, and reading the abstract through, at times, more tangible phenomena including: landscape, scenery, plays (as in drama), money, the detective story, and autobiography. Finally, she constructs a hybrid genre text that is not prose, poetry, or autobiography but a combination of these, and simultaneously also a meta-text that theorizes its own interrogation of genre (form) and identity (content). I read *The Geographical History* retrospectively: as a queer politics, a non-normative practice that fuses form and content resulting in a cultural critique of identity and the possibilities for its representation, and as an open text that we might use to further the impulse to destabilize and reconceive of terms such as nature and identity. Using Stein as a starting point, I proceed to contextualize my readings in terms of the fusion between form and content, and between the textual and the cultural. The primary texts in my study, to different degrees, incorporate hybrid genre strategies in their presentation of cultural content such that clear distinctions between form and content become impossible; each informs the other. Similarly, in this work, textual practice and cultural commentary or critique also, ultimately, cannot be separated.

I begin my dissertation by bringing together seemingly divergent theoretical perspectives in order to draw connections between the textual and the cultural that I will expand over the course of this project. Audre Lorde writes that “poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.” Further, poetry “lays the foundations for a future of change” (*Sister* 37-38). Julia

Kristeva writes: “The text is a practice that could be compared to political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society. The history and political experience of the twentieth century have demonstrated that one cannot be transformed without the other” (*Revolution* 17). And Judith Butler writes that “possibility is not a luxury. It is as crucial as bread” (*Undoing* 29); she believes that opening possibilities for gender expression, in particular, and for recognition and representation, in general, are crucial for survival. I see this dissertation as bringing together the textual and political project of Kristeva (particularly from *Revolution in Poetic Language*) and the cultural, gender studies, and queer theory work of Butler (*Gender Trouble*, *Undoing Gender*, *Giving an Account of Oneself*) together with Lorde’s proposal that aesthetic practice is active, social, political and can be an instrument for change. Kristeva maintained a life-long investment in social politics and revolution, particularly since the student/worker protests of May 1968 in France, and Butler, in addition to studying gender and culture, can be said to read “form” carefully: from forms and structures of gender roles, relations, and performance to narrative as a form of accounting for oneself. I see these two figures at the center of this project and in conversation, both invested to different degrees, and at various historical moments, in textual and cultural understandings of language and identity.

The range of primary literary texts considered here—through different means and to varying degrees—theorize the subjective “I” through writing that is at times meta-autobiographical. From Stein’s non/narrative, inconclusive meditations on “identity” and “autobiography” to Cha’s visually fragmented catalog of diasporic and marginalized histories in *Dictee*, these texts incorporate theories of autobiography as only one of many strategies for documenting experience. They seem in fact to pick up on Sidonie Smith’s proposal that for women, who do not have access to the universal narrative “I,” autobiography is particularly

suited to the positional and situated nuances of identity that do not result in a unified “self”; they “make trouble with that generic ‘I’” both in terms of genre (autobiography) and a generic lacking of an individual voice (*Subjectivity* 5). Subjects of (women’s) autobiography, Smith argues, “often take up the old autobiographical forms, piece by piece. They turn them over, around, inside out, to tell another kind of story. In doing so they try to dematerialize the very cultural apparatus that would materialize them as specific kinds of subjects”; narrating traditionally silenced experiences is seen as working against cultural inscriptions of subjectivity (183).¹ Avant-garde practice often takes this assumption further to interrogate the materiality of narrative itself as an apparatus of cultural hegemony. The writers in this study are already writing from a space outside of the question of narrative and autobiographical “truth” and enact, through material textual practices, these *other kinds of stories*.

Throughout the project, I move beyond formalist readings to examine questions of narrative and identity, through theories of the relation between avant-garde art and the social, as well as through contemporary critical work in feminist poetics. The 1970s and 1980s turn to work by modernist women became both a material, political project of recovery and an appreciation of aesthetic practice; consequently, the dialogue between the modern and the contemporary began to revise theories of literary modernism in terms of gender, textual practice, and social and cultural relevance. In the 1980s and 1990s a number of critical texts emerged — including Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s transformative *The Pink Guitar*—and debates on formal practice and feminist politics began to form. I cite Elizabeth Frost below, who notes the rift between avant-garde women writers and those writing about identity politics through transparently accessible narratives in the 1970s. The split became importantly controversial in

¹ For more on autobiography in general, and feminist autobiography particular, see the work of Anderson, Lejeune, Marcus, Miller, Smith, and Stanley.

poetry communities at the time, as the debate between Ron Silliman and Leslie Scalapino—arguing on opposite sides of the “formalism” vs. “identity politics” debate proved.²

My project seeks to take the conversation of experimental feminist poetics further into the realm of prose writing, to look at work that explores concepts of identity in ways that are neither completely transparent nor unreadably opaque. The first two chapters begin with identity critique and questioning of social norms presented in Stein and H.D., and takes these insights into readings of the (intertextual) projects of Hejinian and Dahlen and their examinations of “genre” (such as journal writing and autobiography) for contemporary subjects. The last two chapters move into the late twentieth century, in which I read texts that offer political feminist versions of the postmodern; here concerns with identity and self-representation open onto a continuum, a politics, for identification and speaking. The modern critique of the socially enforced Oedipal complex takes on new forms by the end of the century. Postmodern trauma is enacted in *Do not Let Me Be Lonely*; in *Pamela* the narrator is unable to articulate her own history and experience; and in *Juice*, text-subjects find it impossible to tell their own (racially marginalized) stories. In my reading, this leads to new models of representation in Spahr’s *The Transformation* and Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Spahr creates a pronoun—and gender—“neutral” account of non-heterosexually normative domesticity, and Anzaldúa creates a hybrid genre text that rearticulates patriarchal, heteronormative cultural traditions and narratives in different terms. Both of these writers reflect on the complex relationships between colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed. Anzaldúa’s project of coming to terms with her own antithetical experiences manifests in a model of possibility for culturally and historically oppressed lesbian, Chicana subjects. Spahr and Anzaldúa queer their writing processes and textual products in order to construct an “other” account of non-normatively heterosexual

² See Watten and Hejinian, *Poetics Journal* 9 (1991)

experience. Finally, Cha's *Dictee* becomes witness, in Kelly Oliver's terms; going beyond the call for dismantling structures and subjects' need for recognition, the text-subject becomes what Cha names "disease," which means the one who is skilled at speaking. *Dictee* opens a space, through its hybrid, textual materiality, in which silenced voices and histories come to "bear witness." In the literature I have chosen, text-subjects are created and revised through subversive narrative and formal strategies, and identity is explored as a continual process and not as a unified product. Incorporating Kristevan theories of textual materiality with cultural studies readings of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identification, I argue that these primary texts go beyond experiment to act as models for political change in the world. The writers of these texts create subjects who enact the importance of dismantling binary structures (straight/gay, self/other, male/female, oppressor/oppressed); they call for alternative means of identification that often are not available through ideological social norms and the essentializing nature of group identifications.

This project seeks to move away from the kinds of practices of identity politics in which subjects are fit into specific identity categories (race, class, gender, sexual orientation) and toward more complicated, contextualized, and historical understandings of identity formation as processual (how the simultaneous, fluctuating, overlapping, and varying degrees of identity categories play out in different contexts and moments). My readings assume identity as process and show how the writers theorize the social construction(s) of identity in the world through the content as well as the formal strategies of their texts. Although Butler advocates subjects' need for "recognition," Kelly Oliver argues that subjects might go beyond recognition to participate in the act of "witnessing," as that through which subjects gain the ability to address and respond, to speak, in relation to events and others. Further, as Oliver explains: "None of us develops a sense

of ourselves as subjects with any sort of identity apart from relations with others”; witnessing therefore becomes not simply a project of individual identity but an “ethical and political responsibility” (10-11). For Oliver, to “conceive of subjectivity as a process of witnessing” necessitates the ability to address and respond “in relation to other people, especially through difference” in order also to “realize an ethical and social responsibility to those others who sustain us” (19). The witness to history, the document that gives voice to the previously silenced, enacts a model of political and social transformation, one through which subjects can speak through their experiences, and witness the injustice of narrative and social norms that serve to restrain, contain, and stabilize identities and subjects-in-process.

The primary texts presented here, although diverse in content, all deal in textual politics that extend out into the cultural realm. The call for new languages, finding other means of representation and seeking greater possibilities for identification in the world is a politics in action. These texts offer material examples that might motivate further textual practice and social change; they use formal strategies to break through (symbolic) narratives that “naturalize” (gendered, sexual, ethnic) experience; and they function within symbolic structures (of patriarchy, language, history) while simultaneously embodying Kristeva’s semiotic space of disruption, rupture, contradiction, and negativity. The discussion of cultural identity translates into the readings of the primary texts discussed below as they enact formal incoherence, and textually perform the clarity and insight found in spaces of interruption. Subjects “interrupted by alterity,” as Diane Chisholm writes, do not simply fit into cohesive narratives of experience. Finding new and alternative means of documenting such antithetical experience continues to offer alternative possibilities for recognition, representation, speaking, and witnessing that do not simply result in narrative cohesion and closure. These writers create subjects-in-process who

move through the space of the text similarly to multiply situated subjects in the world, while the multiple and contradictory discourses of the world are enacted through the formal strategies on the page. The subjects of these texts become witnesses to the limited nature of ideological narratives, and the limiting effects of language and binary structures, and they instead serve as textual models of non/narrative, enacting greater possibilities for identification, representation, and witnessing of subjects' complex experiences in the world.

I. Experiment and Identity

For the purposes of grounding this project within current conversations about formally innovative writing by women in the twentieth-century—what some call avant-garde, language-centered, feminist experimental writing, or non/narrative writing—I would like to begin with Elizabeth Frost's project in *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*, which examines "the work of modern and contemporary women writers who contest issues of gender, race, history, and sexuality in innovative poetic forms" (xi). Frost is in part responding to studies of American poetry by women that "tended to focus on a poetics of personal experience, frequently grounded in identity politics" and subsequently "marginalized avant-gardism in feminist poetics" (xii); it is also a study of the work of poets who share a belief that language both shapes, and can take part in changing, consciousness (xii). True to the tradition of avant-garde practice, Frost writes, "each [poet] weds radical politics to formal experiments" (xii).³

³ Using both the history of avant-garde practice and revising the term in relation to "radical feminist poetics," Frost defines "avant-gardism as any artistic practice that combines radical new forms with radical politics or utopian vision . . . I hold that the avant-garde venture unites formal innovation with political engagement: The avant-gardist assumes that a daring new artistic practice has the potential to change the world by inciting a change of consciousness. In my view, radical political belief precedes and *necessitates* formal invention on the part of the avant-garde artist: More than an aesthetic choice, experimentation bears the full weight of urgent social conviction" (xiv-xv).

Frost marks the 1970s as a moment in which politically feminist poetry, and concerns with aesthetic practice in women's writing, diverge. As work by women writing accessible political poems became popular, especially in relation to activist politics of the women's movement, Kathleen Fraser and others decided to create a space for women poets interested in aesthetic practice as politics, following in the tradition of the avant-garde and contextualized in their contemporary moment. Frost notes Fraser in particular, who worked to create a space for reclamation of the work of modernist women writers and for the continuing practice and acceptance of work by contemporary innovative writers. Fraser's own politics came to include the formation of the journal *HOW(ever)*—which printed twenty-four issues between 1983 and 1992 and continues presently online—and the continual negotiation of feminist theory and poetic practice.

Instead of focusing on work in the tradition of the confessional poetry of Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath, or what came to be seen as the feminist poetry of Adrienne Rich or the late work of Elizabeth Bishop, *HOW(ever)* looked to answer the question: "What about the women poets who were writing experimentally?" and included work of writers such as Rae Armantrout, Barbara Guest, Fannie Howe, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Beverly Dahlen, Hannah Weiner, Myung Mi Kim, Sheila K. Smith, Mei Mei Berssenbrugge, Gail Scott, Laura Moriarty, Nicole Brossard, and Carla Harryman, among others. Co-editor Frances Jaffer considered *HOW(ever)* a space for "The poetry feminists usually eschew, believing that now is the time for women to write understandable poetry about their own lives, and with feeling, with the heretofore undeveloped self in prominent display," and because "the myths of a culture are embodied in its language, its lexicon, its very syntactical structure." Further, Jaffer argues, "to focus attention on language and to discover what can be written in other than traditional syntactical or prosodic structures may

give an important voice to authentic female experience. Certainly one should be read side-by-side with the other” (*HOW(ever)*). The philosophy behind *HOW(ever)* was not to displace mainstream feminist literature, but to widen the “canon” by including writing that was doing political work on the level of language and formal structure. Although Jaffer’s meaning is not completely clear, and pointing to a sense of “authenticity” can be problematic for many reasons, I would argue that for Jaffer, “authentic female experience” enacted at the formal level of the text must recognize the variety of experiences of subjects situated within multiple social, economic, gendered, and other contexts, and discourses, as well as opening further possibilities for aesthetic practice.

The project and politics of *HOW(ever)*, as an early moment in the poetics of late twentieth-century avant-garde women writers, has been essential to the further recognition and theorization of feminist aesthetics. The original impetus has been enhanced and revised by later poetics anthologies and studies—*Moving Borders*, *Breaking the Sequence*, Ann Vickery’s *Leaving Lines of Gender*, DuPlessis’s oeuvre, Frost’s *Feminist Avant-Garde*—that, to different degrees, expand the range of representation to include more ethnic and cultural diversity and well as ranges of experimentation and commentary. Though *Moving Borders* (discussed below) and *Leaving Lines of Gender* present limited conversations on the relationship between textual experimentation and cultural politics, each marks an important historical moment that seeks to make public writers and texts that had previously, for the most part, been kept on the margins (the margins of the already marginalized avant-garde). Further, *Breaking the Sequence* is one of few texts dealing with experimental fiction writing—most discussion of women’s experimental writing centers on poetry—in which contributors explore various ways in which experimental fiction writers “[explode] dominant forms” of traditionally masculine fiction writing. DuPlessis,

throughout her work, crucially opens spaces of poetics and criticism for feminist re-readings of masculine modernism and cultural interrogations of textual and linguistic practice, while Frost's project brings textual practice and cultural politics in twentieth-century poetry together in a way that allows for a greater range of conversation on form and content in the chosen texts. Frost begins with historical examinations of Stein and Mina Loy, moves into a section on race and gender through a reading of Sonia Sanchez and the Black Arts Movement, and finally considers tradition simultaneously with contemporary hybrid practices through the work of Susan Howe and Harryette Mullen. In a way, where Frost moves toward the hybrid text as a means of enacting cultural tensions, I see my project beginning: with hybrid genre writing that further continues the conversation of the inseparability of form and content, with particular regard to cultural politics.

The publication of *HOW(ever)* began in 1983 in order to bring together the writing of women who were, and had been, writing in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as put them in conversation with modernist women predecessors. In 1984, *Poetics Journal* published a special issue on "Women and Language," edited by Barrett Watten and Lyn Hejinian, highlighting the creative and critical theorizing among women writers affiliated with the language-centered writing of the 1970s, and which critically focused on what Ron Silliman would call "the referential dimension of language." Silliman's anthology, *In The American Tree*, expanded the canon of transgressive literary practice selected in Donald Allen's earlier *New American Poetry* and included writing that interrogated the structures of language as a political practice. A number of women writers included in Silliman's anthology are also prominent in Mary Margaret Sloan's 1998 anthology, *Moving Borders*, which, like *HOW(ever)*, specifically brings together the innovative work of contemporary women writers from the 1970s to the 1990s. *Moving Borders*,

though, primarily focuses on the variety of formal practices, leaving aside any discussion of feminist politics. Additionally, around this time critical work on contemporary experimental poetry by women began to emerge as a new field in itself; the field of poetics includes creative and critical writers who now regularly explore questions of historical canonicity (expanding the canon to include scholarship on experimental women writers), aesthetics, and cultural, social, and political relevance of experimental work.⁴

The field of poetics has moved beyond the examination of modernist textual disruption as political practice, to include a variety of approaches to reading texts by both men and women in terms of gender and gendered politics. Some modernists such as William Carlos Williams and James Joyce have been read in terms of their “feminine” styles of writing because of the ways they subvert and resist language structures in response to (patriarchal) social structures.⁵ Others like Mina Loy appropriated the avant-garde practices of her male counterparts to create, at times overtly, feminist political texts that were in part due to her dissatisfaction with the social position of women in general as well as their inability to fully participate in the literary circles around her at the time.⁶ The French theorists in the 1970s and 1980s provided additional alternative ways to expand the discussion of textual practice, through textual analyses, and toward studies that seek to relate formal practice and real world politics.⁷ Taking on the metaphorical “feminine” and “masculine” styles of modernist writing, for example, critics such as Marianne DeKoven (*A Different Language*) and Linda Kinnahan (*Poetics of the Feminine*) focused on the textual styles of writers such as Stein, Williams, and Loy. Other critics, including DuPlessis and Frost, expand their readings to investigate how formal issues are central to the politics and cultural critique

⁴ In addition to the critical work of DuPlessis, see work on modern and contemporary women writers and feminist poetics by DeKoven, Keller, Miller, Kinnahan, Hogue, Hinton, Simpson, and Spahr.

⁵ In particular see Kinnahan.

⁶ See Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto”; “Songs to Joannes; and “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose.”

⁷ In particular see Derrida, Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva.

expressed in poetic texts, going beyond discussion of the styles of “gendered” writing. The field has moved beyond the textual, material readings of formal innovation to show important relations between formal strategy and content, be it political, social, personal, or otherwise. A critic can no longer read simply for a gendered style of writing, but must also consider relations between and among gender, race, sexuality, and/or cultural politics inside and outside of the text.

Key to my project is the importance of the feminist politics of the 60s and 70s, what Felski calls the “phenomenon of women’s explicit self-identification as an oppressed group, which is in turn articulated in literary texts in the exploration of gender-specific concerns centered on the problem of female identity” (Felski, *Beyond* 1). Further, I expand and complicate the idea of “self-identification” by including more formally innovative texts, in order to show how the “oppressed group” of women is not a singular group at all but a network or field of multiple voices and concerns. Felski argues against the idea of a singular “feminist aesthetic,” since necessary to any project is “theorizing the historically specific locations of women in culture and society” other than simply placing particular literary styles outside of dominant linguistic structures. The separation between the literature of formal experimentation and that of “social struggle and change” (6) is reinforced as “a link between literature and feminism can only be established in a text that addresses themes in some way relevant to feminist concerns; multiplicity, indeterminacy, or negativity are not in themselves specifically feminist, or indeed specifically anything” (7). In going further to make the connection(s) “between literature and the broader realm of social practice,” she argues, we must understand that “feminist literature is understood as a form of meaning production, a construction of gendered identity which draws upon intersubjective cultural and ideological frameworks rather than a more or less truthful representation of an unproblematically given female reality” (9). Women do not encompass a

“given female reality” but are contextualized in multiple realities, their writing presents a multiplicity of experiences, histories, and understandings, and few, if any, would argue that any literary text is a “truthful representation of an unproblematically given female reality.” Felski complicates this somewhat in her more recent *Doing Time* in which she argues that “it is impossible to define in general terms what a feminist aesthetic might be, that feminist approaches to art must be plural, not singular” (190). The feminist recognition of “the value of ambiguity, contradiction, and non-identity” in aesthetic practice can be useful, especially as art may “help complicate and cast new light on our perceptions of maleness and femaleness, gender and sexuality.” However, Felski argues, it is important to consider that “this aesthetic principle of non-identity does not accord with the more concrete and goal-directed concerns of feminist politics” (189). Although Felski draws a false division between aesthetic “non-identity” and political “identity,” I agree that instead of simply relying on “the subversive effects of formal innovation” as feminist politics, we need to consider larger, and multiple, contexts—the “social and institutional frameworks of contemporary art”—as well as women’s place in the historical production of art, in order to bring feminist politics and aesthetics together into more thoughtful and complex relation.

Further, I want to show how the texts I’ve chosen enact identity as a process through their formal strategies. The aesthetic is used politically in order, among other things, to draw our attention to the impossibility of containing identity within singular categories (black, white, lesbian, straight, etc.). This critiques social and institutional structures that define women, and women’s art, historically. According to Lacan, before language we have no sense of self, no identity; it is “the Symbolic Order of our culture, the social languages that identify us and lend us identities, all of which exceed consciousness and never assume the form of knowable or

conscious identity Our identity is given to us from outside, and we are constitutively alienated” (Rivkin 393). Recognizing this, the authors in my study challenge the myth of the social formation of identity by constructing texts that enact the more complex processes of identity. Subjects cannot simply identify as one or another type of identity but are in (dis)continuous, uneven, simultaneous, spatial, historical contexts through which they make sense of themselves and the world around them. From Stein to Cha, these writers play with language and textuality, break away from normative expectations, and challenge the myth of narrative (identity) as cohesive and singular in order to create new forms of representation for thinking through the complex ways subjects identify.

Although “permanently troubled by identity categories,” Judith Butler believes them to be “sites of necessary trouble” (“Imitation” 308) that we can use for thinking and discussion of identity more productively. She explains, “In avowing the sign’s strategic provisionality (rather than its strategic essentialism) . . . identity can become a site of contest and revision” (312). In terms of marginalized, or other, communities, Biddy Martin examines the importance of “the possibility of reconceptualizing identity without abandoning it and its strategic deployment altogether” (275) and proposes moving away from focusing on particular groups or “identities” and thinking instead in terms of what Theresa de Lauretis calls “micropolitical practices,” as Martin explains: “practices of self-representation which illuminate the contradictory, multiple construction of subjectivity at the intersections, but also in the interstices of ideologies of gender, race, and sexuality” (277). If narrative autobiography can be read as representing the contradictory and multiple—as in the work of Audre Lorde writing black, lesbian, female experience—then this project expands that conversation to read work that includes the textually contradictory and multiple. The writers here enact the tensions of identity categories through the

non/narrative writing of personal and social experience; their text-subjects are continually in process as they question and theorize identity and how subjects identify in the world.

In reading *This Bridge Called My Back*, Martin cites Anzaldúa, among others, for their attempts to attend to the complex intersections of race, gender, and sexuality:

By demonstrating the complex discursive and institutional intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality and their inscription on the bodies and psyches of women, these autobiographical essays, poems, and letters relate psychic and political struggles in ways that make 'identity' irreducible to consciousness. The category 'women of color,' as it is elaborated in *This Bridge*, stands in a critical relation to assumptions of unity based on identity. (282)

This Bridge begins to address the complexities of identity through the use of different genres of writing (poems, letters, essays); the editors seek to show that there is no single way to represent or articulate identity; they want to alleviate the danger of reproducing "a cultural politics that places its faith in identity and in writing" (Martin 282). In *This Bridge*, the contributors use the various genres to "elaborate" identity. The texts in my study take this idea further to challenge representation at the level of genre itself; the writers use, and misuse, narrative as a means of challenging ideologically imposed identities on subjects, and practice a variety of formal, textual strategies. The text, like identity, is irreducible to singular, linear representations of a subject's participation in the world. The complexity of formal, textual elements is analogous to, and enacts, the complex, shifting, layered, discontinuous, and non/narrative "realities" of identity.

Martin explains that for the lesbian-identified contributors in *This Bridge*, "lesbianism clearly does not figure as the exclusive ground of either identity or politics; however, it is neither divisible from nor subordinate to other identities It marks a desire for more complex realities, for relationships filled with struggle and risk as well as pleasure and comfort" (Martin 284). In terms of lesbian autobiography, Martin continues:

Lesbianism ceases to be an identity with predictable contents, to constitute a total political and self-identification It remains a position from which to speak, to organize, to act politically, but it ceases to be the exclusive and continuous ground of identity or politics. Indeed, it works to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around identity, not to dissolve them altogether but to open them to the fluidities and heterogeneities that make their renegotiation possible. (289-90)

In this sense Martin considers lesbian identity as an active and fluid process that “works to unsettle” the confines of static “identity.” Taking this idea further, I use the term “queer” to consider active processes of undoing, an activity of critique and of implementing non-normative (textual and social) strategies. I read queer theory and a poetics of non/narrative identity together to consider that the experimental text may be read as analogous to sexuality, that the (queer) non/narrative is in relation to (straight) narrative in that there are many versions and manifestations of both non/narrative narrative practices.

A number of the primary texts in my project can be considered queer in terms of their non-heterosexually identified subjects enacting complex sexual identities through formal innovation. Butler writes, “David Halperin has said, 'Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence.' . . . It's not (necessarily) just a view on sexuality, or gender. It also suggests that the confines any identity can potentially be reinvented by its owner” (Gauntlett). Although I do not want to generalize the term so that it is no longer useful, I do want to consider queerness as a practice of critique in my readings of the texts here. Many of the writers “identify” as non-heterosexually normative, but to varying degrees of openness in their writing. In order not to assume, or place unnecessary emphasis on, sexual orientation that is not already considered in the content of the texts—and as it seems to make sense within the arguments of this project—I use “queer” as a way of reading non-normative practices and processes of textual construction, as well as how it may apply to the content of the

stories of the text-subjects. A “queering” of the normative, narrative text enacts social critique. The queerness is in the content (narratives of non-heterosexually identified subjects) and in the form (non/narrative and other formally experimental strategies). Queer subjectivity may be read as analogous to textual innovation, but it is also enacted through textual practice; narrative, in many of these texts, is “queered” as a way of enacting alternative practices and identifications that cannot be simply reduced to linear, cohesive identity or narrative choices.

Diana Fuss engages the relationship between identity and identification and claims that although the two terms cannot be simplistically differentiated, they are in intimate relation with one another and yet have differing functions. She writes that “identifications are erotic, intellectual, and emotional” and that “while we tend to experience our identities as part of our public personas—the most exposed part of our self’s surface collisions with a world of other selves—we experience our identifications as more private, guarded, evasive” (2). Fuss contextualizes identification as a process that is not static, but is open to fluctuation of intellect and emotion. If identity is relational, then those relations begin with personal identifications and then move to the social. The process of identification becomes one of a political nature particularly when subjects’ identifications are determined for them, or when the range of possible ways to identify is limited by cultural norms and expectations. Fuss explains:

At the very same time that identification sets into motion the complicated dynamic of recognition and misrecognition that brings a sense of identity into being, it also immediately calls that identity into question Identification is a process that keeps identity at a distance, that prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the formation of an *Illusion* of identity as immediate, secure, and totalizable. (2)

The work of theorizing identification, upsetting the illusion of secure identity, and looking to new or other possible ways for subjects to identify is part of the politics of this project. I would argue that, as my primary texts serve as examples of “other” ways of narrating, they also

function as models for thinking through identity—and the processes of identification within the self—and increased ways in which subjects (in the text and in the world) might identify. Increased possibilities for subjective identification might mean greater awareness of the complex and dynamic nature of identity, and might allow subjects greater social recognition and active participation.

II. Politics and the “Experimental Prose Narrative”

In my selected primary texts, content (the “what”) and form (the “how”) are so intimately connected that they construct each other. The content, or the stories and “meanings” of the texts, cannot be separated from how they are constructed, organized, articulated, challenged, manipulated, and presented. Formal writing strategies—including language play, narrative subversion, repetition, interrogation of the parts of speech and point of view, among others—are as much related to meaning as the ideas and stories themselves; in fact, formal devices are often used purposefully and strategically so that the content is read through, and meaning informed by, formal elements. In this project I use tools of poetic reading and critique, particularly coming out of avant-garde and experimental poetics, to read hybrid, prose texts in terms of both content and form.

Toril Moi argues that “extreme reflectionism simply cannot accommodate notions of formal and generic constraints on textual production, since to acknowledge such constraints is equivalent to accepting the inherent impossibility of ever achieving a total reproduction of reality in fiction” (46). Although few would now argue with the notion that reality cannot be transparently reproduced in fiction, Moi additionally cites Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic*—a text that still read widely as a foundational text for women’s and feminist studies programs—who assert that, through the use of various literary devices, the

female writers they study simultaneously conform to and subvert patriarchal literary standards. However, the devices tend to remain on the surface of the texts for these critics, who finally see the narrated characters as the doubles of the authors; the text is the place in which the real (fragmented and conflicting) experiences of women are organically unified. This idea is challenged by the history of avant-garde practice in which the conception of wholeness of the text or the author of the text is only an illusion, and it is this impossibility of the unification of disparate elements (experiences, understandings of the world, multiple elements of identity formation) that is enacted, in multiple ways, in the avant-garde text. The basic problem, historically, has been this division between realist content as feminist politics, and the idea that formally innovative work cannot be political or contain social critique. This project largely deals with how the selected writers respond to and construct alternatives to linear, progressive, narrative texts, particularly texts that claim to be autobiographical or document a life story in some way.

I am not interested in challenging the genre of autobiography as much as I am in using the primary texts here to explore the many possible other ways to write stories “about” experience. Each text in its way responds to the difficulties of narration, interrogates narrative and language structures as social/historical constructions, and understands that as subjects and citizens we are as much formed by language as by other ideological social tools. These writers both use and dismantle narrative strategies, and for this reason I use the term “non/narrative,” as it is used in the special issue of *Poetics Journal* (no. 5, 1985) on Non/Narrative, and in the recent issue on Non/Narrative in the *Journal of Narrative Theory*. According to Carla Harryman, “the editors [of *Poetics Journal*] chose to resist creating a simple binary between narrative and non/narrative practices, representing a spectrum of positions by new narrativists, poets, and

artists” (2) that “would invite readers to take narrative and nonnarrative equally seriously” (3). The issue of *Poetics Journal* was aimed at writers thinking about narrative in their own work, and was also meant to “encourage critical study of non/narrative in scholarly contexts that could in turn enable the development of a narratology that took seriously the non” (3). Building upon these early goals in a new historical moment, Harryman explains that

the theoretical work of the socially engaged non/narrative text stems from its production of a crisis of understanding. Works that shift between genres disturb categorical frames They radically break rules of story-telling to stage a necessary disruption of asymmetrical power relations, the limits of knowledge, psychological and social operations of recognition and misrecognition, the complex connections between private experience and larger social forces, and the cooperative construction of meaning. (2)

The writers I study here use narrative strategies in a variety of ways, and none of the texts disavow narrative altogether. “Breaking the rules” of narrative writing not only disrupts and calls attention to itself as disruption, but makes readers also participate in the textual experience as a larger social politics and “cooperative construction of meaning.” Working through narrative, as one of many ideological means of socialization, I suggest that my primary texts, through the construction of both form and content, may be read as exploratory interrogations into the nature of identity formation in a historically patriarchal, racist, and homophobic society.

Social and literary resistance, challenging borders and oppositions—this is all work being done currently in queer/gender/sexuality studies and activism, and has been enacted in the work of the “New Narrative” writers. Robert Glück has become a central figure for this group, who, he explains, in the 70s and 80s “were fellow travelers of Language Poetry and the innovative feminist poetry of that time, but our lives and reading lead us toward a hybrid aesthetic, something impure.” This hybridity, in addition to aesthetic practice, often had to do with queer and gay identifications not represented among other literary movements at the time, and the use and necessity of narrative in New Narrative aesthetic practices. For them, Language Poetry

served as a model for formal experiment but was too limited in terms of cultural and identity politics; the New Narrative writers, who predominantly identified as gay men, pushed the genre of autobiographical narrative in more hybrid directions. As Glück explains, “We were thinking about autobiography; by autobiography we meant daydreams, nightdreams, the act of writing, the relationship to the reader, the meeting of flesh and culture, the self as collaboration, the self as disintegration, the gaps, inconsistencies and distortions, the enjambments of power, family, history and language” (Glück). As Dianne Chisholm explains, “the narrative of New Narrative represents gay lives as constructed on location. It calls historical, gay-consciousness into being at a moment when Language Poetry dominated the literary scene with its performative deconstruction of narrative voice Writing autobiography is New Narrative’s mode of representing the complex constructedness of self in commodity society” (56). Important to Chisholm’s project is the “aim of rendering antithetical experience perceptible”; looking at work that brings together “narrative *and* montage, activist *and* negative critique” (60) is then revolutionary in terms of breaking boundaries and creating spaces of possibility for new models of autobiographical writing and social/sexual identification.

The New Narrative movement, according to Rob Halpern, offered “one response to some unresolved impasses between Gay Liberation, the Avant-Garde, and a New Left that seemed at times unresponsive to the exigencies of sexual politics” (82). Narrative storytelling about real gay lives was as important to these writers as dismantling the ideological structures of narrative itself. Recognizing the power of narrative to construct subjectivity, these writers constructed hybrid, non/narrative writing, which in turn could also work politically bringing innovative writing and (gay) politics together in a productive way. Steve Abbott, a central figure of the group, wrote at the time, “New Narrative is language conscious but arises out of specific social

and political concerns of specific communities It stresses the enabling role of content in determining form rather than stressing form as independent from its social origins and goals” (qtd. in Halpern 82-83). In New Narrative, as in Language writing, form and content, as well as the formation of a theory of non/narrative, are in close relation. For New Narrative writers, content additionally includes narrative representations of gay identities and politics in the 1970s and 80s on the West Coast. Used strategically and consciously, as Halpern explains, “narrative has the potential to make perceptible the occlusions and voids in that history where other stories and their corresponding subject positions might then appear for the first time.” In his own reading of the writers, and literature of the period, Halpern is “suggesting an approach to narrative as a political response to that history of enclosures: narrative as a nonsite, or a placeholder, for something in excess of that one story New Narrative could then be read in dialectical tension with its apparent opposite, non-narrative, *each persisting in and through the other*” (105). Reading narrative and “non-narrative” in and through each other is itself a socially productive theory, and political use of, narrative. Halpern further argues, “New Narrative has the potential both to map and transform our conditions of possibility for organizing the social material—feelings, language, affects—that enables new subjectivities to emerge, while making legible the conditions of their emergency, the social lines of force that constrain who speaks and what can be said” (106). This is how I see my project here intersecting with Halpern’s examination of the New Narrative writers: the writers in my study use narrative to represent (often autobiographical) content, while interrogating both the content and the use of narrative in its representation. Narrative and non/narrative, like form and content, are in dialectical relation as they theorize their own processes of construction. My primary texts, through a variety of styles and voices, work through feminist (identity) politics, “autobiography,” and the gendered nature

of avant-garde practices in twentieth-century American literature. These texts use narrative/non/narrative to examine and theorize identity, and offer possibilities for subjective identification and understandings of identity in the world outside of the texts.

In order to further examine the (potential) social or political efficacy of formally innovative work, I want to turn briefly to examples of avant-garde literature as social practice. Although a number of theorists have dismissed the historical avant-garde as “failing” as a political or social aesthetic movement, I want to point to some of the texts that provide substantive accounts for historical and continuing politics that go beyond simplified notions that “negativity . . . is identical to . . . political agency” (Watten 150). As Barrett Watten argues:

The first notion to be cast aside is that the negativity of the avant-garde is always the same refusal—prototypically, that of male artists to participate in normative culture after the traumatic rupture of total war. Avant-garde negativity is quite variously articulated in relation, particularly, to gender and nationality at specific historical moments. There is no ‘one’ avant-garde, defined by the paradigmatic example of the historical avant-garde. (154)

The project of “reconciling radical form with social agency,” he explains, “is the burden of any new consideration of the avant-garde,” even taking into account that “avant-gardes are usually small groups of practitioners at a far remove from the mechanisms of social reproduction” (154). Using the work of El Lissitzky, a Russian Constructivist, Watten frames a conception of the “constructivist moment” and claims that:

In his radical work of the 1920s, the no longer traumatic but now open horizon of revolution and the proposal of such objects are united in the construction of form as an exemplary parable of action. As the word *revolution* itself constructs a horizon of possibility out of an experience of extreme disruption, the continuing revolution is an open horizon of pure possibility that leads to a production of new objects that, in turn, interpret its meaning. (165)

The constructivist moment is one in which the negativity transforms into the art object and subsequently opens a space for an exploration of utopian possibility, for a potential “series of constructive acts” (165) to follow the initial negative impulse; it is through the incompleteness and openness of the object as art, in the context of the social and historical articulation of the artist, that of the “horizon of possibility.” It is “an elusive transition in the unfolding work of culture in which social negativity—the experience of rupture, an act of refusal—invokes a fantasmatic future—a horizon of possibility, an imagination of participation. Constructivism condenses this shift of horizon from negativity to progress in aesthetic form” (191). The constructive space is the space of possibility. To bring together the constructive relation between radical formal strategy and social agency, Watten uses examples such as Detroit Techno and the “reflexive relation between the negativity of Detroit’s social history . . . and the boundary-breaking shock waves of technological innovation” (195-96). The specific potential politics of gender or other point of interrogation can be seen in the constructive moment of each specific text. An example is the work of Gertrude Stein, in which the negative disruption of language opens the constructive potential for a new gender consciousness. According to Krzysztof Ziarek, Stein

poses the problem of the relation between the two “avant-gardes”: on the one hand, the modernist textual practices and formal innovations and, on the other, the “avant-garde” of feminist writing, with its critique of cultural formations, sexuality, and politics. These two avant-garde moments in Stein’s work illustrate the convergences between avant-garde textual practices and a reconceptualization of experience outside of the parameters of patriarchal discourse. (151)

Ziarek argues that Stein’s work “is never a matter of a formalist aesthetics,” because it actually works to remap “the very structure of experience, against the predominant representational and linguistic practices” (152). Stein, he writes, “rewrites the relations constitutive of experience on the elemental linguistic level: relations between words and syntactical rules.” One might say that

the formalism of her aesthetics is precisely the cultural critique that is at the heart of her project. But Stein's genius lies in the ways in which she enacts her cultural critique through her subversive linguistic strategies. *Tender Buttons* and *Lifting Belly*, for example, are "about" lesbian domesticity, romance, and desire; from the caressing of nouns in *Tender Buttons* and the public presentation (the text) of the private lesbian domestic space, to the lesbian "sex act" enacted through erotically charged, repetitive language, Stein challenges given conceptions of both language practice and lesbian desire, and opens spaces of possibility for sexual, lesbian, and gendered representations and identifications outside of the text.

Echoing Audre Lorde's claim that "poetry is not a luxury," Judith Butler argues that "possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread" (*Undoing* 29). The New Narrative writers are thinking in terms of sexuality and politics, as well as how textual strategies might enact possibilities for "rendering antithetical experience perceptible." The texts that I examine in this project take this sense of possibility further into explorations of feminist and gender politics in relation to, and enacted through the use of, formal strategies and narrative subversion. At the borders, up against the boundaries, in the constructive moment, spaces of possibility open to allow for new models and ways of knowing, for alternative means of identifying and speaking.

III. Methodology

In this project I deal with strategies—for writing and reading texts—and formations—of texts and identities in the world. A feminist politics as reading practice looks to possibilities at the level of form, and examines identity in terms of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, class, history, and geography. Rachel Blau DuPlessis asserts that "there is female aesthetic, but not *a* female aesthetic, not one single constellation of strategies" ("For the Etruscans" 3) but "various and

possibly contradictory strategies of response and invention shared by women in response to gender experiences” (10). It is within the text, following DuPlessis, that one can enact struggle and resistance, through the simultaneous construction of form and content: “What we have been calling (the) female aesthetic turns out to be a specialized name for any practices available to those groups—nations, genders, sexualities, races classes—all social practices which wish to criticize, to differentiate from, to overturn dominant forms of knowing and understanding with which they are saturated” (16). Each text must be read with specific attention paid to its practices for resistance and the ways in which it may open spaces of potential politics and action.

Kristeva is especially useful for exploring the relationship between aesthetic practice, the social/historical/political, and the construction of identity in my chosen texts. It is true that some feminist critics have dismissed Kristeva’s work “for its ahistorical conception of the sign, its dismissal of the political, and its essentialist notion of the body” (Hennessy 47) and for her emphasis on the textual rather than on real social action.⁸ In fact, Kristeva spends a good deal of time, over the course of her work, considering the relation between aesthetic practice and social politics. Specifically, for the purposes of this project, I am primarily interested in Kristeva’s idea of the subject-in-process as it is presented in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, and how this is relevant in terms of the linguistic and the political, for reading experimental work and its potential use for studying culture.

⁸ Additionally, the Materialist Feminists whom Hennessy cites fault Kristeva for focusing on avant-garde texts that have little relevance for collective social action, and, she writes, “despite its suggestiveness as a critique of the unitary subject of western rationalism, Kristeva’s conception of heterogeneity within signification, her notions of the materiality of the disruptive ‘Other,’ of contradictions and heterogeneity, are inimical to a feminist agenda committed to emancipatory social change” (51). It is also important to consider Kristeva’s own commitment to political struggle especially through the example of the May 1968 Revolt; this became important for Kristeva and other French intellectuals who thereafter believed that social revolution was still possible. See Moi’s Introduction in *The Kristeva Reader* on this, as well as *Revolt, She Said* in which Kristeva champions the continuous freedom to revolt in aesthetic and cultural realms.

In her chapter on Kristeva, Toril Moi writes: “Instead of an exclusive emphasis on the gender of the speaker, [Kristeva] recommends an analysis of the many discourses (including sexuality and gender) that together construct the individual” (169), or as Kristeva states, “I favour an understanding of femininity that would have as many ‘feminines’ as there are women” (qtd. in Moi 169). Kristeva is clearly invested in understanding gender, like symbolic language, as socially constructed and not biologically determined. Following this, Kristeva’s theory of the subject-in-process—or the relation between (or evolution of) the subject and (evolution of) language—seems especially useful for looking at the relationship between the subject of the text and the space of potential politics opened by disruptive textual strategies.⁹ According to Moi, the subject-in-process (or the disruption of the subject) for Kristeva parallels, or works as an analogy to, revolutionary disruptions of society. If we go back to Watten, it is in the disruption itself that space is made available for the construction of material and social alternatives. Kristeva does not necessarily need to show how society will be overturned, but instead offers a linguistic theory that demonstrates how symbolic language is used to continually (re)construct subjects in society, and in its disruption is the opening of space for social politics. Kristeva’s idea of the interaction between the semiotic and symbolic, by which symbolic language is disrupted but not abandoned altogether, is not unlike bell hooks’s more material, culturally activist notion that the oppressed use the oppressor’s language while simultaneously remaking it as their own.

In the non/narrative text, identity, like gender, is seen as constructed, relational, and in process. The texts I’ve chosen use formal strategies to break away from (symbolic) narratives that “naturalize” (women’s or gendered) experience. These texts function within the symbolic structures (of patriarchy, of language) but simultaneously embody Kristeva’s semiotic space of

⁹ See Prud’homme and Légaré.

disruption, rupture, contradiction, and negativity, which exists before gender, before the symbolic gender system socializes the subject. For Kristeva:

The opposition between feminine and masculine does not exist in pre-Oedipality [the semiotic] Any strengthening of the semiotic, which knows no sexual difference, must therefore lead to a weakening of traditional gender divisions, and not at all to a reinforcement of traditional notions of ‘femininity’. . . . Femininity and the semiotic do, however, have one thing in common: their marginality. As the feminine is defined as marginal under patriarchy, so the semiotic is marginal to language. (Moi 165-66)

Gender is relational, and since women are positioned as marginal in symbolic, patriarchal order, “Kristeva’s emphasis on marginality allows us to view this repression of the feminine in terms of *positionality* rather than of essences. What is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies” (Moi 166). It is clear here that she is thinking of gender or other identity markers as discursive and relational.

Ultimately, Kristeva is interested in language “as a heterogeneous process”; it is a “complex signifying *process* rather than a monolithic *system*” (Moi 152). Or, according to Kristeva, “the kind of activity encouraged and privileged by (capitalist) society represses the *process* pervading the body and the subject, and . . . we must therefore break out of our interpersonal and intersocial experience if we are to gain access to what is repressed in the social mechanism: the generating of significance” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 13). It is the process that signifies, not the (commodified) end-product. Further:

The text is a practice that could be compared to political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society. The history and political experience of the twentieth-century have demonstrated that one cannot be transformed without the other Hence, the questions we will ask about literary practice will be aimed at the political horizon from which this practice is inseparable, despite the efforts of aestheticizing esoterism and repressive sociologizing or formalist dogmatics to keep them apart. We shall call this heterogeneous practice *significance* to indicate, on the one hand, that biological urges are socially controlled, directed, and organized, producing an excess with regard to social apparatuses; and, on the other, that this instinctual operation becomes a *practice*—a transformation of natural and social resistances, limitations, and

stagnations—if and only if it enters into the code of linguistic and social communication.
(Kristeva 17)

The political horizon is inseparable from literary practice—the text—and these together enact a process of transformation through the “code of linguistic and social communication.” In order to encounter significance, we must move outside of rigid conceptions that separate art and politics; to focus on process is to be open to the dynamic potential for literary practice as social action. “This heterogeneous process . . . is a structuring and de-structuring *practice*, a passage to the outer *boundaries* of the subject and society” (17). The text brings about change in the subject, like revolution brings about change in society, and “one cannot be transformed without the other.” The subject is affected by and through textual and linguistic practices, and this subject then enacts social revolution as action. But the subject is also in continual process of formation and alteration, as is society in a continual state of revolution (or revolution can be continuous). This is both a metaphorical and literal politics, and moves beyond theories of stylistic or textual disruption as aesthetic affect.

My use of Butler begins with her cultural analysis of gender in *Gender Trouble* and *Undoing Gender*, and further considers her discussion on how we account for ourselves, as ethical subjects in the world and in relation to one another, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler seeks to dismantle the reliance on understandings of the binary nature of masculine-feminine gender expressions and to show that gender is not a stable formation but is dynamic, and that changing and multiple gender expressions are possible within a continuum of possible gender expressions. “Gender trouble” is the potential for multiple, more flexible gender expression through the disruption of the performance of gender. *Undoing Gender* continues and revises this project by examining the variety of gendered identifications and advocating for dismantling social and gender norms in order to create spaces of possibility, as a matter of

survival, for subjects' identification and practice. *Giving an Account* moves somewhat out of the focus on gender and sexual identification to consider how we narrate ourselves to others. If we have subjective agency, it is because we are in relation to others, and we account for ourselves within that self-other relation. I use Butler's ideas here to theorize the uses and limitations of narrative for text-subjects often trying and failing to articulate their life stories and experiences. Through Butler, I show how narrative necessarily fails, thereby opening productive gaps in which the necessary work of understanding self in relation to other, and in terms of social politics, can and should happen. The ethical project is in attending to the gaps, instead of fictitiously making the inconsistencies or disturbances cohere, in order that we better understand our responsibilities for ourselves in relation to others and to society.

Additionally, the text, like identity, is a constructive process, and it is also spatial. Susan Stanford Friedman suggests that "academic feminism involves moving *beyond* gender" in part due to "new positional, locational, spatial . . . concepts of identity" or what she calls "the new geographies of identity" (*Mappings* 17). As an order of feminist practice, Friedman suggests, this new way of conceptualizing "performs a kind of dialectic that reflects opposing movements in the world today revolving around the issue of identity" which is "polyvocal and often contradictory" (19). In order to move beyond "gynocriticism and gynesis" Friedman looks to "the blending and clashing of overlapping or parallel discourses of feminism, multiculturalism, poststructuralism and postcolonial studies" to offer six "discourses of identity within this new geography of positionality" (20):¹⁰

¹⁰ Friedman explains, "For gynocriticism, the existence of patriarchy... serves as the founding justification for treating women writers of different times and places as part of a common tradition based on gender. For gynesis, the linguistic inscriptions of masculine/feminine—indeed language's very dependence on gendered binaries—underlie various feminist unraveling of master narratives and discourses" (*Mappings* 18).

1. multiple oppression includes the differences among and between women from various cultural, class and other backgrounds; to define women only in terms of gender renders other oppressions invisible;
2. multiple subject positions occur as the intersection of different or competing cultural formations of race, ethnicity, class sexuality, and etc.;
3. contradictory subject positions occur when one is simultaneously oppressed in some way and privileged in another;
4. subjectivity is relational; gender is in relation to sexuality and class; identity is understood as a fluid site vs. as a static or fixed essence;
5. situationality means that identity resists being fixed but instead shifts from one context to another;
6. ethnic, postcolonial, diasporic hybridity occurs through geographical migration.

The concepts of relationality, contingency, and positionality of identity, through Friedman, connect to both Kristeva's textual politics and Butler's cultural politics for marginalized subjects. Using Kristeva and Butler, and Friedman's geographic, spatial theory of identity discourse, I seek to bring the textual and cultural into closer relation, particularly in terms of how they can mutually aid in advancing political endeavors for marginalized subjects and others who are unable to conform, to various degrees, to social norms and expectations.

Although the specifically feminist analysis throughout this project varies from one text to the next, it is important to recognize that women's experiences as citizens and writers is socially, culturally, and historically contextualized. We learn from many modernist writers that form as well as content can be (or not be) about experience. For this project, I am interested in reading texts written in (fictional or nonfictional) autobiographical or poetic styles, and specifically texts that fall outside of any easy means of categorization in terms of form, gender, or feminist politics. In trying to define the parameters of what makes a text feminist—from authorial intent, to political content, to reader interpretation, to textual stylistics—Elizabeth Grosz concludes that “no text can be classified once and for all as wholly feminist or wholly patriarchal: these appellations depend on its context, its place within that context, how it is used, by whom and to what effect. These various contingencies dictate that at best a text is feminist or patriarchal only

provisionally, only momentarily, only in some but not in all its possible readings, and in some but not all its possible effects” (23-24). The primary texts I’ve chosen here vary in terms of style as well as feminist or other politics. Some are more clear about their politics in their content than others, some are working through their own processes of thinking through their politics through the writing itself. The text-subjects and narrators examine, work through, and make discoveries about gender, race, sexuality, and identity while simultaneously involving readers in their processes, and leaving the conclusive space open for cooperative thinking and potential real world action. As Judith Butler explains in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, the narrative “I” does not replace or even represent the “I” that remembers that past, but instead the narrative “I” is added to the “I” of real experience, thereby making the cohesive narrative of a self difficult, if not impossible. These texts show us the fictional nature of self-narration through their own non/narrative, hybrid formal strategies and the refusal of their text-subjects to identify as unified and coherent subjects. We are contextualized and formed by the symbolic order, symbolic language, and the physical space or geography surrounding us; all of these are constantly in relation and shifting, in process; and the relation between these and one’s having a sense of identity or self-understanding is a dynamic and fluctuating process that is only made more dynamic by the gaps and disturbances that affect the seeming stability of systems. The construction of the text and the construction of identity are processes that can function to open spaces for greater possibilities for (more complex) subjective understandings and identifications in the world. And allowing for a more expanded range of representation and identification for subjects in the world can lead not only to greater awareness but also to a greater potential for, and actualization of, real world politics.

IV. The Chapters

I am interested in how modern and contemporary women writers negotiate their writing practices as both aesthetic and social/historical, and see language and narrative as structures to be addressed, dismantled, and challenged. These writers deal with the “real” world by way of language and the use of textual strategies in order to create works that are not polished, cohesive, narratives that represent “life” but instead enact social/cultural concerns in a fusion of form and content. I put these modern and contemporary writers together for a couple of key reasons. First, we read the past (texts) through contemporary perspectives. Secondly, the fact that women modernists such as Stein and H.D. were actively recovered in the 70s and 80s is important to reading more recent work. Contemporary writers both come out of tradition and create new practices for interrogation and writing. The work of Hejinian and Dahlen comes out of the feminist modernism of Stein and H.D. which sets up the culturally informed, political postmodernism of the late twentieth-century writers I read here.¹¹ These writers take their particular feminist politics beyond masculine traditions of modern and postmodern literary practice, through their own formal, aesthetic practices that fuse with examinations of, and responses to, cultural possibilities and limitations for (often marginalized) subjects.

In chapter 1, “‘I am I because my little dog knows me’; or, the Intertextual Self: Gertrude Stein and Lyn Hejinian,” I show how Gertrude Stein’s *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, and Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life, Writing Is An Aid to Memory*, “What’s Missing from My Life,” and *A Border Comedy*, critique identity as socially and culturally contextualized, and enact their critiques through innovative, formal,

¹¹ Although the texts by Hejinian I read here are more recent, it is in the 70s that Hejinian and Dahlen are working with other language writers to create new ideas about writing and “identity” by way of avant-garde historical practice, as well as reading and recovering modernist texts (by women) that had been disregarded for some time. See chapter two on H.D. and Dahlen.

textual writing strategies. For both authors the process of construction (of a text) and the process of identification (of a self) are continuous, layered, and intertextual. As works that both incorporate and exceed tradition and the individual, these texts challenge notions of autobiography, highlighting the need for narration and identification that are heterogeneous, spatial, and non-linear. Stein and Hejinian push beyond their singular stories to create works that are intertextual, geographical, and continuous, but that also recognize and rupture social norms for writing and identifying. Their texts draw attention to narrative fallibility and institute alternative practices for non/cohesive, non/narrative identification. Butler claims that the demand that one maintain a consistent and cohesive self-identity at all times does a certain kind of ethical violence to subjects who do not continuously “cohere.” Instead, she argues, suspending this demand, allowing space for nonidentity and narrative rupture can potentially allow a subject to exist less constricted by norms of identity instituted through norms of language and narrative. If language forms us before we are formed, then exploring narrative itself, in both form and content, can give us insight into the relationship between language and identity for subjects in the world. Taking Butler into account, we see how Stein and Hejinian theorize this relationship through their interrogations of the content of narrative (examining the stories we are told, and tell, about ourselves) and the formal properties of narrative (challenging linear narrative progression, calling attention to the fantasy and fallibility of narrative cohesion). Their texts enact interruption, and recognize the limits of knowing both at the levels of form and content. In working to dismantle the limitations of language, Stein and Hejinian, in different times and through different means, construct textual examples of tolerance and boundary breaking, showing us how we might further push against the constraints of social and cultural structures that define, or confine, the range of possibilities for subjective identification.

In chapter 2, “Third Person Self (Narrated): H.D. and Beverly Dahlen,” I expand the critique of narrative identity by illustrating how H.D. and Dahlen examine feminine identity and the gender binary through themes of domesticity and psychoanalysis, and by way of autobiographical fiction and the poetic journal. H.D. and Beverly Dahlen create subjects-in-process who dismantle binary structures in order to open spaces for more layered accounts of (gendered) experiences and identities. In *HERmione*, H.D. places geography in relation to the domestic, relational, and “the difficulty of establishing female identity” according to Rachel Blau DuPlessis. The pressure to decide between the heterosexual marriage proposal and the “Otherness” role of lesbian/poet, as DuPlessis explains, puts pressure on the possibility of singular, narrative identity as subjectivity is complicated through alternative syntactic structures and non/narrative strategies. Further, Dahlen’s *A Reading* (the series 1-20) negotiates subjective understanding through the narrator’s textual “conversations” with Freud, and foregrounds an engagement with language and the psychoanalytic process. Following Kristeva’s notion of the subject-in-process, and reading these primary texts through Theresa de Lauretis’s theory of perverse desire, I argue that these works by H.D. and Dahlen offer models of alternative (non-normative) practice, and potentially work toward changing habits of thinking and knowing to open spaces for (textual and worldly) subjective expression and representation.

Through different uses of narrative strategy and different means of ending their texts, both H.D. and Dahlen pervert the hold on narrative desire in order to break the habit of reading for satisfaction and resolution. The focus for these writers is on the process of coming to know, as a means to explore “other” ways of thinking and seeing the (female, lesbian, bisexual) self in relation to the larger world. Freud’s theory of castration means that men and women are always framed within the context of the penis, while the disavowal of castration creates spaces for other

types of relations and contexts that can affirm non-normative sexual, literary, and social practice. I use the theories of Hayden White, who challenges our acquiescent notions of narrative history, and Peter Brooks, who makes us think more deeply about how and why we read narrative texts, and show how even Freud questions his own assumptions about narrative and sexual desire, and H.D. and Dahlen further create examples of habit-breaking, giving us (perverse) non/narrative, feminist texts that call into question how we know and why we act. From Kristeva, we draw on processes of becoming, through the textual and into the cultural/social realms. As Elizabeth Grosz writes, “The subjectivity to which Kristeva refers is constructed within the text. This discursive ‘I’ is not entirely distinct from the living social subject: the latter is to a large extent socially structured and positioned by the discursive construction of the ‘I’ in the symbolic” (55). H.D.’s *HERmione* and Dahlen’s series *A Reading* offer material means for creating new habits of textual practice and affirming an array of linguistic, social, sexual, and gender relations and practices. The (non)narrative construction of the “I” in the texts, we see, can allow for social identification in difference, in dialectical relation with symbolic, normative discourse and culture.

In chapter 3: “The Text-Subject in Social Context: Pamela Lu, Renee Gladman, and Claudia Rankine,” I move into late twentieth-century writing that deals with sex and gender as well as race, ethnicity, language, hybridity, and history. Lu’s *Pamela: A Novel*, Gladman’s *Juice*, and Rankine’s *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* enact oppositional politics as poetics at the levels of both form and content. Formal textual strategies break away from normative narrative practices to create hybrid texts that call attention to historical and contemporary social issues for minority voices, while identity and subjectivity are examined as social constructions in which the narrators often do not seem to fit. They go beyond the projects of the modernist and Language

poets to theorize postmodern identity from queer, feminist perspectives that they enact through formal strategies, and situate their subjects' processes of identification within textual investigations of identity and the need to revise the concept of identity for contemporary subjects.

Following Homi Bhabha, I argue that oppositional politics, languages, cultures, and histories disrupt and create gaps in the narratives of "national will" highlighting their ideological and fictional status. For example, Asian and African Americans have not historically had access to dominant narratives, and have been traumatized by violent histories that do not fit into narratives of nationhood. My readings point to the gap between experience and narration, and toward greater possibilities for cultural difference and identification. The non/narrative, autobiographical-style text is both a metaphorical and literal example of plurality, difference, and giving voice to historically silenced and marginalized subjects and their narratives, while calling attention to the social construction of all narratives that serve to make our experience cohere. They dismantle socially constructed narratives of identity and create alternatives for subjective identification. The subjects' counternarratives give voice to perspectives to those otherwise ignored, serving a politics that promotes creating new models for minority identification.

The question of national identity constructed through narratives of what Homi K. Bhabha terms "national will" is important to these writers as they present minority voices through narrators unable to use those totalizing narratives. The narrator in Lu's novel cannot remember; the narrators in Gladman's stories are lacking both memory and history; and Rankine's non/narrative text explores the lack of useful narratives for traumatized postmodern subjects. I show how these texts are examples of how real (minority, contemporary) experience does not fit in with the larger cultural narratives through which we are "interpellated" as citizens. Looking to

the real experiences of diverse citizens, Bhabha underscores the space of ambivalence between the national will and the “daily plebiscite—the unitary number” (310-11). This kind of locational thinking challenges and complicates narrative historicity that constructs history terms of patriotism, citizenship, and national will.

As Rankine’s narrator tells us at the end of *Do not Let Me Be Lonely*: “I tried to fit language into the shape of usefulness. The world moves through words as if the bodies the words reflect did not exist” (129). The text can be a point of mediation, between experience and its resulting traumatic effects. Rankine’s narrator underscores the need for narratives of history and nation that are complex, connotative, rhetorical, psychic, and diverse. *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* presents a history in the present that is fragmented, confused, depressing, and yet hopeful. If, after Paul Celan, the poem is similar to a handshake, Rankine writes, “The handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that—Here. I am here. This conflation of the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive” (130). This is the kind of storytelling through which “the nation speaks its disjunctive narrative” (Bhabha 311) and as viewer/witnesses, we become involved in further opening spaces for counter-narratives that give language to silenced voices. Through writing and speaking these alternative narratives, subjects can respond to totalizing narratives, create other possibilities for identification, and work toward the communal handshaking that occurs when citizens are no longer writing, reading, speaking, and existing in isolation but become, instead, a part of the process of creation, of renarrating history and experience, of creating new types of national identities.

In Chapter 4, “‘Possibility is not a luxury’: (Re)presentation and (Re)identification

in *The Transformation*, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and *Dictee*,” I bring the readings of the previous chapters together to conclude with models that enact new forms of language, practice, and witnessing for textual and social subjects. This chapter explores language and hybridity, and individual and cultural identity in Juliana Spahr’s *The Transformation*, Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*. Through non/narrative and hybrid textual practice, the subjects in these texts question the concept of identity, and search for alternative, more complex means of identification. They negotiate ideological cultural narratives from within the contexts of their individual experiences; and they create new ways of using language that, for each, comes to represent new strategies for identifying. Interrogating and dismantling social norms for gender performance, sexual practice and desire, and ethnic and geographical dislocation, these subjects-in-process are enacted in the formal strategies of their texts. These texts, further, challenge binary structures, and open spaces for nonbinary models of representation.

These texts challenge binary structures—such as self/other, masculine/feminine, colonizer/colonized—open spaces of possibility for subjective understanding, and act as models for expanding possibilities for representing experience and politics in the text and in the world. Their subjects enact the need for recognition, and go beyond this to become speaking subjects, witnesses to their own experiences and the cultural conditions around them. I use Kelly Oliver here to bring together the conversation of the textual and cultural, to move beyond both Kristeva and Butler, into deeper discussion of the relation between textual subjectivity and the hybrid, prose interrogation of identity, and the cultural manifestations of complex subjective identifications. These texts bear witness to the problematic nature of Western, masculine,

heteronormative narratives and, through non/narrative and other formal strategies, speak to cultural experiences that exceed the norms (of form and content).

All three of these texts offer final examples of how experimental writing can and does open possibilities for politics at the textual level and in the world. Kristeva writes: “The text is a practice that could be compared to political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society.” By exploring the multiply related and positioned discourses of identification in the non/narrative text, I believe we can continue to imagine increased possibilities subjects in the world. These texts simultaneously enact the difficulty and necessity of using language to increase means of recognizability for both textual and cultural subjects. From constructing alternatives to mainstream heterosexual domestic relations, to transgressing and rewriting traditional narratives for women, to re-visualizing and re-framing fragmented and previously invisible details of history, Spahr, Anzaldúa, and Cha create subjects-in-process who move through the space of the text similarly to multiply situated subjects in the world, while the multiple and contradictory discourses of the world are enacted through the formal strategies on the page. The subjects of these texts become witnesses to the limited nature of ideological narratives, and the limiting effects of binary structures, and they instead serve as models of alternative narrative practices enacting greater possibilities for identification and representation of subjects’ more complex experiences in the world. Subjects achieve subjectivity in relation to self and others, and through their ability to witness the gaps in history and through their own alterity in view of totalizing cultural narratives. These text-subjects I argue, over the course of their texts, come to realize their abilities to address (address-ability) and to respond (response-ability) giving them, and their readers, agency, as a mandate to create change in the world.

CHAPTER 1

“I am I because my little dog knows me,” or, the Intertextual Self: Gertrude Stein and Lyn Hejinian

*When suddenly you know that the geographical history of America has something to do with everything it may be like loving any man or any woman or even a little or a big dog. Yes it may, that is to say it does (Stein, *Geographical History* 391).*

In Gertrude Stein's *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life, Writing Is An Aid to Memory*, "What's Missing from My Life," and *A Border Comedy*, critiques of identity formation are enacted through innovative textual writing strategies. As works that incorporate and exceed tradition and the individual, these texts challenge notions of autobiographical writing, and stress the need for narration and identification that are heterogeneous, spatial, and non-linear. As subjects, we are always in flux and changing, not always (if ever) coherent and unified, and the limits of language contribute to limited possibilities for identification in the world. Understanding this, and working to dismantle the limitations of language, can lend toward pushing against the boundaries of other social and cultural structures that define, or confine, the range of possibilities for subjective identification. Working within and against the boundary spaces (on the page and in the world) might offer further opportunities for interruption and revision (of the myth) of social and narrative cohesion. Moving through the "autobiographical" to the intertextual, Hejinian calls attention to the relationship between the materiality of language and the social construction of identity and how one documents a life. Moving from Stein to Hejinian, I hope to show how each uses the process of the construction of the text as a way to theorize identity and interrogate

representations of the “self.” In these texts, interruption, eruption, resistance, and contradiction work as textual strategies that emphasize the complicated nature of the representation of identity.

Both Stein and Hejinian construct texts that are intertextual, incorporating previous texts and ideas while working through their own processes of discovery and reflection. John Mowitt explains Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality points to a break

with the critical perspective that comprehends the utility of sources in terms of the antinomy between ‘tradition’ and ‘individual talent,’ where tradition (whether literary or cultural) serves as a repository of influences activated by an aesthetic consciousness whose inner force transcends them. Intertextuality, on the other hand, obliges one approach literary discourse as though its production transforms and thus constitutes not only what should no longer be called ‘tradition,’ but also what should no longer be called the ‘individual.’ (110-11)

These texts challenge the notion of the individual author as one who “transcends” tradition, and underscore the problematic nature of narrative autobiography. The process of construction (of a text) and the process of identification (of a self) are continuous, layered, and intertextual. A text can be intertextual in a literal sense in the ways that it cites and records other texts, and also more subtly in how other texts influence a writer and thereby participate in construction of her text. Kristeva’s use of the term “intertextuality,” for example, goes beyond the notion of incorporating sources:

The term *inter-textuality* denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of ‘study of sources,’ we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic—of enunciative and denotative positionality. If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality), one then understands that its ‘place’ of enunciation and its denoted ‘object’ are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated. (*Revolution* 59-60)

In this way, the new text, or signifying system, is a dynamic and hybrid practice, one that is not a study of sources from a distance, nor an authorial transcendence. This kind of intertextuality

points to texts as systems at the level of signification itself. Every text is a signifying practice, an intertextuality of “various signifying systems” that is never single, complete, or self-identical. This intertextuality makes authorial transcendence impossible, challenges dominant narratives of tradition and influence, and problematizes the very idea of narrative. As Mowitt explains:

What Kristeva is thus seeking to oppose to the familiar notion of sources is a model of intertextuality that insists upon the way literary texts transform and thus remain marked by, not merely other things like them (i.e., other texts), but other inscriptions of meaning Moreover, by stressing that texts are sites of an ongoing permutation, Kristeva exploits intertextuality to capture the reciprocal action that constitutes the relations among and within texts, as well as between particular texts and the processes that unfold beside them. (110-11)

Cohesive, linear narrative may not capture this “reciprocal action” that otherwise shows through in more “poetic” texts, in Kristeva’s terms. The relations among and within texts, and between texts as ongoing processes of permutation, make the intertextuality of these texts dynamic and processual, practices of signification that cannot be contained as static products. Kristeva’s theory is about meaning at the level of signification, as well as how this plays out in, or as, the text. The poetic text especially is a “signifying practice” that is a “transposition of various signifying systems”; the signifying practice is then inherently plural and irreducible to any cohesive, singular element.

Reading Stein and Hejinian through Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* gives us another way to think through the idea that an autobiographical account can be intertextual in Kristeva’s terms, and show the gaps and processes of narration, instead of presenting a coherent narrative product. Butler examines the ethical implications of accounting, or self-narration; the social nature of one’s giving an account to another; and the difficulty of “capturing” this account in narrative form. Though Butler is not speaking of literary texts necessarily, Stein and Hejinian can be read as enacting Butler’s theorization of non/narrative accounting. Retrospective readings

of Stein and Hejinian through Butler show how narrative accounting of identity breaks down, as well as how this breaking down becomes a necessary and productive moment in the theorization of identity. Butler writes:

The singular body to which a narrative refers cannot be captured by a full narration, not only because the body has a formative history that remains irrecoverable by reflection, but because primary relations are formative in ways that produce a necessary opacity in our understanding of ourselves Moreover, the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our ‘singular’ stories are told. (*Giving* 20-21)

The idea of singularity in our stories is a social construction. We are contextualized as subjects according to social norms, and it is through these norms that we understand ourselves. Butler explains that “the terms by which we give an account” are not our own, and it is within this sociality that we tell our stories. These “structural conditions,” and the narrow realm of social normativity within which we are expected to (narratively) conform, make it impossible to narrate oneself singularly, or to understand oneself fully. For Butler, as a cultural theorist and philosopher, these are ethical questions pertaining to subjects in relation to one another. Stein and Hejinian use literary, textual space to examine the use (and impossibility) of narrative in the theorization of identity through formal stops and starts, fragmentation, detours, and repetition. The texts are in process, refuse closure, and play with narrative and other formal elements to mimic and deconstruct the concept of autobiography, while commenting on the difficulty of narrating a life through terms that are not our own.

Through her reading of Foucault, Butler points to the social norms that influence how we self-identify—and how we are recognized by others—through “norms of recognition”; because of this normativity, recognition is limited, and “self-questioning” becomes difficult:

It also turns out that self-questioning of this sort involves putting oneself at risk, imperiling the very possibility of being recognized by others, since to question the norms of recognition that govern what I might be, to ask what they leave out, what they might be compelled to accommodate, is, in relation to the present regime, to risk unrecognizability as a subject or at least to become an occasion for posing the questions of who one is (or can be) and whether or not one is recognizable. (*Giving* 23)

If, as Butler explains, a “social dimension of normativity . . . governs the scene of recognition” then these norms are also subject to shifting or “rupture” (23). The self-questioning begins a process of “troubling” the socially normalized ways in which we identify and are recognized. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler explores how alternative gender performances “trouble” normalized constructions of gender; similarly, so might “certain breakdowns in the practice of recognition mark a site of rupture within the horizon of normativity and implicitly call for the institution of new norms” (*Giving* 24). Stein and Hejinian enact this practice in their own work, both at the level of formal strategy, as well as for Stein in particular, in terms of sexual identification as content in the writing. In the *Geographical History* the “breakdown in the practice of recognition” is both textual and personal; Stein writes an experimental work that challenges its own recognizability for readers used to clear narrative structure, and as a lesbian she is also unrecognized by social/sexual norms. The *Geographical History* might be read as a “queer” text, which enacts rupture on multiple levels simultaneously.¹ Queerness, in both form and content, is used as a way to trouble narrative structure that will be explored more fully later in this chapter.

In general, the narration of a self to another, especially in terms of sexual or other identity markers, is inherently faulty, Butler explains, “since our exchange is conditioned and mediated

¹ I’m using queer as different from the more specifically “identity” term, “lesbian,” as a way to think about queer as an active process of critique through textual and social practices. Butler writes, “It’s not (necessarily) just a view on sexuality, or gender. It also suggests that the confines of any identity can potentially be reinvented by its owner” (Gauntlett); anything outside of the heteronormative might be considered “queer” or in terms of queer readings of texts, a queering of the normative, narrative text in which the “queer” text enacts social critique.

by language, by conventions, by a sedimentation of norms that are social in character and that exceed the perspective of those involved in the exchange” (*Giving* 28). By its very nature, the story one gives of oneself is not singular since “the narrative authority of the ‘I’ must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story” (37). Any story claiming to have narrative authority cannot be taken as entirely truthful, but writing that foregrounds this narrative fallibility might help to show the role that language, as a social structure, plays in the “fabrication” of narrative, autobiographical-style documents.

My narrative begins *in media res*, when many things have already taken place to make me and my story possible in language. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know. In the making of the story, I create myself in new form, instituting a narrative “I” that is superadded to the “I” whose past life I seek to tell. (Butler, *Giving* 39-40)

In the end, both the narrative, and the identity purported in that narrative, may be read as fictional. The self is created in narrative form that can never entirely represent the “I” of past experience. And because this self is born into social and linguistic structures that are always already articulating that self, the layers of narrative continue to build one upon another in the continual making of its stories. Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* is a philosophical investigation into one’s ability to account for oneself and one’s actions, and this for Butler is an ethical question; we are responsible to ourselves and others to be able to give an account, but we must recognize the impossibility of narrative coherence in the accounting. Butler explains: “suspending the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same” (42). Showing the failure, the rupture—the queerness and the gaps—is important for understanding the ways in which we are all contextualized by social and linguistic norms, and that these affect the construction of our

narrative accounts. Demanding self-identity, Butler proposes, results in a kind of ethical violence for subjects for whom the coherently narrated (stable) self is ultimately only a fiction. The subject at the heart of a narrative account is no more than the narrative “I” *plus* the “I” of past experience.² These two versions of the self may not cohere, or the effort to make them cohere may result in a failed account, which ultimately may be more important than the effort to create narrative flow and unity. Butler explains that this failure may actually be “essential to who we are” (42) as subjects who are narrated, and yet not fully able to narratively articulate our own stories.

This is not to say that there is no need for narrative structure at all, but if all of life is “rendered in narrative form” this could have negative consequences (52). Butler’s point is that we have an ethical responsibility to see how we are subjects constructed through social and historical norms, and to recognize the contexts in which our narratives are constructed, since the “I” who begins to tell its story can tell it only according to “recognizable norms of life narration.” Stein and Hejinian begin on the margins, with strategies of disorientation, understanding that experience cannot be presented in cohesively narrative ways. Through their non/narrative strategies, these texts challenge normative complicity, and offer critically useful theories of identity for subjects in the world, thereby pushing past the narrative and normative boundaries toward the institution of new means of “accounting.”

Stein, *The Geographical History of America*

The Geographical History, she told the reporter, was written “somewhat more clearly” than some of her previous writings. Asked about the difficulties of her style, Gertrude maintained: “I cannot afford to be clear because if I was I would risk destroying my own thought. Most people destroy their thought before they create it. That is why I often

² See Scott’s essay “Experience” in which she explains how the “I” of experience is also a product of the social conditions by which a subject is always already constructed; there is no authentic or essential experience.

repeat a word again and again—because I am fighting to hold the thought. (Mellow, *Charmed Circle* 503)

Written in the summer after her famous American tour over the fall, winter, and into early spring of 1934-35, *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, and the related work, *What are Masterpieces and Why are there So Few of Them*, come out of Stein's experiences of the tour as well as the lectures she gave during the tour.³ Before the American tour, Stein was well known, but not well read, having had trouble publishing her work. However, when *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was published in 1934 it became instantly popular in the United States. In 1934, Stein and Toklas had been living together in Paris for nearly thirty years and although Stein had become a popular figure of attention in the media, she was still not taken seriously as a writer. *The Autobiography* was well received for its accessibility (it wasn't as difficult as much of her previous work), as well as its content (it reads like a history of the art scene in Paris in the 1920s). About the time *The Autobiography* was released, Stein's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* premiered on Broadway and was also a popular success. With the combination of these, and the encouragement of friends and advisors, Stein agreed to do the American Tour. The tour consisted of a series of lectures

³ According to Haas, Stein's post-American tour writing can roughly be divided into entity and identity writing. Identity writing is writing for an audience in work such as in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Everybody's Autobiography*, *Lectures in America*, *Narration*, and *What are Masterpieces*, among others. Entity writing is considered by Stein to be "real" writing, which were often more like philosophical reflections, which include the *Geographical History (Primer)*. *What are Masterpieces*, written around the same time as *The Geographical History*, takes up the History's ideas and themes and presents them in a shorter, more concise and clear manner. Or as Lénárt-Cheng argues, Stein herself saw the autobiographical writing as the "moneymaking style" as opposed to her other more "creative" work. Dydo argues, however, that there was no real separation between audience and real writing over the course of the work: "Her texts do not progress linearly from one concern, say, with grammar, or with the novel, to another, nor do they go as I had earlier thought, from "real writing" to public or audience writing. They never move away from real writing, and Stein's real voice was never lost" (5).

which she wrote to give in cities all over the United States, as well as another series on “Narration” which she gave specifically, over a series of meetings, at the University of Chicago.⁴

It seems appropriate that Stein’s success came with the *Autobiography*, even though the romantic/domestic relationship between Stein and Toklas was never openly discussed. Toklas was, according to scholars, instrumental to Stein’s work on all levels, and their shared domestic life infused Stein’s work. The domestic and the aesthetic were intimately connected for Stein; her and Alice’s life together was a fusion of personal and aesthetic relations. As Shari Benstock points out, “Stein’s relationship with Toklas was the occasion for linguistic experimentation, exploration, and the expression of childlike joy. For Stein and Toklas, the assumption of an artistic priority is particularly important in understanding the personal dimensions of their Paris life” (176). Also key to Stein’s work was her love for, and collection of, modern art and her conversations with her contemporary artists and writers. Her fascination with American English also became even more prominent for her while living in France. English, for Stein, was a means to deconstruct language, and to write “American-ness.” For Stein, Benstock explains, “*everything* in her adult life became a subject for and was subjected to her art. So when she speaks of her own experience living in Europe, or the need to distance herself from America in order to write about it, she is also suggesting the need to distance the facts of her personal life in such a way that she can reapproach them through her writing” (14). This negotiation of attention to the materiality of language and the infusion of personal experience are central to her body of work, and its reception over her lifetime.

Stein’s *The Geographical History of America* is an exploration of the relationships between consciousness, writing, identity, geography, language, and social norms. Through these, Stein interrogates the relation, or difference, between human nature (what might be some kind of

⁴ See Mellow for more on the American Tour.

“essential” identity) and human mind (which is responsible for thinking and writing) in order to theorize and enact a deconstruction of readers’ understanding of what any of these terms “mean.” The process of linguistic interrogation serves to distance the reader from any assumed understanding of identity, and instead to think more critically about what it means to identify. *The Geographical History* is a kind of biographical and cultural commentary focused on writing, thinking, and dismantling social organizations of language and sexuality. The formal practices of the text become strategies for enacting cultural critique and offering alternatives (languages, narratives, and content) to dominant modes of discourse and socialization.

Stein, as in much of her work, is concerned in *The Geographical History* with simultaneity, or enacting a continuous present on the page, and doing away with writing that has, as she repeats throughout, a beginning, middle, and end.⁵ It is written using mainly present tense verbs and gerunds, and only occasionally, and therefore noticeably, is the writing in the past tense. At times phrases or fragmented ideas are used in place of sentences with subjects and predicates, and sometimes longer sentences get caught up in the sound of their words, repeat and circle around as if stalling their movement forward. Stein seems to be showing us that if a complete sentence has a beginning, middle, and end, then sentences that do not have subjects and predicates, or which end up in a circle of repeated words, keep from moving forward. Each word represents each new present moment; there is no past and no future but only “presence.”

According to its title, *The Geographical History of America* is analogous to “the relation of human nature to the human mind.” The relation between these however, is that they are not related, or their relation cannot be coherently articulated. Human nature, she writes throughout

⁵ Although this may not be exactly the same kind of continuous present as in work like *Tender Buttons* and *Making of Americans*, it is I would argue yet another example of continuous present, grounded a kind of present tense in the grammar of the language throughout, as well as on the level of the text as a whole having, as Stein writes, no beginning, middle, or end.

the text, “is not interesting.” The human mind, on the other hand, corresponds to, has to do with, or may actually be, writing. We might interpret that the human mind is represented by writing, or that writing is proof of the human mind that thinks, writes, constructs. Writing and identity, read through Stein, are similar in that each is constructed, and discontinuous. Writing that has no beginning, middle, and end and subverts cohesive narrative structure serves as an analogy for alternative practices or identities that disrupt and call attention to social/structural norms as constructed, and constricting. *The Geographical History* is uneven, disparate, and non/narrative, as is the relationship between human nature and human mind; it may not be articulated coherently, though it nonetheless, according to Stein, deserves thinking, writing, and reflection as a process of discovery and learning.

The line famously repeated (in various ways) throughout the text, “I am I because my little dog knows me,” points to the simultaneity of formal textual strategies used by Stein such as repetition, word play, and challenging the limits of the signifier and signified relationship, as well as the content of her cultural/philosophical investigation into the nature of identity formation and negotiation in the world. *The Geographical History* challenges readers’ expectations by narrating from a first-person point of view while subverting how we are to read the voice of the “I” of the text. The words “identity” “masterpiece” and “autobiography,” as well as other terms having to do with writing and language, nature, and romance, are repeated throughout the text; the repetition, with slight changes in usage, disorients the reader, making her reconsider how these terms “mean” and how we are to understand their use for Stein. Additionally, the text critiques the structural and the linear progression of narrative by using chapter titles that do not progress “forward.” For example, chapter and section titles often seem random: “Chapter II” is followed by “Chapter III” which is followed by “Chapter II,” and these

are repeated as titles throughout along with variously numbered “Acts” and “Parts.” Recognizing that language creates meaning, Stein reclaims ordinary terms that we otherwise take for granted, and pushes them so that they become less recognizable, calling attention to the relation between human nature and the linguistic and social construction of meaning.

As a key influence on contemporary experimental writers, Stein continues to be an example for combining formal strategy and politics. Deborah Mix explains the importance of “recognizing Stein’s presence and the vocabularies she offers” and how these contribute to the “democratizing work of redefining experimentalism and the avant-garde so that we can recognize their potential to embody a libratory and decentralized politics” (5). Stein’s formal, textual strategies thus open possibilities for what can be represented, or altered, through language, and point out how language is a socializing structure that must be challenged and dismantled. According to Mix, her “texts operate not by avoiding or encoding meaning . . . but by opening up meaning’s possibilities” (15). Stein’s politics operate simultaneously at the levels of form and content, in order to model a critique of social structures (linguistic and cultural) that limit possibilities for identification. Further, political engagement occurs on multiple levels: between the writer and the language of the text, between the text and the reader, and between the reader and the world. Mix quotes Patrocinio Schweickart who states, “Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers” (21). And because there is always more work to do in the world, contemporary writers continue to look to Stein’s example for engaging politics through aesthetic form.⁶

⁶ For more on Stein’s aesthetic politics and how it differs from other modernists’ insistence on the separation of high and low culture, see Berry.

In Stein's *Geographical History* the relationships between identity and human mind and human nature are decisively unclear; Stein keeps these concepts in flux, avoiding definition. Like human nature, identity as a term is always in danger of being understood as essential, natural, intrinsic to human existence. If human nature "just is" then identity also is something that is assumed as naturally occurring; we believe that we are born with our identities. The human mind is about writing and thinking, and the use of mind and nature together in often incoherent ways seems to be part of Stein's purpose. The line between nature and construction, for example, is a constantly shifting one, or at best blurry, so that we can never be sure what we are born with, and how we are made by the world into which we are born. It is this tension, and lack of clarity, that plays out in *The Geographical History* through the circular "arguments," repetition, rhetorical play, and logical fallacies she uses to draw readers into the conversation, while refusing to draw conclusions or spell out definitive explanations. Stein's refusal to define or explain identity calls attention to the fact that even though we use the term as if we know what it means, we really have no idea; and the (slightly varied) repetition of the statement "I am I because my little dog knows me" throughout *The Geographical History* breaks the notion of identity out of the abstract box of assumed understanding. Putting identity in fluctuating relation to both human nature and human mind throughout the text puts pressure on any simple definitions; concepts become simultaneous, instead of one causing another in a hierarchy; and we, as readers, find ourselves reading them on multiple levels and in multiple directions all at once. And each turn of each term shifts the process just enough to continue to destabilize meaning, so that the writing is the thinking, which is also the reading, continuously in process of interrogation.

Bringing the conversation back to the notion of queer practice, it is useful to consider that as Stein destabilizes the meaning of the terms above, Butler's explanation of repetition and the

destabilization of gendered identity and the lesbian subject seems especially relevant to Stein's project:

Through the repeated play of this sexuality that the 'I' is . . . it is precisely the *repetition* of that play that establishes . . . the *instability* of the very category that it constitutes. For if the 'I' is a site of repetition, that is, if the 'I' only achieves the semblance of identity through a certain repetition of itself, then the 'I' is always displaced by the very repetition that sustains it. In other words, does or can the 'I' ever repeat itself, cite itself, faithfully, or is there always a displacement from its former moment that established the permanently non-self-identical status of that 'I' or its 'being lesbian'? ("Imitation" 311)

If gender, like identity, is a performance, according to Butler, then we perform our identities through repetition of our "selves"; the "I" has to repeat itself in order to achieve the "semblance of identity." The potential for "trouble" here comes by way of the impossibility of exact repetition. The "I" can't repeat or "cite itself" in the same way all the time so that there is a "non-self-identical status" more accurately representative of an "I" than a singular or stable performance (or definition) of identity. Identity is not seamless, in Butler's terms, but always shifting; recognizing this processual movement of identity (in terms of gender, lesbianism, or heterosexuality) calls attention to the fictional nature of sexual and other identity markers as given and stable. Butler continues:

If repetition is the way in which power works to construct the illusion of a seamless heterosexual identity, if heterosexuality is compelled to *repeat itself* in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity, then this is an identity permanently at risk, for what if it fails to repeat, or if the very exercise of repetition is redeployed for a very different performative purpose? That there is a need for a repetition at all is a sign that identity is not self-identical. It requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk of becoming *de-instituted* at every interval. ("Imitation" 315)

Sexuality, or identity, is not seamless, Butler argues here, even though the normative "heterosexual" is constructed as such, believed to be coherently uniform and unproblematic both in form and in content. Heterosexuality is the accepted norm, and it is so because it is seen as seamless and stable, without disruption. However, heterosexuality, as identity, is precisely not

stable, nor is any singularly defined identity marker, or even identity itself. The emphasis on repetition is its own undoing; where repetition fails to repeat, gaps are found in the logic of repetition as social interpellation.⁷ Stein's repetition calls attention to itself as an exaggeration of its own power to influence. However, the repetition in excess destabilizes the idea and practice of repetition as a tool of power and social construction. When repetition of sexual and gender performance fails, or repeats inexactly, or for a different purpose than ideological inscription, lends toward the undoing, or deinstitutionalization of language, and identity.

Performing or enacting queerness entails interrogating and going beyond normalized boundaries; Stein insists on constantly pushing, even redefining the idea of the boundary itself. Earlier readings of Stein's discussions of the relation between human nature and human mind often simplify a dualistic separation between the two.⁸ The distinction, for Stein, however, is unclearly delineated. Throughout *The Geographical History* the two concepts influence and play off of each other in complicated ways, and the play with language, and misuse of logical argumentation, further draw attention to the fact that the two (nature and mind) are not the same, but they are not in binary opposition either. The relation between the two is a continual process that is dynamic and in flux. Although Stein deals with this relationship in a slightly more accessible way in *What Are Masterpieces*, in *The Geographical History* the two purposefully evade clear explanation or definition, while Stein simultaneously brings readers along through the process of theorizing these, even if there are no absolute conclusions drawn. As a strategy, this works against the boundaries and norms that rely on simple definitions and binary constructions; for if we cannot clearly articulate the relation between human nature and human

⁷ I'm using Althusser's theory of interpellation in which subjects are ideologically produced as social beings.

⁸ Curnutt points to the "distinction between the inner and outer self"; identity is that outer self that is tolerated and not related to the inner self that "exists independent of observation." Ashton uses the more clearly and simply delineated concepts of identity and entity from *What are Masterpieces* to put human nature and human mind on separate "sides" though in the *Geographical History* the two are in more complicated relation.

mind, then we cannot define and categorize subjects based on who or what we think they are, and our processes of knowing ourselves and others become “queered,” opening alternative spaces for interrogative learning and understanding.

A close reading of *The Geographical History* will show further connections between Butler’s theories of narrative and identity, and Stein’s representation of these—thus enacting in her creative-philosophical text many of Butler’s philosophically, theoretical ideas. Early in *The Geographical History*, Stein’s discussion of human nature and human mind, in relation to the question of identity, is presented as complicated subject matter, and thus the process of interrogation and discovery and begins:

Chapter III

The question of identity has nothing to do with the human mind it has something although really nothing altogether to do with human nature. Any dog has identity.

The old woman said I am I because my little dog knows me, but the dog knew that he was he because he knew that he was he as well as knowing that he knew she. (423)

Immediately, “identity” is disconnected from anything we think we might know about it. Stein puts identity in uneasy relation to mind and nature. If any dog can have identity, then identity cannot be an essential aspect of human nature, but points to our having identities as social beings. The question of identity is one of relation, of one to another, yet Stein complicates this, putting the old woman in relation to her dog who “knows” her, thereby setting up an interrogation of the terminology itself that will always fall short of definition. Stein creates an “unsatisfying” excess of language that will continually fail to account for itself, while we as readers will only fall short in understanding whether or not there is even any such thing as identity, let alone how we might define it. As Butler explains, making sense of identity in terms of self-understanding will generally fail; the gap between naming and identity, and being “an identity” limits one’s ability to narratively account for oneself.

If the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us and marks immediately an excess and opacity that falls outside the categories of identity, then any effort “to give an account of oneself” will have to fail in order to approach being true. As we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally or definitively, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. (Butler, *Giving* 42-43)

The Geographical History is excessive in its refusal to identify. The text highlights its own inability or failure to account for the relation between nature, mind, and identity. There is no answer that satisfies the questions presented, but instead the process of exploration, over the course of the text, allows the questions to linger, to remain open as the meaning/content that offers insight into the nature of identity formation in the world. Writing that calls attention to itself in its failure to cohere according to social norms of language, sexuality, and representation, pushes the limits of what is acceptable and “troubles” the system. This opens new spaces of possibility; as Butler says, “by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live” or we let identity remain open and in process, exceeding definition and containment.

In an early section, titled “The question of identity” (401), Stein begins to play with “I” as the first-person pronoun that represents identity, and the number one (written variously as one, I, 1); and uses repetition of the “I” as a defamiliarizing strategy in order to detach herself and her reader from really knowing what the pronoun represents. Notice the repetition of the signs “I” (as both pronoun and roman numeral) and “one” in the following passages:

Part IV

The question of identity

A Play

I am I because my little dog knows me.
Which is he.
No which is he.

Say it with tears, no which is he.
 I am I why.
 So there.
 I am I where.
 Act I Scene III
 I am I because my little dog knows me.
 Act I Scene I
 Now that is the way I had played that play.
 But not at all not as one is one.

Act I Scene I

I am I because my little dog knows me. (401)

Act I Scene I

Which one is there I am I or another one.
 Who is one and one or one is one.
 I like a play of acting so and so.
 Leho Leho.
 Leho is a name of a Breton.
 But we in America are not displaced by a dog oh no no not at all not at all
 at all displaced by a dog. (401)

Scene I

I am I yes sir I am I.
 I am I yes Madame am I I.
 When I am I am I I.
 And any little dog is not the same thing as I am I.
 Chorus. Or is it.
 With tears in my eyes oh is it.
 And there we have the whole thing.
 Am I I.
 And if I am I because my little dog knows me am I I.
 Yes sir am I I.
 Yes madame or am I I.
 The dog answers without asking because the dog is the answer to
 anything that is that dog. But not I. Without tears not I. (405)

The constant repetition of “I” and its interchangeability with the number one, makes the reader question the viability of an “I” that knows itself, or that understands the relation between the first person pronoun, and third person pronouns. In order to be an “I” and give an account of oneself,

according to Butler, one has to be in relation to another; there is no “I” without an other, or a “you.” The repetition of “I am I because my little dog knows me” seems to be a strategy of convincing, as if Stein (or her narrator) is trying to convince herself that she has identity because she is recognized (by her dog, by others), but that the need for convincing is always a need and never a fulfillment while questions still linger (“I am I why. I am I where”). There are also the questions of interchangeability: “Which one is there I am I or another one” and so if one has identity (“I”) how or why is that different from another’s “I”/identity and displacement: “But we in America are not displaced by a dog oh no no not at all not at all at all displaced by a dog.” If identity is interchangeable, and dogs and people all can have identity, then this also reduces the importance of the concept altogether, creating, for Stein, a kind of nonidentity. If every “one” has “identity,” and these are potentially interchangeable, and individual identities can be displaced, then what is the point of identity at all as a concept? It is this which Stein continues to explore (the relation between identity and nonidentity) throughout the text.

Linguist Emile Benveniste, according to Kaja Silverman, explains that “language, discourse, subjectivity” are “shown to be theoretically inseparable” (43). Further:

There is no concept ‘I’ that incorporates all the *I*’s that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers, in the sense that there is a concept ‘tree’ to which all the individual uses of *tree* refer Then, what does *I* refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: *I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse And so it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language. (Benveniste qtd. in Silverman 44)

Silverman explains: “Benveniste insists that the individual finds his or her cultural identity only within discourse, by means of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’” (45). It is through language, by way of our pronominal relations to each other, that we are able to “find” our personal/cultural identities. According to Benveniste, and Silverman, subjectivity is always already conditioned by the available discourses and understanding of one’s place in the (linguistically constructed) world. If

the “basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language,” then subjects’ abilities to form ideas, and negotiate their own processes of identity, necessarily work through language and discourse.

Or as Silverman further explains:

The subject’s discourse is constrained by the rules of language; it can only speak by means of a pre-existing linguistic system. Moreover, ‘language’ must here be understood in the broadest possible sense . . . every utterance must be conceived as having various levels of signification, and issuing from multiple voices. It is spoken not only by the palpable voice of a concrete speaker, writer, or cluster of mechanical apparatuses, but the anonymous voices of cultural codes which invade it in the form of connotation. (50)

These anonymous voices are from previous (and continuing) “codes” and discourses, into which we are born, and which determine speaking and writing in one’s contemporary moment (Silverman 50). Subjectivity then is formed through discourses, and relations between language and culture. Speaking (and writing) subjects are contextualized within a cultural and linguistic system that “pre-exists the individual, and which determines his or her cultural identity” (Silverman 52). If subjectivity is formed through language, then understanding and performing our identities can be seen as both constructed, and potentially even more open to manipulation. Through language we may be subject to ideological expectations and normalizing narratives, but using language we might also subvert, and “re-write” those.

Stein takes on the cultural and linguistic systems in which she is contextualized, and tries to write through them in ways that call attention to the fabricated nature of “human nature,” and the false idea that “identity” is a natural part of that. In *The Geographical History* Stein takes the material language of particular concepts (identity, autobiography, romance, etc.) and tries to divorce them from their cultural significance created through discursive repetition and acceptance. Her other-oriented use of repetition, and her refusal to define or explain, calls attention to the process of signification and brings this back into the realm of the arbitrary. If Saussure claimed that the relationship between signifier and signified is an arbitrary one, use and

repetition have changed the status of this relationship to one that is more determinative. Stein challenges the signifier-signified relationship in order to show that identity and subjectivity are not essential and given, but these are as constructed as anything else that is not part of the literal, natural landscape. In order to understand “identity” one has to understand the nature of the cultural and linguistic systems that have constructed the concept itself. And if “identity” is a construction that has no essential core, then the idea of “autobiography,” as an account of an identity, is doubly fictional. *The Geographical History* is a material example of an attempt to dismantle and call attention to the linguistic and narrative systems that claim to offer us the tools for self-understanding; Stein uses the materials of language to show the impossibility of complete subjective awareness. In addition to repetition and dissociation, Stein uses particular tropes or examples to draw connections and open new spaces for re-thinking the concepts under scrutiny.

Early in the text, Stein draws on the idea of the detective story in order to investigate the mystery (and documentation) of identity:

The whole book now is going to be a detective story of how to write.
 A play of the relation of human nature to the human mind.
 And a poem of how to begin again
 And a description of how the earth look as as you look at it which is perhaps a play if it
 can be done in a day and is perhaps a detective story if it can be found out. (409)

And:

How I do like numbers this Detective story number one.
 Detective story number I. About how there is a human mind.
 And how to detect it.
 Detective story number I.
 The great thing to detect in a detective story is whether you have written as you have
 heard it said. If you do write as you have heard it said then you have to change it. (411)

“Detective story number I” might be the first in a series of stories, or a story about “how to detect” identity. An autobiography might be a detective story in the ways in which it compiles

the details of a life and then tries to make sense of them in some kind of narrative form. Stein's project does something different in the ways it explores concepts we think we understand, and puts them under the pressure of language, calling attention to just how little we do know. How can writing an alternatively narrated text aid in understanding? Writing and human mind are intimately related; writing and thinking are inseparable. This work is an autobiographical detective story about self and writing, or the writing self, and this writing is always in process negotiating between what is heard and said and written, and is always subject to change.

Customarily focusing on the present tense of writing, Stein claims to disavow history, possibly because history is not of the present and can only be written in retrospect. She writes, "Now history has really no relation to the human mind at all, because history is the state of confusion between anybody doing anything and anything happening" (422). And it's not about remembering and forgetting:

The land has something to do with the human mind but nothing to do with human nature.

Human nature is animal nature but the human mind the human mind is not.

If it were then the writing that has been written would not be writing that any human mind can read, it has really no memory nor any forgetting.

Think of the Bible and Homer think of Shakespeare and think of me.

There is no remembering and there is no forgetting because memory has to do with human nature and not with the human mind. (408)

Autobiography, for Stein, is a space for exploration. Remembering is about the past, while writing, or the human mind, has to do with the present constantly turning into a new present. In the middle of *The Geographical History* a section on autobiography relates language and writing in a continuous beginning again, in which, Stein writes, "human nature is not only uninteresting it is painful but I it is not I who doubt what it is all about but naturally what it is is what it is not" (458). An "I" (person) is a "one" (individual) who is not an "I" until known by another. Further, two later consecutive sections: "Autobiography number one is almost done. Autobiography

number one” and “Autobiography number one now almost completely begun” show the constant starting again, this text representing a life that is continually in process. Time, like narrative progression, tries to contain that which doesn’t abide by such constraints.

Autobiography I

When I was one that is no longer one of one but just one that is to say when I was a little one, but not so little that I meant myself when I said not one. (448)

Story, like identity, cannot be contained to linear, progressive narrative. She writes:

The story of my life.

Chapter one.

At that time I had no dogs

Chapter II

So I was not I because my little dog did not love me. But I had a family. They can be a nuisance in identity but there is no doubt no shadow of doubt that that identity the family identity we can do without. (458)

The “family identity” is yet another way of identifying through a social institution. Like language and other social structures, the family reinforces certain norms of identification and behavior. Social, cultural, and familial recognition may become difficult if a subject seeks alternative possibilities of identification outside of social norms for particular identificatory categories. The significance of being recognized by one’s dog, for Stein, is an example that both points to the complexity of identity and recognition, and may expand the sense of the possible: if identity, which begins within the family structure, is impossible, being recognized in alternative ways becomes necessary. Still, the difficulty of socially constructed identity lingers, and Stein’s repetition of the phrase “I am I because my little dog knows me” calls attention to the importance of continuously negotiating an unanswerable question. While this repeated phrase may be read as displacing human identity by putting that in relation to dog identity, it can also be read as calling

attention to alternative means of recognition. In her personal life, Stein's dogs were important to her as companions, and using the example of the relationship between dog and owner further sheds light on that between self and other (one identity in relation to another); "I am I because my little dog knows me" disorients the reader and calls attention to "identity" from yet another perspective, even while the reader recognizes the relationship between one and one's dog as familiar and ordinary. If identity cannot be thought without a consideration of an "I" in relation to a "you," Stein makes readers think about just how complicated this relationship actually is.

Moving out of the autobiography section, Stein, seemingly more concretely, brings money, romance, landscape, and scenery into the mix. If the abstract becomes tangible through the use of concrete examples, then Stein's examples prove to be of little use, except to continue an interrogation of abstract concepts such as identity and human nature through some brain-teasing play between language and logic.

Volume I

Money is what words are.
 Words are what money is.
 Is money what words are
 Are words what money is.
 There can be no romance without nature, there can be no money without words.
 There can be nature without words.
 Nature is here used in the sense of natural scenery and what land is.
 And so nature is not what money is. (461)

We can read various interpretations into the text above, though it seems clear that Stein is thinking of examples that are related to nature, mind, and identity in the ways they are created as social constructs. Words, like money, like language, can be exchanged with arbitrary value. Words can be put together in non-narrative and seemingly nonsensical ways, and still have meaning,⁹ or they can be used in narratives that appear natural even while they are the material

⁹ Stein writes, "I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them

element in the construction of the text. Romance is related to nature, but this is different from human nature which becomes “naturalized” through socially constructed narratives. Romance is also akin to natural scenery and land, which Stein will later explain is continuous and has no beginning, middle, or end. We might also interpret that (queer) romance is natural in this sense, outside of time and money and words, though, she also writes, “money and words and romanticism have no time or identity in them” (462) and “it carefully comes about that there is no identity and no time and therefore no human nature when words are apart. Or rather when words are together” (463). Stein constantly reminds us not to follow the impulse to define, or consider one element more “natural” than another. We can follow the logic of argument, but we inevitably have to participate in that logic and make our own sense of it. Stein is creating a logic that does little to form arguments or come to conclusions. Separate from argument and conclusion, the process of logic is simply one of interrogation. Separated from their cultural meanings, money and words and romanticism might also stand on their own terms, so that we can begin to see them as separate from our preconceived notions.

Further in the text, and more specifically in terms of geography, Stein writes, “In a small country where the land is not flat and where as you look you see what it is if it is as it is a great deal of poetry can and will and shall and must and may be written” (467). As writing comes out of, or is in relation to, the cultural realm, location plays a key role; the text and its context are in critical relation. As an American living in France, Stein used the negotiation between these geographical and emotional spaces in much of her work. For example, she writes: “But in a flat country it must have content but not form and that may make a master-piece but is it poetry” (467). Poetry, as writing that interrogates language, emotion, and culture, can be read as

together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible. Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them” (“A Transatlantic Interview”).

analogous to geographical texture. Poetry, like language, like identity, is not flat. And the relation between form and content is like that between a subject and her geographical and cultural context, geography being used here both figuratively and literally. Stein wrote “about” America, using everyday American English, from her physical context of France. Of her time in America, during the tour of 1934, Stein wrote “the being here it is so natural that it is not real” (qtd. in Retallack 15), a statement that points to the distance, both geographic and linguistic, that seems necessary for trying to make sense of this relationship between the “natural” landscape and constructions of identity (or how it is defined) in the world.

Stein’s continuous present tense functions, in part, as anti-narrative, or against narratives that “naturalize” who and what we are. Human nature is socially constructed because we can’t talk about it without language; we construct language to create understanding of human nature, and so the deconstruction of these narratives, for Stein, has to be approached through linguistic practice. Returning to Butler and Benveniste, it can be said that since subjectivity is possible because of discourse, writing the “I” places the subject in relation, and constructs identity, in writing. The subject of the text (the “I” of experience + the narrative “I”) is contextualized, for Stein, through language and geography. Landscape and scenery are continuous, and similar to the continuous present:

Ordinarily anybody finishes anything.

But not in writing. In writing not any one finishes anything. That is what makes a master-piece what it is that there is no finishing.

Please act as if there were the finishing of anything but any one any one writing knows that there is no finishing finishing in writing. (480)

In writing, Stein enacts the continuous “not-finishing” in which there is no fabricated narrative with a beginning, middle, and end with closure, but is instead a continuous process. She uses the

example of a play, and compares this to the example of natural landscape, or scenery, both of which seem continuous, without beginning, middle, or end:

A little play.

War and storms.

Romanticism and money and space.

Human nature and identity and time and place.

Human mind.

Master-pieces.

There need be no personages in a play because if there are then you do not forget their names and if you do not forget their names you put their names down each time that they are to say something.

The result of which is a play that finishes. (482)

A play, or to play, is active. Identity, like narrative, is expected to be cohesive, a finished product, named and determined, the product at the end of the process (which then is forgotten), and naming leads to recognizability (in terms of given cultural codes and discourses). Stein, however, seems more interested in writing (identity) as play, which is not determined or narrated in a closed structure, but open, dynamic, in flux, continuous. As Jennifer Ashton points out, “naming” for Stein “has been understood as the sign whose structure of meaning is the very paradigm of determinacy” (582) and so, *not naming* keeps the play open, not determined, not finishing. Or:

What is a play.

A play is scenery. (485)

A play, like natural scenery is continuous and has no beginning, middle, end; it is instead continuous action in the present tense. A play enacts the story, while a novel tells a story of something that already happened. Without naming, and without linear progression, a play might continue, like scenery, indefinitely.

Coming to the end of *The Geographical History*, Stein writes, “I am I because my little dog knows me. The figure wanders on alone” (487). But one can only be a one, an “I” in

relation, and as differentiated from an other (my little dog). The figure is alone, but the “I” is relative (the sign in the sentence, the speaker in discourse). “I so easily see that identity has nothing to do with masterpieces although occasionally and very inevitably it does always more or less come in” (487). And so identity, like geography and culture, enter into the text whether intentionally or not. Stein constructs *The Geographical History* to explore these questions of identity, and in the process ruptures our understanding of what it means to identify, creating the concept of nonidentity, and thereby opening space for other means of identification. As subjects, we are always in flux and changing, not always (if ever) coherent and unified, while the limits of language contribute to limited possibilities for identification in the world. Understanding this, and working to dismantle the limitations of language, might make us more tolerant and open to continuing to push against, and revise, the boundaries, the borders: of language, of texts, and of other social and cultural structures.

Hejinian: Intertextual (Self) as Text

A core member of the group of Language poets known for considering language and textuality in political terms, Hejinian takes her politics beyond the textual realm to interrogate narrative, and representations of identity, especially as these manifest in autobiographical writing. Hejinian is most well known for her experimental prose work *My Life*, published in two versions (1980, 1987), and another, later version, *My Life in the Nineties*. In 1980 the book was composed of 37 sections of 37 sentences each, written when she was 37. The later version, written when she was 45, is composed of 45 sections of 45 sentences each. Written as a type of non/narrative, non/autobiography, *My Life* builds on the poetic theories of her earlier *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*, enacting in the text insights and reflections on how one remembers,

represents, and documents memory. Hejinian's essay, "What's Missing from My Life," and the long hybrid poetic work, *A Border Comedy*, continue to explore the documentation of memory and writing a text of a "life," and move further to interrogate the idea of representation itself. In *A Border Comedy*, Hejinian incorporates a theory of intertextuality as an alternative way of writing (a non/narrative, non/representational text) which pushes against borders that otherwise limit self-identification in writing. Throughout her work, Hejinian assumes, after Stein and among others, that identity is not stable but dynamic and in flux. And following Butler above, Hejinian seems to agree with the notion that narrative accounting necessarily falls short, and that this failing works against the demand for coherent self-identity, often resulting for Hejinian, in work that employs constructive processes of non/narrative and non/autobiographical writing.

In a work of involuntary memory like Proust's, Walter Benjamin explains, "the materials of memory no longer appear singly, as images, but tell us about a whole, amorphously and formlessly, indefinitely and weightily, in the same way as the weight of his net tells a fisherman about his catch And his sentences are the entire muscular activity of the intelligible body; they contain the whole enormous effort to raise this catch" (Benjamin 216). In a similar way, the paratactic New Sentences of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* are the muscle and the movement of the whole of the work.¹⁰ Each individual sentence tells the reader something about the whole; the consecutive nature of the parataxis, the fact of one sentence following another, builds (and unbuilds) toward a totality of sorts, that moves through space and a vertical documentation of memory. In light of the Benjamin quote above, it is not simply that the parts add up to the whole, but that the sentences are the *effort* to raise the catch, and the effort is in the "fishing" or the process, the labor, itself. *My Life* enacts the difficulty (or impossibility) of moving beyond the

¹⁰ See Silliman; "the new sentence" refers to the paratactic, anti-narrative strategy of democratically placing sentences in physical relation, one after another, without linguistic or grammatical transitions or relations between them.

effort; the documentation of a life is a process, not a product to be neatly packaged in narrative form; and over the body of her work we see an ongoing interrogation of the possibility of representing identity in textual form.

Benjamin's "The Image of Proust" offers an example of both a quest for, and theorizing a method of, documenting the past in its inclusion of both remembering and forgetting. The following is the key passage in the essay:

We know that in his work, Proust did not describe a life as it actually was, but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it. And yet even this statement is imprecise and far too crude. For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection. Or should one call it, rather a Penelope work of forgetting? Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involuntaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warf, a counterpart to Penelope's work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night was woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting. However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting. (204)

The text is the document of the life as it is remembered, in relation to what simultaneously has been forgotten. As Penelope weaves and unweaves her shroud so is experience remembered and forgotten; the woof and the warf of weaving, the threads crossing over and under each other, form the web of the text of memory, including what is not remembered at all. Specifically, Benjamin says, "the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory." It is significant that he specifies the remembering author, the person documenting his memories. Benjamin's Proust is concerned with the weaving of his memories more than with the present or with real experience. "For," as Benjamin writes, "an experienced event is finite—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it"

(“Image” 204). Like a web, the text of memory is tightly woven, yet open to the potential infinity of remembrances. Hejinian’s *My Life* might be read as imitating Proust’s continuous, open project in a contemporary, experimental, non/narrative form. The images in her paratactic sentences can be seen as involuntary memories that appear sometimes without provocation or conscious effort. Further, *My Life* as a continuous work seems to be an ongoing project, especially with the recent publication of *My life in the Nineties*.

Craig Dworkin compares *My Life* to quilts of the nineteenth century, pieced by hand from scraps of cloth, artifacts of lives lived by the quilt makers. He writes: “The surface of a quilt constantly negotiates between the individual strips and blocks of fabric on the one hand (varied and small patterns), and the entire composition on the other (an overall pattern composed of varied small patterns)” (69). The quilt/text is also a “union of public and private” (60) as work arising out of both personal and social/historical contexts. The quilt analogy emphasizes the constructed nature of a work like *My Life*. The quilter might pick and choose pieces and put them together in any number of possible ways, and “meaning” might then be determined through the squares (language) in its structure and placement; the final quilt/text is only one particular construction among infinite possibilities. The quilt-like formation of *My Life* incorporates this multiplicity of possibilities, and responds to that. There is no single life story, but always a number of possible ways of constructing stories about a life.

Dworkin takes the first part of his essay’s title, “Penelope Reworking the Twill,” from *My Life* to suggest Hejinian’s notion of meta-construction at work in the writing. He italicizes and embeds her lines within his own to highlight her commentary on the “autobiographical” text. “Like *Penelope reworking the twill*, Hejinian is *rewriting in an unstable text*, and the meanings of that text are constantly in flux; this continual re-creation of meaning works to indefinitely

postpone completion and closure in the book and to sustain Hejinian's *Life* (*eternal time—reversal*) in a textual evasion of the mortality of her 'life'" (71). Further, he explains, "Hejinian has constructed a form of biography which plays a life that is always past and fixed against a *perpetual activity* of reading that is always present and open, *repetitious, moment by moment beginnings in the middle*" (71). Like Penelope's reworking, the text recedes and moves forward, or like Stein's *Geography*, it exists in a state of continuous present, or simultaneity of (remembered) events. The text is constantly done and undone, created and destroyed. It works more reliantly on spatial logics than temporal (chronological, linear) progress; as Penelope postpones completion, so *My Life* moves sideways or vertically. The text is one of both recollection and forgetting, woven tightly together and simultaneously pulled apart with every turn of the word and placement of the sentence. Memories documented are both recovered and re-covered, presented and manipulated in the construction process, the undoing of the/a self constructed in the process of textualizing.

Construction is open and web-like, subject to Penelope's method of postponement and advance; the (un)woven shroud is the artifact of a life re-objected/objectified between the covers of the text. As Hejinian writes, "You cannot determine the nature of progress until you assemble all of the relatives" (*My Life* 13). The text thus becomes an assemblage, a material practice of incorporating the disparate and fragmented pieces of the past. Though it is impossible to collect *all* of the relatives, Hejinian points to the assemblage of what is relative as that which is key to the text, or, "to follow the progress of ideas, or that particular line of reasoning, so full of surprises and unexpected correlations, was somehow to take a vacation" (12). But a vacation from what? The linear, narrative, chronological text? She writes: "A pause, a rose, something on paper, in a nature scrapbook. What follows a strict chronology has no memory. For me, they

must exist, the contents of that absent reality, the objects and occasions which now I reconsidered” (16). Although fully admitting, even drawing attention to, the fact of the autobiographical text as a fabrication, the further oppressive construction of linear chronology may restrict the materialization of memory, the absent reality. Proust focused on the importance of *mémoire involuntaire*, in which a memory would be allowed to (re)surface unexpectedly and without constraint. Autobiographical writing, Hejinian seems to assert, which constrains memory to linear narration, may not open space for the absent reality of such memories.

Through lyric repetition and paratactic relation of ideas and events, the construction of a text like *My Life* confirms, “It is impossible to return to the state of mind in which these sentences originated.” She continues, “So I borrowed my father’s typewriter. There was a garden, a hole in the fence, a grandfather who had no religion—one can run through the holes in memory, wearing a wet hat, onto the sidewalk covered with puddles, and there are fingers in them” (40). Always grounding the more abstract in concrete, imagistic details, Hejinian works throughout the text to let the philosophical resonate. We are reading about a life that is actually a reflection on writing and reading “through the holes in memory” and outside of the constraints of linear narration. *My Life* in fact seems more invested in “dimension, longevity, color, and pleasure” (35) and how to enact these on the page. “The world seen in a foreign English, as awkward as surprising, with a vocabulary from the thesaurus instead of from the dictionary” she writes, for vocabulary is relative, not exact. Pointing back to Stein, she suggests that any words put together in a space can “mean,” and depending on placement and context, meaning is flexible and relative, and often in process. “I may have started inexactly,” her narrator explains, “I thought, nearsighted to a buttercup; I will begin again, and I rolled over into the next indentation” (53). Ultimately, *My Life* is a text of active inquiry, never satisfied with transparent

narratives of the events of a life, constantly beginning again, rolling over into every next sentence, every next indentation. The text reaches after “the pith, restlessness, and the severe sanity of inquiry” which is enacted through the layering and weaving of images and memories calling attention to themselves as fragments woven together. “My Life is as permeable constructedness” (133) Hejinian writes, as a confirmation of sorts, that both the author’s life, and *My Life* are permeable and constructed, relative and in flux.

Hejinian’s *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* reflects on the process of documenting memory, while it constructs itself through that reflection. As an example of Hejinian’s process for thinking about the fragmentation of memory, and well as what remains and what is lost in the act of remembering, this text is useful to read alongside *My Life*, before moving to Hejinian’s later, more intertextual, *Border Comedy*. *Writing* is more fragmented and less narrative than *My Life*, it is sectioned by number instead of by title, and each of the sections is of varying length. Some sections in *Writing* contain only parts, and parts of parts, though particular themes arise over the course of the work, such as fractals, verticality, the cyclical, and the natural. It is also a musical text, as if memory (and its documentation) is a lyric event. For example, in section 19 she writes: “do trees in the thickness of thoughts / glides out of the minute / across as through thread / fiddle by the rough of hidden music”; and a little further down: “fixing do trees glide two rates.” Through these examples, as in much of the text what becomes apparent is the play between language and meaning, and the relation between the particular and the whole. The plural “trees” (instead of a singular forest) draws an analogy between many single trees in the forest and the thickness of thoughts; memory is like a forest, and its documentation requires weeding through the forest to focus on the detail of the particular. Yet the forest itself “glides” out of the “minute” or smallest particular, or out of a minute in time, a reflection on the fractal-like nature of the

individual mirroring the whole, and the whole found in the miniature, in this text. The weaving reference, “across as through” such as across space as through time, or across and through the very material of construction, and the thread of the individual memory, are used with other memories (scraps) to weave a life, a text, a quilt. Hejinian continues, “fixing of memory of erasing at any page / so the praise is a limit to any connection” again recalling the Penelope work of fixing (as in setting in place) and erasing, “at” any page (instead of “on”); this fixing/erasing might be encountered on any page at which one arrives in the reading (or remembering). This is not just something found on the page in time (during writing or reading) but a place (space) arrived at. Praise is also not always truth(ful), and mere praise (content-less, or without truth?) only limits real connection or communication. Writing instead moves away from limits, and memory is not limited in its potential for documentation. Texts of memory include what is forgotten, both praise and criticism, and fragments, which by definition include both positive and negative; what is included highlights what is lacking.

Hejinian further uses the fragment, in both its positive and negative aspects, in an essay titled: “What’s Missing from *My Life*,” the purpose of which is to comment on the social and historical context of one section (the ninth) of *My Life*. She does this by first contextualizing the time of the writing of both the original 37 line, and the later 45 line, versions (1977-78, 1986-87), and then gives more detail about the years 1949-50, the time period of the “content” of the piece. Of the Bay Area in 1977-78, and the activities of the Language poets, she writes, “A process of heterogeneity was unfolding—a collectively instigated production of differences. *My Life* is probably a reflection of that, insofar as it is coherently structured but internally disparate” (1). She writes about the Reagan 80s and the sense of “utopian promise” of the 70s turned to one of near despair, and the greater urgency for (and difficulty of) the “production of difference” in

creative work (2). The heart of the matter though is “What’s Missing.” First, she sets out to discern (social/historical) themes in the text as it exists, and then “defends” the fact that:

What’s missing from *My Life* are the numerous sentence-memories that might have named particular public events and/or referred to larger historical conditions and social forces that no doubt structured and in manifold ways conditioned those memories and shifted them about. Indeed, the very modes of memorizing are no doubt culturally and also historically determined. But defense of these at least apparent omissions is that *My Life* was intended as a work of memory not of history; it is a work composed of sentences shaped by memory and the possibilities of English syntax. It was intended as a portrait of memory’s work at identity-in-the-making . . . since the particular events I want to talk about in this paper occurred when I was only around 9 years old, I can’t fault myself for insufficiently remembering them. (2-3)

Feeling the need to “defend” the original text(s) Hejinian seems to draw a line between the social/historical and the personal. That specific sentences naming public and historic events are not included seems to inhibit the fact of a work arising from the context of the social and historical, as well as the personal, whether or not these are addressed directly. Her point is to add more, “real” historical documentation into the text itself, in addition to the conditioned memories, shifted (implicitly) by the social/historical. She admits that “memorizing” (remembering, memorializing, or memorizing images of memory) is culturally and historically determined. Does she simply mean to reiterate the cultural and historical location of a person experiencing, and then later remembering those experiences? Or is there no separation between cultural and personal so that our memories, when documented, will reflect, either implicitly or explicitly, the cultural and social situation of their origins? Hejinian further asserts that the work is one of memory and not of history, a possible negation of her previous statements. But if autobiography and memory can be constructed in alternative ways (in texts like *My Life*), is not history also subject to the possibilities of syntax? Additionally, she qualifies the risk of insufficiently remembering events, in regard to the context of *My Life*, which is filled with commentary on the inability to sufficiently remember and document memory. She seems to be

asking if history maintains its status as more objective because it is “public,” as opposed to memory, as more personal.

Having given this disclaimer, Hejinian continues with a historical read of the ninth section of *My Life*, and adds 18 lines to the original 45-line version, to include some of the social/historical moments of crisis to which the work is, at least implicitly, responding. The historical contextualization, specific in its narration of events and the politics of the time, appears only in subtle ways in the text itself; Hejinian does not overtly include the public events of reference, though they clearly help to construct the text. Her explication of the 1950 context of the work highlights the cultural marketing of the U.S. nuclear family, and the example of the California idyllic nuclear family of Governor Warren. Post-WWII xenophobia, she writes, turned “into an obfuscating auto-phobia preventing clear understanding at a cultural level of either other or self” (4). In addition to anti-communist patriotism legislated by government and enforced in the workplace, the “American nuclear family was invented as a strong site of defense” (11) for growing large numbers of patriots (encouraged to have more All-American babies). The negative consequence, Hejinian asserts, is the “self-contained, self-containing potentially explosive American nuclear family, a thesis of the 1950s which the 1950s tried to withhold from its antithesis. The result is . . . a muddle which is never superseded—an absolutely undialectical culture” (14).

Following Fredric Jameson, Hejinian does a reading of her own work. History, for Jameson, is the absent cause that is present in its effects in the literary text; he asserts that we can read the literary text in terms of its form, logic, and semantic elements in order to get at the historical crisis or situation to which the text is responding. Reading a literary text for the absent cause of history makes that history accessible and subject to its “retextualization,” by bringing

that history to the surface and figuratively revising (as in re-vision, or seeing again) the text in consideration of the subtextual historical situation (*Political* 102). Hejinian reads through the ninth section of *My Life* in order to locate the historical situation to which the text is responding; she then both interprets the historical absent cause of the text, and literally revises it to include a greater awareness of that subtext. Hejinian seems to be reading and revising her own work through (and in response to) Jameson. Further, as Jameson writes,

The type of interpretation here proposed is more satisfactorily grasped as the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext, it being always understood that the 'subtext' is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact. (81)

The literary text interprets the structural situation at work, under its own surface, and a reading of the text in this way (re)creates the situation to which the text responds, "it articulates its own situation and textualizes it" (Jameson, *Political* 82). This historical (re)construction of the text potentially creates multiple readings of the original historical situation, and Hejinian's revision plays with that in the ways it uses the surface language to engage subtextual content. Additionally, *My Life*, like the disparate "histories" under its surface, can be read as an accumulation of accounts, purposely not singular, linear, or narratively cohesive.

In the new, expanded version of the ninth section, Hejinian writes:

As for we who 'love to be astonished,' I'm not your maid I'm your mother. Little sailboats were capsizing in the bay. It didn't seem the least bit amazing that they had tunneled the highway through the living redwood tree, for in so doing they had changed the tree into the tunnel, made it something it had not been before, and separated it forever from any other tree.

And:

He stated that I am not a member of the Communist Party or any other organization which advocates the overthrow of the Government by force or violence, and, though it would seem to contradict this he said too that I have no commitments in conflict with my responsibilities with respect to impartial scholarship and free pursuit of truth.

And:

To bring us in from the dark on summer nights when we were playing ‘hide and seek,’ she would call ‘olly-oxen-free,’ laughing at the door. So that later, playing alone, I could imagine myself developing into a tree, and then I yearned to do so with so much desire that it made me shapeless, restless, sleepless, demanding, disagreeable. (“What’s Missing”)

Although not constructed specifically as a political narrative, the newly added lines include more overt political references to the renunciation of Communist affiliation in universities in the 50s, as well as moments of reflection and documentation of the narrator’s past mental impressions as she is remembering and recording them. The text itself, this revised piece and the whole of *My Life*, is “shapeless, restless, sleepless, demanding, disagreeable” as it works fragments, images, objects, history, politics, self, and voice into the process of documenting the past. Hejinian reiterates this at the end of “What’s Missing” when she writes: “it is the role of art to bring experience to experience—to make us conscious of ourselves and our realities—to infuse life with its proper liveliness. It is the role, in addition, of avant-garde art in particular to keep differences active as a perceived fact and active principle—to sustain the ethical charge in aesthetics and keep intelligence intelligent” (14). The text of “experience” might be one in which history and experience are more actively interrogated, in order to “make us conscious” and aware. The formal, textual elements in Hejinian’s work enact the differences and disparate materials at work in any history or experience, and the challenges posed in recording these, so that we as readers might become conscious of the constructed nature of the historical or autobiographical text. Hejinian uses Jameson to work through her own text, retrospectively, while continuing her project of bringing memory and history together. She is simultaneously reading and writing the open, non/narrative text as an ethical project of “keeping differences active” instead of homogenizing the inconsistencies.

A Border Comedy takes the insights from the texts above and proceeds to move from memory, history, and personal experience into a consideration of the social and political need to recognize difference, instead of demanding unified and coherent narratives and subjects. It examines the relationships between poetry, self, and knowledge; between aesthetics, intellect, and social responsibility. Its emphasis on the intertextual offers an alternative way of reading that is indeterminate and resists closure, and creates a text-subject who discovers, negotiates, and explores the external ideas by way of her own reading and writing practices. The construction of the text is the process of making connections among disparate ideas, exceeding both the traditions cited and the individual author explaining those. *A Border Comedy* constructs, in Kristeva's terms, a "new articulation" of signification, yet another alternative to the narrative account of a life. Hejinian is interested in the play between the narrative "I" and the language of other writers and thinkers; the narrative "I" is constantly in dialogue, in relation to other texts and ideas, language and discourse, experience and memory. The poetic text is a combination of the experiences of the author in her selection of extratextual details, and the narrative that is constructed to bring the details in to relation to each other on the page. The text, a reflection of a self and her reading and thinking practices is constructed in a way that makes its own process of construction readily apparent, and allows for spaces to resonate among ideas, writing, and potential effects on readers.

Divided into "books" instead of chapters, the first begins with a sense of change and pushing against borders, of interstitial spaces and reflection on what falls "between," and on the relationship between past and present:

All the clouds can feel our bodies change

If we just use some imagination

Some instigation

Is that ambition?

Then let the rains descend

The imagination is useless unless the mind is free of prejudice

So that all the faculties can enjoy their objects

Objects turning day to night

Appearance to lightsource, fountains to rice

And what is knowledge in this condition?

Bondage?

Flight? (11)

Imagination and instigation (combined with a lack of prejudice) are central to strategies for opening spaces in which difference and discontinuity can linger, toward greater possibilities for social understanding. Freeing the mind of prejudice is a way of opening, or pushing against boundaries that constrain, in order to allow for access to ideas that fall outside of those constraints, to allow for other, not previously accepted possibilities. The indeterminate, non/narrative text is one way of using the imagination in new and different ways, in order to change perceptions (turning day to night), and offer us, the readers, the choice to use knowledge in order to be constrained, or to be free and take flight. Further, she writes:

The void in which one changes at a moment of encounter

A space, as Heidegger says, for which room must be made room, not at but in a

Boundary

A boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognized,

That from which something *begins*

Its essential unfolding (18)

This essential unfolding is also a resistance to closure; if the boundary marks a point of beginning, or unfolding, it doesn't mark the end, or closure of the text, but instead represents a space of possibility. The "open text" according to Hejinian, "foregrounds process . . . and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product . . . it resists reduction and commodification" ("Rejection" 43). *A Border Comedy* uses the idea of the border as a space of intersection and potential. On one side of the border, the self stops, but the border itself—and what may exist beyond—is the space in which the world and the self begin a continuous process of mutual construction, "not at but in a / Boundary." The text formally enacts the intersections between self, world, the negotiation and reading of other texts, and the readers themselves.

Each "Book" in *A Border Comedy* is a consequence of the narrator's writing and thinking through a collection of others' ideas, and acts as an exercise in conversation, instead of explanation. The narrative here is the process of connection and conversation, and the self of the text is no more than the text-subject in a continuous (and fluxuating) process of construction. Or as Gerald Bruns writes, borders for Hejinian "are sites of 'encounter' and milieus of 'experience', and that, perhaps more importantly, they are mobile or fluid rather than fixed" (397). Hejinian writes:

Stucco and sensation, narrative and window skills, depth perception and the

Stretch

Of the continuous destination

Whose parturition through wordy lips and hidden flaps

Is read in a narrative possession of pulled repeats

But preserves and concentrates its power and is capable of exerting it even

After a long time

In distant places

The repetition stirred to marvelous travel

From interior to exterior or from monstrous to minute

Without the illusion of sequence

Or victory

And actually, it's a lot of fun

Related to experience

And its correlate, the ability to follow a story (18-19)

The continuous destination is the focus on the process, the journey, instead of the product of arriving at a closed point. The continuous, or open, text repeats and moves out of any particular sequence. Like Stein's *Geographical History*, the process of narrating, like the process of thinking or experiencing, is subject to stops and starts, circulation, repetition. The text is both external and internal—both functioning on its own terms and participating in the larger world, both of the self and of the materials from which it is constructed. *A Border Comedy* enacts the non-sequential processes of exploration and discovery, of experience of the self in the world.

Capturing present reality in the text is challenging particularly because of the continuous nature of experience; the continuous present tense leaves every moment behind and keeps anything from ever finishing. For example, "Book Twelve" begins:

A "story of our time" would be hard to confess

If confession is what it would take

And hard to declare

As a good among goods

Hard to have taken

Knowing it lived, a winged creature

Having the unstable identity of anything and the steady state of the psyche

Producing it

Always in the present tense, perhaps because of some paradoxical relationship

That dreams have to experience

The contents of a dream having already been experienced but being experi-

enced in dreams as unexperienced

Which prevents dreams from bring finished and keeps life and dream looping

Their links and rattling their chains (156)

The text, as a document that may or may not capture experience, is like a confession that cannot narrate itself. The difficulty in the telling of the story, is the telling, because the “unstable” story is told through the seemingly “steady state of the psyche / Producing it.” Butler’s idea of narrating an account is particularly relevant here as Hejinian calls attention to the seemingly transparent narrative of experience that is actually a fabricated mix of past experience and narration. Instead, “experience,” itself socially contextualized, is further complicated by the impossibility of trying to narrate it; experience can only be experienced through its effects in the text. “In this sense,” Hejinian writes in her essay “Strangeness,” “the process of writing, like the process of dreaming, is a primary thinking process. Thinking explores, rather than records, prior knowledge or an expression of it” (143). Language as process (as opposed to transparent narrative as product) sheds light on the difficulty of narrating a life. Hejinian writes, “Language discovers what one might know, which in turn is always less than what language might say”

(“Rejection” 48). Instead of using language to explain what one knows, she might use language as a way into discovery and further understanding. In *A Border Comedy*, this exploration reverberates through the connections between the various citations juxtaposed into dynamic relation.

We can hear Stein echoed in the idea that language as process and action, as continuous exploration of questions, can lead us in to insights that we would not have gotten to otherwise. Through language we question what we know, and how we know who and what we are in the world.

It is only in sentences that vocabularies produce verbs

As intimate word values

Or yellow sentence branches

And ships pack and moons canoe

Every phrase

An occurrence uncurtailed (*A Border Comedy* 157)

In Stein’s *Geographical History*, the constant turning of thoughts through the language on the page leads the reader through processes of understanding, without confining that to definition and explanation. Knowledge is gained in the recognition of relations and intersections, of citation and association, of intuition and feeling. When the writing becomes strange, it confirms that it is possible to learn through language, instead of using language to explain (insufficiently) what we (do not) know. In his discussion of *A Border Comedy*, Bruns explains that “Heidegger thought that having an experience with language does not occur in the speaking of it but rather when words fail or get away from us, going off on their own” and that this failure may also be related to forgetting, which is key for Hejinian’s interrogation of memory throughout her work. Bruns

continues, “one experiences memory most dramatically not in the possession of it but in its loss . . . forgetting is, like the border, a starting-point, a beginning, a frontier way of writing differently” (406). Or, as Hejinian writes,

What I want to write, then, is that the unlike is always inevitable and never

Sufficient

What we experience is the iffy and hedged (161)

Letting this insufficiency, the “hedged” emerge through the language, in the text itself, the “unlike” becomes an alternative to cohesive narrative complicity. In Butler’s terms, this moment when narrative falls short is one of necessity and productivity. This “way of writing differently” enacts the “iffy and hedged” nature of experience, not in some more “authentic” way, but in a way that allows writer and reader to engage in conversation about the nature of representation when a “self” attempts to write about “experience.” One cannot narrate, or account, for oneself except through this insufficiency, a kind of active hedging of self-understanding.

A Border Comedy uses parataxis as a formal device to both draw attention to the individual disparate details, and to emphasize the importance of relation and contiguity within a larger context. The placement of seemingly unrelated pieces next to one another also foregrounds what falls between, what is unsaid. In her essay “The Rejection of Closure,” Hejinian explains that

in the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion. We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world—to close the gap between ourselves and things—and we suffer from doubt and anxiety because of our inability to do so. (56)

The paratactic text exposes the gaps, calling attention to our limited abilities to use language to make us cohere as transparently narrated subjects. Or, again echoing Butler, every time we fail at

narrating ourselves, we learn something. Using language as a tool of exploration, and allowing the gaps to resonate, opens spaces of possibility for a greater range of experiences that do not otherwise narratively “cohere.” Or, as Hejinian writes:

But I should remember

This is an extended act of conjugation

And might this not put us in a wonderfully instantaneous relationship

To narrative

One which construes narrative as an exchange

Of accidents (163-4)

Recognizing “narrative as an exchange of accidents” brings our attention back to the active, process-oriented composition of *A Border Comedy* as a material text. The accidents occur in the placement of Hejinian’s and others’ language and ideas on the page. Further, the (accidental) exchange continues as the reader becomes yet another element of the text in her negotiation of the multiple and continuously shifting details, associations, and gaps through which she must read herself. Both the text-subject and its reader are “identities-in-process” as they move through the constructive parataxis that is the content of this work. The final book of *A Border Comedy* ends with the following:

It is the one who orders the story who must listen to it

And take on chance

In pushed continuities

In realities snoozed or gossiped near the heaping point, the occasion

And what is chance if not immediate resemblance

A way of knowing things together

Which is why it is change
 And after all difference
 With its slide, decision, and coinciding
 That seizes everything
 And the teller's intention—believe it or not
 Is fortune given
 Living always (212)

Hejinian explains that “the ontological and epistemological problem of our knowledge of experience is, to my mind, inseparable from the problem of description” (“Strangeness” 158). The difficulty with (knowing) experience is the difficulty of describing (through language) that experience. A text like *A Border Comedy*, if not able to make sense of experience, is conscious of the fact of its inability to do so in a coherent way. The strange, or open, text, to some extent leaves the material of its content to chance; it acts as “a way of knowing things together” creating a space for understanding that is not packaged and confined within closed borders of intelligibility. It is this failure of intelligibility that is the fortunate moment of learning, the moment during which new spaces of possibility are opened for further exploration, for expanded possibilities for recognizing disparate and unintelligible experiences of subjects in the world. And it is at/on the border where the action happens. Stein and Hejinian both seem to ask what we can potentially do when we come up against the borders and boundaries: do we remain within their constraints, or go beyond and push them further out, to allow for expanded ways of knowing, seeing, understanding, exceeding what the borders contain?

Conclusion

Stein and Hejinian push beyond their singular stories to create works that are intertextual, geographical, historical, and continuous, but that also recognize and rupture social norms for writing and identifying. Their texts draw attention to narrative fallibility and institute alternative practices for non/cohesive, non/narrative practice and identification. Butler claims that the demand that one maintain a consistent and cohesive self-identity at all times does a certain kind of ethical violence to subjects who do not continuously “cohere.” Instead, she argues, suspending this demand, allowing space for nonidentity and narrative rupture, can potentially allow a subject to exist less constricted by norms of identity instituted through norms of language and narrative, and in more ethically responsible relation to others. If language forms us before we are formed, then exploring narrative itself, in both form and content, can give us insight into the relationship between language and identity for subjects in the world. Taking Butler into account, we see how Stein and Hejinian theorize this relationship through their interrogations of the content of narrative (examining the stories we are told, and tell, about ourselves) and the formal properties of narrative (challenging linear narrative progression, calling attention to the fantasy and fallibility of narrative cohesion). Their texts enact interruption, and recognize the limits of knowing both at the levels of form and content. In working to dismantle the limitations of language, pushing against the borders of what and how we “know,” Stein and Hejinian, in different times and through different means, construct textual examples of tolerance and boundary-breaking, showing us how we might further push against the constraints of social and cultural structures that define, or confine, the range of possibilities for subjective identification, and for subjects’ relations with one another, and toward greater awareness of personal-social responsibility.

CHAPTER 2

Third-Person Self (Narrated): H.D. and Beverly Dahlen

Through their readings of Freud, and in combination with innovative textual strategies, H.D., in *HERmione* and Beverly Dahlen, in *A Reading*, critique socially constructed identity and create models of alternative practice. They use Freudian strategies, such as free association and non/narrative, in their writing practices, and work through Freudian theories, in order to create texts and uncover knowledge. Over the process of the construction of the texts their text-subjects move toward understanding identity as process, and theorizing new means of identification for subjects who do not fit into social norms; they fuse their engagement with, and critiques of, Freud with their own identifications as women and artists (and for H.D. as a bisexual and lesbian). These writers begin in Freud, altering narrative and other formal textual elements, and create content that evokes marginalized, or negated, discourses and subjects. The texts and the text-subjects are in-process, their processes of textual and subjective understanding, interminable. Through their textual inquiries, H.D. and Dahlen break conventions of narrative, point of view, and citation as practices of identifying with other ways of knowing. Breaking social norms and conventions, and creating alternative models, contributes to long-term changes in restrictive cultural narratives for women, artists, lesbians, bisexuals, and those whose experiences are antithetical to the limitations of social norms. Reading these texts through Theresa de Lauretis's theory of perverse desire, I argue that H.D. and Dahlen take their "perverse" non-normative practices (of writing and cultural critique) and turn them into positive models for personal and social identification.

Written in 1927 and not published until 1981, H.D.'s novel is based on events in her life after leaving Bryn Mawr College and before going to Europe for the first time. Although

HERmione was written before she saw Freud for analysis in 1933-34 and thereafter became a lifelong friend and correspondent, she was already beginning to read his work and consider his theories. As a modernist writer, H.D. was in conversation with her (male) avant-garde contemporaries, as well as continually working through her own critiques of gender and social norms in her writing. Dahlen's cross-genre work—which includes poetic and narrative techniques as well as journal writing—in twenty sections over four books, was written in the late 1970s and early 1980s. She can be read both in relation to the work of her contemporaries in California in the 1970s, including Robert Duncan and other members of the San Francisco Renaissance, as well as the Language poets, New Narrative writers, and especially the experimental women writers who formed *HOW(ever)*. Dahlen and her contemporaries in the 1970s and 80s were also actively involved in reading and recovering the work of modernist, and other avant-garde, women writers, work that was important historically and also became influential for Dahlen's own work. Focusing on language and subversive narrative strategy (each to a different degree), H.D. and Dahlen deal with gender politics, sexuality, and textuality in relation to concerns of marginalized subjects. Through a fusion of form and content they create textual examinations of cultural identity, and create alternative models of textual and identificatory practice.

These texts can be read as pushing beyond the dualism of fixed identity/negated identity, toward an awareness of more complex processes of identification. Turning to Kristeva who “challenges traditional notions of identity” (Oliver, *Reading* 1) and “the traditional notion of the paternal function” (3), I show what H.D. and Dahlen are intuitively enacting in their texts. Reading Kristeva, Kelly Oliver explains: “In traditional Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis it is the paternal function that initiates the negation and identification that finally propels the infant

into both language and subjectivity” (3); further, Kristeva is “concerned with analyzing the complexities of the maternal function, which she maintains have been left out of traditional psychoanalytic theory” (3). This is important for Kristeva because of what has become the problematic nature of the “maternal” in western society, “since the maternal function is not separated from our representations of women or the feminine, women themselves have become abjected within our society” (6). In essence, the oppression of the maternal functions as the oppression of women since, for Kristeva, “social problems always have their core in representation . . . that our representations of maternity are not only detrimental to women but, since the first relation is with the mother, to all human relations.” Kristeva argues that we need to “reconceptualize and rearticulate the relation between women and reproduction” (6-8). She sees the maternal as “the other” in the (Freudian) Oedipal, and (Lacanian) phallic symbolic systems. Because representations of maternity historically serve to subjugate women as inferior and lacking, Kristeva sees the deployment of linguistic and social re-presentations of the maternal as a way to break through the paternal function.¹ Concerned with otherness and alterity, as represented by the oppressed maternal function, Kristeva uses the (marginalized) discourses of poetry, maternity, and psychoanalysis, as Oliver explains,

for a reconceived ethics that operates according to a love of difference rather than the regulation and exclusion of difference [and] provides the possibility of an ethics of difference, a feminist ethics Kristeva’s continual concern with negotiating between identity and negation in order to avoid both the totalitarianism of absolute identity and the delirium of complete negation is central to feminism The subject-in-process/on trial is an identity-in-process/on trial. Kristeva proposes a way to conceive of a productive but always only provisional identity, an identity whose constant companions are alterity, negation, and difference. (*Reading* 13-14)

H.D. and Dahlen extend Freud’s theories to create texts that enact Kristeva’s subject-in-process—what Oliver also calls an identity-in-process—in which the semiotic becomes visible

¹ For more on the relation between the rejection of the maternal and historical, social oppressions of women see Chodorow.

within the symbolic, both disrupting normative discourse and opening space for other(ness) discourses. According to Kristeva, the symbolic organizes and unifies (normalizes) the otherwise incoherent semiotic elements; though, always still present, the semiotic threatens to disrupt symbolic unity.

In *Sexual Subversions*, Elizabeth Grosz gives an overview of some of Kristeva's theories on identity, subjectivity, and abjection.² Instead of becoming coherent and unified, "difference" is given space as important to the "process" of "provisional identity." Grosz explains:

The symbolic organizes the libidinal drives according to a phallic sexual economy, a normative and generative linguistic structure . . . and a subjective and social identity. These various identities—sexual, linguistic, subjective—are provisional and threaten to dissolve when . . . the semiotic transgresses its boundaries. These are moments of breakdown of identity (psychosis), meaning and coherence (poetry) and sexual identity (perversion, fetish) . . . Each demonstrates the usually repressed semiotic contributions to the symbolic by providing the semiotic with expression. (48)

If semiotic disruption manifests in psychosis, poetry, or perversion, then it also marks a moment of potential change; upsetting the unity of symbolic organization opens space for other possibilities, outside of normative structures. When meaning and coherence are transgressed (in poetry and avant-garde art) political commentary, philosophical insights, abstract emotion, and difference are given space to emerge and resonate. When the semiotic transgresses the boundaries of sexual identity, perversion (especially according to de Lauretis whom I discuss below) becomes a positive space of potential for more varied expression and identification of sexual identities. Further, according to Kristeva, as Grosz explains:

The dominance of the symbolic is never guaranteed or secure. Symbolic components are liable to exceed the boundaries and limits imposed in them, thus bringing to a crisis point, and possibly to a point of revolutionary rupture, the previous stability which was secured only at the cost of the submersion of the semiotic. (*Sexual* 49)

² Although Grosz later turns away from the study of psychoanalysis and the French feminists, and moves in different directions regarding feminist theory and cultural study (writing on the politics of the body, space and time, and Darwinism and nature, for example), this early overview of Kristevan thought is useful for summarizing some of Kristeva's basic notions on the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic.

The point of rupture is the moment of revolutionary potential. This rupture occurs textually, after Kristeva, in disrupting linguistic and narrative structure, and subjectively, disrupting the structure of unified identity in favor of difference. I argue that H.D. and Dahlen incorporate the Kristevan semiotic, constructive processes in revolutionary disruption of narrative and linguistic norms in their texts, and also create models of subjectivity for textual and worldly subjects to function outside of binary and heterosexually normalized, culturally informed “identities.” They advocate for subjects who identify in less coherent and unified ways, thus queering the (otherwise normative) text and (heteronormative) identity categories in the move toward models that serve to enact more complex, spatial processes of identity.

H.D. and Dahlen (re)consider the “other” or “repressed” in their texts and bring these to the forefront of their thinking. Enacting Freudian analysis in their writing, narrative comes to be seen as transparent and provisional, and desire (for “meaning”; for narrative closure), it becomes clear, can never be fully realized.³ Freud utilizes narrative strategies both in analysis and in the narrativization of analysis, particularly in his case studies. During analysis, hidden or repressed material is brought from the unconscious into consciousness, and through the process of transference, both analyst and analysand use the recovered material (memories, dreams) to “narrate” the patient’s situation. In writing the case histories, in the interpretation of recovered material, Freud relies on literature, philosophy, material artifacts, figurative language and narrative.⁴

³ Although Freud did not believe one could do analysis on oneself, H.D. and Dahlen interpret analysis as a strategy for material textual practice as well as seeking knowledge through writing; they are using analysis as a model and practice, and (non)narratively constructing subjectivity through their writing processes.

⁴ The literary/figurative is necessary for the articulation of the science. Reading H.D., in relation to Freud, Dianne Chisholm explains, “H.D.’s Freud . . . is the Freud who calls on the poets . . . who relies on his schooling in classical philology, folklore, and mythology to interpret the symptomatic dreams of his patients, who employs figurative language no less than the technical discourse of conventional medicine and traditional philosophy to conceptualize operations of the psyche” (3).

Narrative then is one literary element among many that Freud uses to interpret his work with patients. Peter Brooks reads Freud's case history of the Wolf Man in order to explicate a theory of narrativity in Freud. In general, Brooks explains, "the case-history within history, and personal history within the case history, pose forcefully major questions about the nature of historical and narrative understanding, suggesting both the necessity and the limits of narrative meanings, and the complexity of our uses of narrative plot" (265). Freud's case histories call attention to themselves as seemingly transparent reports of analysis as they negotiate the original story and narration of that story. Freud "must manage to tell, both 'at once' and 'in order,' the story of a person, the story of an illness, the story of an investigation, the story of an explanation; and 'meaning' must ultimately lie in the effective interrelationship of all of these" (Brooks 273). Nonetheless, Brooks explains that Freud recognizes the "provisional status" of narrative and its "drive toward the end and a resistance to ending," especially in relation to psychoanalysis, which is:

inherently interminable, since the dynamics of resistance and the transference can always generate new beginnings in relation to any conceivable end. The narrative of the Wolf Man must be given closure and shape, but these are provisional, and could always reopen to take in further circles of meaning and theory The closure demanded by narrative understanding—the closure without which it can have no coherent plot—is always provisional, as-if, a necessary fiction. (281)

This is evident in the example of the Wolf Man story, Brooks explains, since Freud revised the case history with a different reading of the original dream about the wolves, the dream that was key to the whole of the Wolf Man's analysis. Instead of simply relying on the original, cohesive, narrative account of the Wolf Man's analysis, Freud destabilizes the dominance of narrative meaning by opening the possibility for other meanings, and making closure impossible. Freud seems to both rely on and distrust the "narrative plot" with its coherent beginning, middle, and

end in giving accounts of analysis that are “inherently interminable.”⁵ Further, Brooks explains, “like the modernist novel, the case history of the Wolf Man shows up the limits of storytelling while nonetheless insisting that the story must get told. The plots of narrative have become extraordinarily complex, self-subversive, apparently implausible” (285). Both the desire to tell, and the desire to read the incoherent in coherent narrative form, according to Brooks, drives the impulse to narrate. “It is of overwhelming importance to us that life still be narratable,” he writes, “which may mean finding those provisional, tenuous plots that appear to capture the force of desire that cannot speak its name but compels us in a movement—recursive, complex, unclosed—toward meaning” (285). We believe that if it can be narrated, it can be understood, as if narration equals meaning. Freud understood the difficulty (or impossibility) of narrative closure, and recognized possibilities for the interminable openness of analytical or narrative “meaning.”

In his chapter, “Narrative Desire,” Brooks further explains that desire functions in narrative to carry a plot forward, and may also be an element of the story told. Formally, desire works as momentum, as part of the “dynamic operation” of narrative, “connecting beginning and end across the middle and making of that middle—what we read *through*—a field of force,” even if it can never be fully realized (47). Realization of desire may only result in destruction and death; it necessitates lack, and fulfillment results in what Freud theorized as “the drive toward extinction” in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (Brooks 50). In other words,

the paradox of the self becomes explicitly the paradox of narrative plot as the reader consumes it: diminishing as it realizes itself, leading to an end that is the consummation (as well as the consumption) of its sense-making. If the motor of narrative is desire,

⁵ Brooks is using Freud’s own theory of analysis interminable in part from Freud’s essay “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” in which Freud discusses the various possibilities for the termination of analysis depending on factors including the reasons for analysis in the first place (trauma or constitution) as well as the eventual subsiding of recurring symptoms and consciousness of repressed material. Although analysis may end for various reasons, it may not always be “complete” or include satisfactory resolution.

totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for* the end. (52)

This may be what H.D., Dahlen, and even Freud are responding to, if as Brooks points out, “the realization of the desire for narrative encounters the limits of narrative,” these writers seem already aware of those limits and understand the idea “that one can tell a life only in terms of its limits or margins” (52). Desire is both a subject of exploration as well as a motivating textual impulse in their work. To different degrees, H.D. and Dahlen move away from linear narrative practices and resist closure, in order that the writing may, like analysis, go on interminably.

Through Freud and Lacan, Brooks points out that desire is in the “difference” between what is “demanded” and what is “achieved,” or between “demand” and “need.”⁶ Brooks explains: “In this gap, desire comes into being as a perpetual want for (of) a satisfaction that cannot be offered in reality. Desire is inherently unsatisfied and unsatisfiable” (55); we are simultaneously propelled forward and resistant. Narrative, like analysis, moves forward with the hope of resolution, or of “meaning” which will always fall short, which is always lacking (Brooks 56). H.D., Dahlen, and Freud recognize what Brooks calls this “perpetual slippage” in analysis and in writing which embody the gaps inherent in the desire to progress, find meaning, and conclude. In seeking to tell a life story, “the claim that intelligibility, meaning, understanding depend on a fully predicated narrative sentence, on a narrative totality, never is and ever can be realized” (Brooks 60). Drawing attention to language as medium, and to narrative incoherence and resistance to closure as practice, opens possibilities within the continuum between the drive for pleasure and the drive toward death, allowing for other ways of narrating.

If Freud’s narrative case histories become unstable as cohesive narratives, then the truth of the stories may also become fictionalized over the course of their narration. We might ask if

⁶ Brooks also cites Laplanche and Pontalis here, who write “Desire is born of the gap between need and demand” (qtd. in Brooks 55).

the status of the case-histories as fictional or nonfictional is important in the context of the larger goals of psychoanalysis. As Hayden White argues, the use of narrative in the representation of history puts “History” (as it is narrated) in danger of fictionalization, and the danger of fictionalizing history, he argues, is the consequent moralizing that happens by way of narrativization. Comparing different forms of historical documentation (such as annals and chronicles), White points out the constructed nature of narrative in the field of historiography, in which real events are put into the form of a (fictional) story. White questions narrative desire in light of the fact that real events are not formally coherent to begin with but only after their narrativization come to seem as if they happened, originally, in story form. In recognizing this, “we catch a glimpse of the cultural function of narrativizing discourse in general, an intimation of the psychological impulse behind the apparently universal need not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity” (5). We internalize the need for, and recognition of, narrative as if it is a naturally occurring phenomenon, making it difficult to see through to the fact that narrative is actually socially and linguistically constructed.

The forms of annals and chronicles offer a contrast to narrative representations of historical events because of their fragmentation and lack of narrative closure. White, however, considers these forms “not as the imperfect histories they are conventionally conceived to be” but instead as examples of the “possible conceptions of historical reality” outside of narrative as the dominant or accepted conception, “that are alternatives to, rather than failed anticipations of, the fully realized historical discourse that the modern history form is supposed to embody” (6). The notion of alternatives or difference is important. In the dominance of narrative representation, the non-narrative forms of annals and chronicles have been relegated to “failed” or not fully realized, and therefore not complete as historical texts until further narrativized, or

used in combination with a cohesive narrative accounting. Though, as White explains, “Every narrative, however seemingly ‘full,’ is constructed on the basis of a set of events that might have been included but were left out,” recognizing this, we can then question “the notion of reality” that “authorizes construction of a narrative account of reality in which continuity rather than discontinuity governs the articulation of the discourse” (10). The dominance of narrative form, White argues, is linked to a cultural value placed on narrative cohesion, a social and legal system in which the norm of narrative structure erases the gaps and fragments, and values continuity over discontinuity, cohesion over the disparate parts. Additionally, this becomes not simply a matter of formal choice, but an ethical question of how narrative form may inherently be used “to moralize reality”:

Interest in the social system, which is nothing other than a system of human relationships governed by law, creates the possibility of conceiving the kinds of tensions, conflicts, struggles, and their various kinds of resolutions that we are accustomed to find in any representation of reality presenting itself to us as a history Narrativity . . . is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine. (14)

White seems to argue, that—like Althusser’s notion of Ideology—narrative may function as part of the social system in which, “insofar as historical stories can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a plot all along, they give to reality the odor of the ideal” (21). Looking into this relation between the value of narrative and the larger social/cultural system, White ultimately is suggesting “that this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (24). The problem is the separation between the real events and their narrative representation. He asks:

Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to

see ‘the end’ in every beginning? Or does it present itself more in the forms that the annals and chronicle suggest, either as mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude? . . . Or is the fiction of such a world, capable of speaking itself and of displaying itself as a form of a story, necessary for the establishment of that moral authority without which the notion of a specifically social reality would be unthinkable? (24-25)

He suggests that narrative form serves as a reinscription of moral ideology—and normative belief and practice—as seen through the Oedipal figuration and subjects functioning pathologically in relation to “normative” cultural modes. In analysis, non-narrative pathologies (repeating traumatic symptoms, disconnection from original events and conscious understanding or articulation of those events) are dealt with by way of talk therapy, transference, and articulation of the prior events. First the patient discovers—brings material up from the unconscious—and articulates, and then Freud generally narrates the “histories” into stories with plot developments, and closure/conclusions, in order to explain the process from pathology, to recovery, to the move into “normal” social participation. However, even within this seemingly cohesive narrative structure, Freud allows for slippage and gaps in narration and meaning. Freud creates his own way of non/narrating so that the reader cannot follow him blindly but has to engage with the analysis and its narration.

H.D. and Dahlen focus on the gaps and spaces and use these to work Freud from the inside out. Their texts, uninterested in “normal” social participation, linger in the space of difference, of non-normativity; they have a sense of the interminable and call attention to the limits (and limiting nature of) narrative. Centered on process instead of narrative product, these works displace the dominance of narrative and cultural norms and open spaces for other (non-dominant, non-normative) identifications. Through their (non)narrative formal strategies, unconscious material, (trauma, memory) is brought into consciousness (writing). These texts also function within the Kristevan semiotic, (non)narrative space, before memories and ideas become

unified into narrative structure, allowing for flux and fragmentation. In the space between where material is repressed in the unconscious, and when it is constructed into normative narrative structure, much can be learned about the function of narrative structure in relation to the regulation of social norms and representation. Or, as Grosz shows, “In place of a structured, rule-bound sign system [Kristeva] focuses on the becoming, of the processes involved in representation” and she “coordinates these textual relations with the processes of subject formation, especially with the ways it constitutes and challenges personal identities” (*Sexual* 61). Here we see that Kristeva brings textual practice together with an understanding of subject formation in the world. As a political project, “her various analyses are directed towards rupturing certain conservative values (those embodied in the evaluation of identity over difference) and, through this rupturing, the creation of new modes of reading, assessing and valuing texts” (62). Subverting the dominance of narrative and linguistic structures in texts then can ultimately lead to new modes for reading and understanding, and further to subjective identifications that allow for variety and difference instead of conservative and limited conceptions of identity.

As Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains in *Writing Beyond the Ending*, “to change story signals a dissent from social norms as well as narrative forms” (20). Specifically, she examines the shift in narrative and closure in novels by women from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries in order to show how use and critique of narrative form, as a political and feminist project, “makes the ‘meaning production process’ itself ‘the site of struggle’” (Kuhn qtd. in Duplessis 34). According to DuPlessis:

Twentieth-century women writers . . . [invent] narrative strategies, especially involving sequence, character, and relationship, that neutralize, minimize, or transcend any oversimplified oedipal drama Original bisexuality is extended the length of a character’s life in H.D. . . . Women writers readjust the maternal and paternal in ways

that unbalance the univocal sequence of object choices These changes are often accompanied by pointed remarks about the plots, characters, and situations once expected in narrative: gender polarization, patrisexual romantic love, the arrest of female quest, the ‘happy ending’ (37)

DuPlessis draws an analogy between destabilizing narrative practice and destabilizing Freudian theory. She shows how narrative, as an ideological tool of culture, participates in the social construction of gender roles and assumptions. As women gained greater political power and voice in the twentieth century, in comparison to the nineteenth century, their uses of narrative became more political, pushing beyond the previously proscribed narrative endings for female characters of marriage or death. These writers, according to DuPlessis interrogate and complicate the Oedipal complex in order to both critique and potentially change the structure from within. Further, in different texts among a variety of authors, “woman . . . negotiates difference and sameness, marginality and inclusion in a constant dialogue.” This “rewriting of gender in dominant fiction” a “social and sexual . . . poetics of critique” challenges both the “the gendering and the hegemonic process [which] create mutual reinforcement for the double consciousness of women writers” (43). In *HERmione*, for example, H.D. challenges the nineteenth-century marriage plot to offer an alternative “story” of bisexual romance and artistic quest that, instead of ending in death, ends with the woman artist’s having come to a new conception of self.⁷

Dahlen, moving further away from narrative in her critique of both Freudian and narrative impulses, writes *A Reading* in the form of a journal or reading notebook and reworks the (feminine) genre of journal “life” writing, allowing space for gaps, connections and disconnections, leaps, parataxis. There is no linear beginning, middle, end, no conflict nor

⁷ See also *Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction* for more on subversion of narrative by women fiction writers, in which, for “women experimental writers, the woman in the text is also an effect of the textual practice of breaking patriarchal fictional forms; the radical forms—nonlinear, nonhierarchical, and decentering—are, in themselves, a way of writing the feminine” (3); although my readings go beyond textual subversion and gendered writing, this text is important in consideration of twentieth-century women’s non/narrative experimentation.

resolution. Like the history annals cited by White before the narrator imposes a structure that interprets and fashions the material in a specific way (the written history before its narrativization), Dahlen's "journal" or H.D.'s "transference" novel leave space for reader engagement as well as draw attention to what White calls "the cultural function of narrativizing discourse," and the discomfort of dealing with a text that refuses to do so. The "fantasy" of formal coherence is stripped away precisely to highlight the unconscious material, the material without a constructed narrative plot. H.D. and Dahlen present material pulled from the metaphorical unconscious, and use these variously in both narrative and non-narrative ways. The play between the semiotic and symbolic challenges the social/cultural mandate to narrate, while offering alternatives to narrative norm. If Freud opened space in the story of the Wolf Man—by allowing for different readings of the original wolf dream—for greater play between fiction and nonfiction, for additional ways in which to read childhood events, then H.D. and Dahlen further this impulse by creating texts that allow space for memories, events, and Freudian texts to play without closed conclusions. The texts, like their subjects, like Freud's narratives, are in-process, tentative, provisional, and like the therapeutic process, interminable. And they function as political projects in the ways in which they rewrite narrative conventions for women as textual, and cultural, subjects, and ultimately offer alternative models for gendered identification and social participation.

HERmione

H.D. finished writing her autobiographical novel *Hermione* in 1927, about twenty years after the original events of the story. Although it underwent revision and publication preparation by H.D. before she died in 1961, it was not published until after it was recovered as a manuscript in 1981.

The novel is based on H.D.'s life after leaving Bryn Mawr, while she was briefly engaged to Ezra Pound, and before she initially left for Europe with her friend and romantic interest, Frances Gregg. Though the story takes place before World War I, the novel is written well after, and might be read to include H.D.'s trauma from the war and the loss of her brother. The story enacts her struggle to find her identity as a poet, intellectual, and bisexual, and the concerns, including the trauma of witnessing both world wars, that she would carry through much of her later writing. It also deals more with her lesbian romantic life than her other autobiographical novels. Although eventually H.D. lived in Europe with her long-term domestic partner, Bryher, both women were also, at times, married to other men. In most of her work, H.D. was not open about her personal, lesbian domestic life, though it was a regular topic of conversation in her analytic sessions with Freud.⁸

In *HERmione*, H.D. deals with her earlier complicated relationships with Pound and Francis Gregg (in the characters of George and Fayne), leaving her academic career (and disappointing her father), and deciding to follow her own artistic pursuits. More generally, the book is about Hermione's struggle to become a (woman) artist in a masculine (modernist) literary world. In the view of "society" she feels like a failure, but nonetheless follows her creative intuition to do something other than what's expected of her:

'I failed,' she flung it out again, 'utterly.' Would 'I failed utterly' keep people from repeating as they would keep on, Tibetan prayer wheel, 'What are you going to do, what are you going to do, what are you going to do now?' What was 'now' and what was 'doing' and what was 'what' precisely? Words went round, had odd ways of tacking off, billowing out, full sail. (54)

⁸ See H.D.'s *Tribute to Freud* in which she relates her experiences in analysis with Freud. Freud's own views on bisexuality and lesbianism were ambivalent and conflicted, and always in process, as can be seen over the course of his work (in particular see Jessica Benjamin, Chodorow, de Lauretis, Freud). Further, after her time in analysis, Freud and H.D. maintained a life-long friendship and correspondence.

Although H.D. had serious friendships with other modernist poets and writers of her time (Moore, Williams, D.H. Lawrence) some of these more intimately intersected with her personal life (she was engaged to Pound, and married Richard Aldington only later to divorce). Her critical interrogations of gender, sex, and social roles and expectations, in relation to (and in conflict with) her own intellectual endeavors emerge throughout *HERmione*. It is through the Freudian delving into the unconscious that H.D.'s main character, and sometimes narrator, Hermione, comes to terms with her own ideas of self over the course of the text. Writing of *HERmione* as a type of Freudian autobiographical writing, Diane Chisholm explains, "*Her* is not so much a prefiguration of *The Gift* and subsequent autobiography as a testament to the inadequacy of the narrative discourse of case history for the production and signification of visionary self-consciousness" (76).⁹ Further, relating H.D.'s writing to her interest in Freud, Chisholm explains

H.D.'s poetic generativity is . . . supplemented by Freudian utterances: her type (of) writing is a dissemination of Freudian discourse. We might translate this figure . . . as a sign that she has determined how to conceive of their relationship as a desirable intertextuality. Freud's salting of H.D.'s type (of) writing reads allegorically as a combination of semiotic practices, an intertextuality in Julia Kristeva's sense of the term, 'a permutation of texts,' in which 'in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.' (12)

At the time of writing *HERmione*, H.D. had read Freud and was already incorporating Freudian theory into her own writing process. *HERmione* is a text that works through the double-ness of subjectivity (heterosexual/lesbian, woman/artist) as Her tries to come to understand her own desires and identifications. We might say that in *HERmione*, through Freud, H.D. brings her childhood material to the (conscious) text. "H.D.'s figure of childhood fantasy and her technique of recall through the 'trance' of simulated 'transference' are the structuring nuclei of her

⁹ See H.D.'s *The Gift*, a later, more cohesively narrative and popular autobiographical novel by H.D., written in London during WWII and published in 1969.

Freudian life-writing,” writes Chisholm (69). H.D.’s writing is not unlike Freud’s talking cure. The text is the space in which to recall and articulate feelings and memories; like Freudian analysis, writing is a process of discovery with the goal of further understanding of contemporary circumstances. In the novel, Hermione uses psychoanalytic terminology in the effort to make sense of her situation, while pointing out that simply giving names to phenomena, without further investigation or analysis, is generally futile.

Her’s energy must go groping forward in a world where there was no sign to show you ‘Oedipus complex,’ no chart to warn you ‘mother complex,’ shoals threatening. ‘Guilt complex’ and ‘compensation reflex’ had not then been posted, showing your way on in the morass. (*HERmione* 47)

Hermione’s process-of-becoming happens over the course of the text and is told through the negotiation of her relationship with George—the heterosexual, symbolically patriarchal male poet who sees Hermione more as a decorative muse than a poetically intellectual equal—and that with Fayne—Her’s intellectual counterpart and the object of her lesbian desire. The book begins with Her’s sense of failure, moves through her unsure courtship with George and affirming intimacy with Fayne, and ends with Hermione having acquired the ability to make decisions and speak on her own terms.

Although there is a narrative frame in which the story moves through time in a linear fashion, each paragraph and sentence seems to want to detour from this notion as H.D. creates visual, sensory spaces of poetic and philosophical inquiry and reflection. It is as if the characters only fade in and out of Hermione’s mental wanderings as characters in the performance of an epic poem. For example, the following:

There are of course bits of colour to be thrown down like counters in a banking house, or chips across a poker table. All your life you will retain one or two bits of colour with which all your life will be violently or delicately tinted. You will have an infinitesimal grain of purple dye or a flat counter to hoard or to risk in one reckless spendthrift moment. There are gamblers of the spirit as there are gamblers of the mind, passions of

the psyche as well as passions of the body. All of life may be spent looking in vain for a counter that might bring glory or fame or wisdom which at some off-moment you may pick up unexpectedly—from the gutter—then you save it or you spend it. (53)

The focus here is on the process of investigation and the happenstance discoveries often found unexpectedly (“from the gutter”); the emphasis on discovery, and deciding what/how to deal with what has been discovered, is of greater importance than setting out toward a particular goal, which may only fall short. This may seem like gambling, to set out without specific direction, though it can lead to greater discoveries. All of life may be a process, H.D. seems to assert, a continual negotiation of finding fame or wisdom unexpectedly, and deciding how to use it.

H.D. enacts Freud’s process of bringing the repressed into consciousness and articulating (or showing the attempts to articulate) through formal strategies (starts and stops, repetition) as well as using Freudian vocabulary and theories. According to DuPlessis, H.D., in her prose fiction, seeks “to unify such female experiences as (lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual) sexuality and motherhood with creative power” (DuPlessis, *H.D.* 31). DuPlessis focuses her analysis on how H.D. assumes “the authority of Otherness so that female-centered experiences and ties are the source of theme and character, narrative and resolution, language and rhythm” (31-32). *HERmione* enacts that sense of otherness through the fusion of form and content: from the story of Her’s choosing Fayne over George; to the paragraphs and sentences that subvert and undermine linear narrative progression. The intertextual play with Freud’s language and theories, the metaphorical use of sexual and creative desires, and the narrative breaks that linger in spaces of language, image, and sensation in which time stops and the movement of the story is halted all contribute to enacting this “otherness” in the text. When Hermione thinks of Fayne, for example, it is obvious that Her’s sexual and artistic self discoveries are analogous. Sexual/artistic self-identification play figuratively off one another as they evoke the “search for identity” which,

after Freud, is an interminable process of discovery and understanding. Or, as Susan Stanford explains:

H.D.'s search for her identity as woman in both her life and her art went in both lesbian and heterosexual directions with great intensity She brought the contexts of *both* experiences into her sessions with Freud: the insecurity and fragmentation she wrote about as a woman in relationships with men; the sense of wholeness and affirmation she wrote about as a woman in relationships with women" (*Psyche* 46-47).

Hermione's quest in the novel is to find a sense of self on her own terms, as a woman and as an artist, and like many of H.D.'s other novels, according to DuPlessis, *HERmione* is "about the repeated formations of a woman artist who must 'create her creativity' given the social, psychic, ideological and political events reverberating with her femaleness: the conditions in which she writes as a woman, the politics of gender" (*H.D.* 31-32). The "plot" is the process of interrogation of self-identity in the context of outside elements pressuring Her (and H.D.) to identify. Her's father wanted her to be successful in science like him and her brother; George (Pound) wanted her to be his muse and wife; her mother wanted her to marry well and appropriately; and Fayne engaged Her in intimate friendship and wanted to travel to Europe with Her. In the end, Hermione never goes back to school, refuses all of her mother's advice on love and marriage, breaks her engagement with George because, she realizes, he will never know her, and decides to go to Europe on her own with other friends, instead of with Fayne.

An examination of the relation between identity and subjectivity is of fundamental concern, especially in terms of the subjective "break" in the character of Hermione. The use of pronouns throughout the book make Hermione at once subject and object, self and other, as in the following passages:

Her Gart went round in circles. 'I am Her,' she said to herself; she repeated, 'Her, Her, Her.' Her Gart tried to hold on to something; drowning she grasped, she caught at a smooth surface, her fingers slipped, she cried in her dementia, 'I am Her, Her, Her.' Her Gart had no word for her dementia, it was predictable by star, by star-sign, by year. (3)

and

She said, 'I am Hermione Gart,' but Her Gart was not that. She was nebulous, gazing into branches of liriodendron, into network of oak and deflowered dogwood (3)

and

Hermione Gart could not then know that her precise reflection, her entire failure to conform to expectations was perhaps some subtle form of courage. (4)

Hermione is not an "I" but a "Her." And the name "Hermione Gart" no longer makes sense or defines her. The name itself signals her inability to "conform" to live up to expectations to which she believes the name to be attached. She is Her, or Her is out there away from her. She will spend the duration of the book extending and complicating this pronoun space in order to emphasize the negotiations involved when a subject recognizes, or tries to understand, how identity is continually in process. As the narrator explains:

Clutching out toward some definition of herself, she found that 'I am Her Gart' didn't let her hold on. Her fingers slipped off; she was no longer anything. Gart, Gart, Gart and the Gart theorem of mathematical biological intention dropped out Hermione. She was not Gart, she was not Hermione, she was not any more Her Gart, what was she? (4)

The repetition, additionally, causes defamiliarization which further distances the "I" from the "her." And the question "what was she?" seems to be the guiding question over the course of the book. In addition to Hermione's split subjectivity, the narrative subtly shifts between the regular third person narrator (who refers to Hermione as Her, though it is a limited third person narrator telling the story from Her's perspective) and the first person, in which we hear Hermione's thoughts, which at times is more like a direct address to the reader. Sometimes it seems like simple slippage between the two:

She must get away from Eugenia sitting in the dark like a great moth, dimity dressing jacket, feet crossed on a low pouf thing, hands knitting, hands, hands . . . knitting. Eugenia worked her old charm. She hypnotizes me. (original ellipses, 80)¹⁰

¹⁰ Since, throughout *HERmione*, H.D. regularly uses ellipses, in quotations from the novel I will include the original ellipses without brackets, and place my own ellipses in brackets to designate where I have condensed the original text.

In this example, the “she” changes from referring to Hermione, to Eugenia (Hermione’s mother), as the narration changes from third to first person in the last sentence. This type of move from Hermione narrated in the third person, and Hermione thinking in the first person, happens consistently throughout the text. Only occasionally does the narrator include a rhetorical contextualizing device such as “Hermione thought . . .”; generally, Her’s thoughts weave in and out between the larger narrative structure and the dialogue. Because this is a limited third-person narration, we only know what the other characters think by way of their dialogue, whereas we learn Her’s thoughts intimately. For example, later in the exchange with Eugenia from above, Her thinks in first-person: “I am broken like a nut between two rocks, granite, and granite . . .” (81). This statement alludes to Her’s split subjectivity sexually (as heterosexual fiancé of George, and lesbian friend of Fayne), artistically (can a socially gendered woman follow her artistic vocation?) and in response to nineteenth-century double-consciousness in which the narrator/protagonist has to choose between marriage and death; yet, this moment occurs in the middle of the novel, when narrative closure is still completely open to negotiation.

Throughout the text, H.D. is also interested in signification, particularly in terms of naming, and using nouns to signify persons, places, things, as if understanding the use of nouns might aid in the comprehension of what otherwise seems unintelligible or incomprehensible. For example:

The woods parted to show a space of lawn, running level with branches that, in early summer, were white with flower. Dogwood blossom. Pennsylvania. Names are in people, people are in names. Sylvania. I was born here. People ought to think before they call a place Sylvania.

Pennsylvania. I am part of Sylvania. Trees. Trees. Trees. Dogwood, liriodendron with its green-yellow tulip blossoms. Trees are in people. People are in trees. Pennsylvania. (5)

Later in the novel, the narrator explains, “Words were her plague and words were her redemption” (67), since Her wants precision in language where there is none. She seems to realize that the precise nature of language is only a fantasy that can never be realized. Her plays with this continuously, but calls particular attention to the discrepancy when she claims, “I am in the word TREE. I am TREE exactly” (73). Saussure said the signifier-signified relationship is arbitrary, in the sense that there is no inherent connection between them but that they come to have meaning through use. And it is practice or habit that normalizes language use. The consequences for a character such as Hermione are that words are both “plague and redemption.” If one can call oneself “tree” and be “tree exactly” then one need not have more questions about one’s identity and place in the world. If one can name things precisely, then she must also mean and be understood clearly. However, nothing about identity, even if it is named specifically, is so definitively clear, as Her finds time and again.

Getting married and changing one’s name, for example, is a standard “normal” cultural practice, yet H.D., in calling attention to the language around the practice, shows its problematic nature. What seems like unthreatening “naming” is actually an enactment of a more serious oppressive power differential; it reflects both on Hermione’s sense of identity in her name, and how language can affect, even change, actual social relations. “I am Hermione Gart and will be Hermione Lowndes . . . it wasn’t right. People are in things, things are in people. I can’t be called Lowndes” (112). Hermione Gart, in becoming Hermione Lowndes, becomes also subservient as a wife and artist, a mere muse or possession. What may have started out as an egalitarian relationship of mutual respect between poets, becomes irrevocably changed with the shift in language. Hermione is a person who doesn’t fit the norm, or she realizes that to be “normal” is to perform according to others’ expectations:

Something hit me on the head, Gart and the formula, how dare they go on pretending I am just like other people? For Eugenia . . . I will go on pretending I am just like other people [. . .] Odd distorted Hermione descended the hall steps. She moved odd, distorted like a mermaid with no feet to walk on [. . .] (113)

Naming, and conforming to problematic expectations regarding gender and social roles, cause Hermione a type of anxiety that emerges in the writing of the text; the obsessive repetition and linguistic play becomes a way of working through the nature of the problem and serves to emphasize the obviousness of previously hidden, accepted social expectations.

Meeting and talking with Fayne serves to further open the cracks of doubt that Hermione has in agreeing to marry George. At times it becomes impossible to articulate her feelings, let alone draw clear boundaries between herself and the others who have come to affect her. Within the context of these two love interests, Hermione struggles to find a language to express her own (odd, queer) voice:

‘I am, Miss Her Gart. And I am not. I mean looking at Miss Her Gart, I see a green land. There is something to it, a long lane winding among birch trees.’ ‘No-o-o—not birch trees.’ ‘Yes. I say they *are*. I say they are birch trees. We are and we aren’t together . . . we go on and we do not go on together . . . there is fear and disaster but Fayne and Hermione do not go on together [. . .] I can see you are and you aren’t here. You are here and you aren’t here. I hate all these things that blunt you. You aren’t firm enough. You are transient like water seen through birch trees. You are like the sparkle of water over white stones. Something in you makes me hate you. Drawn to you I am repulsed, drawn away from you, I am negated. You are not myself but you are some projection of myself. Myself, *myself* projected you like water . . .’ (145-46)

Her’s relationship with Fayne is a crucial point in Her’s self-interrogation. In the passage above, “you” is Fayne, which is also Her(self). “Drawn to you I am repulsed, drawn away from you, I am negated.” Instead of threatening her autonomous selfhood (like George), the character of Fayne helps to cultivate Her’s artistic self. Her’s relationship with Fayne is a relationship with herself as woman and artist, and it is through their relations that she comes to a sense of clarity

on her own terms. In a number of passages, Fayne and Hermione become fused/confused in the pronoun her/Her such as in the following:

George should see Fayne. Things are not *agaçant* [annoying; irritating] now I know her. I know her. Her. I am Her. She is Her. Knowing her, I know Her. She is some amplification of myself like amoeba giving birth, by breaking off, to amoeba. I am a sort of mother, a sort of sister to Her. (158)

Note the shift between the capital and lower case versions of the pronoun in the line “Knowing her, I know Her.” As Susan Stanford Friedman explains:

Where her nickname symbolized her object status in Her’s relationship with George, it signals a liberating woman-identification in her relationship with Fayne Unlike George, who compares Her to art objects in a book, Fayne understands that Her’s writing is the essence of her identity, as inseparable from her as breathing Hermione discovers her creative center in her identity as *woman* through her love of her sister-image. (Friedman, *Psyche* 43)

Although Friedman’s language here is a kind of dated feminist-speak, she points to something important in the relation between Her and Fayne. The sister-image, the recognition of self in other, the love of the same functions here in the play between lesbian love and artistic process. If the heterosexual power differential in Hermione’s relationship with George threatened her ability to “breathe,” to be Her self as a poet, then it is through the queer/non-normative spaces of sexual and self-identification that Hermione comes to feel confident in choices that do not subscribe to socially normalized expectations. This is exemplified in the following conversation between Her and George:

‘But I won’t ever—ever be your wife, my Georgio.’ And he said ‘You’re being very funny.’ And she said ‘You just said you didn’t want me.’ And he said ‘I always say that in case I never get you.’ And she said ‘Anyhow I love—I love Her, only Her, Her, Her.’ (170)

Hermione “loves” both Her (self) and Her (Fayne, the other) enacting in the language itself a lesbian love of the same, and the socially egregious act of breaking her engagement (and refusing

to participate in the heterosexual norms of marriage and security for women) in order to follow her (own) sexual and creative desires.

In another passage, Hermione narrates her thoughts between moments of dialogue with Fayne:

Her bent forward, face bent toward Her. A face bends towards me and a curtain opens [. . .] Curtains part as I look into the eyes of Fayne Rabb [. . .] Curtains fell, curtains parted, curtains filled the air with heavy swooping purple. Lips long since half kissed away. Curled lips long since half kissed away. In Roman gold. Long ere they coined in Roman gold your face—your face—your face—your face—your face—Faustine. (163-64)

In the whole of the section from which this passage is extracted there is confusion about who is speaking to whom. The conversation is between Her and Fayne, and the interior narration is that of Her's thoughts, but the dialogue is not clearly contextualized to know exactly who is speaking. Additionally, the opening curtains—signaling the opening of possibilities (sexually and personally)—and the references to Swinburne, evoke both desire and fear. Her's reference to Faustine is probably that of Faustina of Rome (about whom Swinburne's "Faustine" is written), whose face was on a coin. She was also beautiful, dangerous, and unable to be loved. It will turn out that Fayne will betray Hermione when Fayne and George have intimate relations with each other. This will further complicate Her's emotional relationships with both George and Fayne, and stress her investment in herself as she negotiates her own needs in relation to these love interests. The other characters act symbolically as the parts of herself with which she struggles to come to terms: socially acceptable, heterosexual member of the Gart family, and queerly identified sexual, artistic, and autonomous woman.

Central to the story then is the impulse, as in much of H.D.'s work, "to rupture the universalizing of male experience in Freud, to undermine or deflect the postulate, which reiterated a major element in Western philosophic and psychological tradition: that woman was

deficient” (DuPlessis, *H.D.* 83). Mixing genres and registers of language, style, and voice H.D. uses the character of George as symbolic of patriarchal social power as well as legitimate male poet (versus lacking woman and woman artist). Hermione, the narrator/protagonist, creates a space for the female subject and artist through her own psychoanalysis, in a sense. Her thoughts and reflections, which often sound like direct address to the reader, act as a type of talk therapy through which she comes to terms with her “role” in the story. H.D. enacts this through the content of the story, as well as through the “Freudian” strategies she employs in the construction of the text:

Freud’s analytic procedure—the talking cure, the chains of free association, the metonymic combination playing across the axis of selection to construct a swelling, interminable reading of any sign, this associative, ruminative, atemporal and palimpsested style—was already H.D.’s technical procedure (in *HERmione*) but until Freud she could not recognize that her palimpsested style, the [Kristevan] voice of the ‘chora’ was the definitive rupture from ‘vanishing points of sterility and finesse.’¹¹ (DuPlessis, *H.D.* 85)

H.D. creates spaces of association, rumination, and obsession throughout *HERmione* as a way of enacting the process of repression, retrieval, and articulation in analysis, but in the style of the writing itself. A main example of this is in the conflict that comes out of Her’s ambivalent relationship with, and later refusal of, George. This tension and realized clarity happens in the assault scene, which functions both literally as a plot device and metaphorically as an example of George’s violent oppression of Her as a self-aware subject and artist. Whether or not Her is actually raped, the aggression and violence, I would argue, is comparable to a more gratuitous

¹¹ She the intro to Kristeva’s *Desire in Language* in which she explains the relationship between the “semiotic” and “chora”: “semiotic relates to the ‘chora’ (receptacle, from Plato) ‘an invisible and formless being which receives all things and in some mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible’ It is also anterior to any space, and economy of primary processes articulated by Freud’s instinctual drives through condensation and displacement, and where social and family structures make their imprint through the mediation of the maternal body. While the chora’s articulation is uncertain, undetermined, while it lacks thesis or position, unity or identity, it is the aim of Kristeva’s practice to remove what Plato saw as ‘mysterious’ and ‘incomprehensible’ is what he called ‘mother and receptacle’ of all things....”

depiction in contemporary terms. When Hermione is held down and assaulted by George, it is like the Freudian moment of repressed material fully coming into consciousness; it is as if she is recalling her dreams, experiences, and thoughts about George and then finally has the “break” she needs in order to see herself clearly in relation to him. Although this is not a single, clear, transition moment—George does not disappear from the story—it is a decisive moment in which it becomes clear that Her and George are at odds, that there is no egalitarian understanding between them, but only a power differential. In this scene, George takes control and pushes Her down onto the couch. They struggle, and his actions show him thinking little more of her than a poetic and sexual conquest, his muse:

He wanted Her, but he wanted a Her that he called decorative. George wanted a Her out of the volumes on the floor, out of the two great volumes. He wanted Her from about the middle, the glorious flaming middle, the Great Painters (that came under Florence) section. (172)

And Hermione realizes:

George never understood me. Rising to her feet, knowing that he would not understand Her, she was drifted toward the divan. George with a twist and deft knee movement had thrown her on the low couch; so lying she regarded the ceiling [. . .] Now George had put the lamp out. (173)

This scene, like a performance, enacts a more cliché romance narrative written in a dramatic style. It is as if the main character being assaulted is in shock or traumatized in such a way that she can only describe the scene from an ironic distance; the shift between third and first-person narration is a formal cue of the confusion and discord at play. The scene unfolds as if Hermione is watching, instead of acting as an actual character in the scene, the description alluding to the figurative elements at play; because for Her, there is no other way to make sense of what is unfolding.

Now more than ever she knew they were out of some bad novel. Sound of chiffon ripping and the twist and turn of Hermione under the stalwart thin young torso of George

Lowndes. Now more than ever thought made spiral, made concentric circle toward a darkened ceiling. The ceiling came down, down. The ceiling became black, in a moment it would crush down, crushing her and George Lowndes under a black metallic shutter. The ceiling was a sort of movable shutter like some horrible torture thing out of Poe's tales, the wall that came close out of Poe's tales was coming close, the wall was coming close. Doors were no more in walls, the curtains were no more curtains. Walls were coming close to suffocate, to crush her . . . 'You've torn this chiffon sleeve thing horribly.'

A twist, a turn. Men are not strong. Women are stronger. I am stronger. I turn and twist out of those iron arms because if he had held me, I would have been crushed by iron. Iron is in walls. 'She said 'Please put the light on.' (173)

At this moment she claims a right to her authority as a person and an artist while commenting on the bad romance novel that reinforces sexual hierarchy. She is not George's muse but a poet on her own terms, and will not be crushed by him (or the patriarchal hegemonic system that is heterosexual marriage). She is not his sexual conquest but instead has the ability to fight back and walk away. She continues to negotiate—by way of the textual play with pronouns and language—a sense of self-identity as she can understand it, in relation socially to the other characters. She calls attention to the fact that one is always in relation to others, that language constructs our relationships with each other and with ourselves. Particularly, she acts as if she does not know how to relate to George nor how to stay away from him, as if he has some power over her still, even if he has no way to relate to her, and she knows that he never will. A later conversation references a dinner during which Her and George had discussed a "boring" performance that they had attended. Her's narration loses some syntactic cohesion when, in response to his comments, she explains: "Moment in the cab was nearest when George had said, 'But all this is so unlike you.' What was you and what was you and what was you? What was like Her and what was unlike Her? George had no inkling" (188). The question seems to be whether or not language can aid in any real understanding. Pronouns, and shifting narrative point of view throughout the text, draw attention to the construction of the story by way of messy

materials of language, that always remain inadequate for understanding ourselves in relation to others. H.D. pushes this linguistic interrogation further, coming back to the notion of naming, of nouns and their use as people, places, and things. Nouns are different and they are the same; and all nouns are signs, made up of signifiers and signifieds, the precision of which is supposed to aid in the understanding of meaning: a word (form) is attached to a concept (meaning). And nouns in particular are the most concrete, material, and visual elements in language, like “tree” in its visual representation and written out as a word.

It was obvious that people should think before they call a place Sylvania. People are in things. Things are in people and people should think before they call a place Sylvania. I am the word AUM. The word was with God, the place was Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania was some sort of Lilliput or Gargantua, things like that, places like that, nowhere was Pennsylvania. (198)

However, what becomes obvious is not clarity of meaning, but possible multiplicity of meanings, even when using the most concrete elements of language: nouns. And this, combined with H.D.’s purposeful play with pronouns and point of view, makes any idea of a single narrator telling a singularly narrative account of events impossible. For example, in the passage below:

I am the word tree, I am AUM exactly. Fayne being me, I was her. Fayne being Her I was Fayne. Fayne being Her was HER so that Her saw Fayne; there was no use trying to hide under a midnight black hat rim for out of the black hat Her saw everything. Her was Fayne, Fayne was Her so that saying to George did you love, one I love, meant nothing. I knew George saw Her, say George, say Fayne. (210)

The characters and their signs (meanings?) become con/fused here as Her is dealing with the fact of Fayne’s becoming involved with George after Her is finished with him. She and Fayne are different, and the same. Again, in struggling to make sense, she turns back to language and the fantasy of its precision and use as a tool of meaning and understanding. She replaces the representation of “tree” with herself as the representation of the word “tree.” AUM is another word for Om, the primary and sacred syllable, and is both a word and a sound. She claims, “I am

AUM exactly,” the very root or primal sound in language. We are defined by and within language. Fayne and Her become the same through language:

Fayne being me, I was her. Fayne being Her, I was Fayne. Fayne being Her was HER so that Her saw Fayne; there was no use trying to hide under a midnight black hat rim for out of the black hat Her saw everything. Her was Fayne, Fayne was Her so that saying to George did you love, one I love, meant nothing. I knew George saw Her, saw George, saw Fayne. (210)

The confusion here among names and identities also serves to create a new structure of being in relation. Instead of the male-female, heterosexual binary that is the basis for the traditional romance novel, this story both breaks that structure but refuses to simply replace it with another binary structure. Instead of simply replacing the heterosexual with the lesbian (Her and Fayne live happily ever after), everything becomes confused, identities mingle in the language and in the attempts to narrate a socially unnarratable situation. Her and Fayne and George have formed a triangle in which no one part is greater or more powerful than another. And each understanding of her/his self is implicitly connected to the others. This image creates an alternative scene of recognition that can no longer be shaded over by linguistic and social norms of gender and sexual relations, there can be no more hiding behind the hat. The lesbian, and the poet, will be recognized within the social context (even if still in relation to the patriarchal male poet) instead of continually outside of it.

Further, the narrative, near the end of the novel, makes a final, decidedly non-narrative statement:

Then in a moment, in an infinitesimal second, the moment that divides day from dawn, that other moment that divides dawn from morning, perhaps that moment that divides early morning from exact morning, will intercede. A moment will stand in a starched apron and the moment will save Her's being. I will draw back tenuous antennae of delirium . . . Her will be quite sane. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps on its petty pace from day to day and all our yesterdays and all our yesterdays . . . (216)

Her's focus on the moment, outside of past or present, the intensity of present tense ("the moment that divides day from dawn") is what brings her sanity. Concern with presence, in each individual moment, is the antithesis of a narrative moving forward in chronological time in which a clear beginning, middle, and end are designated and a cohesive moment of closure resolves and finalizes the story. After she realizes sanity is in the present moment, the language of the last line above seems to drift away in an abstract nonattachment, as if she has no relation to the tomorrows and the yesterdays which seem to only exist as signifiers, without their counterpart signifieds (of meaning). What is important is what happens between the tomorrows and the yesterdays.

H.D.'s intellectual and emotional experiences, through Freud and her own artistic processes, are evident in *HERmione* as we see deeper into the text. As Friedman notes:

H.D. fused the roles of woman, student, disciple, seeker, and patient into a united intellectual and emotional complex of experience The healing catharsis of self-knowledge and understanding that she really began with Freud and that continued throughout her life gave her the power to transmute experience into art. (*Psyche* 47)

She moves through the final, non/narrative passage above, as a way of maintaining the presentness of the text (the refusal to give in to desire narrative for the resolved end of the story) and to show that identity is still always in process. Instead of narrative closure, after Her decides to go to Europe with other friends and end her relations with Fayne, Fayne reenters the story—and Her's poetic and personal life—when she appears in Her's room. Here the book ends, the suggestion being that *HERmione*/Hermione will remain in-process.

In *HERmione*, H.D. is writing a twentieth-century love story, in response to the limitations of nineteenth century women's stories, which is also entirely a metaphor for her own love of self as an individual and as an artist. She enacts the queerness of the content of the story—the love triangle, her own "real life" bisexuality, her desires to do something other than

conform to family and social expectations—in the formal elements of the text, and creates a text that is experienced most profoundly in each moment of reading. There is no summary of the story of *HERmione* without an understanding of the words, sentences, and paragraphs, the very language through which H.D. makes her Freudian quest. In maintaining the triad structure of desire, instead of bringing closure to the text through another binary-structure, H.D. creates a new model for personal identification in relation. In the end Hermione is also George and Fayne; she is the poet and the lover. As her relationships with George, Fayne, and Her/self shift and move over the course of the text, *HERmione* as a meta-autobiography refuses to unify the tripartite subject and instead leaves Hermione, and her readers, in continual process of becoming.

Beverly Dahlen, *A Reading*

Beverly Dahlen continues the impulse toward textual and subjective becoming through the interminable process of writing her long work, *A Reading*. This series of twenty sections is less narrative and more hybrid in form than *HERmione*, and takes the intertextual play further to explore a variety of cultural concerns that extend out from Dahlen's own personal politics. Dahlen began writing *A Reading* in the 1970s, publishing the first book, *A Reading 1-7*, in 1985. The most recent addition, *A Reading 18-20*, was published in 2006. The series, so far, is published in four books, made of 20 sections in total, and may continue. The long work is composed in the form of a journal, which records thoughts, ideas, and quotes from, or in response to, other texts. Immediately evident upon encountering *A Reading 1-7* are a number of formal strategies that frame just some of its politics: the space of the journal (as genre of writing) is reworked, turned into a hybrid form, and made public; only occasionally are the "read" texts cited or referred to specifically; sometimes lines are quoted but no original source is given.

Additionally, sections often begin and end in ways that avoid any clear notation of beginning or ending (they begin in the middle of something and then simply end at generally non-specific points); the work opens, in *A Reading 1-7*, for example, with the line: “before that and before that” (15). And the whole series avoids heading toward any sort of closure. The process of recording reading notes creates its own genre, in a way, and in a separate essay, Dahlen writes that the work only “turns out to be something like a journal . . . that it was not preconceived in terms of these or any other forms originally” (“Forbidden”).

Dahlen’s work incorporates a variety of textual and cultural politics of the 1970s and 80s. *A Reading* begins in the late 1970s, a high time of feminist political activity and popularization of French feminist language theorists including Kristeva and Irigaray, and the work of psychoanalytic feminist theorists in response to Freud and Lacan. Especially in the first text, *A Reading 1-7*, but throughout the series, Dahlen reads and negotiates Freud on her own terms. She takes his theory of “free association” as her own method of composition for at least some of the work, and further incorporates him into the text itself, putting her own writing and thinking in conversation with Freud. The dialogic, exploratory nature of her work interrogates in order to think through “knowing,” in order to “evade the censor . . . to say it all, to try to say everything” (“Forbidden”). Further, Dahlen explains:

There is what I might call an interrogative style that seems to turn up frequently in the writing of feminist women. It’s a style I’m ambivalent about—it annoys me—and yet I find it to a remarkable extent, as here, in my own work What I am calling the interrogative style of women questions because there are no answers. They are real questions. They are questions about the ground of authority, radical ontological questions, questions about the practice of writing from a center of experience that has been defined by others as non-existent, an absence. These questions throw me into that void, the gulf opens. (“Forbidden”)

Questions lead to discoveries and insights, even if there are no clear answers. *A Reading* is “about,” and enacts, the “practice of writing” coming out of traditionally “othered” experience.

Questioning is the beginning of the process, the opening of the void, which Dahlen negotiates throughout her work. Interrogating and working through the possibilities for meaning and knowing is a kind of ontological endeavor that cannot be captured in a linear narrative structure, and Dahlen creates an open text that “knows” through interrogation. After Kristeva, Dahlen incorporates material, formal strategies to enact processes of coming to know, or to be. A *Reading* becomes a model for interrogative practice that opens space for subjects who do not identify within symbolic “norms,” by way of non/narrative methods that move beyond the limits of narrative conventions. We might add to Dahlen’s comments above Kristen Prevallet’s understanding of “Relational Investigative Poetics” to think about writing that negotiates history and culture, and includes intertextual dialogue within a poetics. Prevallet writes:

Instead of buying gas masks and digging underground shelters . . . I turn my rage and confusion towards poetry, the unacknowledged legislation of worlds unacknowledged, to reveal both systems of knowing (content) and structures of ideology (form). Poetry, the work of radical linguistic, contextual, and metrical articulation, is a way to structure my sometimes perpendicular thought processes, transforming confusion and anger into form and meaning. (2)

Prevallet uses Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” and Open Field Poetics, as well as other long poems by women (Susan Howe, Anne Waldman, Muriel Rukeyser) as examples of poetic projects that open to the messiness of history and the process of examining human experience within the space of the poem. A relational poetics considers “texts as being themselves in a constant state of motion, dispersion, and permeability that is inseparable not only from the shifting social and political context, but from the cycles of the earth and the diversity of nature” (4). The Relational poet constructs by way of a collection of gathered material, an “accumulation of sediments” that may contribute to an “apprehension of the world not as an unshaped bundle of materials waiting to be formed, but rather as a diverse and extensive patterning that is already formed and transforming, already imbued with a logic” (4). This strikes at the heart of what,

Dahlen is doing throughout her long work: gathering, looking for patterns, recording and working with the bits and details in a reciprocal constructive process. As she gathers and assembles, the work simultaneously informs her own knowledge about the work and about the world; the text is a process of apprehension. And the materials of the text—the fragments, quotations, pieces of history and thought—combine to build a hybrid genre work that breaks away from conventional notions of poetry, journal writing, or autobiography to create something else, an alternative model for coming to know through the practice of writing.

Writing on Dahlen's work, Megan Simpson claims that *A Reading* is "a performance of exploration and discovery in which the writing functions as a reading of the author's life, self, unconscious, relationship to language, and the cultural knowledge that informs and partakes in the construction of all these" (83). Simpson examines the feminist, woman-subject of the text through its Freudian-Lacanian elements, and Dahlen's renegotiation of these, through Kristeva, which foregrounds both an engagement and play with language and the psychoanalytic process. "Dahlen's sense of language as endlessly meaningful (i.e., generative) and yet interminably indecipherable renders her project quite similar to H.D.'s. Both writers, of course, are working out of Freud's theory of the unconscious" (85). Language here is "the active agent" and "what language is *not*, in this work whose primary method of composition is free association, is seamlessly symbolic, coherent, or controlled" (85). Additionally, "the speaking (writing/reading) subject in *A Reading* is shown to be in a constant process of construction—indeterminate, interminable, fluid and multiple—indeed a series of overlapping and unfixed identities" (85). The subject of the text, and the text itself, are fluid and multiple; the "messages" in the work exist in and through the very methodology of the work itself as well as more directly taking on cultural politics in its content. This will become clear in the close readings of the text below. In

the meantime, it is important to note that Dahlen functions in this work as both writer and reader (of other texts and of her own). The title, *A Reading*, works in multi-directional ways: who is reading whom and/or what remains in constant motion. Within the Freudian-Lacanian framework Dahlen seems to realize, according to Simpson, “the most powerful threat to the law of the father . . . is simply the knowledge that knowledge itself is constructed and perpetuated in the service of maintaining the authority of this law in the first place” (88). This is a kind of knowledge that can be dangerous; when one can see through the authority of the law, through the ideological construction of knowledge and social understanding, one becomes threatening to those structures. Further, “the reading-writing subject-in-process in *A Reading* constantly asks what knowledge is, even as she seeks to know; this asking often reveals itself through contradiction” (88). *A Reading* performs the act of questioning, breaking through the language and narratives that reinforce social norms: it queers those norms through active subversion and critique, and enacts alternative ways of using language to create a different type of model for reading and writing oneself into larger spaces of knowing. Simpson claims that “Dahlen is not so much protesting gender hierarchies as she is celebrating the possibilities for getting outside of them by using the language differently” (92). Through the contradictions and gaps that happen by way of interrogation and investigation, one comes to see the constructed nature of power and gender structures as these surface in Dahlen’s readings. Through dismantling linguistic structures—allowing the Kristevan semiotic to resonate throughout the work—and making her feminist politics transparent—through direct references and social commentary—Dahlen works simultaneously textually and culturally to think political action from the ground up.

Lynn Keller reads Dahlen next to DuPlessis as women writers who are consciously trying to use language differently, and with a specific sense of politics in mind.¹² These are writers who “have dealt with the problematics of an inheritance that positions man as writer and woman as written partly by seeking out a female tradition of writers who explored language innovations with a consciousness of the relation between gender and language” (241). Keller notes both writers’ complicated relationship to masculinist tradition (literary, psychoanalytic) in which they are implicated and simultaneously turn away, in DuPlessis’s terms, to pursue an “Otherhow” of feminist writing practice. Keller further shows the connection between these contemporary poets and two other important influences on their work: H.D. and Robert Duncan. She traces some of the similarities, particularly between Duncan and both DuPlessis’s and Dahlen’s poetics and process. Duncan seems to have served as a model for both poets in part because of his own version of a feminist, queer poetics, and the three poets similar interests in writing that is ahierarchal, polyphonic, nonlinear, nonteleological (247); the focus on Freudian thinking and analysis in his own poetic process (248); the “acceptance of the artist’s alienation from hegemonic society . . . and his determination to use poetry as social critique” (249); and what he terms the “derivative” nature of the writing (250). These strategies call attention to writing that reworks literary tradition. Work by writers such as DuPlessis and Dahlen is additionally “self-consciously gendered” and “is composed with the transgressive awareness that while a woman writes within the gender system, her position is also radically and inevitably ‘outside the law’” (252). This would apply as well to Duncan who brought his own sexual politics to his writing, creating poems that could be read as queer in form and content. Although Keller, DuPlessis, and Dahlen seem to agree that there is no inherent connection between the feminine/female and the

¹² Keller is referring to DuPlessis’ continuing, long poem project, *Drafts*, which is also hybrid in its intertextuality and interested in correspondence between texts and among subjects.

experimental (252), the consciousness of language structure and writing method, and an awareness and politics of gender, combine to work through and inhabit the form-content complex that becomes the work itself. The work becomes “queer” in its refusal to subscribe to any proscribed theories of gender or sexual identification, linguistically or socially, as well as in its subversive practices. In Dahlen’s work, the content (including domestic themes or journal writing, Freudian theory, history, literary history, feminist politics) combines with formal elements, themselves charged with a politics of challenging modernist and psychoanalytic traditions. The work takes the private, “feminine” journal into the public space by way of a written text that is both a product of literary tradition and directly in response to that as critique, resistance, and reworking. The “otherhow” space that is still always articulated through, or within, the context of the dominant linguistic discourse and cultural space becomes a tool for widening or dismantling the dominant structure from within. The work of Beverly Dahlen, even more specifically, disrupts and shifts conventional modes of knowing and understanding in multiple ways. The combination of writing strategy, intertextual dialogue, and reflection that happens through the body of the work makes a case for the displacement of the solitary writer as all-knowing, inspired master-mind author, and instead instates spaces into the literary landscape that open to various forms, styles, and voices that rework culturally accepted traditions, prejudices, and binaries. Dahlen, in her long work, creates spaces that are heterotopic, in Foucault’s terms. *A Reading* includes spaces that are simultaneously real and unreal, that open what otherwise might be a linear space into a spatial network of connected spaces, each in relation to the other, the whole reflecting the impossibility of a whole unless it is textured and contradictory. This heterotopic space ultimately includes the actual and the potential, the present and the past.

The question of space, and spatial logic in the text, relates to the interrogation of borders in formally innovative work; in part, the experimental text serves to open space in terms of representation and genre, to ignore boundaries and advocate for the practice of new ways of writing and thinking. In the introduction to *Moving Borders* Mary Margaret Sloan writes, “The terms for defining innovative writing over the last three decades center on issues of formal exploration, that is, on the interrogation of forms of representation and on the opening and investigation of literary structures and genres” (6). The theme of the anthology is the movement between, and manipulation of, aesthetic and culturally constructed borders. In Dahlen’s work, the border between form and content is often erased, or shifted substantially. Sloan explains: “If there is a particular focus in these writings on space as the ground for literary exposition and therefore necessarily on questions of boundary, position, and closure, that interest may express the radically changing status of contemporary women” (6-7). And it is at every level that Dahlen, as a discerning reader interested in the politics of innovation in writing, and the politics of women in the world, investigates how these boundaries are negotiated. *A Reading 1-7* begins with the following:

before that and before that. everything in a line. where it was broken into, the house. not a body but still I could not see that it didn’t have a roof. then there was something to cry about. assumption of protection. whether I thought the sky the top of. whatever does. this I carry forward. the sky which was not a limit but apparently so. and that mistake which. colored it. what color? as if in another light. so shadows. (15)

The series begins in the middle of a sentence that alludes to beginning (e.g., “in the beginning”), as well as tradition (in literature) or history (we repeat history), and the concept of linearity, which immediately seems ironic since the text is nearly the antithesis of linear. Dahlen writes, “everything in a line” but what kind of line? A line of poetry? A line in which things fall in order? Although there may be some order that these sentences follow, the paragraph seems

random, definitely paratactic. And the next sentence (fragment) is curious since the first part of it can be read as following the previous sentence, “everything in a line. where it was broken into,” as well as with its own subject, “a house.” If read that with the previous sentence the text already is commenting on its own methodology of writing sentences, lines, and then breaking into them. And even in the rest of that sentence, “house” might be read metaphorically in terms of language, and Dahlen’s project as a response to formalism in poetry. Further, the references to the “roof” and the “sky” point toward this breaking out, or going beyond, limits of language and tradition; she writes, “the sky which was not a limit but apparently so” foreshadows the politics of the work in that appearances—or assumptions, like cultural myths and reinforced social “rules” and “roles”—can be deceiving. Even the sky is not the limit (does not limit) but colors and shades of “meaning” can be interpreted as having such limits. But this means that they can also be interpreted otherwise. The point is to “be in” the process since, like in psychoanalysis, reading and writing continue on indefinitely: “the interminable reading. the infinite analysis” (17). Further referencing Freud and Lacan, Dahlen writes: “turning first to the chapter on mourning and melancholia and later to the chapter on the uncanny. this was about mirrors. in some sense she was my double. she died” (19). The mirror represents double-ness, the real and not real, the subject who is not autonomous. But who “she” is in this passage, who is the subject, who the double, who dies, one cannot tell from the text. In Kristeva’s theory of abjection, following Lacan and Freud, the abject subject is part of, and rejected from, symbolic order. “She” in this sense might be a kind of universal “She,” an abject subject within the phallic, symbolic order.

Freud will continue to appear throughout *A Reading* in various permutations. Dahlen also references innumerable other sources and writers, though the specific nature of the references is often unclear. For instance, she writes, “we do not love words the way we love things” (20) and

although we might read this in Freudian terms, after the discussion of *HERmione* above it is impossible not to think of Her's obsession with language, in particular, nouns and naming. But Dahlen's line here is misleading, for read in terms of H.D., words and things cannot be separated, or "things" are what make language come alive, as concrete elements of language. Further, Dahlen early on begins to comment on narrative form; *A Reading* is, at least in part, a response to narrative in terms of structure, linearity, plot, and character development. *A Reading* should not be read as a poem simply because it is not narrative, but in its critique of narrative the formal strategies of *A Reading* incorporate narrative elements as well as other elements of prose and poetry writing. For example, in the passage: "following that she dropped from sight. follow the thought, it goes somewhere. in narrative we follow a trail, the clues laid out. that's how it becomes the illusion of space. that we follow it. the ubiquitous Galápagos trail marker, the post painted black and white" (21) Dahlen examines the idea that narrative structure inherently includes clues not just for reading, but for reading with a sense of linear progression and "meaning," the payoff for following from one thought to another, from beginning, through middle, to the end. Interestingly, she writes, "that's how it becomes the illusion of space" instead of saying that narrative is itself an illusion, narrative becomes the "illusion of space," followed by "that we follow it." Ironically (and purposefully), the thoughts here are not easy to follow and seem to stand still, in the middle of the trail, at the trail marker. The "illusion of space" is like the illusion of the trail, which is only a trail because of the trail markers lining it. In narrative there are "ubiquitous" clues to keep one reading forward. In this text there are no narrative clues to aid in progressive, linear development.

However, narrative does play a role throughout the series. In the following, we are again reminded of *HERmione* and the relation between experience and writing, between cultural identity and textual identity:

this is the story of my life. I cast her in the third person or in the second person at will. who is this I? who asks the question already knows the answer. it is nothing, illusion, something made up out of loss, desire. you suffer her fate. she, and not he. the child is a gift and suffers the fatality of the given. (34)

This passage could be responding specifically to *HERmione*; it is possible that Dahlen had read *HERmione* as an unpublished manuscript in the late 70s, or in the early 80s in its published form, since *A Reading 1-7* wasn't published until 1985. Certainly, Dahlen was reading other work of H.D. as a modernist influence; and because of their shared interest in Freud, H.D. can be said to resonate throughout Dahlen's work. As in *HERmione*, this passage foregrounds pronouns as the linguistic representation of self in relation to world, as well as the narrative illusion of the clarity of this relationship. The syntax itself, in its strangeness, enacts the difficulty of telling a life story, particularly when the (female) subject is born into a "given" social/symbolic structure. Additionally, Freudian desire to "know" or find meaning in one's life story becomes infused with narrative desire to progress through the text in order to arrive at an answer to the question, "who is this I?" But the answer, like desire, can only be "nothing," there is only the illusion of an answer, ultimately only a lack/loss. Later, she writes:

how come it's easier to write her, that third person. how come saying I means I. a confession. the I is never identical with the fictional character being written. 'the moment of writing.' but what I that is not a fiction, there isn't one, me from moment to moment, I think I know where I am. 'where you are there arises a place.' a theory of relativity. (72)

The relation between time and place/space, as well as subject and text is woven into this passage that cites Rilke ('where you are there arises a place') and any number of other writers who could be attributed for the quoted: "the moment of writing." Writing in third person gives the writer

subjective distance; in H.D.'s case this distance is always in flux as the narration moves between first and third-person voice throughout *HERmione*. Dahlen is aware of the difficulties of narration and how pronouns play a crucial role. And if "saying I" is a confession and also makes that "I" fictional, this creates multiple layers of analysis that simply acceding to narrative does not.

Dahlen's non-syntactically correct, non/narrative analysis of narrative uncovers a complexity, particularly for the woman writer as cultural and textual subject. Subjectivity in narrative is a theory of relativity, in the sense of Friedman's concept of the "geographics of identity," by which the subject is always contextualized, positioned, located in relation to multiple elements simultaneously from one moment, or one space, to the next. Kristeva's subject, or identity, in-process, acts similarly: the subject in the world is in flux, always in relation and not always progressing or developing in a linear fashion. The non/narrative text enacts an interrogation of narrative, linearly constructed subjectivity, and aims for a type of characterization that shows its subjects to be contextualized and in-process, even when the text consequently becomes messy and complicated because of it. Although pushing further out and away from cohesive narrative strategies, Dahlen does not abandon narrative altogether. Rather, she purposefully weaves in and out of a narrative voice in order to simultaneously draw attention to the difficulties of narrative form, while offering an alternative means of exploratory writing in which desire for "meaning" is considered in terms of knowledge. This allows the writing (via reading) to push open spaces for further thought, reflection, and insight. We might read this as a relational strategy of gathering and resonance:

(All this language is floating. The men make statements. They use the forms of the verb 'to be' with confidence. What I write is provisional. It depends. It is subject to constant modification. It depends.) (76)

The writing, like the subject, is “subject to constant modification”; this is why the writing, like analysis, is interminable. This is an alternative also to the Cartesian male sense of subjectivity in which simply to state “I am” is in fact, “to be” without an understanding of positioning in terms of linguistic or social context. In fact, “I am,” like the text, “provisional,” and dependent upon any multitude of factors or elements at any given time. And because subjectivity is implemented in and through language, the language then must float toward discovery (questioning) and away from definition (making statements).

Not knowing can, in fact, be a means of discovering knowledge. Switching into a first person narrator addressing a second person “other,” Dahlen writes:

the reading of the writing goes on, this is for you because you are not here. you are always not here. you are never here. I make you up, I wonder how you look. and now it is so much easier to write than to speak. an other is so much an hallucination it's scary. I do not know what I speak to. (78)

Two pages later this passage is repeated exactly. Although Dahlen repeats words, phrases, and ideas occasionally throughout the entire series, this is one of only a couple of whole passages that are rewritten word for word. This lends toward an interpretation of its importance, but also a sense of anxiety. “I do not know what I speak to” might point to some sort of anxiety about the project, yet this statement occurs in the middle of the first book, *A Reading 1-7*, and the series continues on through three more books (so far) after this. Important to the project is this sense of not knowing, of allowing the text to remain open. And here it also comments further on the relationship between self and other, writer and reader, reader and (previous) texts. It is unclear why the other of this address is “always not here. you are never here,” and why the syntactically awkward “you are always not here” is repeated in more simple terms, “you are never here”; however, the words “always” and “never” resonate in their antithesis even if the two sentences say the same thing. It seems clear at least that even without a specific sense or understanding of

her audience, the narrator requires “an other” in order to have a textual subjectivity, in order to write at all; “the reading of the writing goes on” and in a circular fashion: Dahlen reads previous writing, takes notes, writes her own text, reads more writing, and it goes on.

Dahlen’s strategies might lead us to consider the question of power and how she is responding to that. Is the lack of power, of “othered” subjects, used as a positive motivation in a text that circulates instead of progresses forward, toward some goal or end? The anti-symbolic, non/narrative text, in Dahlen’s terms, may be as she writes, “a power which is no power. a display of wounds. all that should have remained hidden, obscene, a great need, a lack” (88). Thinking back to Hayden White, the non/narrative historical document is lacking when it is not turned into, or accompanied by, a narrative account. Or, historical narratives might leave out the original document altogether and instead narrate it for readers, so that the original remains “hidden.” Many of Dahlen’s primary sources are hidden, in the sense that she doesn’t cite them other than using quotes, and sometimes not even that. Though the “display of wounds. all that should have remained hidden” is in fact on display here, not hidden at all; the sources are not cited, but the material is transparently on the surface of the text, in all of its fragmentation and messiness. Narrative cohesion smoothes over gaps and holes that make a story messy, but Dahlen’s messy story gives us something else; like White’s examples of the annals or chronicles, *A Reading* offers readers the language, detail, and space in which to interact and interpret. Before language is constructed into symbolic language, according to Kristeva, this semiotic space enacts emotion, music, and pure potential for exploration, in contradistinction to symbolic narrative structure in which movement and understanding are ordered and organized with little flexibility for the incoherent. Making the wounds, or the lack, positive and offering a credible example of possible alternative ways of knowing, a text like Dahlen’s is going beyond simply reacting to

“masculine” writing with “feminine” writing. Of greater importance here is the opening of the continuum of possibility, for greater inclusion of linguistic and narrative practices that, in Dahlen’s, terms might “disavow” difference and complicate our reading practices as well as our understandings of gender:

if sexual difference is disavowed she

if sexual difference is disavowed she
will be more complicated (88)

If there is no sexual difference, then what is there? Although it may be impossible to imagine such a scenario, it is the possibility of imagining that is important. Without sexual difference, how does one exist as a knowing “she”? It is more complicated because it hasn’t been thought before. This passage, the repetition of the first two lines, calls attention to how *A Reading*, in so many various ways, leads us through questions and potential possibilities for thinking in different terms, and challenging our inherited, normative beliefs.

Throughout *A Reading*, Dahlen creates alternative forms of expression, using and writing over previous texts and ideas. Over the course of the series she alternates between long prose lines and shorter, broken poetic lines, drawing attention to the white space of the page. Sometimes she numbers the sections, and sometimes not, though each section ends with a note on the dates of writing, and when applicable, revision dates. In order to conclude this reading of *A Reading 1-7*, I have included the long passage below which acts as a poetics of the project at large:

a white space intervening.

a white space intervening, white, white. that white light, static. questioning the first draft. this is not a literary work, I told him, this is not fussy. this is not my mother dusting the daisies. this is not domestic duty. this is not the idea. a preconception. this is it. the baby. the corpse. you can take that body and cut it up forever. this is a metaphor. a something. a meaning carried over. from one thing to the next. these are my leg hairs. the short hair

that grows at the edge of my lips. lips, teeth. this is my little bow mouth. here it is. you will never know what I mean. when I say you I mean me. erasing all the *I*'s and using instead the third person. it alternates. an alternation, or alteration of generations. it changes. in other words. i.e., it changes. that is to say, it changes. it alters. it becomes something else, though its original form is still visible. one can trace that. he put a mark over it, a cross, but the word could still be read beneath it. 'the effacement of the trace.'
(90)

The line, "the effacement of the trace" comes from Derrida in *Of Grammatology*: "it is the myth of the effacement of the trace, that is to say of an originary difference that is neither absence nor presence, neither negative nor positive." Both the trace and its effacement are based in originary myths. Further, Derrida states, "Writing is one of the representatives of the trace in general, it is not the trace itself. *The trace itself does not exist* In a way, this displacement leaves the place of the decision hidden, but it also indicates it unmistakably" (167).¹³ The difference, or the spaces between, the displacement, allow for movement between past and present, from previous to contemporary texts. Dahlen, in the passage above, seems aware of the trace as both real and mythical; previous ideas and practices both repeat and change until there is no longer an actual origin, even if "its original form is still visible." Like hereditary characteristics in families, new writing both resembles, and is unique from, its precursors.

Absence and lack are necessary to presence, to signification. Dahlen builds on this idea of language play as well as writing, and writing over, to show change and similarity; although according to Derrida, the trace does not exist, has no original cause, it nonetheless lends toward this idea of change and alteration which Dahlen repeats in the passage. In the very beginning of the passage, she writes, "questioning the first draft," mentions "metaphor" and "meaning carried

¹³ In *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Dermot Moran explains, "From Levinas in particular, Derrida takes the notion of 'trace' as a mark of something absent that has never actually been present...As Derrida comments...a 'trace' is not an effect since it does not actually have a cause. All signs are in effect traces. Indeed, the act of signifying itself can only be understood as a trace. Derrida talks of language as a 'play of traces'... In Derrida's use of the term *trace*, it applies as much to the future as to the past, and indeed constitutes the present by its very relation to what is absent" (469).

over,” and a body that might be cut up into eternity, like the text in which only effacement is continuous. What has come before is still always visible, even if it cannot go back to a single origin. And the play of language results also in yet another reference to movement between first, second, and third-person pronouns and the subjective layering that happens here: “when I say you I mean me. erasing all the *I*’s and using instead the third person.” The effacement of the trace, the effacement of the text, the erasing of “I” and use of “she” or “he” results in an insight on the process of reading, writing, erasing, adding to; the process of writing/effacing a text, an identity, is continuous, alternating, changing yet also retaining something of what came before. The palimpsest as metaphor offers an example of transparency that more structurally coherent, linear narrative writing does not as it neatly covers over that which might cause us to question. As if concluding this passage, after the Derrida quote, Dahlen writes: “what thought there was we do not know. we will never discover it. it is not there. it is gone, or it never existed” (90). And so the point is not in discovering the “origin” but in the process itself of using/reusing, of reading/writing/rewriting in order to discover new thoughts; though coming out of a history of thought, they nonetheless also stand on their own. In a sense then, Dahlen’s text, based on and in conversation with previous texts and ideas is, as she writes, “beginning anew. that we come to it” (107). And it is through this hybrid genre text, that is both poetry and prose, narrative and non/narrative, that the productive, processual space is opened for “conclusions” that cannot be predicted ahead of time. She writes: “on the third day I embarked for the promised land. these are narrative sentences and not statements. they are suspended. fictions. holding the breath, breathlessly, to watch it, how it will progress, what will be the outcome, the end” (112). One must watch how it will progress, from one suspended, fictional narrative sentence to another. Dahlen draws a distinction between fictional narrative sentences, and (factual) statements, as if

to emphasize the fabricated nature of narrative that we might not otherwise see through; narrative catches our attention (and keeps us distracted), we hold our breaths, watching to see what will happen.

The second book in the series, *A Reading 8-10*, repeats and expands upon themes and texts from the first book and adds new material. In addition to Freud, Dahlen expands her reading to include more feminist commentary, especially in relation to female historical figures and writers, as well as references to Marx and larger social/economic structures in which Freud as well as other thinkers and writers are a part. Both explicit and implicit references to H.D. are included, as well as metacommentary on reading, writing, narration, and the “autobiographical” subject of the text, or the problematic nature of that.

Dahlen begins section 8 with a specific image: “this leaf, the local. splotted or daubed with silvery white a descending order of greens, and red. I read the seeds, colors and shapes,” invoking the local, specific leaf within a hierarchy greens. Further in the paragraph, she writes, “there is a project called nature beyond the pale. a leaf, a stream, infringed upon, not safely in another dimension” (7). This book puts us immediately in a space between nature and culture, in which the particular details of a leaf can offer insight into the social workings of the larger world. Only a little further down the page the gender critique begins when she writes: “an undisturbed genius. the genius of the room is masculine. but the mother is the muse. she who charms us by her silence, and her beauty, or fascinates and repels by her ugliness, her oldness. and I in the guise of the knight. in the name of the son I rebel” (7). Although Dahlen uses mostly lower case throughout the series, the “I” is always capitalized, giving power to the female speaking subject. The “I” is, at the same time, in this selection caught in a kind of gender confusion, if we read the speaker as female. Though the female can be “in the guise of the knight” and can rebel “in the

name of the son” this nonetheless seems to push the gendered binary not toward androgyny but toward something more akin to a potential for queer identification that may or not be culturally acceptable.¹⁴ Further in this section she writes, “she played the illusion of the bridal veil swathed in hipboots. she herself unwinding. these identities. a wounded father, the lack, the absence” (7). The genius of the masculine author is foregrounded and challenged by a female writer/speaker doing in this text something different from masculine “genius” literary writing, even while this tradition is invoked, instead of ignored. This project deconstructs, reads, and writes through multiple registers, including literary history, using language that is at times narrative, and other times, fragmented and paratactic; ideas repeat and shift, creating a constellation of investigations into social, linguistic, and gender systems. As in the work of Stein, Dahlen’s uses of language play function aesthetically in terms of sound and musicality, as well as participating in the content of critique in the text. The politics are enacted within the lyric play of language, among other things, as a challenge to traditional forms of lyric poetry that portrayed women as the written, or muse, without agency.

it is the law alone that finds her unnatural
 ‘this is not nature’ I said to him
 it is not nature you cannot speak of it
 the law of the father determines her fate (13)

Literature, psychoanalysis, lyric poetry are not natural phenomena but are constructed according to “the law of the father,” linguistic, social, and historical systems rooted in the patriarchal. Again, the play between personal pronouns points to a shifting subjectivity, much like in *HERmione*, in which the narrator negotiates her position between self and world. Dahlen further references a number of historical female figures, weaving them into the poetic prose of the text, for example in the passages below:

¹⁴ For Foucault “The binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive, and medicojuridical hegemonies” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 26).

the moon winked, she rides for us, her red-rimmed eyes. blind truth, it is 'mediated, female, and probably mad.' the matter of Britain, the matter of Troy. a city lost. a woman on the ramparts. she, she was its downfall, by her treachery, her betrayal. she, Guinevere, or Helen, outside the law, that dangerous radical, the beautiful woman. (16)

recognize it. she was up all night writing. she thought he was skitterish, he envied her, was finally jealous of her power. I was thinking of George Sand. (20)

. . . and Macbeth is tempted to enter a world of feminine evil. he is taken in by witches, by powerful magic, by women who do not bear children in the ordinary way, but bear prophecy, madness, death. they will act outside the patriarchal order. violating that order is tragedy (84)

. . . Isis is looking for the fragments as if she were whole. as if she were. come on. there's a lovely picture. do not you believe it. Isis is blasted. look it over. there isn't any mother who is whole, who can be counted on to pick up the pieces. we all refuse it. no one will do it. it's too much like cleaning house, like laundry, like shit. too much like bloody entrails. (85)

And she continually weaves references to Freud into the text, from "The Wolf Man" and "Dora," to the story of his own grandchild playing a game of his own invention: "*fort/da*, the child with the cotton reel, a spinning wheel, the counter transference" (41). All of the above examples, in a way, can be summed up in the *fort/da* story. The reference is to the recursive action in the game the child plays with the cotton reel when his mother is gone, throwing it away from him and then pulling it in, and repeating "*fort/da*" accordingly (French for "gone" and "there"). Representing going and coming/returning, this process is not unlike psychoanalysis, which involves a continual going into and returning, in which both analyst and analysand participate in the process of narrating and/or giving meaning to the recovery of repressed material. This is also an analogy for literary history in which prior material is used/referenced and revised, through which ultimately there is no original trace. This is a more challenging yet still true analogy for women writers who create, or participate in, an alternate heritage, having been excluded from the male literary canons; or female characters who participate in the repetition of repression because of their status as women. Over time, however, some of these women as artists or thinkers may be

granted greater status, for example writers whose works are posthumously recovered or published; or figures like Guinevere, Helen, or Emma who act outside the (patriarchal) law; even though they will suffer the consequences, they will be remembered through history. Dahlen also recovers, or recontextualizes, female tropes such as the feminine evil in Macbeth, or Isis picking up the pieces, gathering fragments “as if she were whole,” as is the role of the woman/mother, because no one else will do it.

In analysis, the repressed material never wholly goes away, but is used in the transformation from symptomatic or traumatic repetition to more full participation in everyday life. Participating in everyday life, however, also entails performing according to social and sexual proscribed “norms” in which one may not feel comfortable or feel recognized, in Butler’s terms. Dahlen, referencing Simone de Beauvoir writes, “she has mistaken it, mistaken the call. the brotherhood will not include her. it is madness to think so. and for him also madness, or pious sentimentality. she has a different story” (60). Getting other stories told is the continual challenge. Revising or rewriting (repressive) literary history is like a game of *fort/da*, continually disappearing and returning, progressing and receding, and becomes a kind of repetition without origin.

History, or writing, though does not repeat in the same way every time. Feminist politics or experimental writing, for example, push against boundaries and work to deconstruct limits imposed through social, linguistic structures or habits. Breaking the habits, troubling the repetition creates spaces in which new politics and ideas might happen. For example, Dahlen writes: “there is an edge that has been gone over. past point” (117) and “what is language. a pattern, an archaic heritage” (120). As in families, heritage repeats and changes. Patterns can be altered. Limits can be pushed, edges gone beyond. Dahlen uses and recontextualizes Freud

within the alternative history and canon of female production, and simultaneously creates a formally alternative text that pushes the boundaries of literary convention, working against social and linguistic structures as a politics within, and toward action outside of, the text.

For example, throughout *A Reading 8-10* Dahlen references Marx, connecting references to the Freudian/Lacanian Oedipal social/sexual system to the linguistic and the economic. Language, in the Marxist model as read through Dahlen, is a fundamental element of the economic system, which cannot be separated from the social. For example, in the following:

reading, I am prepared for this country, with vocabulary, descriptions of foxes, their pictures, I may never see a fox. whatever else I know through books, it is nothing like what is. is, is there. there is necessarily no link, no chain fence, stopped short. a word suffices, it carries no weight, it is a part of the base of the superstructure. (121)

what does it profit anybody, you lost. you can't do more than lose. it was settled that way. a basis. base. the foundation. the base and the superstructure. (124)

There seems to be a discrepancy between what the narrator has read in books and what happens in reality, "it is nothing like what is." In writing that is part of the base and the superstructure, that conforms to mainstream norms, cultural narratives, and utilizes conventional narrative strategies, the "word" carries no weight, it is simply a part of the system. Although she may not be suggesting the possibility of exiting entirely from the system, drawing attention to the problematic nature of linguistic, social, and economic repression of "other" elements acts as a politics that pushes against the restraints to recover language and strategies that work against the repetition of social, sexual, economic, and linguistic norms.

years. the automatic text. we will not fall out of this world. how. I thought how can you, are you. I was more than invisible. whatever language is, it is invented. it is a closed system.

it is all the words you didn't use. what was not there. they are always looking at it, what is not there. what is absent. presence is one thing. but only one thing. (137)

Dahlen in fact seems to say that the work of revision, of reconstruction has to be from within “this world” and through the very language that had been used historically to control women’s voices. “Language is invented” and can be manipulated, what has been left out can be included, can be given material space.

A Reading offers an alternative in its very formal structure, as a non/narrative text that might be read as analogous to possibilities for social, sexual, economic alternatives. Through Dahlen’s reading practices, we as readers of her writing participate in the negotiation of narration within a history of psychoanalysis and patriarchy. Writing itself becomes a process of understanding oneself, one’s world, and critically thinking of greater political possibilities for subjects in that world. Among these, we encounter constant slippage and movement, a spatial simultaneity of ideas, practices, and suggestions that neither move forward nor backward in a linear way. This practice of coming to knowing is recursive, indeterminate, and interminable. Dahlen writes, “one writes to find out what one is writing. that is all” (144) though that is not all. It seems more accurate to say, following Dahlen’s narrator(s) over the course of the work, that one writes to find out what one knows, does not know, and what one can learn. Reading and writing are paths to knowledge, the process of which is in itself indeterminate and interminable, hence the continuous, inconclusive project that is *A Reading*.

on top of it
it was headquartered in an attic.
walking up the stairs in the dark
one hand against the wall.
what is contiguous, going back in a line
infinite regress, no beginning
no end of circling. (150)

therefore, this is a work about desire.
there is a part that is missing.
if this were known one might move beyond the pairs of
contrasts. (151)

There will always be a part (at least) that is missing. What is absent, lacking, keeps us going, as readers and as historical subjects. Desire is that which can never be fulfilled, unless it results in the end, death. Dahlen's project is non/narrative: it cannot perform itself as entirely narrative or entirely not-narrative; it is a continual negotiation of knowledge used in the production of spatial logics that serve to move us away from linear binaries and toward more inclusion of alternative practices. And as Dahlen suggests, "one might move beyond the pairs of contrasts." It is not simply a matter of choosing one or the other, but through more dialectical relations among elements, the more we might be able to "move beyond" the opposing contrasts. We might break out of the linear, binary structures that hold us in a space without possibility or real choice.

A Reading 11-17 further comments on the interminable nature of the reading and the writing, and uses desire, the negative, or lack, as positive motivation for continuing the series. As the series progresses, the critique of narrative as ideology, and the general social adherence to norms that confine and define, plays out in various examples and examinations. The often disparate, fragmented, textured writing dismantles the rigid structures of social and sexual thinking and offers new ways of using language to represent ideas and experience.

there will never be time to write all the sentences one may have been capable of writing, even about one subject. take a subject, anything, it is so simple, but the sentence is notched, can view the relationship from any one of a number (the number is infinite) of stances. where would you like to stand to view this one. any sentence is merely an example. it shows what might be done. a sentence is a model, in no way permanent, of thought. (62)

The sense of infinity and impermanence also keep writing and knowing in flux. There can be no closure because any sentence cannot permanently contain thoughts or ideas, and therefore the text is always open to change and fluctuation. This is not unlike thinking which can change as moments and contexts change. As Dahlen writes, "thinking is the same as writing. writing

thoughts in which you move. follow one thing to the next. there, I said to her, write that, that's your first line. then what do you think of. then what do you imagine. do you begin there, not hearing the others?" (69) Through writing one comes to know, or make sense of one's thoughts. And, like thinking, writing can be circular, can seem to have arbitrary beginnings and endings. One moves through writing as one moves through thinking. In *A Reading*, thinking, writing, and reading are always in close relation:

but of course there was the reading also. first one would have been a reader. then one was helpless. then one knew nothing but the writing. as the reader one knew nothing but the writing. then the person disappears. then, and then the writing is all. all there is. then there is nothing but reader, reader of the writing. then we can only wonder at the person who might have been, the someone who was there, now gone, disappeared long ago behind the writing. there, perhaps, once, but that was long ago. the writer may now be gone, dead perhaps. in any case, not there. (86)

Although one has to start with the reading, something prior must have been written, and again we are inside the circularity of the trace without origin. In any case, the reading makes one "helpless" and without recourse but to engage in the writing which then "becomes all"; of course this is still intimately attached to the reading as one becomes "the reader of the writing." And it is the writing which will outlive any particular writer about whom we can "only wonder at the person who might have been." In the end, the identity of the writer is only that of the text itself, as the text moves from the writer and into the world. Ultimately, Dahlen seems to have faith in the text's potential impact on the social:

a work one desired to see slim and easy. all this, and something else too. why not change? why not make another pact with the future. what of the past, that it stopped, at a certain place, and not all would be, that not at all, that the narrative line would be lost. muscles work, a certain pitch is achieved, desire stands out, sweating over the surface. what is this but disgust, what is it but doesn't it hurt, she said. there the very picture of desire, the body a display of symptoms, the

painful inanimate breaking out. (73)

She asks what may be the most important question: “why not change?” It sounds so simple. However, reading history in a way that lends toward making “another pact with the future” might both disrupt narrative tradition and be painful. The syntax in this passage makes the meaning unclear, but this is part of the point: the disruption of the norm (in syntax, in narrative, in the structure of desire, in reading history) in order to make changes toward a different type of future. But the changes are not definitive. Breaking out of the narrative habits of history opens spaces for alternative ideas, identifications, texts, practices that lend toward multiple future possibilities. Breaking out of linear, binary structures of thinking ultimately can be a cognitive practice that opens possibilities for more spatial, heterotopic, heterogeneous practices. If the nature of desire is such that we keep wanting more, keep moving forward, so that to stop (reading, writing, working for change) is to, in a sense, die, then we might think of Dahlen’s work as inclusive of both textual and social desire: there can be no closure or conclusion because there is always more work to do.

Like challenging literary tradition, social change can be difficult and painful, but the desire for a different future makes it also necessary. *A Reading*, as a series, is a project of social change through literary action (experimentation); there is no way to predict the outcome, but in the process the writing continually builds upon what has come before in order to leave us no choice but to consider the nature of choice itself, to question and reflect upon how we know what we know and where that information comes from. *A Reading* doesn’t simply repeat the same continuous social critique, but moves through examples and ideas in a circular and spatial fashion so that these ideas resonate, while others accumulate, adding to the argumentative impulse and call for social action that, ultimately, is a great part of the motivation of this work.

A Reading 18-20 returns more intently to the theme of desire, taking the concept of narrative desire in non/narrative directions. In addition to Brooks's discussion of narrative desire above, I look to Teresa de Lauretis's notion of perverse desire as a way to further think about alternatives to normative conceptions of desire and representation. Bringing de Lauretis' (re)use of the perverse, into conversation with Dahlen's material, textual practices further makes my point that the experimental works I am examining are invested in textual and cultural politics and change for marginalized and "othered" subjects. Kristeva queers the symbolic, heteronormative language system, and de Lauretis queers Freud, on his own terms, through his concept of perversion. De Lauretis reworks Freud's idea of perversion into a useful conception of lesbian desire that can be considered outside of the Oedipal complex and Freud's theory of castration. The *disavowal* of castration, according to de Lauretis, moves the subject out of the Oedipal model (penis envy/castration) and into the female body (outside of the relationship to the penis): one's own (subjectivity), or another's (fetish). She explains:

the mediating term, the signifier of desire, is not the paternal phallus but the fetish. . . . fetishistic or perverse desire goes beyond the Oedipus complex and in its own way resolves it. For the instinctual investment represented by the fetish is an investment not in the mother (negative Oedipus) or in the father/father's child (positive Oedipus), but in the female body itself, ultimately in the subject's own body-image and body-ego whose loss or lack it serves to disavow. (*Practice* 289)

The fetish, or the object of desire, as a same-sex object, makes the desire perverse, but de Lauretis' notion of disavowing castration (lack), and instead emphasizing the female body, reforms the idea of perverse desire into a useful model for lesbian studies. Although focusing specifically on lesbian desire in relation to the Freudian, Oedipal, heterosexual structure of "normal" sexuality, de Lauretis also suggests that perverse desire might be considered in terms of the non-normatively heterosexual. She explains that "if perversion is understood with Freud as a deviation of the sexual drive from the path leading to the reproductive object . . . then a theory

of perversion would serve to articulate a model of perverse desire where perverse means not pathological but rather non-heterosexual, or non-normatively heterosexual” (*Figures* 86). Perversion, simply put, is deviation from the norm. If (hetero)sexuality, as a model for social structure, includes reproduction as its goal (sexual and social), then any deviation from that (non-sexual reproduction; refusal to reproduce oppressive social ideologies) can be considered “perverse.” If “perversion” is seen as a turning away from “a socially constituted norm” and not a refusal of nature, then this norm, or “normal sexuality,” can be seen as “a requirement of social *reproduction*, both reproduction of the species and reproduction of the social system” (de Lauretis, *Figures* 113). As a socially constituted norm, sexuality is repeated through cultural myths and narratives, ideology, and (patriarchal, heterosexual) power structures.

Although not overtly writing from within a space of lesbian desire, Dahlen tackles the social (vs. “natural”) throughout *A Reading*, in various examples. In this last book of the series, she references Marx’s model of the base and superstructure which constitute economic and social institutions such as religion, politics, and law. Like H.D., Dahlen is interested in what happens outside the proscribed norms instilled within the socialization process that begins in the Oedipal stages of development. And using de Lauretis’s notion of the non-normatively heterosexual, from Freud and H.D. and into Dahlen, I think we can read a kind of perverse desire in the formal strategies of the text that refuses to participate in a satisfaction of narrative desire—which moves from beginning through a middle and toward an ending in resolution and closure. *A Reading* perverts the narrative by focusing on its own material textuality, and its interest in the disavowal of the (hetero)normative Oedipal model which suppresses female subjectivity and the possibility of alternative object choice. The feminist text breaks away from phallic power structures to focus on its own development and reach out to other, non-(hetero)-normative

subjects, a kind of textual desire offering a non-narrative alternative to the dominance of narrative norms.

In section 18, Dahlen writes from the perspective of a first-person autobiographical narrator reading and thinking about desire through Barrett Watten, and Derrida:

Then I was reading a recent essay of Barrett Watten's which begins: "The world is structured on its own displacement." I read it again and again. I tried to imagine using it, going beyond it. All I could really imagine was quoting it in its entirety. What did I want? the negation of a negation? Watten's work reminded me of all I know to be true: that the world, the self and the other are created out of absence, lack, desire; that "desire is the desire for meaning itself" (I do not know where that quote comes from), that desire is that which by definition can never be fulfilled.

"We make something out of what's missing," Watten writes, "by filling in the blanks, giving our meaning to what has been negated. Such are the limits of art."

So the world is put off, and meaning is postponed indefinitely; this is Derrida's *différance*. It is one of the ~~meanings~~ . . . of writing as/an endlessly unfinished work.¹⁵ (12)

In fact it is narrative meaning that is put off, postponed. If narrative desire only ends in the closure of the text and death, then instead the writing or any art might continue on without finishing. The negative space, the lack that is created by desire is actually positive space in which we as readers, audience, citizens can participate and create, to "make something out of what's missing." This doesn't elide "meaning" but changes the terms of how to mean, or what "meaning" means. Narrative meaning controls our reading and interpretation practices. Non/narrative reading and writing calls on readers to participate, to bring our own meanings to the gaps and spaces that are apparent in the non-cohesive, non-linear text. In this way, we come to not only understand the "displacement" of the world better, but learn to engage more fully outside the norms of knowledge and action.

Sections 19-20 continue to reference desire as well as religion and history. The series continues, in this last book (so far) to weave the personal, political, and commentary on social norms and institutions. Following the references to Marx and the economic-social structure

¹⁵ Dahlen actually puts a large X through "meanings" which I've represented with a single line strike-through.

contextualized by the base-superstructure, we can't help but read "religion" in this last book in terms of its normalizing, ideological function (by way of Althusser following Marx). Religious narratives, like other sorts of cultural narratives, serve to keep norms intact, to give followers faith and doctrine instead of gaps and spaces for questions. Like historical narratives, religious narratives are meant to be easily digestible and consumed without effort.

what would it make up
 though I have not charity
 I'd be as tinkling brass or
 field lilies
 who are the poor *in spirit*
 who walk around with the kingdom of heaven
 in their heads

who'd be there counting out *peoples*
kindred in the roofs of their mouths
 here is the church
 and here is the steeple
 mimicking past lives
 the ghost of a chance
 the productions of time congealing
 the trees swaying in the wind
 as they do in silent films
 at 16 frames per second (21)

The tone is hard to read here, but there is at least a sense of pointing to the gaps, or the way that stories (like children's games) simplify "faith" so that one need not question. There is a discrepancy, for example, between actually having charity in the world (action) and walking around "with the kingdom of heaven" in one's head (non-action). The lines "here is the church / and here is the steeple" refer to the children's rhyme in which one opens her interlocked hands to show the fingers that represent opening the doors to "see all the people," a narrative construction not unlike a silent film moving slowly enough for the images to potentially linger on the brain.

In the style of Hejinian's *My Life*, Dahlen also periodically moves back into the personal memory realm, especially as it relates to narration and "truth" as it is assumed in the narrative

text. Writing memory in this non-linear way draws attention to the difference between memory and experience and how we, generally unproblematically, (re)construct this is narrative form:

sometimes the memory of something, place or room, returns so vividly, unexpectedly, as if I were hallucinating the interior of my father's car, say, in 1946, or when did he sell the old Plymouth, the green one, 'going to see a man about a horse,' earlier, making the trade for it, were we really to have a *horse*? and where would we keep him and shall we have a buggy too (40)

Following this is a related commentary, which further repeats, from earlier sections, a concern with the repression of women's stories and writing in the service of normalizing masculine literary tradition:

autobiography, memory and mechanisms of concealment
that fantasy or wish to sit up all night with her exhausting
one another with talk conceals
or *you* know what
lavish passion in the absence of a mother
impressing *conscripting* language into the service
of repression (40)

Although, again, the syntax makes a literal meaning unclear, the repetition of the word "conceal" as well as the words "fantasy" "conscripting" and "repression" set a tone that critiques the use of language for the construction of our life stories. In the first line, autobiography and memory are listed as on par with "mechanisms of concealment," as if the telling or writing of a life actually has more to do with concealing than with revealing. The "absence of a mother" may refer back to Kristeva's theory of abjection, and a reconsideration of the mother figure suppressed in Freud's Oedipal narrative. Language is drafted into the service of maintaining the gendered status quo, and used especially in the construction of cultural narratives that reinforce (ideological) social, sexual, economic, linguistic, and religious, norms. Dahlen ends section 20 with a further comment on this, and a question which serves to keep the reading, and the writing, going:

verisimilitude is after all a problem in fiction. it demonstrates our boundless need for belief in the coherence of systems. we never notice it unless it fails. then we write

contemptuous letters to the author citing the anachronisms. surely the old man was capable of distinguishing truth from poetry else what's a conscience for? (64)

Fiction, is a fiction then, another tool used in the service of ideology to help fulfill our need to believe in coherence, even if this belief is shaken with the accidental intrusion of gaps. Dahlen, however, highlights the gaps, making belief in "the coherence of systems" a more complicated endeavor. The interrogation may be dangerous because as one (the feminist writer) moves away from (masculine tradition) and into an "otherhow" space, she can't know precisely what she leaves behind. And, if she is wrong, or if she is doomed to "fail" the fear is always that: "she has mistaken it, mistaken the call. the brotherhood will not include her. it is madness to think so. and for him also madness, or pious sentimentality. she has a different story" (60). The question is whether or not this story can be told, and how it will be constructed. But, in fact, her different story may be a disavowal of simply joining the brotherhood, and the possibility of alternative, potentially more positive, representations of (female or queer) self in relation to other.

Conclusion

Changes in practice can lead to changes in habits. If desire is a combination of instinct, and construction through familial and social institutions, then breaking through the repetition of these, with the goal of greater sexual/self understanding becomes a necessary, processual, project. Perverting the norms in order to implement textual and social change, offers a whole different conception outside of the Oedipal model of heterosexual relations and gender subordination. Breaking habits in social institutions, including narrative, creates space for the feminist text to exist as a positively perverse form of the desire for knowledge and understanding that is, ultimately, always in process.

Through different uses of narrative strategy, and different means of ending their texts, both H.D. and Dahlen pervert the hold on narrative desire in order to break the habit of reading for satisfaction and resolution. The focus for these writers is on the process of coming to know, as a means to explore “other” ways of thinking and seeing the (female, lesbian, bisexual, artist) self in relation to the larger world. Freud’s theory of castration means that men and women are always framed within the context of the penis, while the disavowal of castration creates spaces for other types of relations and contexts that can affirm non-normative sexual, literary, and social practice. If Hayden White challenges our acquiescent notions of narrative history, and Peter Brooks makes us think more deeply about how and why we read narrative texts, and even Freud questions his own assumptions about narrative and sexual desire, then H.D. and Dahlen offer further examples of disruption and troubling, giving us (perverse) non/narrative, feminist texts that call into question how we know and why we act. These texts act as alternative models from which subjects might identify as instruments of political change. From Kristeva we draw on processes of becoming, through the textual and into the cultural/social realms. And through material, textual practice and experimentation the implementation of new habits can come to revise symbolic social structures. H.D.’s *HERmione* and Dahlen’s series *A Reading*, offer material means for breaking habits of textual practice, masculine literary tradition, and sexual or gender informed practices, and affirm an array of linguistic, social, sexual, and gender relations practices, and identifications. The (non)narrative construction of the “I” in the texts, we see, can allow for social identification in difference, and always in dialectical relation with symbolic, normative discourse and culture.

CHAPTER 3

The Text-Subject in Social Context: Pamela Lu, Renee Gladman, and Claudia Rankine

Pamela Lu's, *Pamela: A Novel*, Renee Gladman's *Juice*, and Claudia Rankine's *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* examine postmodern identities, and enact oppositional poetics as textual practice and cultural critique. These texts explore themes, such as the erasure of memory, the genealogy of the "self," and traumatic postmodern subjectivity particularly as they are relevant for Asian and African American subjects in contemporary American culture. In these works, formal strategies break away from normative practices and call attention to historical and contemporary social issues for minority voices, particularly in relation to cultural ideology and narratives of national identity. Through hybrid writing practices, these writers enact the theory that oppositional poetics, languages, cultures, and histories disrupt and create gaps in totalizing narratives, drawing attention to narrative's ideological and fictional status. As Asian and African Americans have not historically had access to dominant narratives, and have been traumatized by violent histories, these texts point to the gap between experience and narration, and enact possibilities for more complicated understandings of ethnic and gendered identifications. The non/narrative texts read here are metaphorical and literal examples of plurality, difference, and giving voice to historically silenced and marginalized subjects, while calling attention to the social construction of narratives that serve to make our experiences cohere. And they act as positive models of aesthetic practice and representation for subjects interested in exceeding normative narratives of identity and citizenship.

National identity—constructed through narratives of what Homi K. Bhabha terms "national will—is important to these writers as they construct narrators who are unable to make

their experiences cohere in the context of those totalizing narratives. The narrator in Lu's novel cannot remember; the narrators in Gladman's stories are lacking both memory and history; and Rankine's anti-memoir explores the lack of historical context for traumatized postmodern subjects. These writers give us examples of how actual minority experience often does not fit in with the larger cultural narratives through which we are "interpellated" as citizens. In his essay, "Dissemination," instead of "nationalism" Bhabha is interested in exploring what he calls "the *locality* of culture"; he advocates for ways of "writing the nation" other than through dominant, historicist national narratives that make the gaps, inconsistencies, complexity, and heterogeneity of experience cohere; and he advocates "a form of living" that is, among other things, "more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism" (291-92). Instead, looking to the real experiences of diverse citizens, Bhabha underscores the space of ambivalence between the national will and the "daily plebiscite—the unitary number" (310-11). This kind of locational thinking challenges and complicates narrative historicity that constructs subjects in terms of patriotism, citizenship, and national will.

Bhabha argues that "we need another time of *writing* that will be able to inscribe the ambivalent and chiasmic intersections of time and place that constitute the problematic 'modern' experience of the western nation" (293). Modern experience occurs at the intersection of time and place, in the interstices, the spaces elided by dominant narrative strategies. Calling for another time (and place) of writing, Bhabha advocates new forms and possibilities for the representation(s) of modern, culturally and racially diverse, Western experience. This is precisely where dominant narratives fall short:

To write the story of the nation demands that we articulate that archaic ambivalence that informs modernity. We may begin by questioning that progressive metaphor of modern

social cohesion—*the many as one*—shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community, and by theorists who treat gender, class, or race as radically ‘expressive’ social totalities. (294)

This strategy of “holism” seeks to eliminate difference, alternatively narrated histories and experiences, and any questioning of how culture and identity are constructed and articulated in contemporary society. Dominant historical narratives function ideologically to control the understanding of nation and citizen in the present, to continually displace the “irredeemably plural modern space” of the contemporary nation. Bhabha explains that “counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined’ communities are given essentialist identities” (300).¹ These counter-narratives may function both at the level of ideological socialization and in the aesthetic realm, particularly in work that enacts the ambivalence and inconsistency of modern experience. By calling attention to boundaries or limits, counter-narratives disturb the essentializing nature of ideology. Dismantling ideological, narrative constructions of identity may increase possibilities for subjective representation and identification both textually and culturally. Deconstructing narratives of the nation as a unitary whole, and opening possibilities for representing dissident and alternative voices, is a necessary oppositional strategy, and one that also requires continual deconstruction in order to avoid further forms of ideological narrating. Bhabha gives the example of Walter Benjamin, who “introduces a non-synchronous, incommensurable gap in the midst of storytelling” through which “the nation speaks its disjunctive narrative” and “disturbs the homogenizing myth of cultural anonymity.” At the margins, and from “the insurmountable extremes of storytelling, we encounter the question of cultural difference as the perplexity of living, and writing, the nation”

¹ See Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities” which, as Bhabha argues here, potentially is subject to the danger of ideological essentializing of group formations.

(311). Cultural difference then is both crucial to, and acts as an analogy for, heterogeneous texts and the confusing task of “living and writing the nation.” In the face of cultural difference, marginalization, and incommensurable experience, dominant ideological narratives become suspect and disturbed.

Linguistic strategies that challenge dominant patriarchal, white, European language structure and discourse have historically circulated among marginalized, and oppressed, groups. Bell hooks explains that “words impose themselves, take root in our memory against our will” (295). The title of her essay, “‘this is the oppressor’s language/ yet I need it to talk to you’: Language, a place of struggle,” reminds hooks of “the link between language and domination” (295).² She is inclined to “resist the idea of the oppressor’s language, certain that this construct has the potential to disempower those of us who are just learning to speak, who are just learning to claim language as a place where we make ourselves subject” (295-96), and concludes that standard English does not speak for “dispossessed and displaced people” and that it “is not the speech of exile. It is the language of conquest and domination” (296). Standard American English “is the mask which hides the loss of so many tongues, all those sounds of diverse native communities we will never hear”; the oppressors “shape it to become a territory that limits and defines . . . they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize” (296). However, oppressed peoples have historically needed to both speak the dominant language and remake it “so that it would speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination Enslaved black people took broken bits of English, fragments, and made them a counterlanguage” (297). It is yet another way that language becomes a site of resistance (298). “We take the oppressor’s language and turn it against itself. We make our words a counterhegemonic speech, liberating ourselves in language” (301). Working from within the structure of language itself pushes the politics of

² This title is taken from Adrienne Rich’s poem “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children.”

dismantling and revising further than simply altering the content of narrative history. Oppositional groups work through structural, formal articulations, as well as through traditional stories that serve as hegemonic cultural and historical content, and toward creating new models and languages in order to account for their experiences, and to use in more positive and affirming ways.

Recognizing the need for the interrogation of structural systems of domination through language and poetic practice, Erica Hunt argues that “oppositional poetics and cultures form a field of related projects” that have taken “a critically active stance against forms of domination.” Oppositional cultures, for Hunt, include “dissident . . . as well as ‘marginalized’ cultures, cutting across class, race and gender.” Hunt further takes up this resistance to dominant discourse in terms of poetics, explaining that:

conventional poetics might . . . be construed as the way ideology, ‘master narratives’ are threaded into the text, in content and in genre Notions of character as a predictable and consistent identity, of plot as a problem of credibility, and theme as an elaboration of a controlling idea: all mirror official ideology’s predilection for finding and supplying . . . the appropriate authority. Social life is reduced once again to a few great men or a narrow set of perceptions and strategies stripping the innovative of its power. (681-82)

However, within the range of real and potential oppositional strategies that expand the “sense of poetics,” she writes, “a more fluid typology would favor plural strategies to remove the distance between writing and experience, at least as it is socially maintained by the binarism of fact and fiction, of identity and nonidentity” (682). A greater field of possible strategies—in terms of both form and content—that produce a wider variety of texts resistant to, or in negation of, “dominant modes of discourse” that rationalize, conventionalize, and organize our ordinary lives will continue to open (constructive) spaces for politics and social action (682). Especially “in communities of color,” Hunt asserts, “oppositional frames of reference are the borders critical to survival” (683). For Hunt, resistance happens on a variety of linguistic, formal, and narrative

levels that begin in the negation and challenging of existing borders (be they literal or figurative), and call for the creation of new formations and potential politics. She explains, “In literature . . . oppositional projects replicate the stratification of the culture at large. There are oppositional projects that engage language as social artifact, as art material, as powerfully transformative, which view themselves as distinct from projects that have as their explicit goal the use of language as a vehicle for the consciousness and liberation of oppressed communities” (684). Yet, the stratification among different types of projects—in terms of both form and content—only serves to create multiple and divisive groups that might in turn be more politically ineffective. Considerations of “language as a mediation of consciousness,” in addition to concerns of “race, class, gender, and affectional freedom,” is necessary, but should not be an alienating activity of liberation (685-56). Instead, Hunt suggests that we think about “how writing can begin to develop among oppositional groups, how writing can begin to have social existence in a world where authority has become highly mobile” (687). In an age when memoirs of “truthful experience” have become the bestsellers, and the advertising industry regularly appropriates avant-garde aesthetic strategies to sell corporate loyalty, it has become important to recognize the necessary diversity of oppositional practices working on various fronts against oppressive regimes, and that these are not necessarily opposed but can work in concert toward various, but mutually benefitting, political ends. Although Hunt advocates for the importance of radical aesthetic practice and writing that deals with cultural critique through those practices, what is important here is the call for recognizing the range and diversity of aesthetic practice, particularly on behalf of writers who call attention to the varieties of social oppression for contemporary subjects, instead of maintaining separate camps of aesthetic political thinking.

Audre Lorde is an important figure who critiques social oppression from multiple perspectives as a black, feminist, lesbian. Lorde writes poetry that although syntactically innovative, does not come out of a radical aesthetic lineage, and prose memoir and essays that are narratively normative and accessible. For Lorde, poetry and writing were a means of survival in a world in which she continually felt unrecognized, and narrating her experiences were fundamental to her own processes of understanding and coming to terms with her “identities” in relation to larger social communities. For Lorde, writing was not a choice, but a responsibility. In her book of essays, *Sister Outsider*, Lorde tells us that “poetry is not a luxury” (36), it is “not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before” (38). As she explains in her own memoir of politics and possibility, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, there were no examples or stories for black lesbians in the 1950s. Lorde tells her story of growing up black in white schools, coming to understand her own sexuality through her relations with predominantly white women, and working through the process of making sense of the relationship between race and sexual orientation. She writes:

I was gay and Black. The latter fact was irrevocable: armor, mantle, and wall. Often, when I had the bad taste to bring that fact up in a conversation with other gay-girls who were not Black, I would get the feeling that I had in some way breached some sacred bond of gayness, a bond which I always knew was not sufficient for me.

This was not to deny the closeness of our group, nor the mutual aid of those insane, glorious, and contradictory years. It is only to say that I was acutely conscious . . . that my relationship as a Black woman to our shared lives was different from theirs, and would be, gay or straight. The question of acceptance had a different weight for me. (180-81)

As she narrates her adulthood in *Zami*, Lorde struggles to support herself, moving from one job to another, intermittently enrolling in college courses, and trying to overcome the emotional damage done while growing up in her rule-structured, conservative parents’ house. And all of

this is told through the stories of the women with whom Lorde had various types of relationships, beginning with her closest friend and “sister” as a teenager and moving eventually into her most powerfully intimate, sexual partnerships that came to help her identify on her own terms, even within the context of a racially hostile society. The point, it seems, is the process by which Lorde comes to identify as a black lesbian, to find recognition in the gaps and unrecognized spaces of the social realm that do not cohere with mainstream notions of nation, and citizenship. The stories she recounts in *Zami* lead the reader through her process of coming to terms with this displacement; she creates narratives that inhabit the gaps of dominant narratives, dismantling them, calling attention to the plurality of real, lived experience; the idea of “the many as one” is exposed as fiction when “the one” doesn’t meet the prerequisites of “the many.” In her process of identification, Lorde encounters many outsider sisters who embody counter-narratives for sexual identification, though she can never entirely reconcile her own experiences as a black lesbian for whom there are no (narrative) models, and no one with whom to identify. As a subject, Lorde exists in the gaps in the cohesive, ideological fabric that structures the lives of the citizens, and uses that space to construct stories that, in terms of their content, explode the dominant narratives that oppress racial and sexual expression. Lorde’s oppositional poetics lies in the writing of her memoir about her experience. Although the text is not formally experimental, it has a conversational style and uses creative language and vocabulary in the telling of an “alternative” experience within the larger cultural context. The text is for other black lesbians, but it is also for a wider audience with whom black lesbians exist in everyday society. Lorde doesn’t exist within totalizing cultural narratives for white or black women, recognizes that there aren’t narratives for lesbians, regardless of skin color, and takes on new strategies for narrating and representing herself in writing. In her historical moment, Lorde’s text opens a new

space for the presentation and reception of black, lesbian concerns. Through her poetics and politics, she is able to disseminate a unique perspective that, she felt, had not been voiced before, and she is thereby able to encourage others to narrate their own uniquely contextualized experiences that fall outside of mainstream cultural myths of identity.

Recognizing the importance of Lorde's project, Lu, Gladman, and Rankine take their experiences as Asian and African American subjects further into the realm of avant-garde aesthetic practice to dismantle the totalizing narratives that claim to represent identity even while its subjects are unable to identify with those stories. They create texts that critique the content of cultural narratives of identity, and employ non/narrative strategies to enact identity-as-process, and allow for new possibilities for articulating contemporary experience. Their narrators, like Lorde, realize that they can no longer rely on the constructed narratives that never actually represented their experiences, and they struggle through memory, history, and language in order to come to terms with their paradoxical experiences: realizing that they have been left out of narratives that represent experience, they seek to understand what their experiences have been in order to then represent them. Their texts enact the processes of understanding and representing experiences antithetical to larger cultural narratives.

Pamela: A Novel

Pamela Lu's *Pamela: A Novel* is an experimental, fictional work that questions self-representation, critiques identity-related experience, mimics the representation of self in the media and in society in general, and struggles to find a clear notion of how one goes about presenting memory and past experience in a text. Not only is *Pamela* a critique of the genre of autobiography itself, but it seems to argue that narrative autobiography is especially problematic

for people who have no access to history outside of those historical narratives culturally constructed for them. Lu's narrator tells us, for example, that this fictionalized history "was not 'based' on anything" but that "our virtual existence sponsored itself and did not conform to any standard of correctness or realism, because such an original standard did not exist" (20). The theme of virtual existence continues through the text, while the narrator, P (all of the characters are designated by single letters), theorizes memory through a type of anti-autobiography. One can document events as history, as having happened in the past, but the difficulty of creating a text based on memory comes from the narrator's knowledge that her experiences and memories have been socially constructed by way of mainstream consumer culture; the mainstream autobiographical text reinforces the status quo of "commodity culture" constructed memory. The narrator thus constructs her own past through the formal strategies of the text itself. There is no clear narrative progression; there are gaps between reported events and situations, and the continuous commentary that runs through the text. What stands in the place of 'meaningful' memory in this text are experiences, events, and conversations that are recalled, but not inhabited; the past moments are not brought to life through detail and image in the present moment, but instead seek to prove that there can be no genuine, remembered experiences for the socially constructed subject.

There a loss of identity and self-understanding at work in *Pamela* as a fragmented subjectivity emerges. The narrator's commentary throughout serves, in part, to reinforce the lack of understanding, and the fragmented identity stands in for any sense of coherent identity. P's awareness that there may be no self, or only constructed, often incoherent selves, comes to function in place of a lucid narrative identity. Her meta-narration constructs her as a non/narrative subject aware of its own construction through ideology and hegemonic forces:

“Our silence and invisibility was of the utmost importance to the state of the nation because the very suggestion of us challenged and undermined the simplicity of narrative on which the national identity depended” (29). Lu’s narrator functions as one reporting a life instead of remembering, in other words, she seems to understand that a lack of real memory combined with too much culturally constructed memory offers little foundation on which to set the present, and therefore creates anxiety around any possibility of moving into the future. This is enacted in the circular, non-progressive nature of the narrative; there are no starting or ending points to this story. Lu foregrounds language and the formal properties of the text as a way to critique the practice of memory in autobiographical texts, and she presents a narrator who is anxious, over-intellectualized, parodic, and campy yet is always cognizant of the persistent critique of subjectivity of the modern subject. Lu’s narrator takes on the theoretical terminology in order to both enact and critique that theory. The anxiety surrounding the writing of autobiography in this text—is there a self to write and to read?—is intricately woven through the text. And it is the very nature of the modern subject as having little more than a fragmented present existence divorced from history, and the history of one’s own memories, that troubles the subject’s ability to remember outside of her role within media and commodity culture. *Pamela* challenges the notion of memory as a foundation on which to base a subjective present existence, but also submits that there can be no present existence, no sense of coherent identity if there is no memory on which to base this self.

The structure of the text enacts the function and process of memory that is under scrutiny; it also calls attention to the difference between real and imagined past events and the fact that we (“we” the readers of the novel, and “we” the remembering subjects of our own lives) often can’t tell the difference. It is not the difference that is important (between real and imagined) but the

recognition of that difference and of the slippage between them. The imaginary or the virtual is highlighted, calling attention to the virtual aspects of memory representation as well as to texts that purport to represent past experience. Events reported are at the mercy of the uncertain subjectivity of the narrator, and because none of the characters, including the narrator, are developed fully, the details are incomplete. This makes it difficult for a subject to speak or perform her identity. For example, early in the text the narrator remarks, “I did not have a personality that I could effectively project outward, and in my worst moments, I did not have a personality at all. I was a very poor impersonator of myself in public” (13). The difficulty comes through the recognition that if there can be no authentic experience, there can be no authentic memory, and no authentic self, though this also serves as a critique of the idea of ‘authenticity’ as an impossible endeavor in general. The fragmented modern subject may have a sense of a past which is not her past necessarily, and this further entails a lack of personal connection to her own history. For example, P explains:

we found it natural, if not imperative, to be assaulted and overwhelmed by memories which were not our own but which we nevertheless carried as though they had actually happened to us. In this sense, the history of our lives was always the history of something else. We were forever displacing ourselves in the chain of events without knowing who exactly was doing the displacing, and our lifetime goal, if we desired success in the conventional sense, consisted not in getting to know ourselves, but in getting to know ourselves less. (33)

The sense of near-identification recurs throughout the text, and is most pronounced when the narrator and her friends try to make sense of their individual ethnic identities, as Asian-Americans, in the context of an accumulation of cultural myths about ethnicity. Whether the past is real or imaginary, remembered or forgotten, it is fundamental for the articulation of a subject in her present. Through her narrator, Lu may also be pointing to the greater historical trauma of

modernity, and how the text is unable to account for a self whose (ungrounded) present moment is underdetermined by a lack of memory.

Further, *Pamela* conflates history (traumatic history) and contemporary media society. As P explains, “Just as R experienced the grim humor of situations whose anxieties predated her, so she appeared at times to inhabit the outline of a self formed half a century ago—that is, R was not a WWII survivor but she might as well have been; she was not a great moment in history, but she played one on TV” (69). One thing that is apparent here is the continuity of past in present; R is inhabiting a self from the past as if she cannot be held responsible for in her own present. In a way, specific historical moments take on lives of their own as they are passed around through stories, texts, and media and come to form vital elements of individuals’ existences. The great moments in history, whoever decides what these are, are played over and over on TV, or we replay great historical moments as if they were scenes from our own lives. Different messages and memories circulate in any variety of ways, and we consume, repeat, and circulate them.

Lives and memories are constructed in no small part through our media saturated society, but the danger lies in simply accepting that experience and memory may be based on myths and illusions, and instead we must critique complicity. The tension for the narrator in *Pamela* is the fact of having to negotiate her knowledge of the social construction of experience, and the need to have a past to remember, in order to have a present to inhabit. The subject’s power over her past, and therefore over her present, is manipulated at every turn. “It was as if television had trained us to be nostalgic from the start,” the narrator explains, “so that we yearned from childhood while we were still children and continued to be nostalgic for the present moment before we had finished living it” (31). For the narrator and her friends, the sense of the loss of

something they never even had in the first place is essential. There is no present because there is no past.

In capitalist consumer society, the circulation of the commodity erases its production/labor history, forgotten in favor of its presence in the present moment. In *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, Richard Terdiman invokes Marx and the idea of “genesis amnesia,” or the forgetting of the origin and history of commodity production through “the process of reification” by which the history of commodities, the “memory of their production from their consumers, as from the very people who produced them” becomes hidden (12). Further, Terdiman writes, “to understand what we have made, we have to be able to *remember* it. Because commodities suppress the memory of their own process, they subvert or violate this fundamental tenet of the *mnemonic* economy” (12). So a loss of memory actually helps the capitalist system that articulates its subjects as consumers. If there is only a notion of the commodity in the present, then each new commodity will have an autonomous life of its own. Subjects are thus divided from the history of the commodities, and from their own histories as producers of those commodities. In part, Lu is examining what happens to subjects who are either cut off entirely from their own sense of history, or who only have a sense of history created as an ideological social formation which serves to keep subjects embedded within the structure.

The present for which the narrator and her friends yearn is based on some other past altogether, and their present resembles a sort of virtual existence, based on imagined ideas circulated throughout mainstream culture. It is a present existence of pieces that always fail to add up to a whole, only held together by their desire to have a past that culminates in some type of authentic present. Recognizing the impossibility of this, the characters exist in this continuous

state of desire in which there is no unity of narrative, no unity of identity, no real context for identification. Of her contemporary situation the narrator explains, “Such was the promise of a manicured lawn, a two-car garage, and a swastika on every corner, and life there paralleled the experience of a badly written sentence, whose construction consisted of numerous phrases, each of which amounted to a complete sentence in itself, but whose sum total was less than its parts, an idea amputated in mid-thought, a non sequitur” (42). She draws an analogy with a sentence that is poorly written in the first place, and is constituted by phrases that ultimately add up to nothing. Just because there are parts and pieces (memories, commodities, stories we tell each other about our lives), and the desire to make them “mean” does not necessarily entail they can or will add up to anything meaningful. Lu seems to ask how it is that one is supposed to move into the future in the face of this distorted (badly written) present/past; if we have only the present commodified moment, on what then does one base any hope for a future?

For an individual who is part of a group, the difficulty lies in navigating social narratives of history; in Pamela, the idea of finding one’s identity is as foreign as having any identity to find, particularly as a person identified as Asian-American and subject to the cultural myths and messages surrounding this:

For C wrote with all the awful clarity and slenderness of someone who had grown up Asian in Indiana, the memory of anger and that daily experience of coming home single to watch the double of his face peel away from itself in the mirror now sublimated into a stunning command of the English language that manifested itself as poetry, or a series of eloquent, articulate stabs at reality If C worked in the sanctity of silence, then YJ was always living and writing against a blind wall of cacophony that existed somewhere between plain sense and the din of cultural expectation and popular music

As a consequence, she occupied the contemporary position of always being foreign to herself. (16-17)

Although it is unclear throughout Pamela, to what extent the characters, other than P, are aware of their double existence as subjects contextualized by “cultural expectation,” their actions as

narrated by P serve to enact the complex ways in which Asian Americans struggle to make sense of their present lives in relation to the historical narratives always already, and continuously, interpellating them. However, it is the awareness of the situation that contributes to the doubleness. YJ, the narrator explains: “occupied the contemporary position of always being foreign to herself”; the contemporary is the space in which awareness is possible, but the consequence of that is never having experiences that one can claim as one’s own.

French historian Pierre Nora, who writes on relations between memory and identity, may be useful for further working through Lu’s project; Nora theorizes the relation between “real memory” (which only existed in pre-historic cultures) and that tainted by contemporary media culture. He writes: “Indeed, we have seen the tremendous dilation of our very mode of historical perception, which, with the help of the media, has substituted for a memory entwined in the intimacy of a collective heritage the ephemeral film of current events” (7-8). He explains that because “history” records and archives the past, we now only have a kind of memory that cannot occur outside of its cultural context, and he uses this theory to further think about the role of representation in relation to different kinds of memory, and what one might do with memory in the context of one’s historical situation. Nora continues:

How can we fail to read, in the shards of the past delivered to us by so many microhistories, the will to make the history we are reconstructing equal to the history we have lived? We could speak of mirror-memory if all mirrors did not reflect the same—for it is in difference that we are seeking, and in the image of this difference, the ephemeral spectacle of an unrecoverable identity. It is no longer genesis that we seek but instead the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer. (17-18)

In the gap between what we are and what we are no longer, we find the irrecoverable identity which is the only identity we can remember. The original event cannot be reproduced, but only represented. Remembering, recovering, and documenting memory is a process of decipherment. This awareness is key to the representation of memory, of identity because one has to read

herself through difference, through the space of what is now not recoverable. Lu, as well as Gladman and Rankine, seem keenly aware of just this, that the text is a hybrid process of deciphering and representing memory and experience, and using those to theorize the construction and function of identity.

A strong example of this occurs in the middle of *Pamela*, in which, in a moment of meta-fictional commentary, the narrator and author become confused, and a discussion of the text itself arises in which the author takes over the text to theorize memory and the process of its documentation as autobiographical writing. She calls attention to the separation between narrator and writer, between the self of the past and the self of the present, and the difficulty of communication between these different versions of self. The narrator, and the text, is always in and of the past and that past stays within the confines of the document of text; the present can recognize, but not connect with, the past self of text. The narrator explains: “I found the story of myself to be endlessly fascinating, with its catalogue of histories, repressions, and picaresque cast of characters It was a classic story of joy, disappointment, and discovery, and I often reread my favorite parts in my spare time, vicariously living . . . as if I were actually P going about her business in a world more believable than my own” (57). At the end of this passage, the reader is unsure who is speaking. Is the narrator divorced from her own sense of self when she reads her accounts in writing? Or is the writer including her own comment on the estranging nature of witnessing one’s life documented in the text? She writes further of the relativity of this situation: “There was the subjunctive of the real character speculating about the imaginary situation, the fictitious character speculating about the real situation, and then of the fictitious character speculating about the even more fictitious situation, which could prove to be either totally unimaginable or, equivalently, as unimaginative as the plain facts” (57-58). The

contingency and possibility, the merging and movement between fact and fiction, memory and speculation, experience and the text as the documentation of experience, complicate (and articulate) the reading experience. The text is the construction of the already constructed experiences of a shifting narrator-self who is unsure of her own place in the writing/reading of the text. Like Lu's characters living double or multiple lives as both ignored and ideologically constructed subjects, awareness is both crucial and potentially debilitating. But her characters are continually in process of theorizing and living both their media constructed and "real" experiences through creative and social endeavors.

For example, Lu's audience-narrator explains, "I could hardly read my story without at least on some level reading myself into it," and further, "if I was at risk of suddenly becoming P in the midst of a plausible situation, then P was similarly at risk of becoming not me but Pamela, a project that I had invented to include both P and me, and that was expanding, day by day, into a larger persona than either of us could handle" (58). The movement between Pamela (the text), P (the narrator/main character of the text), and "me" (the writer of the narrative) in the documentation of the text is explicitly exposed, and confused; "Pamela threatened to subsume us in a state of suspended animation, stranding P in the past and me in the present P was an act of memory but Pamela was an act of homicide" which assembled "the particulars of my private existence into a form suitable for larger display" (59). The form suitable for display is the (autobiographical) text. Although a writer is presumably in control of its construction, the text can itself take over and ultimately function on its own terms; the "real" experiences of the subject are subsumed by the text itself. Moreover, this section from *Pamela* suggests that the temporal movement is completely disturbed when the life is presented as a text of memory and the lines demarcating the tenses become frozen in print. Lu writes, "I had terrible fears of being

abandoned not only by Pamela but by that abbreviated version of Pamela, P, who survived the present tense by avoiding it altogether and prolonged the past by inflecting it into a space of indefinite duration, like a note of music stretched out and played repeatedly to make a landscape” (60). The past is prolonged to the exclusion of the present; although the writer/narrator reading the document of the past can relate and enjoy it as story, there is a physical analogy here of the text as the container of the past. The narrator, P, is able to avoid the difficulty of the “reality” of the present tense, but this only has negative consequences for the writer/narrator who is further separated into irreconcilable parts of herself (Pamela, P, me). If the past cannot be accessed except through reading it as (possibly someone else’s) story, it is possible that the self of the present tense can have no authentic experiences as those are always turning into past experiences, which cannot be accessed. It is not then a past of useful memory, and therefore elides the present altogether; on a textual level, the writer, the real, is elided by the narrator-self and the text-as-life, as these come to stand in for any other sense of “authentic” experience. At the end of this section the writer/narrator states, “If P was the wallpaper to the house that was Pamela, then I was the resident who paced restlessly through the halls, shutting the storm windows all around and watching the rain happen not to me, but to my house” (61). In only one sentence, Lu points to the layers of identity through the negotiation of memory/past and present. “I” lies within, or under, the layers of “house” and “wallpaper”; Pamela is the structure, P is the decoration or culturally constructed subject, and “I” is that which paces and watches life happen, always in process of negotiating her own identity.

Terdiman claims that there is a strong correlation between “cultural disturbance and one’s contemporary situation and the way memory is considered and theorized in literature.” He is especially interested in the “deeply historicized relation between the problem of memory on the

one hand and the representation of experience on the other” (ix). Terdiman writes: “Of course every culture remembers its past. But how a culture performs and sustains this recollection is distinctive and diagnostic” (3). It is diagnostic of the particular situation of the culture’s historical moment, and of the differences in recollection from that of earlier times. He marks a difference between precapitalist societies and the modern time, and also between cultures that remembered past events naturally, and how memory shifted with the rise of historiography and the documentation of memory. In the “natural” memory process, for example, memories and past experiences circulate among the present moment and there is less distinction between past and present. When memory is documented as history, the text contains and defines the memory as past and it becomes less accessible. Terdiman defines this “memory crisis,” particularly for the period in Europe after the Revolution and the move into the nineteenth century, as “a sense that their past had somehow evaded memory, that recollection had ceased to integrate with consciousness. In this memory crisis, the very coherence of time and of subjectivity seemed disarticulated” (3-4). It becomes a crisis because “memory is the modality of our relation to the past” (7); if the mode of relation to the past has become distorted, how are we to relate to that past? If there is no memory, or if there is a fear for the loss of memory, the effect may be on the continuity of the subject, and of a culture, as it moves from past into present. “Memory stabilizes subjects and constitutes the present. It is the name we give to the faculty that sustains continuity in collective and in individual experience” (8). He continues, “Memory functions in every act of perception, in every act of intellection, in every act of language” (9). In this way memory and history are intimately related; quoting Michel de Certeau Terdiman explains: “Before we can understand what history says about a society, we have to analyze how history functions within it” (20). It is not enough to study cultures, people, and texts in their historical contexts (what history

says about these); we have to also pay attention to how the history itself functions within the people and the texts that they produce. Lu pushes this analysis in order to call attention to the simultaneous crisis of history, as a crisis of memory in a late capitalist, postmodern time of forgetting. Lu speculates about the possibility for history and memory in literature; are there alternative means of representing the past? Is there a way to rearticulate the coherence of time and subjectivity? For Terdiman, “What is at stake is nothing less than how a culture imagines the representation of the past to be possible, for the problem of representing the past is really the representation problem itself, seized in its most critical locus in experience” (32). In *Pamela* Asian-American experience is shaped and articulated in the context of capitalist modernity. If there is no way out of this type of structuring of experience, the text seems to suggest, then we must take account of the difficulties and think about other possibilities for representing experience. Lu’s characters, and her own commentary, work through their own memories (or lack of) and experiences (real and virtual) in order to theorize and practice other possibilities for representation.

Lu’s text theorizes its own construction as a theory of memory and might, in this way, be compared to Proust’s *Swann’s Way*. At times in *Pamela*, feelings are employed in place of the specific detail of memory; this is not unlike Proust’s Swann, who can only remember his feelings in response to a sonata, and the sonata’s general architecture, before he hears it again and is able to imprint the detail of its sound on his memory. In a way *Pamela* is like the moment before Swann hears the sonata for the second time; the past events recorded are little more than structure, there is no detail, nothing to fill in the basic architecture. There is feeling and sentiment throughout *Pamela* about the past, but what is lacking are the details that bring a document of memory to life. Although the writing gestures toward the detailed memory of the

past, toward what is missing or under the surface, it calls into question the very possibility that there is anything under the surface to get to. It might be argued that *Pamela* presents the idea of memory only on the surface, as little more than a type of voluntary memory, before the Proustian moment of diving further in when he bites into the madeleine. But if *Pamela* enacts memory as little more than surface material, it is the narrator who suffers the consequences, who is unable to form a coherent sense of her own identity—and readers are unable to form a coherent sense of the narrator; Lu uses this as a strategy to destabilize “identity” itself so that as readers we become involved in the process of working through, and reworking notions of how Asian, and other American minorities, identify.

Further, Lu uses other formal textual strategies to represent the properties of past, present, and future spatially, enacting the problem of simple, linear notions of the progressive movement of time. We are always in space and in time simultaneously, and when we recognize the difficulties of the present moment as constantly shifting forward from the past but never quite moving into the future, this can contribute to a distorted sense of space-time, and the complex layering of past and present in any particular moment or image. The narrator tells us, “for a while I had been struck by the passage of time as a spatial passage, which drowned me at random intervals in old familiar places I had never been” and then tells of a particularly Proustian moment in which she witnesses the visual details of a memory of a garden from childhood while looking out the window of a train. She explains: “I was not remembering the garden itself, but the most accurate perception of it, that is, I was remembering the exact feeling of my eyes and mouth and the exact position and tension of the muscles in my arms that would have occurred had I actually been in a garden in the residential section of Pasadena with my mother 22 years ago, which I had not” (31). What is important is the feeling, and the experience of memory, even

if there is no original event with which it is actually attached. This scene seems especially responsive to Proust first in the narration of the memory: “I had grown accustomed to riding my train with a book in one hand and looking out the window from time to time to rediscover the magnolia garden my mother and I had passed while walking through a Pasadena neighborhood when I was two: the shade of sky and fleeting shape of sidewalk were exactly as I remembered” (31), and second in the admittance that the memory is fabricated. The point is to remind us not to take Proust, and the writing of memories in general, at face value, which seems obvious, but important especially when so much emphasis is continually placed on the authenticity of memory in autobiographical texts. Lu is questioning the authenticity of memory and the construction of the text of memory, and how necessary memory is in order to experience a sense of self in the present.

For if L was ephemeral like a leaf in the wind, then she was also at one time anchored to some tree at the heart of her matter which she dimly remembered and which she searched for again and again in various uncanny, recollectable places spread out across the earth. Such a motion of recovery was what led us that night . . . to an impressionistic replica of her father’s living room in Woodstock—complete and large as memory down to the antique mahogany armchair and the wide, rose tapestry rug that covered the hardwood floor. (Lu 55)

The narrator explores this memory of the living room by describing how they spied on it like voyeurs as the image was framed by the window through which they looked. The image is then both visible in its detail, but inaccessible because whoever is looking is not supposed to be looking. This image is “complete and large as memory” as if it is not actually a memory, but only like a memory in its imagistic detail. The closest we get to any type of Proustian memory in Lu’s text are images that are meant in some way to stand in for memory. This movement seems to simultaneously critique Proust, and acknowledge the importance of his project.

In a kind of post-Benjaminian way, this text seems to offer no utopian potential because there is never a concrete sense of past and memory from which to move into the future. However, it is the knowledge of this difficulty, this fluctuating sense of what it means to have a past that is filled with memory, that is hopeful and that opens a space of possibility. The text asserts that one can still have experiences, even while having a lack of memories; and the text itself can be an experience (the writing and the reading of both its form and content). This text comments on our modern condition in which, instead of having any sense of history, we are distracted by commodity-driven, media culture; we live through a constant production of memory-less/content-less ideology through which subjects are restrained from relating meaningfully to historical events. Personal memory, and experience constructed through dominant narratives, merge and intersect only to complicate the notion of experience. Products of late capitalism, postmodern, Asian American subjects are products, and victims, of a continuous present moment and cannot remember, and this inability to remember results in an inability to identify, to have identity. The fragmented, marginalized subject is over-articulated into a subject without a meaningful past, and the search for that past results in an awareness of lack, and a suspicion of what might be called experience, and a need to document that experience. Without a present grounded in a remembered past one can only question her own sense of identity. Lu's narrator explains: "Every generation preoccupied itself with the struggle to produce something new—a defining moment, action, or style that would mark it as unique and constitute an answer to the question of "'Who are you,' or more often, 'Who were you?'" (43). The difficulty is of course leaving documents of the past that can at all accurately reflect that past in order to have some coherent sense of present. "It seems at times that we were the only present thing in our moment, where our moment was nothing more than a wishful standard

masquerading as present reality and thus more suitably situated in the future tense” (91), though this is not actually about the future at all, but is in fact critiquing the present moment as “wishful” and “masquerading as reality” and therefore only imaginary, just as the future tense is always only imaginary because it hasn’t happened yet.

Pamela ends in a virtual space: “For some time I remained sunk in my seat, fingers clenched around the plastic armrests, until the sensation advanced and passed through me, leaving me afloat once again in the perpetual predawn light and more than willing to let the whole subject drop, in the midst of a moment that technically never existed” (98). The subject to which the narrator refers may be the transcendent feeling of “being overlapped” and experiencing the compression of her “thoughts, actions, feelings, preoccupations, and regrets” (97), or it may be to the book as a whole. If this incident on the plane never occurred, nonetheless we have the record of it here. If the events of the book never happened, still we have the text that documents these events, we have a text of (non)memory that theorizes memory, experience, and representation. In view of our contemporary society’s obsession with memoir and biography, we need texts that open further possibilities for exploring memory in terms of its social and cultural contexts, and that question our allegiance to dominant narrative that falsely identify us as citizens. If it is a strategy of hegemonic power structures to impose narratives that are without real content for marginalized subjects, then it is a necessary endeavor for writers like Lu to disassemble these narratives and create other possibilities for remembering, narrating, and identifying. The danger otherwise is of simply going along with what the institutions have cultivated within us. Or, as Terdiman writes:

Such representations of the ghostly presence of the past have this in common: that—in the same way that under capitalism Marx had claimed that the power and creativity of the worker seem to pass into the tool—they seek to explain how in the modern period memory appears to reside not in perceiving consciousness but *in the material*: in the

practices and institutions of social or psychic life, which function within us, but, strangely, do not seem to require either our participation or our explicit allegiance. (34)

The text that theorizes memory in such a way is working against being subsumed into larger cultural and historical narratives, and creates a new space for theorizing experience and offers another possibility for cultural identification. As an anti-autobiographical text, *Pamela* functions as an alternative narrative of experience, an account of a culturally marginalized group in opposition to the status quo of their invisibility; and this Lu does through disruptive, non/narrative strategies that calls attention to the lack of memory and experience for subjects indoctrinated in a narrative, media-saturated, fabricated present tense. In its lack, the text actually offers a positive model of speaking, acts as a space for the narrator to voice her examination of personal and social/cultural identity. Group identity here manifests in a collection of individuals' stories "about" their Asian American experiences, reinstating them as social subjects while refusing to collect them into a singular identity.

Doing Time: History and Narrative in *Juice*

In *Juice*, a book of four separate fictional stories, Renee Gladman constructs narrators-in-process who, in various ways, seek to identify as contemporary subjects while missing whole pieces of their own histories. This lack of history often results in narratives that are missing the elements necessary for telling coherent stories, including details, background, and information that would help fill in the content of the narratives. On occasion, only some of the stories reference African American or lesbian experience in their content, additionally making the point of the need for an understanding of history and the impossibility of articulating contemporary experience without it, particularly for traditionally marginalized subjects. The narratives are often surreal in the ways they refuse to clarify what is real and what is imagined, and the

narrators often seem neurotic and obsessive as if the gaps in their own memories, and the lack of real content in their own histories, makes them personally and narratively ungrounded. Gladman's narrators are compulsive about making sense of what's happening around them, though sense-making is clearly impossible with such a limited amount of information to work with; instead there are gaps and fragments but no linear, cohesive historical narratives that seem to make any sense. Her project in *Juice* is to put pressure on narrative structure (in general, and in fiction writing in particular), to enact through form what she asserts in the content, thereby gaining knowledge through the fragments, disruptions, and breaks in history, and demonstrating how narrative functions in the construction of history.

Gladman begins *Juice* by setting up a feeling of temporal confusion through narrators who seem to exist simultaneously in, or between, the past and the present. She uses an epigraph from Alain Robbe-Grillet which reads, "In the modern narrative, time seems to be cut off from its temporality. It no longer passes. It no longer completes anything" (5). In *Juice*, history is incomplete, and time is an essential element of interrogation while there is a seeming lack of movement and progress forward; even if at times the narratives allude to the possibility of a future, time is static in a way that only circulates between past and present. A French film made in 1961, Robbe-Grillet's *Last year at Marienbad* has no linear narrative progression but instead moves through scenes of a story between two characters (a woman and a man) so that the viewer can never be sure of the "real" story or history to which the characters are related, although there seems to be some indeterminate past event, experience, or relationship between the two that is never fully explained. Gladman's *Juice* in some ways echoes the film—in its formal movement between real and imaginary without narrative contextualization, and the often surreal tone—and incorporates the anxiety of subjects who suddenly realize they are unsure of their pasts as well as

potential for the future. In the film, the man may be time or history itself personified to chase the woman, as if she is haunted by her past, or oppositely, trying to move forward and completely ignore a past which refuses to be ignored. The insistence on/of the past weighs heavily while, at the same time, the woman seems to have total memory loss and cannot relate to that past. Narrative scenes are played and replayed, reconstructed, cut and re-presented so that they are similar yet different in each presentation. One reading of the film might argue that the man is the past itself, the woman is the perpetual, amnesiac present, and the woman's husband (a more peripheral character) represents a future who, in playing the game of chance throughout the film, always wins, is always able to predict opponents' moves based on past moves and win (as if moving forward). The camera moves in and out, working with perspective as if to see from all angles, yet the viewer is always aware of missing information both textual and visual. We can never really see anything about these characters, and yet we see everything in the fragmentation, the difficulty and messiness of memory and history, the impossibility of a present based on an illusive history. We are left at the end of the film, when the woman leaves with the man who may be her past, with a feeling of incompleteness yet finality. The language in the end is haunting, the scene is dark and quiet, the dialogue reflects the rigid patterns of straight lines of the French gardens of this final scene, and finally the man alludes to the "statues in frozen motion where you were already losing your way forever with me." This English translation of the French retains the ambiguous nature of the language to designate a clear sense of past or present (or future): the passive voice combined with idea of "motion," the reference to eternity, the paradoxical notion that one might lose her way while she is in "frozen motion" only reinforces in this final yet continuing moment the temporal confusion, or the film's critique of linear temporal simplification. It is surrounded by time yet can move nowhere. Gladman's

narrators in *Juice* often exist in this temporal stasis in which they are consumed with the idea of a past that they do not actually have access to. The narrators' presents are based on incomplete histories, or exist in the gaps between dominant cultural narratives and real African American historical experience.

A reading of the first story in *Juice*, "Translation," will show how the text enacts, through both form and content, a genealogical method of doing history. Written from the first-person perspective, "Translation" reads like both a personal account and an interrogation of the narrator's history, as the narrator in the story has returned to a presumable hometown from which everyone has disappeared. In the first paragraph she explains: "but this is not a story about me . . . this is about those of us who live among the great ink-stained mountains." The mountains may be signifying the space written by history, constructed through language. "Though I have cut corners to get here," she says "these are the basics of my story: the fact of everybody's disappearance, a conviction of flight and return, and a loneliness so startling that people will want to paint it" (8). When she returns to this town, no one else is living there. And such a story, one of an individual cut-off from her collective identity as part of larger social group, sets up both the need for, and the difficulty of, group identification. The narrator at once needs to incorporate the history of the community into her own contemporary understanding of herself, as well as find a voice with which to articulate her particular experiences within that history.

For Michel Foucault, in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," past and present are not continuous in a linear and progressive way; the past occurs in dispersion and discontinuities. In order to understand history we must look to local specificities, read the body as primary text and cultural object, think of history as a relational force; if we are formed as social/cultural subjects, then we must look to the details, the gaps, the relations between seeming disparate elements in

order to better understand history. Genealogy, as a practice, is an analysis of descent and emergence, a way of doing history that breaks out of the linear and totalizing narratives of historical documentation. As an argument for thinking history as process, genealogy recognizes incongruities and inconsistencies, instead of blindly following linear, cohesive, ideologically constructed History. It can be used as a way to see the material forces and details that constitute the past and affect the present, and as a way of analyzing the past to interrogate present historical knowledge. Foucault writes, “The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled” (88). A genealogical method works to uncover the debris, lingers in the narrative gaps, and might ultimately allow for the silenced voices and invisible subjects to tell their stories.

As a material example of uncovering the debris, “Translation” incorporates the subject of archeology, both literally and metaphorically, into its narrative. The narrator explains, “Everything I know began the first summer I was in an archeological gang” (8); this immediately sets up the focus on, and importance of, history for the original people of her community, and the marginalized element of that: instead of a research group, they call themselves a gang who works on recovering the artifacts of their collective history. The narrator explains: “The town established a gang of archeologists to explore the facts of our extended history” (9). Immediately in these few lines we see that one can learn from the material fragments of the past and that history is constructed with miscellaneous, dusty pieces of things that are put aside and later revisited. For the narrator, the materials here have to stand in for history, because, as she says, “It seems that some relatives were in a hurry and gave abbreviated narratives” (9). History is also not only temporal but spatial. The physical artifacts are stored in what she calls the “past shelter,” an actual physical space used to store the past. Only later do we learn that her brother

found the “break in the mountain or narrow upper cave” (12) that was to become the shelter. We learn also that the children acted as the caretakers of the artifacts of the town’s history, though an implied sexual abstinence points to a sense of possibility that lies in the past instead of the future. The narrator explains that “communication between lovers was spatial . . . contact was not desired; one was satisfied with what seemed like endless possibility, and so, dwelled in that” (9-10). The material array of fragments of the past offer the children a space in which to create and dwell in experiences that bring past and present together, in a space which recognizes the messiness of the particulars of history as having indeterminate potential effects on the present. For example, we are told:

The emotion behind this story is colored by events that would be lethal to repeat. That is, their unfolding would unleash a polluted something beyond anyone’s comprehension. No science can explain what propels this story. The land can hardly contain its volatile nature. Anyone observing my predicament would wonder why I have continued on. But, in a way, because there are no observers, I have no choice but to go on. (11)

Here history is constructed as it is being told, the “unfolding” of the events occurs in their telling, instead of telling events as they had previously unfolded. “No science can explain what propels this story,” she says. Is she talking here about the content of the story, or the method of its construction? The land is the physical text of history hardly containing the “volatile nature” of the story. The history may be one of a people who have seen great hardship. How, she seems to ask, is a volatile history smoothed into a cohesive narrative? How does a single individual, or a single narrative, embody and disperse such a difficult history? Even after the narrator recognizes the incompatibility of content (the volatile events) with method and form (how to tell these stories), she realizes the story must nonetheless be told in a way that recognizes the difficulty of telling; there is no possibility of narrative unity here to smooth things over.

In the next section, we learn that the narrator's brother "was a pioneer" because "he discovered a place that was not too close to our present lives where we could store our heirlooms" (12). It is curious that the heirloom storage place is "not too close to our present lives," and one wonders both on the nature of the relation between artifacts of the past and present understanding, as well as the grammatical confusion and significance of "our present lives": which present exactly she is talking about? The rest of the paragraph is more clearly in the past tense and we read that "the town as a whole felt discomfort around these "gifts" from the past," as if they were not their own heirlooms (12). The townspeople seem disconnected from their past, and, the narrator tells us, "In order to believe in them [the "gifts"], we did not want to see them" (12), alluding to the magical role of the unseen artifacts to function as a past that acts as a system of belief. The town "could not face the proximity of the past and did not want to use it either" and they brought the things that "their forefathers had left them" to the "past shelter" for storage. Then the narrator tells us that her home is "right outside the shelter" and she "would want to go there,"; "and hang out with the things that root my people"; "The hope being that upon their return I will have missed them less" (12). The present as spatial is rooted in these physical artifacts of history as the narrator hopes that upon the return of her people (a gesture toward the future) she "will have missed them less" a grammatically correct sentence in which narrator and reader alike for a moment dwell in present, past, and future simultaneously. These passages also reiterate the fragmentation of the past in the present; the narrator has only these few artifacts (fragments, shards of "history") and no real history.

Near the end of "Translation," we get just a hint of what may have happened to the narrator's people: "Many years back there was a virus ravaging us—made the black skin of my neighbors turn toward the mood Bear in mind this is a land without normal science" (16). In

the context of the story so far, we might read this in multiple ways, but it seems apparent that history requires us to complicate our notions of how it is constructed especially when taking in to account race and social marginalization. When the experiences of a group of people do not match the cohesive cultural narratives of “the nation,” other accounts must be made available; when stories are left out and material history ignored in the later cultural narration, it becomes necessary to read more critically and dismantle hegemonic narrative history with an openness for what has otherwise been cast aside. The histories of marginalized groups rarely match the narratives that are later constructed by dominant structures. Through “Translation” Gladman considers the messiness of the materials of history—experiences and artifacts—to deal with the complexity of the past in the present. But when there are no suitable narratives, or no narratives at all, what is left? “When a tribe has been reduced to one, there is no talk of remedy. Well, there is no talk. As a town, we had the most intriguing conversations. Now I play with leaves” (17). Gladman seems to be asking how whole groups of people have been neglected in the histories that have been constructed thus far, and how new histories can be written that refuse to totalize experience and instead open space for the recognition of diverse voices and sensibilities?

The last section of “Translation” includes spirits and a return to archaeology. The spirits of the past “are said to teach people about death” (19) but the narrator claims to instead teach the spirits; the present informs the past. The narrator sits on this constantly moving line that falls between the past and present, at the interstice that joins the ancestors, the histories, and the possibility of the return of her people. In order to save history and a potential future, one has to save the land, and, she explains, “to save this land I have to bring back archeology.” The narrator continues, “In the appearance of any species there is an element of its disappearance and within its disappearance a particle of return. And that is why we have storage” (19). The present storage

of memories, fragments, material pieces of history keeps one close to the past while awaiting the potential of return:

In our past there is a germ for survival, beneath our weathered clothes and yellowed papers, a propellant of time. If I wanted to I could spend the rest of my days devoted to time. Or end the township here for something on the other side of the mountains . . . is there life there? Well, it does not matter if there is life because I am not leaving this mountainside. It has been six years since the exodus. A year since I last spoke. I have forty-two years left of health, and anticipate five hundred years before the great tidal wave. Things here slowly returning to slime and translation. (19-20)

The narrator simultaneously moves into the future—having 42 years left of health, 500 years before the great tidal wave—and recedes into the past, the origin of slime and translation; however, this is no starting place or point of origin, but a return to process and potential. The slime is what is left after receding into the past, but is also what will be used as the material for whatever will grow next, it goes back to the earth to begin again. Translation is a process. History is translated into narratives that maintain the status quo, or the narratives are translated into fragmented networks of the pieces of material experience that complicate the possibility of cohesive historical narratives. When something is translated, it can be mistranslated, or undergo a change of some kind within the text, thus opening a space for alternative knowledge or understanding to emerge. We leave “Translation” in the space of translation, of process, of the return to the space of possibility. This different way of doing history and narrative then might also be a larger political project in its desire to call attention to rupture within the texture of (narrated) history. Instead of determining the future through the reproduction of mainstream ideologies, the present includes the fissures or breaks from which might emerge the potential for a politics of recognition.

The third story in *Juice*, “No Through Street,” reiterates some of the same concerns, through a narrator who is alone and unable to form any connections to the people around her;

one finishes the story wondering whether or not the people referred to by the narrator actually existed or were instead imagined. The missed connections, and the movement between the narrator's memories of her past and the contemporary moment, point to the necessary difficulty of relating the two.

Fifteen years ago, as I walked along the tree-lined street toward my now-past future, I saw Mr. Godfrey standing on the edge of his lawn in utter fascination of something. When I think about it, I am sure that he had witnessed the chaos that I am now seeing. What else could explain his suddenly heaving chest and the way his eyes glazed over when they turned to me? (30)

The narrator returns to the street of her childhood after leaving it fifteen years before, in order to confront her past: "Six days after my return, I stood again at the head of Hershey Street, still unable to surrender my past to its obvious transformation. It was by accident that I found myself there" (33). In the meantime, she claims, she had spent her time riding on trains "going east to west" (34). Hershey Street seems to represent the past that the narrator has avoided, or forgotten while she passed her time riding trains: "For twelve of the fourteen years that I know I was on trains, I was wondering about my body" and only during "the last three of the fourteen years, I had vivid dreams of my long-lost street" (35). Finally, years later she returns to come face to face with her street and the memories of her sister. Her sister, as it turns out, is the painter of the famous street signs, that of "Hershey Street" included, and who has in the present become famous for her work. Physically reentering this space causes the narrator to respond in various ways. She explains: "the feelings that anchored me the other day to the sign, *Slow to Bridge*, were not feelings as much as they were remembrances. I think I see our childhood in that sign" (39). Sometimes, "consulting the signs for direction," she explains, "I . . . am brought back to the highlights of my past. I can remember things in a way I cannot at the head of the 'new' Hershey Street. I believe that if I saw my sister she would tell me more about my life, but if I have learned

anything from my past, it's that I must pace myself" (39). The signs point to the past and seem necessary for understanding one's place in the present, yet there is a hesitation; one must pace herself when discovering the past. And, she leads us to believe, one remembers differently depending on spatial location and physical context. The signs point to her past. The "new" Hershey Street represents a present that she is not a part of. Yet, we as readers never get a real sense of the childhood seen by the narrator, or the gap between that and her feeling of displacement in the present space of return.

Eventually, the narrator goes to the museum where her sister has been invited to paint her signs, as an exhibit. It is here that the sense of the past in relation to present should come together, made whole by the narrator's sister who can fill in some of the blanks in the story. However, she finds that

the woman in tattered, paint-splashed clothes with kinky black and tan hair outlining the beginning of what probably will be a spectacular piece of art was not my sister. She didn't even impersonate her when I walked up. She simply said that she had never heard of me.

And I believe her. But then, where is my sister? And if this woman is the directionalist whom everyone knows about, who is my sister? (44)

We can read a number of things here: the difference between the real and the imagined (narrative), the perception of identity that may not match up to some outside reality, the effort to make sense of one's past in the present, and the relation between the stories of self and of others. The narrator, existing mainly in the past of this space to which she has returned, in the end has no relation to the present. But the present without the past would seem to make as little sense as one wonders why the sister (who is apparently not her sister) "directionalist" is painting signs in the museum, for which she has become famous in the real world of the streets; an apt metaphor for the relation between real, individual experience and its "translation" into institutional, cohesive narratives of "the many."

In *Politics Out of History*, Wendy Brown calls Foucault's genealogical method an "other way of conceiving the familiar" (96) and considers the relation of the past to the present, and the relation between individuals and others. Genealogical history, she writes, "is precisely the opposite of teleological history; indeed it is in a permanent quarrel with teleological history, insofar as it treats the present as the accidental production of the contingent past, rather than treating the past as the sure and necessary road to the inevitable present" (103). Using terms like "contingent" and "accidental" emphasizes the focus on possibility instead of determination. The present is the consequence of fractured and multiple details of history. History, in these terms, cannot be thought as teleological because the potential for change precludes predetermined end points. Brown writes, "Genealogy reorients the relationship of history to political possibility . . . in place of the lines of determination laid down by laws of history, genealogy appears as a field of openings—faults, fractures, and fissures" (103). The present is no longer constrained by its histories, but is able to break through totalizing historical narratives to look for "openings for disturbance" in which lie the possibility for change, action, politics (Brown 103). In order to break through the myths and narratives to see what is left out, disruption is imperative. Brown writes, "The measure of genealogy's success is its disruption of conventional accounts of ourselves—our sentiments, bodies, origins, futures. It tells a story that disturbs our habits of self-recognition, posing an 'us' that is foreign" (106). This is not unlike how the narrator in "Translation" moves through time and space with a disturbed sense of past and present; unsure of herself, she writes, "I know that I am not the 'me' of ten days ago—I certainly do not look like that 'me' or how I thought of her" (14). And in "No Through Street" when the narrator comes face to face with the person she thought of as her sister and the key to understanding her past, she realizes they are not related and do not even recognize each other, and this disrupts the

narrator's understanding of herself, and readers' understanding of the potential past that, at that moment, seems no longer possible.

This inability to identify with one's past points to the recognition of constructions of identity based on passively consumed narrative accounts. Brown continues, "Where there is narrative logic or continuity, genealogy assaults it by introducing counterforces and revelations of discontinuity" (106). These counterforces and revelations of discontinuity are enacted in the structure and narrative strategies of Gladman's stories; "the story" is in the broken logic of the narrative form itself. The text takes on this genealogical method as a political act for which, according to Brown, we need to first understand "the historical composition of our being" (108). A politics of the present stands in view of the layered and textured history from which it has emerged, and the "fractures in history become the material of possibility in the present to the extent that they signify weaknesses or openings in the structure of the present—"virtual fractures' as Foucault writes, ' . . . open up the space of freedom'" (Brown 113). The fractures, fissures, breaks, and gaps in the text itself, like in history, open the space for political possibility in which the present is not simply determined for us, and in which totalizing narratives might be translated into processes for change. The seemingly static nature of time in *Juice* is a strategy of its interrogative translation project. Creating a static present gives the narrators the space they need to delve into the past, to find the weaknesses and fractures, in order to open further space for "political possibility." Gladman's narrators are adrift because they are in process of finding a present tense that has not been predetermined. They create non/narratives that function as examples and processes for change, and this, in Brown's terms, "reorients the relationship of history to political possibility." Working through and coming to terms with History—and how as marginalized subjects they do and do not relate to that history—and breaking with narrative as a

hegemonic organizing strategy, allows the narrators in Gladman's stories to act as vehicles for greater understanding as well as narrative and political action in the present. Through her non/narrative writing strategies, Gladman takes us through the process of interrogation and imagining possibilities for subjects seeking to articulate their experience and further participate as social citizens.

Documenting Postmodern Trauma in *Do not Let Me Be Lonely*

In her introduction to *Everybody's Autonomy*, Juliana Spahr points to Frederick Douglass's understanding that "literacy is a pathway to freedom" (2). Douglass, she writes, "would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing It opened [his] eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder which to get out" (3) and he came to recognize "reading as a communal, not individual act"; that reading dependant on community can turn "into a force that can be manipulated and used as a tool of resistance to respond to the inhumanity of slavery" (3). In the case of Rankine's *Do not Let me Be Lonely*, we can use Douglass's example to point to the inhumanity of the emotional violence of history, the ills of contemporary culture, and the importance of "reading dependant on community" particularly in relation to individual marginalized subjects' negotiation of identity within the larger cultural context. Rankine seems to assert in this text that as socially responsible citizens, we need to become literate at "reading" culture.

As a contemporary poet, Rankine is concerned in much of her work with African American history, subjectivity, and negotiations of contemporary culture. In *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* she moves out of the realm of poetry and into a type of experimental memoir. This hybrid, non/narrative "documentary" work can be compared to a documentary film, in which arguments are made either overtly or subtly, and specific and varied examples are presented to

support repeated main ideas over the course of the text. It is a work that engages the visual as it makes the argument that images shape our knowledge and understandings as contemporary citizens; and images from contemporary culture play a role in the experiences we have and the stories we tell, especially of, and for, African Americans, though the history of African Americans is the history of America.

Each chapter, or section, in *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* is marked with a photograph of a television with static on its screen, and in the static the savvy viewer will notice a shadow of a head, the reflection of the TV viewer, the reader watching the text unfold; the reader is hereby implicated in the events that unfold “in culture” as it is accessed through the television screen. Even if the viewer does not participate, she gains the knowledge of culture—via the TV, via the documentary text—and may be held accountable for having such knowledge. Each chapter, instead of carrying forward an overarching narrative, takes up a particular event or idea; photos are sometimes included to—either directly or indirectly—relate to the idea of each chapter, and some photos are framed by the same television image that marks chapter breaks. An early section, for example, begins with the narrator explaining that she watches TV to help her fall asleep, during which time, she says, “Sometimes I count the commercials for antidepressants,” and notices a commercial for PAXIL which “says simply: YOUR LIFE IS WAITING”; this message, on the page, is in white letters against the black screen of the TV. Without sound, she explains, “it remains on the screen long enough so that when I close my eyes to check if I am sleeping, instead of darkness, YOUR LIFE IS WAITING stares back at me” (29). The narrator then gets a prescription of her own, it is not clear for what, and makes a list about deciding not to take the pills, concluding: “My desire is to give the pills away as I might a pair of shoes I have never worn. I want to give them to a friend, to someone who could decide to throw them away”

(32). As a subject, she is split between the messages of the TV and the reality of chemical medication, the dream-space of night and the daylight realization of diagnoses and prescription, making us question the difference between the real and the imagined, between virtual, media/ed experience and “real life.”

The reader of *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* gets the sense that Rankine’s narrator is cursed with the ability to read the landscape of contemporary culture and write the individual voice as part of a communal act; she constructs an intertextual and layered critique that calls attention to the notion of a stable, single-authored, autobiographical narrative, and the myth of “happiness”—that we are fed via various media—that is supposed to come with a comfortable social and economic class position. Highlighting particular aspects of culture, race, and gender point to the “relationship between literature and consciousness raising” (Spahr 5) to create a complex work in which the seemingly clear and straightforward parts add up to a whole that is nonetheless disjunct. Rankine’s documentation of specific events and reflections reveals a traumatic situation that transcends the personal, and makes readers complicit in the cultural critique and the psychic dangers that mark the crisis of the (postmodern) contemporary.

Is this a postmodern text? Or the “story” of a postmodern subject? (Whose life is waiting?) If “both” is the too easy answer, nonetheless *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* is a work that explores the possibility of postmodern subjectivity and enacts this interrogation through the formal strategies in its construction. In *Autobiography and Postmodernism* Leigh Gilmore describes this type of text “as a site of identity production” in which the subject is both “an agent in discourse,” and “is understood as necessarily discursive” (3) or constructed according to historically and culturally specific discourses. Using strategies that subvert narrative cohesion, and refusing to give a clear account of the identity produced in this text, Rankine’s narrator

enacts a subjective response to the gaps and contradictions in culture and (or because of) discourse, and the notion of self-representation in an autobiographical text becomes impossible. The writer of autobiography tends, according to Gilmore, “to heighten the contradictions in the discourses of self-representation” and create subjects who “record the effects of fragmentation” (8). Central to this postmodern subjectivity, Gilmore points out, after Emile Benveniste and Roman Jakobson, that the pronoun “I”—considered to be the narrator and subject of the autobiographical text—exists only in relation to others, and asks, “what readings of autobiography are possible when the linguistic element upon which one would most wish to depend for some sense of stability . . . offers both collectivity and individuality?” (7). Although the text is no longer stable in terms of its presenting a unified narrator who directly transmits to readers her subjective experience, we gain something here in the way the text and its readers come into critical relation with the simultaneous individual and collective “instability” of the text.

“Postmodern knowledge,” writes Jean-Francois Lyotard, “refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” (xxv). Lyotard studies the condition of knowledge and culture following transformations in postindustrial, Western society and explains how our ideas of knowledge have changed especially with the rise of computer and other technological advancements. Instead of grand philosophical narratives that regulate and prescribe ethics and action, he believes that it is more relevant now to think about how we are all contextualized by, and perform within, multiple smaller narratives, and the various roles we play in our everyday lives. Additionally, he explains, “A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever

before” (15). Rankine picks up on this notion, citing multiple stories throughout *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* that only seem related by virtue of the traumatic details of the stories or their effects.

Fredric Jameson sees postmodernism as a reflex still contained within capitalism in which consumption and commodification have saturated all aspects of contemporary life. Jameson’s “postmodern condition” includes a number of symptoms including “historical deafness” (*Postmodernism* xi); the schizophrenia that marks an inability to “unify the past, present, and future of . . . biographical experience or psychic life” and through which we experience a “series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (27); depthlessness, or the multiplication of surfaces which mark culture and experience as spatial instead of temporal (12); and feeling is replaced by euphoric “intensities,” as a result of the simultaneity of the spatial, instead of the movement of the temporal. At the core of Jameson’s ideas of the postmodern is the lack of temporality which results in an inability to unify through the use of historical understanding. Style and materiality of texts and of life dominate the contemporary, and it is through this depthless present that the past is read simply as an accumulation of commodifiable styles. The simultaneous “presents” mark a breakdown of temporality seen especially through the materiality of language and mere meaning-effects of postmodern writing. And the loss of historicity leads to surface effects such as “pastiche” and “nostalgia” averting any more thoughtful depth of reflection.

Rankine’s *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* serves as an example of a more updated, theory-in-practice of postmodern subjectivity. Read through and against Jameson’s summary of postmodern effects above, *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* performs many of the elements by which we might define a text as postmodern; further, it redefines postmodern textual practice in a meaningful way that serves to enact a critique of contemporary culture, and to potential for

political action. Her text ultimately critiques the notion of the postmodern subject as simply reacting without agency. Although the contemporary subject, for Rankine, is traumatized by her own loss of identity within contemporary culture, through the process of the text Rankine brings her readers in to participate in a hopeful potential for something beyond that trauma; and this rests in the—subtle and implicit—notion of community advocated in the text. Formally, *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* enacts a non/narrative style of simultaneous happenings that seem superficially non-connected; instead of progression, one chapter falls alongside the next, moments or ideas reflect back and forth or stand alone, images hypertextually link the text to significance in the technologically mediated world. Space is a topic of investigation throughout as the narrator moves through different physical, psychic, and emotional spaces, and events under scrutiny occur in a variety of locations. For example, Rankine explore a number of places and events including James Byrd's murder as he was dragged behind a truck in Texas; Abner Louima's assault; and the shooting of Amadou Diallo in New York; the Museum of Emotions in London and the lawn in front of Buckingham Palace filled with flowers and cards for Princess Diana; and the World Trade Center site after 9/11. The theme of death that runs throughout is immediate and always framed in the present tense as a situation or state of being, not as the end of a progression in time. For example, a television interview transcribed by the narrator shows how knowledge is only formed from one moment to the text, making communication difficult:

Man: He is deceased?

Boy: He is dead to me.

Man: So he is not deceased?

Boy: I do not know.

He could be dead.

Man: Is he or is he not dead?

Boy: He's been dead to my life.

Man: Someone wrote in your file

that he is dead. Did you tell

someone that he is dead?

Boy: All right, he is dead. (15)

Lacking a common sense of understanding or language, these two characters seem to be speaking simultaneously and communicating little between them. *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* sometimes seems to include more lack than content in the ways it calls attention to gaps, disturbances, and events that simply cannot be made sense of. And through all of this, real life as well as fabricated characters function in solitary space (they are alone, lonely) as if constructed by but unable to participate in any larger social network. Other thematic elements include references to lost or lacking memory, such as the friend with Alzheimer's who writes on a message board, "THIS IS THE MOST MISERABLE IN MY LIFE" which the narrator connects to the voice of Joseph Brodsky "saying, *What's the point of forgetting it it's followed by dying*" (17); then the narrator repeats these two phrases back to back in a continuous circulation that seems to exist in a moment completely outside of time, and resonates through the rest of the text. Rankine seems to be emphasizing exactly that which does not fit into hegemonic, totalizing narratives, the stories that have been left out, edited away, smoothed over. What is lacking is any context for making sense of experiences that fall outside of the narrative myths of the American Dream. In *Do not Let Me Be Lonely*, she creates a genealogy of debris that exceeds the narratives of nationhood that her subjects have been ingesting throughout the twentieth century.

This text utilizes a number of formal, textual strategies to explore space, enact simultaneity, and emphasize repetition, in relation to real world events and emotions. It theorizes and enacts the fragmented and simulacral elements of popular culture and contemporary existence, and gives readers—as subjects implicated in the construction of the (cultural) text—insight into the psychic, social, and historical causes and effects of trauma, suffering, and loneliness. This text is anything but what Jameson might call “historically deaf,” depthless, and without feeling. *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* moves trauma as a theme, like death, like loneliness, through the book. Some of the characters suffer trauma in different ways; viewers may be traumatized by events witnessed in these pages; contemporary culture itself may be read as traumatized, having survived one violent event after another and continuing on, haunted by the past. We the citizens of this contemporary postmodern culture suffer traumatic effects, in our personal lives and in the stories that surround us, as new acts of violence and death recall the infinity of past events. History is temporal. Trauma is about time, or about events happening, and then recurring in the mind, over time.

Using Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Cathy Caruth explains that the traumatic neurosis is “not the reaction to any horrible event but, rather, the peculiar, and perplexing experience of survival” and asks the question “what does it mean to survive?” (“Violence” 24), which seems also to be the question Rankine asks throughout *Do not Let Me Be Lonely*. According to Caruth, the pathology or neurosis is not in the original event, but in the haunting repetition of the image or event that takes hold of the traumatized in different manifestations, and for which there may be no understanding. The obviously traumatic event for both family and friends of victims, and the general American public, is 9/11—into which there is no real access, nor does it seem possible to represent. Alongside a photo of a pile of stretchers made of wood for

transporting rescued victims (or bodies) from the Trade Center wreckage, Rankine writes, “The language of description competes with the dead in the air” (82). What does it mean to survive? Caruth explains, “contemporary trauma” involves “a crisis of truth” that “extends beyond the question of individual cure and asks how we in this era can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access” (*Trauma* 6); Caruth says this is an impossible history because it cannot be entirely possessed but only possesses. The literary text, in working to translate experience into understanding, “as the narrative of a belated experience . . . attests to its endless impact on a life” (*Unclaimed* 7). Following Lacan, Caruth suggests “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (*Unclaimed* 7).

Rankine enacts this trauma through the presentation of events that are separate from, yet intimately related to, subjective contemporary experience. The text seems to ask how we as viewers are possessed by the traumatic history repeated in the violent acts against Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo (56-57) ? How is the immediacy of this history a traumatic crisis? Instead of access to some kind of truth or ability to make sense of the events, the narrator explains, “instead, I get a sharp pain in my gut Not quite a caving in, just a feeling of bits of my inside twisting away from flesh in the form of a blow to the body . . . / Sometimes I look into someone’s face and I must brace myself—the blow on its way” (56). The experience is felt as physical pain, the weight of the history of violence as racist control haunting the present moment of watching Louima on television, of watching his photo in this text. And when Diallo’s death is announced: “All the shots, all forty-one never add up, never become plural, and will not stay in

the past” (57). The past remains aggressively in the present as the images will not fade until it becomes possible to articulate the horrific and inexplicable.

The event that triggers the personal traumatic repetition at the center of this book is the story of the narrator’s sister’s family who were killed in a car accident. The personal and the cultural mingle and point to questions of action/inaction, personal agency, and the trauma that history leaves for us in the present. The narrator tells us, “in truth I can do nothing but see in the activity of her grief three people’s death” (63). Caruth points to Freud, who asks, “what it would mean for history to be understood as the history of trauma” (“violence” 24). And she concludes

that such a history—individual or collective—bears with it the weight of a paradox: that external violence is felt most, not in its direct experience; that trauma is constituted not only by the destructive force of a violent event but by the very act of its survival. If we are to register the impact of violence we cannot, therefore, locate it only in the destructive moment of the past, but in an ongoing survival that belongs to the future. It is because violence inhabits, incomprehensibly, the very survival of those who have lived beyond it that it may be witnessed best in the future generations to whom this survival is passed on. (25)

For better or worse, survival is passed on. And the text as a place/space to repeat the violence, to make us viewers participate in the violence by way of its traumatic aftermath, may also work as a means to understanding, or horizon of hope, by way of our communal implication and responsibility: *Do not Let Me Be Lonely*. The writing of the text, and the act of reading/viewing, might be used as a tool of resistance to the repetition of history, toward a future of collective action.

Define loneliness?

Yes.

It’s what we can’t do for each other.

What do we mean to each other?

What does a life mean?

Why are we here if not for each other? (62)

We are responsible for each other, Rankine's narrator argues. Loneliness is what happens when we refuse to making sense of tragedy and work toward the (non-traumatic) social, collective, good.

The narrator tells a story about a "13 yr old boy convicted of first degree murder for killing a six yr old girl." She explains: "We hear on the television . . . I, or we, it hardly matters" (67). The boy is convicted and "in this moment we are alone with the facts as he will be when he understands" (67). We, viewers as members of a society in which something like this happens, are complicit. We watch as he is sent to prison for life, we participate in his fate. The hope for breaking through the repetition of violent history is in the basic relation between self and other, reader and text. This is a story about the repeated violence in African American history, which is American history, in all of its messiness, gaps, and traumatic effects. When a black man is shot forty-one times, we are all implicated in the history that has instigated and then condoned this event in the present moment. The contemporary traumatic is enacted as a symptom of our collective, violent history/ies. The representation of this event in the text is both traumatic and cathartic; in order to break out of the cycle, we need to see it and recognize it and then resist. The text may mediate this process. Rankine points to Myung Mi Kim, who "did say that the poem is really a responsibility to everyone in a social space. She did say it was okay to cramp, to clog, to fold over at the gut, to have to put hand to flesh, to have to hold the pain, and then to translate it here. She did say, in so many words, that what alerts, alters" (57). The text is an alarm. It is up to readers to take action, to alter. Or, as Rankine's narrator tells us, "I tried to fit language into the shape of usefulness. The world moves through words as if the bodies the words reflect did not exist" (129). The text can be a point of mediation, between experience and its resulting traumatic

effects, and seems to enact violent personal and social experiences in order to break the cycle of repetition.

Conclusion

These texts points to the need for narratives of history and nation as complex, connotative, rhetorical, psychic, and diverse. *Do not Let Me Be Lonely* presents a history in the present that is fragmented, confused, depressing, and yet hopeful for contemporary American subjects. If, after Paul Celan, the poem is similar to a handshake, Rankine writes, “the handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that—Here. I am here. This conflation of the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive” (130). This is the kind of storytelling through which “the nation speaks its disjunctive narrative” (Bhabha 311) and as viewer/witnesses, we become involved in further opening spaces for counter-narratives that give language to silenced voices. Through writing and speaking these alternative narratives, subjects can respond to totalizing, nationalistic narratives, create other possibilities for identification, and work toward the communal handshaking that occurs when citizens are no longer writing, reading, speaking, existing in isolation but become, instead, a part of the process, of re-narrating history and experience, of creating new types of national identities. And the ways in which Lu, Gladman, and Rankine enact their cultural critiques through innovative, non/narrative textual strategies further makes the argument that opening spaces for counter-narratives involves not only the content of critique, but a dismantling and rebuilding of the very social, linguistic structures that define and contain identity for subjects. In these readings, the text-subjects’ “stories” act as models for the variety of subjects—and their various identificatory

concerns—seeking alternative and expanded means of identification, through a more thoughtful relationship between history, memory, individual experience, and collective, social responsibility.

CHAPTER 4

“Possibility is not a luxury”: (Re)presentation and (Re)identification in *The Transformation*, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and *Dictee*

Citing the tensions between collective, group identity and individual experience, Juliana Spahr, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha create text-subjects who bear witness to the problematic nature of Western, masculine, heteronormative narratives for identity, and speak to cultural experiences that exceed textual and social norms. The text-subjects speak from places of cultural and ethnic dislocation, and it is through their processes of (“autobiographical”) writing that they dismantle and revise narratives of collectivity and personal identification. These subjects generate new ways of using language and documenting history that represent new strategies for identifying. Spahr’s *The Transformation*, Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and Cha’s *Dictee* interrogate and revise social norms for gender performance, sexual practice and desire, and narratives of ethnic and geographical dislocation. Dealing with geographic and ethnic colonization, and historical oppressions, these subjects-in-process go beyond linguistic subversion and cultural critique to construct new models for articulating non-normative, non-narratable experience and history. These texts challenge binary structures—such as self/other, masculine/feminine, colonizer/colonized; open spaces of possibility for subjective understanding; and act as models for expanding possibilities for representing experience and politics. Their subjects enact the need for recognition, and go beyond this to become speaking subjects, witnesses to their own experiences and the cultural conditions around them. Bringing Kristeva’s textual/social politics together with Butler’s cultural theories, I use Kelly Oliver’s theory of “witnessing” to deepen the discussion of the relation between textual subjectivity and the hybrid, prose interrogation of identity, and the cultural manifestations of complex subjective

identifications. These writers further negotiate the historical need for collective identification and the antithetical individual experiences that cannot be fully articulated. Through strategies of re-contextualization, re-identification, and re-collection, the subjects of these texts dismantle, rearrange, and reconstruct the stories about their lives, while simultaneously trying to make sense of those stories.

The difficulties of identification, when there is little to identify with, are opened for exploration by way of subjects who are multiply positioned, and who enact this multiplicity through the use, and revision, of language and textual strategies. The subjects of these texts do not “fit” into binary, ideological notions of gender, sexual practice, and historical/cultural experience; each struggles with the need for collective identification, and recognizes that there is no stable self, no single discourse or perspective from which to speak and identify. From queering heterosexual domestic relations, to transgressing culturally traditional narratives of gender performance, to visualizing and recontextualizing the fragmented and incoherent details of history, each subject moving through the space of her text is analogous to the multiply situated and contextualized subject in the world, the multiple and contradictory discourses enacted through the formal strategies on the page. The process of the text is the process, for each of these text-subjects, to come to terms with a useful understanding of collective identification and its relation to individual experience.

Diana Fuss calls attention to the relation between identity and identification and the need to theorize the instability of these terms. Particularly for subjects who are marginalized in culture, or who make life choices that do not fit in with hegemonic cultural narratives, the ability to identify with others, or find space within an amenable discourse, is crucial. As Fuss explains:

Identification is the detour through the other that defines a self. This detour through the other follows no predetermined developmental path, nor does it travel outside history and

culture. Identification names the entry of history and culture into the subject, a subject that must bear the traces of each and every encounter with the external world. Identification is, from the beginning, a question of *relation*, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside. (2-3)

In order to connect with oneself, and connect in the world, one must have something with which to identify. Identification is primarily understood through relations between and among subjects, and even an individual subject's inner and outer psychic life. Neither identity nor identification is predetermined or static, but each remains flexible and open to change, always in relation to oneself, to another, to a larger social world. Spahr, Anzaldúa, and Cha's subjects seem implicitly aware of the dynamic nature of identity, they work through their own processes of disavowing norms and narratives to which they cannot relate, and they create new means, and new possibilities—through language, history, memory, geography, and the body—for identification. In addition to one's having her own sense of identity, this is also central to political action. Even for Freud, Fuss writes, "to the extent that every social group is constituted . . . through identification between its members, through social ties based upon a perception of similarity and shared interests, there can be no politics without identification" (10). The projects of the texts discussed here, although diverse in content, all deal in textual politics that extend out into the cultural realm for subjects invested in finding ways of meaningful identification. The call for new languages, finding non/narrative means of representation, and seeking greater possibilities for identification in the world is a politics in action. These texts offer just three material examples that might motivate further textual practice and social change; they use formal strategies to break through (symbolic) narratives that "naturalize" (gendered, sexual, ethnic) experience; and they function within symbolic structures (of patriarchy, language, history) while simultaneously embodying Kristeva's semiotic space of disruption, rupture, contradiction, and

negativity, in order to more deeply consider possibilities for alternative gender expression and collective identification, by way of embodied experience.

Judith Butler explains that we need to recognize “how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality can become instituted . . . a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone.” Troubling sexual and gendered identity categories is one way of pushing against boundaries, of going beyond “norms” into other, potential spaces of action and being. And for Butler this is not a choice, but a responsibility. “Some people have asked me what is the use of increasing possibilities for gender,” she explains, “I tend to answer: possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread” (*Undoing* 29). Pushing past boundaries and exceeding norms are necessary political action, imperative for instituting “new modes of reality” through which even silenced, invisible subjects can become recognized. And beyond recognition, they become speaking subjects, witnesses to the detrimental effects of totalizing narratives and binary structures.

We can further turn to Susan Stanford Friedman’s spatial and geographical theory of identity as constructed through multiply positioned discourses, in order to detect “possibility” working through, between, and among gender, sexuality, identity, politics, class, race, culture, geography, and language. And at the level of practice, we can see how these are enacted in a variety of ways in the non/narrative, autobiographical-style text. Butler echoes this notion in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, in which she explains, “if we require that someone be . . . a coherent autobiographer, we may be preferring the seamlessness of the story to something we might tentatively call the truth of the person, a truth that, to a certain degree . . . might well become more clear in moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness—in enigmatic

articulations that cannot easily be translated into narrative form” (64). The non/narrative text represents this cultural incoherence, the multiple and constantly recontextualized self, at the formal level of the construction of the text. For Butler, “the purpose . . . is not to celebrate a certain notion of incoherence, but only to point out that our “incoherence” establishes the way in which we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us” (*Giving* 64). This discussion of cultural identity translates into the readings of the primary texts discussed below as they enact this incoherence, and textually perform the clarity and insight found in spaces of interruption and “enigmatic articulations.” Subjects “interrupted by alterity” do not simply fit into cohesive narratives of experience; however, finding new and alternative means of documenting this kind of antithetical experience continues to offer alternative possibilities for recognition, representation, speaking, and witnessing, that do not simply result in narrative cohesion and closure.

The Transformation

Juliana Spahr’s *The Transformation* witnesses postcolonial effects from the perspective of an outsider colonizer in contemporary Hawaii, grounds its formal strategies in the experience(s) of a multiply identified and conflicted narrator, and creates a textual space for the interactions of language, history, identity, and the dismantling of binaries. Spahr writes a text that is anti-memoir, in a sense; we cannot read it as entirely autobiographical though it is based on her time living and working in Hawaii with her two, male, domestic partners. Key to its anti-memoir quality is the fact that she uses the third-person pronouns, instead of first or second; instead of using: “I,” “we,” “she,” “he,” “us” she uses only “they” and “them.” I read this as her way of taking the focus off of her specific experience to offer a larger cultural commentary, to

create a new way of thinking about being the white outsider recontextualized within the historically saturated contemporary world of Hawaii, and to have a language for talking about an unconventional domestic partnership between three, non-normatively heterosexual adults. In the first part of the text the narrator neurotically obsesses over trying to make sense of living in a place in which it becomes impossible to articulate that place. As an outsider she has no access to cultural critique or interpretation, yet it becomes clear how the history of a place that has been exploited and multiply colonized, and is in antagonistic relationship with its current colonizer and owner, the mainland U.S., is affecting the everyday, present life of everyone who lives there. In this first part of the book she uses the literal and metaphorical discussions of the rich natural surroundings to attempt to articulate her anxieties, concerns, and inability to reason and speak coherently. In the second part of the book, the domestic partnership of three moves back to New York City, just before 9/11, and the narrative continues to attempt to make sense of cultural dislocation, how “they” are different, and how New York is different, after Hawaii. The concept of “transformation” happens on a variety of levels, from the narrator’s need to transform language, to the literal transfer from one location to another, to how everything is different during and after 9/11. And ultimately, the text works through a transformation of self that happens over the course of a “non/memoir” that is also an extended analysis of self in relation to her outer environment(s), and an individual in relation to collective concerns.

Spahr begins *The Transformation* with an analogy between the natural environment and human society in order to think about naming, categorization, and the ways language is used to construct explanations of natural and social phenomena. She writes: “Flora and fauna grow next to and around each other without names. Humans add the annotation. They catalogue the flora and fauna, divide them up, chart their connections and variations, eventually name them, and as

they do this they read into them their own stories” (13). The relationships between colonizer and colonized, native and other, fill a complicated Hawaiian history, and this is evident in language drawn from natural surroundings. She uses the real and metaphorical example of the “huehue haole,” a term used for white outsiders, and explains the origins of the term: “What was called the maracuja, the passiflora, the passionflower, they called the huehue haole. Huehue is the name of a climber native to the islands. Haole is the word that is used to describe some of them in this story, people who arrive from somewhere else. In the world of plants it is also used to describe a particularly noxious and invasive species” (13-14). If so much of Hawaiian culture is articulated through the natural vegetation, environment, and landscapes, Spahr’s narrator understands that in order to tell her story she must also interpret it through the material and metaphorical natural phenomena in which she is now contextualized. She explains: “This is a story of the passiflora and the tree canopy. This is a story of three who moved to an island in the middle of the Pacific together” (14). The story must be told as a Hawaiian story, even while she is trying to come to terms with the complexity of that story—or more accurately the multiple stories that construct “Hawaii” and how her own stories now mingle with those.

The three who move to the island together are individually and collectively referred to as “they” as a way to get around gender identification, though it is made clear that the triad conforms to traditional heterosexual practices of sexual relations. Nonetheless, the gender-neutral pronoun “they” troubles the construct of the heterosexual domestic partnership, even if the narrator refuses to adopt queer terminology to signify “their” situation. The spatial and political inquiry moves between domestic and public space, and is enacted in the form of repeated phrasing and sentence constructions that write “around” meaning, pointing to the inadequacy of language to provide articulate explanations for the layered understandings of self

in relation to other. The story that unfolds weaves natural phenomena with the struggle for personal understanding within a context of complex historical and cultural politics, as in the following example:

The minute they got off the plane they realized that the beauty of the island was its own radiant thing full of boths and that they had to begin with these boths. It was an island of both great environmental beauty and of great environmental destruction. And these boths fed each other in a complicated feedback loop When they looked around most of what they saw among the many things growing, flying, and crawling had been brought onto the island after the whaling ships arrived. It told a story of beauty and a story of mismanagement. It told a story of invasion and of acceptance as if it could tell both of these stories using the same vocabulary. (Spahr 27)

Central to telling the stories and making sense of them is the difficulty of language. How does one make sense of binary oppositions simultaneously? How can a place be beautiful and suffer such consequences of destruction? How can such beauty be so historically mismanaged? The narrator sees the paradox, and the sadness, of a place with such a complicated and layered identity, a place that has been exploited for so long by so many different groups, and its residents, both resistant and resigned, holding on to language, tradition, and stories that often point toward various, different origins. Although Spahr uses the word “both” an important part of her project is to undo the simplicity of binaries; there are never only two sides, but a history of complex issues that cannot be neatly separated. This is apparent in the history and evolution of language and the ways language is used in Hawaii, and Spahr’s attempts to find language to articulate her own questions and analysis. She writes:

despite the expansionist language and all its tools, all the laws and all the imperialism, all the economic dominance, all the military might, all the technologies, and all the entertainments, the language politics of the island remained endlessly complicated. The expansion did not happen overnight and one could point to how the local languages and the languages that were often created by the arrival of the expansionist language to someplace new, the pidgins and creoles, the burrowing languages, the negotiated languages, refused to go away as evidence of how the expansionist language might not be as good at expansion as one might think. (Spahr 95)

Language controls and refuses to give in to control. The history of the uses and mingling of languages in Hawaii reflect the complex cultural history of domination and resistance, of different groups moving in and out, assimilating and fighting back, at various turns. Spahr enacts this on the level of her own language through the use of repetition and listing; in the quote above, the types of languages listed represent the layers of complex history and culture that one must negotiate in order to make sense of the history of language in Hawaii. This list then repeats throughout the chapter, with occasional slight variation. The text does not simply narrate and explain a complex history of relations, but it instead tries to use the density of language in order to present experiences themselves dense in construction. In fact, she seems to ask, what kinds of vocabularies can account for the layers of stories and politics, for beauty and destruction? This anxiety runs through the text; Spahr is asking how language can be used to account for the histories of our relations to one another: colonizer and colonized, self and other. It asks how we can possibly recognize and identify ourselves when we are constantly moving through contexts and languages that are always already constructing and identifying us.

In order to move away from the binary, oppositional structure, Spahr uses the concept of the triad as a model that challenges and resists given constructions; there is no easy language to explain a sexual and domestic union of three people. In a triad, issues cannot simply be reduced to those between self and other, or gender limited to he and she. The triad changes the dynamic of the binary, indeed makes it impossible, and requires new means of language for explanation and recognition. The triad works as a literal example of the difficulty of falling outside traditional means of categorization and recognizability, and as a metaphor for breaking out of cultural, binary constructions for gender, sexuality, and identification. The triad moves the construction out of the self-other structure and into a more circular constellation of elements. If

history and politics could be understood in terms of constellations, instead of as binary issues in which one must choose one side or the other, this could open space for greater possibilities of recognition and understanding. The triad is the difficult anomaly that cannot be merely explained or defined because it calls attention to the simplified, problematic narratives that otherwise construct our everyday lives.

The model of the triad as a domestic partnership also works as an example of the non-normatively heterosexual desire, in Theresa de Lauretis's terms. The trio, consisting of two men and one woman, claims to still fit into a model of heterosexual desire, though there are no models for such a partnership of three. The narrator uses the example of receiving invitations that include a partner, and having to ask about bringing both partners. It becomes a queer construction in which the three are inevitably in perverse relation to one another, and in which the non-normative heterosexual and homosocial elements mingle and fuse into a singular domestic entity—the extent of the desiring relationship between the two men is never entirely clarified. De Lauretis's model of perverse desire offers a positive account of non-normatively heterosexual desire, and combined with Spahr's example of non-normative romantic domesticity, already a space has been opened for further exploration. When one "chooses" to turn away from social norms, the process can be that much more difficult without something else with which to identify. If "perversion" is seen as a turning away from "a socially constituted norm" and not a refusal of nature, then this norm, or "normal sexuality," can be seen as "a requirement of social *reproduction*, both reproduction of the species and reproduction of the social system" (de Lauretis 113). Read in this way, Spahr's triad is seen as a perverse response to heterosexual domestic partnerships and a model for alternative practices, especially for those who are not able to conform to the norms of social reproduction.

The triad's move back to New York, to the "islands in the Atlantic," seems to be an opportunity for relief from the difficulty of living an unconventional domestic lifestyle, in a place of difficult language and history. Optimistically, the narrator explains:

The gray matter at the back of their brain told them to move to the islands in the Atlantic because the islands were known for their perversions and various sexualities and they wanted to live someplace known for its perversions and various sexualities. The gray matter at the back of the brain wanted to move to the place that self identified as a place of complicated sexuality, a place for people who liked to be getting in and out of various beds in various different ways. A place that celebrated different beds and different ways of bedding down and around. The islands in the Atlantic, were full of perversions of all sorts and the stories told about the people of the islands had all genders in all the different combinations, even the ones beyond the two that so defined their culture at this moment. (123)

New York seems like a place full of other like-minded people, a place of "complicated sexuality" within which, as a trio, they will feel more comfortable in their "perversions." Eventually they will find that there are still very few, if any, models that match their own, and this place of becomes, in effect, no more accessible than Hawaii in terms of non-normative romantic identification. They are not a three-some in a traditional sense, and they are not self-identified as queer. Instead they have a specific schedule and heterosexual lifestyle that entails that one woman alternates sleeping with two different men—whose specific relations with each other is undetermined—and as a platonic trio they function as a domestic partnership of three. Here collective identification falls short, or requires more complex thinking through. The sentiment here echoes Spahr's earlier reflections on the difficult relations between historical colonization(s) and "native" collectivity in a place (Hawaii) where neither history nor native claims to that place can be summarized in any simple terms.

Back in New York, the three also witness 9/11 from across the river, and among other things, they become involved again in poetry readings and social gatherings. According to the narrator, after "the buildings fell" things became both more meaningful and more difficult to

interpret and understand. Conversations became “deeper” and more “resonant . . . as if they were shaping their lives.” The narrator continues:

They felt that life was good as long as they could talk about the lyrics to Brandy and had a relationship with other people who also knew the lyrics to Brandy and had a relationship to them that was like theirs, that abandoned irony in the pursuit of all-out sentiment. The readings and the gatherings were a sort of ephemera that rose up when the buildings fell. They were a place to feel safe, to feel as if it were fine to be a pervert because they were with other perverts, those who identified as queer or not, the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians and the ACLU and the People for the American Way. (187)

The narrator refers to the comments made by Jerry Falwell after the 9/11 events who blamed terrorists and liberals among others for helping cause such devastation. Outside of this radical and disturbing version of American patriotism, Spahr offers an example of the need for communal identification as a politics as well as means of survival. Having others with whom to identify can offer a safe place, a place in which what is seen by dominant culture as perversion functions in positive and supportive terms. The readings and gatherings become a constructive and encouraging space for “perverts” or simply those who didn’t identify with the extreme conservative “norms” of citizenship articulated in the wake of 9/11, reiterating the necessary and difficult struggle between individual and group identification, even if one is a part of a “group” that has been identified by an oppressive narrative.

Further coming to terms with “their” own perverse domestic situation in the context of the larger culture, toward the end of *The Transformation*, Spahr’s narrator strategically references Sappho’s poem, “He is More Than a Hero.” In the poem there is a pair of lovers and an other—the narrator—who seems to be in love with one of the pair, thus forming a love triangle, used to reflect the awkward triad structure of the three lovers in Spahr’s account. The narrator explains:

At that moment, they had agreed to a third point, a Sapphic point They agreed to no longer see relationship as a feedback loop of face-to-face desire. Instead they had to deal with a sort of shimmering, a fracturing of all their looks and glances. And it was because of this third Sapphic point that they implicated themselves in they. (206)

The Sappho reference offers not only a possibility that is of three instead of only two, but actually perverts the conception of heterosexual pairing and sexual object choice, and opens the field for constructions that may or not be clearly articulated. It is at this moment that the narrator seems to come to terms with their identification as a “they,” and the relationship of three not as a unified subjectivity but “as a sort of shimmering, a fracturing” and as something that is awkward. This is analogous to how describing or articulating the history, language, and politics of Hawaii constantly turns linguistically and socially difficult and messy. The positive perversity of *The Transformation* is in its recognition and exploration of dense layers of culture, history, sexuality, and language that are constantly ignored and smoothed over by narratives that define identity for cultures and individuals. Their perverse awkwardness results in a troubling that creates the space for articulations of sexual, domestic, and cultural investments, and the construction of a model for undoing and revising historical and hetero-normative binaries, thus challenging and confirming spaces of collective identification.

Borderlands/La Frontera

Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* uses hybrid strategies, combining accessible personal memoir writing with poems and reflections, in order to enact the multiple identity formations through which she is working in the text. At its center is a continuously circulating reading, undoing, and rereading of the traditional stories and cultural myths on which Anzaldúa was raised as an Indigenous Mexican and American woman, raised on the border of Texas and Mexico. The text is an example of feminist critique and queer transgression of traditional (binary

and hierarchal) constructions of gender and sexuality, and extends further in its queerness into, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, “the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with [gender and sexuality] and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses” (*Tendencies* 8). As Anzaldúa explains:

For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior Being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I *made the choice to be queer*. It’s an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts. It makes for *loquería*, the crazies. (41)

This path into knowledge is a necessary and conflicted journey, and it is this that is foregrounded as the text negotiates registers of language, different styles of written presentation, the weaving of Spanish and English, political commentary, and personal narration. Anzaldúa also incorporates more difficult, innovative poetic passages that make the various strategies resonate at yet another level, almost as if these are coming from another place of experience or identification altogether. The text utilizes a fusion of formal strategy and personal narrative content in order to enact the complicated relationships, as she explains, between psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands that she reads and negotiates in this personal/textual process of subjective understanding. The multiple layers and shifting registers, narratives, and contexts are analogous to Friedman’s spatialized conceptualization of identity. Anzaldúa interrogates, explores, and performs this theory of identity as a means of re-reading her past, through the present, and toward an alternative model of narration and identification that she can take out into the world.

Although this text is easily read in the ways that it enacts multiplicity in identity, what is often left out of readings is the importance of the most textually innovative passages. The text as a whole is hybrid in its use of a variety of generic strategies, but is often narrative and accessible;

however, it is in the more difficult, linguistically indeterminate passages that Anzaldúa seems to go into some other space of consciousness, in order to find the means for creating her new model of identification. Her project, as she has come to determine it, is to work within the traditional narratives of her cultural experience and revise these on her own terms. She ultimately creates the persona of the “mestiza,” the one who is a mix of Mexican and indigenous cultural tradition and feminist, lesbian, intellectual. But before she comes to the conception of this new way of identifying, she must work through a Kristevan semiotic space of linguistic disruption and subversion, as a means of going into the pre-Oedipal space, before the social, patriarchal, religious, hetero-normative formations of the cultural traditions of her cultural identity. For example, Anzaldúa titles chapter 4, “La herencia de Coatlicue The Coatlicue State.” Coatlicue is an Aztec earth goddess who wears a serpent skirt, whose head is encircled by the joined heads of two snakes. She is the source of life, and represents creation and destruction, life and death, nourishing and devouring:

protean being

dark dumb windowless no moon glides
 across the stone the night sky alone alone
 no lights just mirror walls obsidian smoky in the
 mirror she sees a woman with four heads the heads
 turning round and round spokes of a wheel her neck
 is an axle she stares at each face each wishes the
 other not there the obsidian knife in the air the
 building so high should she jump would she feel
 the breeze fanning her face tumbling down the steps
 of the temple heart offered up to the sun wall
 growing thin thinner she is eyeless a mole
 burrowing deeper tunneling here tunneling there
 tunneling through the air in the photograph a double
 image a ghost arm alongside the flesh one inside her
 head the cracks ricocheting bisecting
 crisscrossing she hears the rattlesnakes stirring in

a jar being fed with her flesh she listens to the
 seam between dusk and dark they are talking she hears
 their frozen thumpings the soul encased in black
 obsidian smoking smoking she bends to catch a
 feather of herself as she falls lost in the
 silence of the empty air turning turning
 at midnight turning into a wild pig how to get back
 all the feathers put them in the jar the rattling
 full circle and back dark windowless no moon
 glides across the night sky night sky night (63-64)

We can read “protean” in the sense of coming first (or primordial), and in taking on different forms, shapes, meanings, or exhibiting variety or diversity. In this semiotic linguistic space of disruption and contradiction, before linguistic/social symbolic structure becomes dominant, the Coatlique functions both in its movement into a pre-gendered, pre-patriarchal space—what Anzaldúa calls the underworld—and represents the contemporary moment of heterogeneity and possibility in the opening of the language of the text at hand. We immediately notice the spacing of the language on the page, in which the words flow, yet do not move smoothly because of the varied lengths of the spaces between words, and we get a kind of tentative movement into another type of space; both the space of the page and the space in which the narrator is (fearfully) attempting to go are unknown alternatives to the types of textual identifications that have come before.

Simultaneously, in the passage above, we can read the connection between the “protean,” the underworld, the darkness of night in which there are “no lights just mirror walls”; and the mirrors that are “smoky” yet “she sees a woman with four heads”—as if she sees the multiple heads of herself, while “each wishes the other not there.” It is at this point that the narrator realizes there is no going back to some single sense of unified self (indeed there has never been one), but instead: “the cracks ricocheting bisecting crisscrossing she hears rattlesnakes.”

Coatlique, the snake woman, represents the potential explosion, disruption, fragmentation that begins first with only cracks that then multiply. Wondering “how to get back all the feathers” of herself, the rattling continues and repeats. Further, there is no moon but only “the night sky night sky night”; the underworld, although dark and unknown, offers the alternative to the space of unrecognizability that “she” has suffered (65). She explores this question of unrecognizability further in the next passages:

The secret I tried to conceal was that I was not normal, that I was not like the others. I felt alien, I knew I was alien. I was the mutant stoned out of the herd, something deformed with evil inside.

She has this fear that she has no names that she
has many names that she doesn't know her names She has
this fear that she's an image that comes and goes
clearing and darkening the fear that she's the dreamwork
inside someone else's skull She has this fear that if
she takes off her clothes shoves her brain aside
peels off her skin that if she drains the blood
vessels strips the flesh from the bone flushes out
the marrow She has this fear that when she does
reach herself she turns around to embrace herself a
lion's or witch's or serpent's head will turn around
swallow her and grin She has this fear that if she digs
into herself she won't find anyone that when she gets
“there” she won't find her notches on the trees the
birds will have eaten all the crumbs She has this fear
that she won't find the way back (65)

The problem is the repetition of the self as unknown—enacted in the repetition of the words fear and name—the unnamed cannot be recognized. Or as Butler writes:

I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable. This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation. (*Undoing* 4)

Anzaldúa's narrator "has this fear that she won't find the way back" but in fact, there is nothing to return to, only this movement toward a potential, new, open consciousness. Recognition for this narrator is the impossibility of recognition within her experience of narrowly defined languages of identification. If she is named, it is because she has been identified within a system that doesn't recognize how she doesn't fit in to the parameters of that system. The difficulty here is in the impossibility of defining oneself by way of language that doesn't allow for alternative possibilities; the challenge is finding the ability to articulate one's experiences when there is no acceptable language for doing so. Pushing against the boundaries of personal narrative, this text calls for expanded possibilities for recognition through its refusal and rewriting of the personal, poetic narrative. In the process of working through an oppressive past of patriarchy, religion, and historical ethnic cultural limitations, Anzaldúa revises narrative and identity on her own terms. In her own life she explains the choice to identify as a lesbian, and in writing she constructs a queer text that doesn't conform to any particular genre specifications. By bringing these together in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she creates a new identity through her own readings of the spiritual and cultural narratives she has known all her life. In seeking to re-frame an oppressive past, Anzaldúa avoids its total disavowal and is able to explore and re-use it in ways that seem more relevant for her own experience. Taking on this revised past, incorporated within a present that recognizes the complex and non-static nature of identity, Anzaldúa creates spaces of possibility for further exploration, through a text that includes and explodes conventional ways of "doing" autobiographical identity politics. And crucial to this exploration and articulation of a new model

are the semiotic spaces, the spaces at the border, the frontier, before terms and stories have been defined and categorized. In this primordial, pre-Oedipal space, Anzaldúa finds the non/narrative means to reconstruct what happens at the interstices of history, tradition, collective identity, and queer experience. It is in the process of the writing itself that the processes of questioning and revising begin to open space for the creation of something new altogether. The “New Mestiza” is not a final answer, but a place of beginning, a beginning that is always still in process, a place of continual negotiation. It is through the formal openness and experiment in the text that leads Anzaldúa toward a reconceived relation to traditional collective identity and her own shifting and dynamic personal identifications.

Dictee

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* is memoir as the site of the impossibility of memorializing. While past impressions and artifacts are collected in the text, materials come together and separate, weave and unweave themselves into the space of the text that is outside of the various temporalities to which it points. *Dictee* is a retrospective constellation of materials that, through its accumulation of the messy details of history, refuses the idea that a subject is a unified self who gathers and then documents her memories into a coherent personal narrative. In her article on *Dictee*, Anne Cheng asks how a text can be read “as a ‘multicultural, feminist, post-colonial and ethnic memoir’ when its process of *recollection* continually stalls and refuses identification even on the simplest level?” (119). Since, she continues, this text speaks “through disembodied yet multiple voices, borrowed citations, and captionless photographs, this supposed autobiography gives us a confession that does not confess, a dictation without origin, and history without names” (119). The text “offers up bits of re-collected narratives, but they stand in the

text as half-revived, half-buried information. Indeed, in *Dictée*, acts of recollection (in the sense of memory recall) are frequently indistinguishable from acts of collection (in the sense of gathering bits of objects)” (Cheng 119). Throughout the text images, references, and artifacts are treated as evidence and of a personal and cultural history: from the presentation and parody of French lessons and dictation, to the diary writing of Cha’s mother, to images of Korean protests, violence, and revolutionary acts in the face of Japanese occupation. The form of the text presents the past as historical documentation that mingles with family history, personal reflection, voice, identity, and memory. Like a scrapbook, images and fragments of text are pasted together, often without captions, to form particular constellations within larger histories, single moments representing the past in the instant of the (present) text.¹

This non/narrative, non/memoir begins, even before the book begins, with an image of the writing of a Korean exile on the wall of a Japanese mine. Translated, it reads: “mother/I miss you/I am hungry/I want to go home” (Park 226). Korea was occupied by Japan from 1909-1945, and the history and emotion of this runs through *Dictée*. The entire collection of fragments spread throughout the text resonates into a final image, in place of any solid conclusion, which comments on the difficulty of vision, of looking out beyond one’s own capability or perspective. The words etched on the wall, and this final image, create a frame around the text, the stories of the mother and historical female figures framing the story of the child. The narrator continually negotiates her own writing and experience through the women’s stories, the images and pieces of

¹ For further reading on *Dictée*, see Kim and Alarcon’s *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Donnell and Polkey’s *Representing Lives: Women and Auto/Biography*, Hinton and Hogue’s *We Who Love to be Astonished*, Keller and Miller’s *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory*, Hakutani’s *Postmodernity and Cross-Culturalism*, Nock-Hee Park’s *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics*, Mix’s *A Vocabulary of Thinking*, Cheng’s *The Melancholy of Race*, Spahr’s *Everybody’s Autonomy*.

history, the historical characters that run through the text. First, in order to set up this frame before looking into the body of the text, it seems useful to read the final image:

Lift me up mom to the window the child looking
 above too high above her view the glass between
 some image a blur now darks and greys mere
 shadows lingering above her vision her head tilted
 back as far as it can go. Lift me up to the window the
 white frame and the glass between, early dusk or
 dawn when light is muted, lines yield to shades,
 houses cast shadow pools in the passing light. Brief.
 All briefly towards night There is no one inside the
 pane and the glass between. Trees adhere to silence
 in attendance to the view to come. If to occur. In
 vigilance of lifting the immobile silence. Lift me to
 the window to the picture image unleash the ropes
 tied to weights of stones first the ropes then its scraping
 on wood to break stillness as the bells fall peal follow
 the sound of ropes holding weight scraping on wood
 to break stillness bells fall a peal to sky. (Cha 179)

Cha is commenting on the book as a whole, on this collection as an act of lifting the silence, “as the bells fall peal follow the sound of ropes holding weight scraping on wood to break stillness bells fall a peal to sky.” Falling bells, one can imagine, are noisy. “Peal”: a loud burst of noise, while the ringing turns into the sound of the movement of “weight scraping on wood” breaks stillness, the stillness and silence of letting history go untold. In this account, “bells fall,” ring out, and they appeal, the sounds ringing and resonating to end a text that remains open. The material text holds the accumulation of details and voices, pieces of narratives and images, between its covers. These are the materials the narrator has to work with in the construction of the subject of the text, which is the process of accumulation and collage itself. Reading this final image back into the text highlights the importance of writing the noisy gaps and fragments into history, as well as how that history is constructed through language and writing.

Language, history, and writing are also intimately connected to speech and the body. Cha creates play between language and speech, silence and voice, words and the physical phenomenon of speaking (or being unable to speak). Elisabeth Frost writes that Cha “provokes through verbal and visual means an inquiry into the nature of cultural identity and corporality” (“In Another” 181). For example, in one section Cha includes diagrams of the parts of the body used in speaking, swallowing, and breathing, from the mouth down the neck and into the lungs. This focus on the “corporeal suggests that text and image are tools to render the body intelligible,” writes Frost. The body is as difficult a text, as a difficult text, hence the need to consider the body in terms of the history of resistance in Korea, according to Frost, and in the textual document that revises (or sees again) that history. Imperative to this project is the practice of giving language to unspoken history and silenced subjects who, through the text, can testify to the events of the past. Cha writes:

*Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in
Time’s memory. Unemployed. Unspoken. History.
Past. Let the one who is disease, one who is mother
who waits nine days and nine nights be found.
Restore memory. Let the one who is disease, one
who is daughter restore spring with her each ap-
pearance from beneath the earth.
The ink spills thickest before it runs dry before it
stops writing at all. (Cha 133)*

The one who is disease is the one who speaks well, the one who, because of her skill, will “restore memory.” But there are two here: the mother, like memory and history is restored and given the ability to speak in the text; and the daughter, we might read, is the writer of the text, restoring what has been buried. This re-collection, or re-construction, of fragments is the task of the writer who uses language to restore memory; the project is a dialogue between mother, daughter, history, memory, language, geography, image, and speech. The noise of the text breaks

the silence, fills in some of the gaps left by history. The narrator daughter needs to tell the story of the mother, of the mother's history, in order to come to terms with her own story. She needs to write it all out, while "the ink spills thickest" even if the story is still incomplete, constructed in stops and starts, fragments and incoherent details. The relationships between the hybrid elements of the text constellate between the covers of this book to open into a world that redefines what it means to record history and narrate experience. Or, as Frost writes:

Cha combines divergent modes of representation: visual images . . . alternate with passages of English, French, Latin, and Chinese. Hand-written passages and calligraphic ideograms large enough to fill a page blur the lines between the discursive and the imagistic. Cha evokes multiple discourses and their accompanying conventions: lyric and epic poetry, parable, translation, correspondence, catechism, historical narrative, cinematic prose. (181)

Cha also organizes *Dictee* into nine sections, each named for one of the Greek muses and contributing to the "mythology" she constructs for "subjects marred by unspeakable loss—silence, exile, or death" (Frost 182). At times, Cha offers meta-commentary on the complex nature of hybridity in *Dictee*. The following selection is one part of a longer piece, "Aller," which is followed by another piece, "Retour." The idea of going and returning is recursive, not unlike the unburying of history, the writing of memory or past events. *Dictee* is in continual process of going into history to recover material, and coming back out to record, revise, re-articulate that history. This becomes not simply an endeavor, but a responsibility; the one who has the skill for speaking is the one called upon to act as witness, the one to write it all down. Cha writes:

Forgetting nothing
Leaving out nothing.
But pretend
go to the next line
Resurrect it all over again.

Bit by bit. Reconstructing step by step
 step
 within limits
 enclosed absolutely shut
 tight, black, without leaks.
 Within those limits,
 resurrect, as much as
 possible, possibly could hold
 possibly ever hold
 a segment of it
 segment by segment
 segmented
 sequence, narrative, variation
 on make believe
 secrete saliva the words
 saliva secrete the words
 secretion of words flow liquid form
 salivate the words
 give light. Fuel. Enflame. (129)

There is a sense of necessity—to speak, to (re)write history—that runs through this text, but there are also gaps; there are no overarching narratives and few captions or rhetorical, contextualizing devices to help the reader through the materials that are presented. The narrator is constructing a material document of experiences that have not been previously recorded, or have not been put together in such a particular context. Personal history merges with official history, and all of this runs through the hand of the narrator, documenting by pasting fragments and details together. Similarly, Carol Jacobs interprets Walter Benjamin's theory of memory, or documenting the past, "in which the past must and must not be told—neither as conventional flowing narrative, nor, certainly, as report, but as epic and rhapsody, literary forms that mark

their own ruptures” (29-30). If then the past cannot be told as a chronicled and flowing narrative, then maybe there is, in Benjamin’s terms, not necessarily a thing called autobiographical writing, but only writing that seeks to uncover the past in its layers and ruptures. Cha writes, “Forgetting nothing / Leaving out nothing. / But pretend.” It is always a (necessary) (re)construction that can only happen “within limits” in which one can only “resurrect as much as possible . . . segment by segment / sequence, narrative, variation / on make believe.” There seems to be a simultaneous erasing and rewriting of memory; the details of the past are made louder, more visible, given voice in their constellated messiness as they are contained by the text, through language; or as Cha writes: “secretion of words flow liquid form / salivate the words / give light. Fuel. Enflame.” The text that rewrites history is a political practice in which light is shown on what has previously been secret, untold.

Putting herself in charge of documenting this past—and creating an interpretation based on the way in which she constructs the text—Cha is acting as witness to the stories and histories she engages. Witnessing, according to Kelly Oliver, is crucial to a politics that goes beyond subject recognition in order to give subjects voice and the ability to participate in documenting the truths of history. In *Witnessing*, Oliver tells the story of a Holocaust testimonial by an eyewitness who gives her account of the “Auschwitz uprising in which prisoners set fire to the camp”; although the witness reported seeing four chimneys on fire when there was actually only one chimney, Oliver explains, the discrepancy points to something especially useful:

The Auschwitz survivor saw something unfamiliar, Jewish resistance, which gave her the courage to resist. She saw something that in one sense did not happen—four chimneys blowing up—but that in another made all the difference to what happened. Seeing the impossible—what did not happen—gave her the strength to make what seemed impossible possible: surviving the Holocaust. (1)

The witness reads possibility into her account, and although the account she reports does not match the facts regarding the chimneys, it lends itself to a historical truth that is outside of the particular details. While before this event there was little hope of Jewish resistance and survival, this witness reframes that thinking to include hope—opening a space for the possibility of resistance and survival—within her testimony.

Oliver presents witnessing as “response-ability,” the ability to respond, which one cannot do when one is merely recognized but cannot speak. To be a witness is to be given the ability—in fact the “responsibility”—to respond to others and events. Further, “address-ability,” according to Oliver, is an ability that one cannot have if one is not considered a subject with agency to be addressed, and to respond. This notion goes beyond theories of recognition, which Oliver sees as antagonistic in structure—following a Hegelian model—and limited to recognizing oneself in another, or being (submissively) recognized by another. Instead, Oliver writes:

Through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, those othered can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects . . . the speaking subject is a subject by virtue of address-ability and response-ability. Address-ability and response-ability are the roots of subjectivity, which are damaged by the objectifying operations of oppression and subordination. (7)

During the Japanese occupation of Korea, the Japanese made it illegal for citizens to speak Korean. This lack of access to their own language also made them unable to speak at all, in a certain sense. That Korea, for Cha, entails a confusion of silence and oppression, of resistance and subordination. In reconstructing that history, both visual and aural aspects of language are essential to her account. What the page looks like is as important as how the language sounds, or what it means. Cha finds visual recognition, written language, and speech in fundamental, intimate relation in her witnessing of past events made present in the text. *Dictee*, consequently,

functions as a type of “retribution and compassion” in the ways in which it gives voice to historically silenced subjects, and as textual witness, reconstructs fragments into a testimony that articulates that history on behalf of those subjects. As Oliver explains:

I would argue that testimonies from the aftermath of the Holocaust and slavery do not merely articulate a demand to be recognized or to be seen They are also testifying to the process of witnessing that both reconstructs damaged subjectivity and constitutes the heart of all subjectivity The demand for recognition manifest in testimonies from those othered by dominant culture is transformed by the accompanying demands for retribution and compassion. (8)

Oliver further writes that “compassionate relations” between subjects can manifest by way of processes of “working-through whatever we might find threatening in relation to otherness and difference” (10). *Dictee* is an important text on many levels, but particularly in the way that it works through the history of oppression of the Korean people, and Cha’s sense of her own identity as a Korean-American subject; she transforms her cultural and personal history into a testimonial document that speaks. Her project, through the process of the text, is in figuring out what, and how, “to say.” This kind of working through might function, in Oliver’s terms, as a kind of “social theory of transformation” through which it becomes “necessary to reconceive of subjective identity in a way that does not require abjecting or excluding others or otherness in order to have a sense of oneself as a subject” (10). Working through traumatic history, through the materials, documents, and first-person accounts, functions as a way for Cha to reconceive of her own identity, to come to terms with the history on behalf of her own family and the various unrelated historical characters of the text, and bring that into the (revised) present. *Dictee* is the space in which Cha becomes witness to that history, and is able to alter the present and potential future, on new terms. Because, as Oliver tells us, “None of us develops a sense of ourselves as subjects with any sort of identity apart from relations with others,” witnessing becomes not simply a project of individual identity, but an “ethical and political responsibility” (10-11). For

Oliver, to “conceive of subjectivity as a process of witnessing” necessitates the ability to address and respond “in relation to other people, especially through difference” in order to also “realize an ethical and social responsibility to those others who sustain us” (19). The witness to history, the document that gives voice to the previously silenced, enacts a model of political and social transformation. As the formal hybridity of *Dictee* enacts the complexity of the stories, experiences, sentiments, languages, and histories, so does the document itself perform a transformation from silence to speech, from obscurity to transparency, from hope passed from mother (tongue, land) to daughter (one who is skilled at speaking), so that future generations can look up and out the window toward another horizon.

Conclusion

All three of these texts offer final examples of how experimental writing can and does open possibilities for politics at the textual level, and in the world, enacting the difficulty and necessity of using language to increase means of recognizability for both textual and cultural subjects. Moving from the focus on contemporary American culture in chapter 3, the texts in this chapter deal with geography and diaspora in ways that comment on, and complicate, personal and “ethnic” identity. These writers “write the self” through their own and others’ histories of dislocation and subjective exploration. Their personal histories and articulation of experience work politically to create textual models for the representation of “the antithetical” within the context of dominant cultural narratives. Kristeva writes: “The text is a practice that could be compared to political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society.” In different ways, each through her own historical and geographical displacements, Spahr, Anzaldúa, and Cha’s text-subjects gain new perspectives on the relationship between

individual and collective identity, and advocate for the negotiation of subjective identification on new terms. From Spahr's project of constructing alternatives to mainstream heterosexual domestic relations, to Anzaldúa's interest in transgressing and rewriting traditional narratives for women, to Cha's re-visualizing and re-framing of the fragmented and previously invisible details of history, these writers create subjects-in-process who move through the spaces of the text similarly to multiply situated subjects in the world, while the multiple and contradictory discourses of the world are enacted through the formal strategies on the page. The subjects of these texts become witnesses to the limited nature of ideological narratives, and the limiting effects of binary structures, and they instead serve as models of alternative narratives and practices. They speak to and for historically silenced subjects and their texts witness the gaps in history and language for colonized or culturally oppressed subjects. Pushing beyond textual subversion, these text-subjects, over the course of the texts, come to realize the ability to address (address-ability) and the ability to respond (response-ability) giving them, and their readers, agency as a mandate to create change; creating what Oliver terms a social theory of transformation. Change happens in different spaces, over and across time, and through various means. Breaking habits of narrative, textuality, subjective and cultural understanding, and representation can lend toward social transformation, in theory and in practice.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." *The Dialect of Enlightenment*. New York: Verso Books, 1997. Print.
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001. Print.
- Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. [1987] San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999. Print.
- Ashton, Jennifer. "'Rose is a Rose': Gertrude Stein and the Critique of Indeterminacy." *Modernism/modernity* 9.4 (2002): 581-604. Print.
- Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Pantheon, 1988. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Image of Proust." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1968. Print.
- . "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 3 1935-38. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002. Print.
- . "On the Concept of History." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 3 1935-38. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002. Print.
- Benstock, Shari. *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*. Austin: U of Texas Press, 1986. Print.
- Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. New York: Zone Books, 1991. Print.

- Berry, Ellen E. *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering: Gertrude Stein's Postmodernism*. U of Michigan Press, 1992. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." *Nation and Narration*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984. Print.
- Brown, Wendy. *Politics out of History*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.
- Bruns, Gerald. "A Poem of Laughter and Forgetting: Lyn Hejinian's *A Border Comedy*." *Textual Practice* 23.3 (2009): 397-416. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- . *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005. Print.
- . *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- . "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* Ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Caruth, Cathy, Ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. Print.
- . *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.
- . "Violence and Time: Traumatic Survivals." *Assemblage* 20 (1993): 24-25. Print.
- Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung. *Dictee*. Berkley: Third Woman Press, 1995 (1982). Print.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.

---. "Memory and Anti-documentary Desire in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*." *Melus* 23.4 (1998) Web. 6 Nov 2011.

Chisholm, Dianne. *Queer Constellations*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2005. Print.

---. H.D.'s *Freudian Poetics: Psychoanalysis in Translation*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992. Print.

Chodorow, Nancy. *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1989. Print.

Curnutt, Kirk. "Inside and Outside: Gertrude Stein on Identity, Celebrity, and Authenticity."

Journal of Modern Literature 23.2 (1999) 291-308. Print.

Dahlen, Beverly. *A Reading 1-7*. San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1985. Print.

---. *A Reading 8-10*. Tucson: Chax Press, 1992. Print.

---. *A Reading 11-17*. Elmwood, Conn.: Potes & Poets, 1989. Print.

---. *A Reading 18-20*. Boulder: Instance Press, 2006. Print.

---. "Forbidden Knowledge." *Poetics Journal* 4 (1984). Print.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. 1949. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. NY: Vintage, 2011. Print.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1984. Print.

DeKoven, Marianne. *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991. Print.

---. *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*. Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1983. Print.

de Lauretis, Teresa. *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Secuality and Perverse Desire*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994. Print.

---. *Figures of Resistance: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois Press, 2007. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997. Print.

Donnell, Alison, and Pauline Polkey, eds. *Representing Lives: Women and Auto/Biography*.

Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. Print.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama Press, 2006. Print.

---. *H.D.: The Career of That Struggle*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1986. Print.

---. *The Pink Guitar*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

---. *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry 1908-1934*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.

Dworkin, Craig. "‘Penelope Reworking the Twill’: Patchwork, Writing, and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*." *Contemporary Literature* 36.1 (1995): 58-81. Print.

Dydo, Ulla. *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2003. Print.

Eysteinnsson, Astradur. *The Concept of Modernism*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990. Print.

Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989. Print.

---. *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2000. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Print.

---. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York:

Pantheon Books, 1984. Print.

Fraser, Kathleen. *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity*. Tuscaloosa:

U of Alabama Press, 2000. Print.

- Freud, Sigmund. "Analysis Terminable and Interminable." *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. vol 23. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1968. Print.
- . *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989. Print.
- Friedman, Ellen, and Miriam Fuchs. *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989. Print.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998. Print.
- . *Psyche Reborn. The Emergence of H.D.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981. Print.
- . "Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)Birth of the Author." *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein. U of Wisconsin Press, 1991. Print.
- Frost, Elizabeth. *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*. Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 2003. Print.
- . "'In Another Tongue': Body, Image, Text in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictée." Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue, Eds. *We Who Love to be Astonished*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama Press, 2002. Print.
- Fuss, Diana. *Identification Papers*. Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Gauntlett, David. "Judith Butler." *Theory.org.uk: Media/Gender/Identity Resources*. 2nd ed. CAMRI: U of Westminster, 1997. Web. 3 Nov. 2011.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiography and Postmodernism*. Boston: U of Massachusetts Press, 1994. Print.
- . *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994. Print.

Gladman, Renee. *Juice*. San Francisco: Kelsey St. Press, 2000. Print.

Glück, Robert. "Long Note on New Narrative." *Narrativity*. Issue 1. n. pag. Web. 6 Nov 2011.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989. Print.

---. *Space, Time, and Perversion*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.

---. *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. Print.

---. *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994. Print.

Hakutani, Yoshinobu. *Postmodernity and Cross-Culturalism*. Madison: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 2002. Print.

Halpern, David M. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995. Print.

Halpern, Rob. "Realism and Utopia: Sex, Writing, and Activism in New Narrative." *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 41.1 (Spring 2011): 82-124. Print.

Harryman, Carla. "Introduction: Non/Narrative." *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 41.1 (Spring 2011): 1-11. Print.

H.D. *Tribute to Freud*. New York: New Directions, 1974 (1956). Print.

H.D. *HERmione*. New York: New Directions, 1981. Print.

Hejinian, Lyn. *A Border Comedy*. New York: Granary Books, 2001. Print.

---. *My Life*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987, 1980. Print.

---. *My Life in the Nineties*. New York: Shark Books, 2003. Print.

---. *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1996. Print.

---. "The Rejection of Closure." *The Language of Inquiry*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2000. Print.

---. "Strangeness." *The Language of Inquiry*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California Press, 2000. Print.

---. "What's Missing from My Life" Conference Presentation 2004. Print.

Hennessy, Rosemary. *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Hinton, Laura, and Cynthia Hogue. *We Who Love To Be Astonished*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama Press, 2002. Print.

hooks, bell. "'this is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you': Language, a place of struggle." *Between Languages and Cultures*. Ed. Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh Press, 1995. Print.

Hunt, Erica. "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics." *The Politics of Poetic Form*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof Books, 1990. Print.

Jacobs, Carol. *In the Language of Walter Benjamin*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999. Print.

Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982. Print.

---. *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991, 2005. Print.

Keller, Lynn. "Grand Collage 'Out of Bounds': Feminist Serial Poems by Beverly Dahlen and Rachel Blau DuPlessis." *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1997. Print.

Keller, Lynn, and Crisanne Miller. *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1995. Print.

Kent, Kathryn. "'Excreate a No Sense': The Erotic Currency of Gertrude Stein's I." *Making Girls Into Women*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.

Kim, Elaine and Norma Alarcon, Eds. *Writing Self, Writing Nation*. Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994. Print.

Kinnahan, Linda. *Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov and Kathleen Fraser*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1994. Print.

Kristeva, Julia. *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. Print.

---. *Desire in Language*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980. Print.

---. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia UP, 1984. Print.

Last Year at Marienbad. Screenplay by Alain Robbe-Grillet. Dir. Alain Resnais, 1961.

Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 1989. Print.

Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1982. Print.

---. *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984, 2007. Print.

Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. Print.

Lu, Pamela. *Pamela: A Novel*. Berkeley: Atelos, 1998. Print.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1984. Print.

Malcolm, Janet. *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007. Print.

Marcus, Laura. *Auto/biographical Discourses*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994. Print.

Martin, Biddy. "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s]." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

- Mellow, James R. *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company*. New York: Avon Books, 1974. Print.
- Miller, Nancy K. *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988. Print.
- Mix, Deborah. *A Vocabulary of Thinking: Gertrude Stein and Contemporary North American Women's Innovative Writing*. Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 2007. Print.
- Mowitt, John. *Text*. Chapel Hill: Duke UP, 1992. Print.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24. Print.
- Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.
- . *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2001. Print.
- Park, Josephine Nock-Hee. *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Prevallet, Kristin. "Writing is Never by Itself Alone: Six Mini-Essays on Relational Investigative Poetics." *Fence* 6.1 (2003): 1-9. Web. 6 Nov 2011.
- Poetzsch, Markus. "Presence, Deixis, and the Making of Meaning in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75.4 (2006): 946-956. Print.
- Prud'homme, Johanne, and Lyne Légaré. "The Subject in Process" *Signo* (2006). n. pag. Web. 6 Nov 2011.
- Rankine, Claudia. *Do not Let Me Be Lonely*. Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 2004. Print.
- Reddy, Srikanth. "Changing the *Sjuzet*: Lyn Hejinian's Digressive Narratologies." *Contemporary Literature* 50.1 (2009): 54-93. Print.

- Retallack, Joan. "Introduction." *Gertrude Stein: Selections*. Ed. Retallack. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2008. Print.
- Scott, Joan. "Experience." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1998. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1990. Print.
- . "Queer and Now." *Tendencies*. Raleigh-Durham: Duke UP, 1993. Print.
- Silliman, Ron. *In the American Tree*. Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1986. Print.
- Silverman, Kaja. *The Subject of Semiotics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984. Print.
- . *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988. Print.
- Simpson, Megan. "Subjects of Knowledge: Processing Gender and Sexuality." *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Orientated Writing*. Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 2000. Print.
- Sloan, Mary Margaret, Ed. *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing By Women*. Jersey City: Talisman House, 1998. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie. *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth-century*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1998. Print.
- Spahr, Juliana. *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama Press, 2001. Print.
- . *The Transformation*. Berkeley: Atelos, 2007. Print.

Stanley, Liz. *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992. Print.

Stein, Gertrude. *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974. Print.

---. *Writings 1932-1946*. New York: The Library of America, 1998. Print.

---. "A Transatlantic Interview—1946." *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*. Ed. Robert Bartlett Haas. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974. Print.

---. "Identity: Audience Writing." *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*. Ed. Robert Bartlett Haas. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974. Print.

---. "Entity: Really Writing." *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*. Ed. Robert Bartlett Haas. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974. Print.

Terdiman, Richard. *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993. Print.

Vickery, Ann. *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*. Hanover: UP of New England, 2000. Print.

Watten, Barrett. "The Constructivist Moment: From El Lissitzky to Detroit Techno." *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2003. Print.

Watten, Barrett, and Lyn Hejinian, Eds. "Non/narrative." *Poetics Journal* 5 (1985). Print.

---. "Women and Language." *Poetics Journal* 4 (1984). Print.

---. "The Person." *Poetics Journal* 9 (1991). Print.

White, Hayden, *The Content of The Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1987. Print.

Ziarek, Krzysztof. "Gertrude Stein's Poetics of the Event." *The Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2001. Print.

ABSTRACT**WRITING THE SELF:
FEMINIST EXPERIMENT AND CULTURAL IDENTITY**

by

JILL DARLING**May 2012****Advisor:** Dr. Barrett Watten**Major:** English**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

This dissertation examines how twentieth-century experimental women writers construct non/narrative texts whose text-subjects mediate identity and call for increased possibilities for subject-identification in the world. The use of innovative formal strategies and experiment with narrative, combined with the content of identity critique, make these texts political projects that variously explore gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity in relation to contemporary American culture. In this project I bring discussions of identity into the theorization of formally innovative writing. I work to move away from the kinds of essentializing practices of identity politics—in which subjects are fit into specific identity categories—and toward more complicated, contextualized, and historical understandings of identity formation. I begin with the notion that identity categories, or markers, play out in different contexts and are, at different moments: simultaneous, fluctuating, overlapping, and spatial (instead of hierarchal). I then continue toward readings of literary texts that function as new models of identification for spatially contextualized subjects. This project is significant for the way in which it brings together a diverse selection of non/narrative writing by women in the twentieth-century, and combines

textual and cultural analysis to think through identity issues in relation to contemporary social subjects.

This project is grounded in literary modernism and moves into work by contemporary American women writers at the end of the twentieth century. I begin by pairing the work of Gertrude Stein and Lyn Hejinian in chapter 1, and that of H.D. and Beverly Dahlen in chapter 2. As modernists, Stein and H.D. are key figures who negotiate identity and non/narrative writing, and are important influences for Hejinian and Dahlen. The pairing of modern and contemporary authors in the first two chapters illustrates a correlation between writing styles and practices as well as how these diverge from the early to late part of the century. Hejinian's body of work, beginning in the 1970s, can be read as coming out of Stein and thinking avant-garde practice through her own contemporary politics as a Language poet. Dahlen seems to pick up H.D.'s Freudian project, and additionally incorporates deconstruction and feminist criticism of the 1970s and 80s in her work. Hejinian and Dahlen also serve as intermediaries between the modernists and later contemporary writers—many of whom have been influenced by modernists such as Stein and H.D., as well as subsequent avant-garde authors and practices. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on contemporary prose and hybrid works by Pamela Lu, Renee Gladman, Claudia Rankine, Juliana Spahr, Gloria Anzaldua, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. These writers, to different degrees, use a variety of formal strategies and problematize narrative autobiographical writing to simultaneously focus on language as instrumental to subjectivity and to represent “experience” as cultural content. They negotiate practices of avant-garde experimentation and writing that explores identity-as-process through examinations of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and history. Their text-subjects become witnesses to the discrepancies in culturally inscribed norms, and call for expanded possibilities for narrative and social

representation; their texts become new models for representing contemporary subjectivity. Reading the primary texts through theorists including Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Susan Stanford Friedman, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Kelly Oliver, among others, offers me ways to show how textual practice and cultural critique in this literature lend toward theorizing expanded possibilities for personal and social subject identification—how subjects identify—in the world. This project is invested in continuing to open spaces of possibility for textual practice and social subjectivity, as well as the feminist political impulse to dissolve margins and bring those “marginalized” voices into spaces with greater potential for personal and social identifications and politics.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Jill Darling did her undergraduate degree in English and Spanish at the University of Detroit Mercy, and earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Colorado State University in poetry and creative nonfiction. An active poet and writer, she has had two poetry collections published: *Solve For* (BlazeVOX, ebooks) and *begin with may: a series of moments* (Finishing Line Press), and her manuscript, *A Geography of Syntax* was recently chosen as a finalist for the Omnidawn Poetry Prize. She also recently published her essay, “The Content of Essay Form: on Reading Carla Harryman’s *Adorno’s Noise*” in a section on Harryman’s work in the online journal *How2*, and has had poems and creative essays published in a number of literary journals. Her research interests include poetry and poetics, modernism and contemporary American literature, cultural studies, feminist and gender theory, and transnational studies. She also has extensive experience teaching creative writing, introductory literature courses, and college composition courses at a variety of schools, and is working toward obtaining a full time, tenure-track teaching position.