

SOUNDING SILENCE: AMERICAN WOMEN'S EXPERIMENTAL POETICS

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Traditional feminist readings have valued women's writing that voices silenced experiences. In contrast, other twentieth-century theoretical formulations regard absences, refusals, and silences as constitutive of aesthetic practice rather than as imposed upon it. This dissertation attends carefully to how U.S. women writers approach the nonlinguistic, accounting for how they have been silenced as well as for the kinds of silencing that women poets themselves perform. It argues that U.S. women's experimental poetry is driven by contradictory relationships to language and silence: in one strain, gendered cultural repression spurs American women poets to push language into new territory, often figured as speaking out. But in another mode, female identification with the nonrational or nonlinguistic, whether externally enforced or strategically inhabited, impels women to develop poetic silences in order to resist the impositions of language on a feminized other. Meeting these simultaneous and opposed goals—creating poetic forms capable of greater expressive range while signaling the inadequacy of linguistic expression—necessitates formal experimentation. My primary claim that an unresolved ambivalence toward the nonlinguistic drives innovation dictates an emphasis on formal technique, including syntax, rhyme and meter, sentence and stanza structure, and figuration. This attention to poetic particulars grounds my

contextualization of the work of each poet I consider—Emily Dickinson, Lorine Niedecker, and Gwendolyn Brooks—in relation to her own life, to broader literary and cultural histories, and to poststructuralist theories of language.

The first chapter of my dissertation explores the role that early American, particularly Puritan and Transcendental, attitudes toward wilderness shape poetic motivations both to extend and limit the reach of language throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In subsequent chapters, I evaluate how those motivations change in the context of Dickinson's nineteenth-century spirituality, Niedecker's modernist and postmodernist anxieties about the role of the poet, and Brooks's engagement with the politics and aesthetics of black nationalism. Reading U.S. women's poetic innovation as simultaneously breaking and cultivating silences opens a dialogue among historically feminist understandings of silence as oppressive, theories that put silence at the heart of poetic impulse, and avant-garde theoretical conceptions of linguistic experimentation as a feminist project.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

VOICE AND THE WILDERNESS

At a 2003 poetry reading at Western Washington University, Li-Young Lee spoke about silence. Poetry, he said, shaped silence like a cathedral shapes empty space, making us aware of it and making it perceptible to us; poetry shapes language around great arches of silence so that we can hear it and stand in awe. To demonstrate, Lee read slowly, pausing often, and left a long silence at the end of each poem he read. The silence that Lee's poems marked was not the absence of all sound but the absence of language; it was something other-than-language to which poetry attended. As Lee read, a restless child jogged his feet against the metal legs of his chair; two people murmured on the other side of double doors. My position here is that we can read twentieth-century American poetry as if standing in the cathedral that poetry builds around silence, but we must recognize that poetry is, also, the child's insistent heels and the voices outside the door: it shapes our reverent silences, but it also itches to interrupt them, tear them down, to fill cathedrals with the noise of language saying a new thing, the noise of irreverent tapping and gossip.¹

Thus silence, defined for my purposes as the absence of communicative language, necessarily plays an uneasy role in poetry. Silence comes before speech, and it comes after it; words are sensible only because a silence surrounds each one, separating it from the others. And yet, in our pauses and hesitations, in the places where language falters or becomes nonsense or noise, the surrounding silence threatens to do away with language, to obliterate the speech it makes possible. Poetry cannot be made in utter silence, however much its language may shape itself around it and attempt to approximate it.

Silence, then, serves two distinct and contradictory functions in poetry: it can be the conditions and even goal of poetic language, or it can be its limiting border, and it is often both. Poetry is shaped by the concept of silence as a generative matrix for language and meaning and by the concept of silence as a border to be crossed. The poets considered here situate themselves in a relationship to silence that is special perhaps not in kind but in degree, intensifying a fundamental ambivalence of poetry toward silence: poetry's need to maintain and use certain silences and its simultaneous interest in pushing at language's borders and exploring other silences, translating them into a shared language.

Twentieth-century literature is especially self-conscious about silence. This is partly because the modernist struggle for coherence in the face of fragmentation and postmodern pastiche and *jouissance* share a doubt in the capacity of language, especially ordinary or instrumental language, to represent reality. This awareness of the gap between representational strategies and lived experience, between the signs humans can make and what they are meant to signify—which we have come to call the crisis of representation—has led to a heightened awareness of the failures or absences in artistic production, perhaps most notably, the absence, even impossibility, of meaningful, communicative language. Because it has expressed doubt in the capacity of language to communicate, our crisis of representation has also effected a reevaluation of the place of silence in literature. Many observers and critics agree that silence is particularly important in contemporary literatures, but their reactions diverge: writers like George Steiner and Susan Sontag submit that twentieth-century literature is losing a battle with silence, that it is failing to defend language from an encroaching and paralyzing nihilism,

while writers like Max Picard and Stuart Sim insist that a return to silence is a humanist project that will allow human culture a profound and fruitful connection with experience. While twentieth-century responses to the tendency toward silence in literature range from dire warnings to exuberant hortation, they all take silence to be a complex phenomenon central to an understanding of contemporary life and art.

One of the most influential narratives of twentieth-century poetics emphasizes silence as the fertile and sometimes terrifying engendering matrix of poetry. In fact, the turn toward what can't be said, toward silence as the subject or even substance of writing, not its limit, is often considered the mark of modernity. According to some twentieth-century linguists, even the empirical investigation of how language systems function must take silence into consideration. Bernard Dauenhauer explains that language must reach outside itself for authenticity and that "at bottom in all utterance there is an appeal beyond utterance for an authentication of the utterance [. . .]. Authentication must be awaited in silence" (19-20). Thus, language depends on the non-linguistic, on silence, not only for its physical existence but in order to make meaning: the propositional content of language, what it means to say, depends on the extra-linguistic in order to be considered true or meaningful. Language cannot validate itself; it must point outside itself. Every utterance implies a silent truth. For Dauenhauer, at least, this silence is a "center of significance": "In performing silence one acknowledges some center of significance of which he is not the source, a center to be wondered at, to be in awe of. The very doing of silence is the acknowledgement of the agent's finitude and of the awesomeness of that of which he is not the source" (25). To be actively silent, which Dauenhauer claims is

intrinsic to using language, one must confront a nonlinguistic “awesomeness,” greater than oneself, that grants meaning to speech.

This silent center of significance is prominent in twentieth-century philosophy and theories positing that language necessarily circles around emptiness or an unsayable thing. Though emptiness and the unspeakable are distinct in some respects, in poetry, which is a linguistic event, the unspeakable must necessarily be represented by emptiness, whether the more literal emptiness of white space and refusal to speak at all or the emptying out of meaning in nonsense poetry or other strategies that silence communication. The concept of an empty, silent, or unknowable center unifies twentieth-century thinkers whose concerns are otherwise divergent. Ludwig Wittgenstein claims that philosophy, in the end, can only point to the impossibility of philosophy, and proposition 4.115 of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* asserts that philosophy will “mean the unspeakable by clearly displaying the speakable” (77). The later claims of literary deconstructionists in some ways echo Wittgenstein’s fundamental disbelief in the capacity of language to express reality and the importance of using language to evoke what exceeds it. Jacques Derrida, like Wittgenstein, argues that language must always be pointing away from itself toward a vital absence. Thinking of Plato, Derrida names this non-linguistic non-place that gives birth to language the “khôra” and argues that language is impossible without a matrix of non-language.² Similarly, in a vein more directly concerned with the development of literature, Roland Barthes contends that writing ultimately ends in silence. He develops a teleology of literary development in which writing “has reached in our time the last metamorphosis: absence” (5). Though the strain of thought sketched here by surveying only a few influential thinkers is by no means the

only attitude toward language extant in the twentieth century, a shared focus on the absence of language as inherent to the working of language, as something more than failure to communicate, is characteristic of twentieth-century European and American conceptions of silence.

Twentieth-century art is similarly fascinated by the absence of language or meaningful expression. This fascination is perhaps most evident in literature because language is its medium; this is especially so in poetry, which can be defined by its awareness of language as form.³ Twentieth-century poets often value the failure of language, and many argue that silence is the condition toward which art aspires, that silence is, in fact, constitutive of poetry. Though silence may be implicit in their poems, its value to contemporary poets is often made quite explicit in their essays on poetics.⁴ Louise Glück's "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence" is one among many such essays that argues for the value of silence in poetry, particularly in the work of poets whom Glück considers "master[s] of not saying" (379).⁵ Distinguishing her own attitudes from what she sees as her generation's tendency toward exhaustive conclusiveness, she writes, "I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power: often I wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary" (378). In this formulation, poetic language, that which is said in a poem, is especially valuable or attractive inasmuch as it expresses the pull of the unsaid and points toward silences. Though Glück recognizes that poems cannot be made entirely silently ("often I *wish* an entire poem *could* be made in this vocabulary"), she regrets the necessity of language and wants a language capable of existing in ellipsis. Silence, here, is a desirable but impossible state for poetry. Accordingly, an excess of words and

information is considered vain, while reticence is a mark of respect and humility before the unspeakable. In praise of George Oppen's "Street," Glück claims, "The poem refuses to project its informing intelligence. The figures beheld remain themselves, and apart. This is not insufficiency of feeling, but absence of vanity" (383). Because the poem refuses to say what it knows, or does not know, it avoids the vanity of speech and allows for the ineffability of its subject. Glück's essay espouses attitudes typical of twentieth-century poetics that view words as a necessary presumption upon the ineffable that should be mitigated by attempts to make room for silences within the workings of poetic language.

But to describe the allure of silence and somehow to make that silence present in a poem are different endeavors. The most difficult task of poetry that seeks to make room for silence is that it must use language to invoke its own absence. John Cage's infamous 4'33'' calls for a pianist to "play" four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. By surrounding silence with the trappings of musical performance—a player at his piano, a stage, an audience—Cage effectively makes it audible as music. But the instruments of poetry cannot be so easily set upon a stage as a piano. Cage's poem "Where Are We Going? and What Are We Doing?" borrows some of its four-part structure from music but adapts musical techniques to the paradoxical purpose of making the absence of language felt in language. It is written in four-line stanzas that interweave four distinct voices or strains, differentiated from one another by their placement in the stanza and by their typography, which combines regular, bold, and italic type. Stanzas in which all four voices speak look like this:

there's still time. We're getting

did it. Was it in 1913 when
simpler if we were expressing
there is a great interest in going

around to the usefulness of science

Duchamp wrote his piece of music?
ourselves. In that case all you'd
and staying at the same time

Lines that take the same placement in the stanza (line 1, 2, 3, or 4) are typographically the same and continue the utterance of the previous similarly placed line. This mimics musical notation where all the parts of a song (for instance, the soprano, alto, tenor, and bass vocal parts) are written and performed together, but each gets its own distinct musical staff. This becomes clearer when one or more of the voices drops out. Instead of creating a one-, two-, or three-line stanza, Cage uses bullets to mark the silence of the voice that has stopped speaking. When the third voice stops it is noted thus:

you were writing a song, would

When did competition cease?

.

keep the traditions and

When the first three voices drop out, the empty lines are preserved:

.

.

.

so much about tradition, but hang on anyway

And, perhaps most strikingly, some stanzas have no lines of text at all:

.
. .
. . .
. . . .

(212)

When two or three of the voices drop out of the poem, it becomes much easier to follow what the voices still speaking are saying. The silence of voices 1, 2, and 3 makes voice 4 more audible. Thus, in Cage's poem, the less language is present, the more can be heard. By subtracting words, Cage makes the sense of other parts of the poem more evident, and white spaces and emptiness signal clearer communication. By this token, when the poem introduces whole stanzas empty of language, a purity, a clarity, a missing voice is invoked: a silent voice can finally be apprehended now that the distraction of language has been cleared away. As his 3'44'' does for musical composition, Cage's poem works to make the silence that is necessary to language perceivable as a phenomenon in its own right. It exemplifies the tendency among many of those concerned with language in the twentieth century—from linguists to literary critics, theorists, philosophers, and poets—to value silence as a matrix for and even the longed-for goal of language and literature.

Maurice Blanchot neatly aphorizes this strain of thought in *The Work of Fire*:

“literature's ideal has been the following: to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing” (324).

American poets, as the work of Louise Glück and John Cage attests, are essential participants in the larger literary and cultural valuations of silence that have characterized

the twentieth century. However, the multivalent influence of concepts of wordlessness on U.S. national and cultural development makes it both exceptionally important and particularly difficult for American poets to work out the role of silence in their work. Though Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 "frontier thesis" famously falls short of articulating the complexity of American history, his formulation of American identity as shaped by its response to a frontier perceived as empty still resonates in American self-characterizations from Kennedy's "New Frontier" to *Star Trek*'s "space, the final frontier."⁶ As Perry Miller reminds us in *Errand Into the Wilderness*, American identity cannot be reduced to an inevitable response to geography, political or physical, but the metaphor of the frontier—the uncivilized wilderness that threatens and coaxes, whether that wilderness is a literal one or the forests of an unsubdued and sinful soul—is undeniably compelling (1-2). The myth of the wilderness and its metaphorical resonances can make American poetic responses to silence especially charged. When wilderness is defined as the absence of human presence, what William Cronon calls "something irreducibly nonhuman," it is also defined as the absence of human language (2).⁷ Something entirely other than human cannot be expressed adequately in human terms. Thus, at the core of some of the most cherished and long-held ideas about American specialness, which depend on the fiction of an untamed land, is a silence about which American culture has been conflicted.⁸ The silences of the American wilderness urge both preservation and civilization, a contemplative hike and a territorial expedition, a mystic's wonder and a pioneer's cartographic and domesticating eye.⁹

An unresolvable tension between what I will call mystic and pioneer responses to wilderness, between preserving and breaking silences, is apparent in the United States'

Puritan past. Puritan responses to the real and imagined wildernesses they faced have sometimes been characterized as overwhelmingly negative; however, Puritan doctrine reveals, coexistent with demonization of the wild, a fundamental respect for the untranslatable or the inhuman as sacred and holy.¹⁰ Though the Puritans are popularly considered the dour and legalistic parents of the rebelliously mystical Transcendentalists, they too sought a kind of holy wilderness: even if they did not go out into the woods or up on mountain peaks to find evidence of the divine, their concept of divinity responded to the influence of the wilderness metaphor, especially to the inadequacy of human speech in the wilderness. As Miller describes it, the development of American Christian religious culture—especially as it concerned the doctrine of predestination—involved an oscillation between awe before the unknowable will of God and a covenant with that God, a covenant that necessarily had to be communicable in human terms. Thus, the beginnings of a dominant strain of American culture were marked by ambivalence toward the wilderness of divine silence and the language that might or might not be capable of translating it. On the one hand, Puritan doctrine posited a divinity that depended on unspeakability: God merited worship precisely because he could not be understood in human terms. In this sense, God was holy because inhuman, an inhumanity He shared with the literal wilderness that surrounded the early colonists in a newly real way. On the other hand, Puritan daily life depended on a working understanding of God's covenant, his word, the language in which he made agreements with human beings, just as it depended on domesticating the inhuman wilderness and converting it into necessary resources. Miller argues that the tension between an unspeakable God and human

language was central not only to Puritan theological questions but to the development of American civic life. Each was driven by the same paradox:

Here, then, was the task which seventeenth-century Calvinists faced: the task of bringing God to time and to reason, of justifying His ways to man in conceptions meaningful to the intellect, of caging and confining the transcendent Force, the inexpressible and unfathomable Being, by the laws of ethics, and of doing this somehow without losing the sense of the hidden God, without reducing the Divinity to a mechanism, without depriving Him of unpredictability, absolute power, fearfulness, and mystery. (56)

Though God may be unspeakable, the human religious community depends on linguistic communication. Though the wilderness might stand in for the “hidden” and “unpredictabl[e]” nature of divinity that should not be “cag[ed] and confin[ed],” trees must be cut down to make houses, paths cut for commerce. Miller is not explicitly addressing the role of language in the attainment of these paradoxical goals, but he describes, in the Puritan relationship to an incomprehensible divinity, a phenomenon that takes place in language. Further knowledge of God (and, for the Puritans, this also meant knowledge of the world more generally since all knowledge was understood as revelatory of God’s plan) could mean a move away from language, a silence before an unspeakable God, or it could mean the development of more accurate or more compelling language for understanding His will, for articulating it in the human terms of ethics, the true, and the good. It could mean a mystic preservation of inhuman silences or a pioneering urge to explore those silences and convert them into something communally useful. This duality, shaped by an encounter with the silences of wilderness, may not directly be the source of

American poetry's desire both to extend and limit language, but it does reflect how deeply this doubleness is ingrained in the American relationship to silence.

While Puritan mystic and pioneering responses to silence are constructed by analogy to theological and civic responses to God's unknowability, subsequent American thinkers respond more directly to the idea of wilderness itself. Though the men and women sometimes uneasily grouped under the banner of Transcendentalism are famously mystical in their responses to wilderness and its silences, they too evince an ambivalence that is not as easily resolved as the simple equation of Transcendentalism with mysticism might imply. In their own time, the Transcendentalists were received as mystics and not always well received as such. Hawthorne's notebooks describe Emerson as "the mystic, stretching his hand out of cloud-land in vain search of something real [. . .] the great searcher after facts; but they seem to melt away and become insubstantial in his grasp" (qtd. in Kopley 604). And Lydia Maria Child, "sometimes called a Transcendentalist [her]self, perhaps because [she] use[d] the phrase 'highly gifted,'" explained that the Transcendental "doctrine of intuitive perception" was to blame for the "mystical sound" of their writing and the difficulty of ascertaining the "deeper significance" of "that which is *really* uttered" by Transcendentalists (Child 94-95). These imputations of vagueness are directly related to the sense among the Transcendentalist writers themselves that transcendent experiences are difficult to articulate in common language, poetic language, or even in language at all. Experiences that exceed human speech are most commonly found, for the Transcendentalists, in the wilderness. Ralph Waldo Emerson's most famously mystical moment is recorded in the "transparent eyeball" passage of "Nature," in which he describes an ecstatic oneness with all of existence, experienced through

communion with the natural world (8). This mystical union is explicitly attained through silence in “The Poet” when Emerson talks of the submission of the poet to nature as a silent force that speaks through him: “The path of things is silent. Will they suffer a speaker to go with them? A spy they will not suffer; a lover, a poet, is the transcendency of their own nature,—him they will suffer. The condition of true naming, on the poet's part, is his resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms, and accompanying that” (30). Emerson insists that the poet “resign himself to the divine aura,” the silent path of things, and “accompany” that aura. The poet is suffered to travel alongside the divine down a silent path, but he himself does not blaze that path or break its silence. The authority of the poet is indicated by the fact that he accompanies a silent force not by his exploring or translating or rendering it significant. Henry David Thoreau echoes and expands Emerson’s mystical responses to the silent wilderness in his famous claim “In Wildness is the preservation of the World” (“Walking” 672). Because wildness is that which is “unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable,” it is salvific (*Walden* 419). This mystical attitude leads Thoreau to value the preservation of silence: to scriptural exegetes who sought a definitive interpretation of Biblical texts he responds, “Do you know the number of God’s family? Can you put mysteries into words? Do you presume to fable the ineffable?” (*Week* 48). Clearly, Thoreau finds it ridiculous to “presume” that all things can be known and “put into words.” For Emerson and Thoreau some experiences—the divine, the natural, and the divinely natural—are beyond expression in language.

However, despite the evident mysticism of Transcendentalism, the silences of the wilderness also elicit a response perhaps more in line with the prevailing spirit of

pragmatism, positivism, and materialism against which the Transcendentalists often railed. Though the mystic current of Emerson's essay "The Poet" is undeniable, it is also true that Emerson's description of the coming American poet insists on the possibility of "true naming" and on the poet as one who can fully penetrate the silences of nature, thus invoking the sense of the poet as pioneer, as one who can conquer silences with speech and domesticate the mysteries of nature with human language. Emerson makes the role of the poet that of the "sayer," he who "expresses" what other men only dimly perceive; he leads us into new realms and, with his voice, carves out new territory in the silent wilderness on the other side of the borders of ordinary language ("Poet" 12-13). The wilderness calls to the poet and in doing so forfeits some of its wildness: "Nature offers all her creatures to him as a picture-language," and the job of the poet is to interpret and express that language (18). Emerson imagines nature as seeking out its expression through the emissary of the poet. If anything is inexpressible, it is not inherently so but only remains silent because of a temporary failure of the poet or his language: "Since everything in nature answers to a moral power, if any phenomenon remains brute and dark, it is that the corresponding faculty in the observer is not yet active" (20). The phrase "not yet active" indicates that the observer has only to hone his faculties to be able further to penetrate the mysteries of nature. Though Emerson often suggests poetry approaches an unspeakable wilderness, his language reveals that he also sees the true poet as one who plots certain silences, for he "puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object" (25). When Emerson begins to speak directly to the poet he imagines is due on the American scene, his exhortations, in a "Go West, young man" spirit, direct the pioneer poet to "the Western clearing, Oregon and Texas," which "are yet unsung" (41).

Though the difficulties of language are recognized and silences are confronted, in the end the poet is made a poet by conquering silence and bending it to his will:

Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity. Nothing walks, or creeps, or grows, or exists, which must not in turn arise and walk before him as exponent of his meaning. (43)

Emerson evokes the mystical power of the wilderness, but that mystical strength serves to emphasize the greater exploratory command of a poetic language, “a power transcending all limit and privacy,” that can subdue it into expression and meaning. Thoreau, too, though he may be more concerned with maintaining the unfathomableness of the wilderness than Emerson, is compelled by pioneer rhetoric and does not fully affirm the silence of the wilderness over the incursions of human language. As Bradley Dean argues, Thoreau was not only driven by awe and wonder before the unspeakable wilderness but by a naturalist’s yearning for clear understanding, for codifying and explaining the mysteries of nature in human language. Dean explains the coexistence of these modes in Transcendentalism in terms of eternity: “Because the universe is infinite (and, Thoreau and Emerson assert, spiritual as well as material), it accommodates both humanity’s need for mystery *and* our earnest wish ‘to explore and learn all things’” (85).¹¹ For both Emerson and Thoreau, wilderness is simultaneously to be accompanied in silence and explored with all the capacity of human language. Thoreau recognizes the importance of both of these responses to wilderness in *Walden*: “At the same time that we

are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of Nature” (419).

The ambivalence of Puritan and Transcendentalist responses to wilderness and its silences is also apparent in American poetry. However, poetic responses to mystical and pioneering traditions must be specifically contextualized as distinct from the philosophical, religious, or political. Shira Wolosky’s explanation of mysticism reveals the importance of language, and the negation of language, to mystical formulations:

Almost by definition, mysticisms demote and ultimately attempt to abrogate language. A negative approach to language is almost always central to the mystical desire for ultimacy, seen as a state beyond multiplicity, division, and dispersion—conditions closely associated with language. Exactly because mysticism longs to go beyond sequence and difference to unity, negation is an integral part of its evaluation of language, which is the site and sign of sequential difference. As the inexpressibility topos suggests, the assertion of what language cannot say is a traditional means for designating an ultimate realm beyond formulation. Negation and transcendence are thus closely allied. (3)

Evoking silence in poetry can be a method for mystical transcendence of the divisions inherent in language and for establishing, or reestablishing, a primary oneness with something beyond words.

However, the role of silence in American poetry is often somewhat divorced from its explicitly religious or spiritual context. Instead, it evinces a more general mystical attitude that seeks to negate language in favor of a non-linguistic force or potent absence,

not necessarily a divine unity. Mystical poetry is poetry in which, as Glück notes of Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," "[t]he unknowable is the poem's first referent, the context" (378-79). Though many writers who posit silence as the end (in both senses: cessation and culmination) of literary work might characterize themselves as atheist or even nihilist, their silences structurally imply an ineffable force, an emptiness, or an absence that is quasi-divine by virtue of its unspeakability, its unavailability to human knowing through language.¹² Poetic mysticism, then, allows something (some unspeakable thing) to remain other than linguistic and, by extension, it preserves a wilderness that is decidedly nonhuman, something outside of the poem's language and other than the speaker or reader of that language. Even when silences are profoundly destructive of literary meaning-making, when poetic language seeks to undo itself, the result is still positive: ineffable non-linguistic meaning has been made and the silent unknowable is gestured toward. American poetic mysticisms are shaped by similar forces to those that shape Puritan, Transcendental, and other American mysticisms, but the significance of language and the concern with its formal elements necessarily distinguish poetic responses to silence.¹³ Thus, unlike religious or philosophical approaches, poetic mysticism, as I am using the term, is primarily concerned with evoking, in language, the experience of the non-linguistic and is not determined by the kind of non-linguistic experience to which it alludes.¹⁴

"Pioneer" can perhaps more straightforwardly be adopted as a specifically poetic term than "mystic." The figure of the pioneer encompasses both the explorer and the settler. He blazes trails and sets off into empty plains, but he also makes the wilderness hospitable: he plants crops, raises a family, lays down rails that will bring others. The

pioneer impulse in American poetry maintains both of these senses. The exploratory poet pushes language into silence; he innovates and ranges far afield of the cultivated preserves of what has already been said and of what language is already capable of saying.¹⁵ He uses language to explore silences, but he also makes those silences more hospitable to those who come after. The goal of language, in a poetic informed by the American pioneer mythos, is to explore the wildernesses of silence and, eventually, to articulate a path through them, to make a home for language in territory that has been inhospitable to it. Moreover, like the early American explorers and settlers, in American poetics the pioneer has had to ignore or destroy the voices already present in his supposedly silent wilderness. In these senses, then, the mystic and pioneer responses to wilderness evident in Puritan and Transcendentalist thought are also extant in American poetic responses that conceive of the wilderness in more directly linguistic terms, as silence.

Though an apophatic or mystical denial of language recalls old-world attitudes, both European and Eastern, twentieth-century American writers who seek to create silences in language are firmly within their own national tradition.¹⁶ Melville's *Bartleby* is perhaps the most iconic American literary figure of silence as mystic negation; "Bartleby the Scrivener: a Story of Wall Street" circles around Bartleby's stubborn refusal to explain himself, the reticent finality of his "I prefer not to." Bartleby's silence may tempt readers to fill in that absence with various kinds of meaning, but ultimately it resists meaning and remains unintelligible.¹⁷ This refusal of meaning, the empty center of Melville's story, is not an isolated incident. Richard Chase argues that American literature is distinguished by its stubborn insistence on looking at the aberrant, anti-social,

mysterious, and strange and on delving into the unspeakable and hidden.¹⁸ He calls this a romantic tendency and claims that American romances (he uses Hawthorne's work as a prime example) require a fog of "mystery and bewilderment" not only because they take such mystery as their subject but because they must obscure their failure to represent adequately the social and material (*American Novel* 23). In Chase's account, the American romance is definitively addressed to the encounter between the individual and the unknown and in maintaining a veiling silence around that encounter.

Though Chase deals exclusively with the novel, American poetry shows a similar concern with evoking the wilderness—the mysterious or unknowable as such—and refusing to give it fully over to language. Melville's poem "The Berg (A Dream)" narrates the encounter of "a ship of martial build" and a "stolid iceberg" (401-02). The majority of the poem recounts, through an accumulation of detail, that the iceberg is entirely unmoved by the event, though the ship is undone by it. The final stanza delineates most clearly the awfulness of silence in the poem:

Hard Berg (methought), so cold, so vast,
With mortal damps self-overcast;
Exhaling still thy dankish breath—
Adrift dissolving, bound for death;
Though lumpish thou, a lumbering one—
A lumbering lubbard loitering slow,
Impingers rue thee and go down,
Sounding thy precipice below,
Nor stir the slimy slug that sprawls

Along thy dead indifference of walls. (402)

Those who seek to “impinge” on the iceberg will “sound” it only through their own deaths: “Impingers rue thee and go down, / Sounding thy precipice below.” The pun on “sound,” a term for measurement, makes both understanding and voicing contingent on losing one’s self to the thing being sounded. Despite its exhalation of “dankish breath,” the berg will not speak to a living person; perhaps more importantly, it cannot be adequately spoken about. The parenthetical “(methought)” reminds us that even the apparently objective adjectives “cold” and “vast” are attributed to the iceberg by the speaker of the poem, by his perceptions, and are not its knowable, inherent qualities. As if to compensate for the iceberg’s resistance to articulation, the rest of the stanza pulls out the poetic stops, piling on repetition, alliteration, and assonance, as in “Though lumpish thou, a lumbering one— /A lumbering lubbard loitering slow.” But, in the end, the impingement of this language makes no difference, and the iceberg remains, in the final line of the poem, “indifferent.”¹⁹ The only thing that moves or marks the iceberg is itself; it is by its own “damps self-overcast.” Though the poem does not unambiguously celebrate silence, it pays homage to it as a blank presence that exceeds and is indifferent to language. This kind of valuation of the unspeakable or the unknown, of that which remains silent even in the face of all our powers of speech, is an integral part of the story of writing in America.

And yet, despite the influence of mysticism in American literature, American writing has more often defined itself as a pioneering enterprise. This is, of course, not exclusively an American attitude, but it is especially pronounced in American poetics because of the influence of the frontier rhetoric on American writers and readers.²⁰ Walt

Whitman, often considered the most representatively American poet in the canon, answers Emerson's call for an American poetry that makes language the tool of the explorer and gives voice to, or forces voice upon, the silence of the wilderness.

Whitman's "Song of Myself" famously makes the personality of the poet-speaker, "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son," a unifying dynamism capable of encompassing and expressing all things. Though, like Emerson, Whitman's speaker-self recognizes the power of what is beyond his reach, that force nevertheless serves to indicate the authority of the speaker who can, through greatness of effort or being, encompass it. This expansive self is explicitly identified with poetic speech in section 42 of "Song of Myself," where the speaker begins with "A call in the midst of a the crowd, / My own voice, orotund sweeping and final" and claims later in the section that he "know[s] perfectly well [his] own egotism, / Know[s his] omnivorous lines and must not write any less" (112). Here the poet's ego is identified with his poetic voice and technique (his "omnivorous lines"), and they are both "sweeping and final": the poet, embodied in his lines, is capable of speaking all. No part of experience is exempt from the omnivorous poetic voice; no silences are impenetrable. In section 44, the poetic ego is pictured as surrounded by the silences of nothingness and the unknown but not overcome by those silences or insufficient to express them. Instead, the speaker leaves a primordial nothingness behind in an ascent through the unknown toward an ontological completeness and finality figured as accomplishment and enclosure. The section opens in line three with "I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown" but quickly asserts that the unknown is not fundamentally unknowable, simply not yet known:

I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I an encloser of things to be.

My feet strike an apex of the apices of the stairs,

On every step bunches of ages, and larger bunches between the steps,

All below duly travel'd, and still I mount and mount.

Rise after rise bow the phantoms behind me,

Afar down I see the huge first Nothing, I know I was even there. (115)

The poet here is a forward- and upward-moving “traveler,” rendering that which he encounters on each step of his journey into mere phantoms that bow to him as master. The poetic self develops incrementally as it moves away from the silence of “the huge first Nothing” and, step by step, conquers the unknown, finally arriving at a completely self-sufficient identity, the poetic voice exerting dominance over the previously unexplored terrain of experience and knowledge into which it launched. Whitman’s garrulous poetic voice, his exhaustive cataloging, and his claims for the ability of poetic speech to reach all corners of the universe, no matter how wild, serve as part of a compelling pioneer rhetoric that has indelibly marked the character of American poetry.

This pioneer rhetoric has persisted in American literature, even after conquest and colonization reached the West. Like earlier American poets, twentieth-century American writers value newness and promote language as a tool for extending the scope of human understanding. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot famously aligns the poet with the disinterested scientist/discoverer. He alternately figures the poet’s mind as “a filament of platinum” that is the catalyst for a reaction between gasses and as exerting

an intense “artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion [of the components of art] takes place” (41). While his use of scientific language to authorize the poet is linked to the larger international foment of modernism, and his rejection of personality as the source of poetic authority runs counter to the Whitmanian tradition, Eliot’s depersonalized poetic, however international, also has roots in the American pioneer tradition.²¹ If we return to Emerson’s “The Poet,” it is evident that, though Eliot rejects Emerson’s correlation of personality and poetic authority, he is Emersonian insofar as he understands poetic language as something that pushes inventively at the boundaries of language: “we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene” (37).²² The poet yields us a new thought because he makes language capable of expressing something new. Similarly, Eliot conceptualizes his own language as a “venture,” making a “raid on the inarticulate,” which suggests that silence is not the eventual goal or the inaccessible and awesome center of poetic language but rather, as in Emerson and Whitman, a territory to be explored, plundered, and mastered (“East Coker” 30-31). In fact, Eliot makes unspeakable or unspoken experience not only into foreign territory but enemy territory, casting the poet as a soldier in a battle against the inarticulate.

The “East Coker” section of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* gives us the pioneer poet faced with modern (and modernist) doubts about the adequacy of language:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—

Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l’entre deux guerres*—

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt

Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
By strength, and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate— (30-31)

Though the *Four Quartets* at times laments the failure of language, in “East Coker” language is still the tool of the pioneer, of a man on a “venture” who seeks “to conquer / By strength, and submission.” Eliot’s martial language—“*l’entre duex guerres*,” “raid,” “equipment,” “undisciplined squads”—makes the poet a soldier figure whose work is framed and figured by war. This conflation of frontier and frontline, of conquering and discovering, foregrounds the violence already inherent in the pioneer rhetoric that informs work like Emerson’s. However, for Eliot, the poet as soldier-explorer faces a problem with which Emerson did not have to contend: the New World “has already been discovered / Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope / To emulate.” This would appear to rob the poet of his role as the inventor, the conquering explorer of the new, and the pioneering mind. But the poem expresses a fear of belatedness without abandoning its claim to discovery. Instead of a wilderness that is new

to his language, the speaker of “East Coker” seeks a language that is new to the wilderness. Eliot retains for the poet the role of the pioneer by claiming that language is “shabby equipment” and the poet must “get the better of words” in order successfully to “raid the inarticulate.” Thus Eliot reconstitutes the pioneer for an era in which everything has been discovered already by making language itself into the inarticulate thing that must be raided, conquered, and made to submit. Though he rejects the optimism of Whitman’s “acme of things accomplish’d,” he makes the poet one who goes behind enemy lines, a pioneer who struggles with his path but presses forward nonetheless.²³ The figure of the pioneer is by no means a relic of a frontier past but a still-vital metaphor for the development of new capabilities and contexts in American literature.

Though its importance to American identity may not be as obvious as that of the pioneer tradition, the mystical attitude did not fade with the modernizing of American religion and the recuperation of the Transcendentalists into respectability. The ideas of many later American writers, some of whom construct themselves as self-consciously and deliberately American, are rooted in mystic attitudes toward silence, especially the silence of wilderness. Gary Snyder, like the Beat poets with whom he is often identified, is inspired by Eastern, particularly Buddhist, thinking; nevertheless, his mystical poetic develops a distinctly American philosophy of the wilderness. “For Americans,” he explains, “*nature* means wilderness, the untamed realm of total freedom—not brutish and nasty, but beautiful and terrible” (“Poetry and the Primitive” 54). It is this untamed quality that he often seeks to create in his journals and poems by “leaving things out at the right spot” (“Journal” 8). As a poet whose goal is to write about an “untamed” realm, he values silences and often takes as self-evident the notion that the experience of the

wilderness exceeds words. This mystical bent is evident not only in Snyder's frequent philosophical statements in favor of nonrational and nonlinguistic knowing but in his formal choices in his journals and poems.

Snyder's most common strategy for writing about wilderness is to create an image but to remain silent about its significance. Rather than explain that there is an ineffable connection between human experience and the natural world, Snyder will juxtapose images of the human with the nonhuman, the civilized with the wild. Rarely do his poems speak about what wilderness might mean for the human; instead, he places them in silent communion with each other, implying a significance that cannot be articulated in language, which would necessarily leave the mark of the human on the wilderness he seeks to preserve as other than human and would tame what Snyder wants to inscribe as untamed. Snyder's early "Lookout's Journal" expresses the importance of form to making room for silence in language:

How pleasant to squat in the sun

Jockstrap & zoris

form—leaving things out at the right spot

ellipse, is emptiness

these ice-scoured valleys

swarming with plants (8)

Though this section of the journal begins with subjective human experience in the wilderness, the pleasant feeling of squatting in the sun in the barest of clothing, it concludes by erasing the human from the scene. "Form" is defined as the process of

choosing the correct silences and—almost under the heading of “emptiness,” the indentations suggest—there are a few spare notes on the valley, empty of the human though it is “swarming” with plants. The valley stands in unrecuperated otherness: if there is any connection to the speaker, in his “jockstrap and zoris,” it has been elided, passed over in silence, and the white space and the indentation of the lines describing the valley reinforce that silence.

Snyder’s later poem “Burning the Small Dead” employs a similar aesthetic but without the journal entry’s intervening explanation of form that, to some degree, interrupts the silence it attempts to explain. Instead, this poem allows quietness full rein:

Burning the small dead
branches
broke from beneath
thick spreading
whitebark pine.

a hundred summers
snowmelt rock and air
hiss in a twisted bough.

sierra granite;
mt. Ritter—
black rock twice as old.

Deneb, Altair

windy fire (431)

The poem echoes the themes of William Carlos Williams' "Burning the Christmas Greens," a much longer work that interprets the larger human significance of burning decorative boughs in the hearth once winter has passed. Compared to Williams's musing, even didactic tone, the absence of interpretation in this poem is stark. Snyder values physical properties like sound—as in the onomatopoeia of "hiss in a twisted bough"—over abstractions like Williams's "green is a solace / a promise of peace" (64). Unlike that of the Christmas greens, the significance of Snyder's dead branches is not exhaustively articulated, and the form of the poem contributes to this restraint.²⁴ For example, the relationships among the three bare nouns, "snowmelt," "rock," and "air," separated by white space, are not fixed. Each noun invokes a natural element, but the poem refuses to dictate how they interact or what they might mean, indicating that they exceed the capacity of language to articulate and reify interaction. Similarly, the poem undermines the comparative function of language: it calls the "black rock" of Mt. Ritter "twice as old" but does not offer the other half of the comparison: "twice as old" as what?²⁵ Even the sparse information the poem provides implies something unspoken. The line "Deneb, Altair" names two of the stars in the summer triangle, suggesting a setting for the poem and invoking the propensity for making natural objects serve human ends. However, the conversion of natural phenomena into navigation symbols is short-circuited when the third star is not named. And, though "windy fire" may be an attempt at naming the third star in a new way, the poem ceases after "windy fire" to make any attempt at

naming whatsoever. Snyder, like many other twentieth-century American poets, says with Thoreau that we need some part of experience to remain “unfathomed because unfathomable.” Even as our wildernesses dwindle and our myths about them are revised and reshaped, the mystic mode remains a dynamic part of American poetics.

Neither the pioneer nor the mystic is the more valuable or authentic American poetic. Instead, American poetry, and American women’s writing in particular, is characterized by attempts to occupy both of these positions simultaneously. Not only do mystic and pioneer attitudes persist in American poetry, but the fundamental duality of the American relationship to language still echoes in contemporary formulations of what poetry should be and do. Jorie Graham’s “Some Notes On Silence” is, in some ways, mystical. The essay begins: “I think I am probably in love with silence, that other world. And that I write, in some way, to negotiate seriously with it. If poems are records of true risks (attempts at change) taken by the soul of the speaker, then, as much as possible, my steps are toward silence” (163). Graham describes silence as desirable and threatening, as “[a]ll forms of death and mystery,” in short, as an otherness that cannot be expressed in language but toward which language should aim. However, her rhetoric, like Eliot’s raiding, also makes the poet into a soldier on the frontlines of a battle with silence: “one can feel the weight of what the language is battling with,” “[Dickinson and Glück] have battled with a worthy opponent and been gagged by it,” “it is a victory over silence for us,” “an attempt to penetrate the silence,” “put up a fight,” “it’s a draw.” The essay ends by placing poetry on “the boundary [. . .] between the words we speak and those that unspeak us” and describes the best poems as “active negations at that border, not border-skirmishes but great last-ditch efforts” (171). Though Graham claims her poems seek the

“other world” of silence, she also sees poetry as doing battle with silence and sees speech as winning new territory from the unexplored. Graham is clearly aware of her combating urges to extend and limit language, and her formulation of that conflict is reminiscent of the Puritan negotiations with God’s unknowability: “poems are, after all, dialogues between the song of man and the silences of God, aren’t they? And almost every poem illustrates one of the two impulses we experience: to be united with the unknown, to break out of this separateness, or to wrench a uniqueness, an identity, from the all-consuming whole” (168). “Almost every poem,” then, serves either mystic or pioneer goals, and some, despite their irreconcilability, seek to serve them both. It is the desire to have it both ways—to say the unsaid while also signaling language’s limitations—that drives the formal innovations of many American women poets.

Experimental or innovative poetry, that is, the reforming or deforming of received language patterns, is central to achieving this simultaneity. By claiming that innovative poetry is suited to both the evocation and exploration of silence, I do not mean to suggest that only poetry that advertises itself as novel or that drastically departs from mainstream poetic intelligibility is concerned with the tensions between language and silence. Not all poetry in unusual forms is necessarily experimental, and poems within accepted norms can still be experimental. Opening the definition of innovation to any poem that creates or recreates its own form runs some risk of diffusing it; however, poetic experimentation, the most salient characteristic of which is uncertainty of outcome, cannot be limited to particular rhythms, line-lengths, or narrative perspectives. And without innovation, thus broadly defined, it is impossible for a poet simultaneously to restrain and to spur the gallop of words.

Experimentation is useful to mystic poetics because, if language is to approach silence, it must be twisted away from its common goal of expression and communication. If language is inadequate in the face of something that lies outside it, the poet must foreground that inadequacy in order to point at that something. We assume that ordinary language represents experience directly and transparently: it does not make a spectacle of its own failure. But poets who wish to gesture toward the existence of something unrepresentable—some extra-linguistic space, or force, or experience—must make ordinary language reveal its own lacunae. In order to conjure, in language, the non-, sub-, or supralinguistic, poetic language must evidence a difficulty. Therefore, experimental forms, which frequently foreground the difficulty of stable signification, are particularly useful to poets who wish to dramatize the limits of language. Cage’s “Where Are We Going and What Are We Doing?” is a helpful example: its adaptation of the musical staff creates a form for acknowledging silence. However, innovation need not be so obvious. As Graham explains in “Some Notes on Silence,” devices as simple as breaking off in the middle of a sentence or relying on abstract language can indicate the failure of language to communicate something larger than itself. Nor does all innovation toward silence entail erasing parts of language. Pushing language to excess can, paradoxically, also flaunt its insufficiency and, by extension, the unspeakable beyond it. But without altering ordinary language in some way, it is all but impossible to approximate silence.

Similarly, innovation is intricately tied to the pioneer poetics. In fact, “exploratory” and “pioneering” are frequently used as synonyms for experimental or innovative work. This assumes that words are tools that need to be better honed in order to be capable of further exploration into the territory of silence. When the ordinary way

of speaking or writing is incapable of expressing something, that something remains on the other side of silence's borders. Poets must reshape language to make it capable of expressing those things that were once inexpressible; they must carve new tools and draw new maps to win ground for poetic language. Where mystic innovation seeks to evoke silence, pioneer innovation seeks to explore it and domesticate it through the invention of newly capable forms. Though Mary Margaret Sloan's recent anthology *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women* maintains a suspicion of many of the master metaphors of American literary culture, its guiding concept of borders still casts women's innovation as exploratory and the border between language and silence as a frontier: "Much of the writing in this anthology *explores the boundaries* of poetry, narrative, novels, and plays, the *territory* where proposition and prosody are indistinguishable, and where film, theater, performance, installation and the page are mutually informing" (6, emphasis added). Innovation, then, takes place in a linguistic and generic no-man's-land where new roads must be built for new territory to be claimed. Innovation is an important, even constitutive, part of poetry for both the mystic and the pioneer. This, then, is the situation of American poetry in the twentieth century: it must explore the wilderness of silence, conquer it, make it habitable, and subordinate it to language, and yet it must also try to become silence, it must invite it in, revere it as that which validates language itself. For both of these goals, formal innovation is indispensable. To push language toward silence, ordinary language must be undermined or reconfigured. To push language past the boundaries that silence marks, language must be finely tuned and its quotidian uses transformed.

While innovation extends and limits the territory of language, it is particularly crucial in poetry that seeks these ends simultaneously. Further, language that both breaks silences and employs them is especially useful for women poets, and it may be that the importance of innovation for combining these conflicting goals has gone largely unremarked because the work of women has not been given sufficient attention in these terms. Formulations of both mystic and pioneer poetics are often tied up in masculinist rhetoric that places the poet in an oppositional relationship with a feminine or feminized silent wilderness. The influential myth of woman as wilderness obscures the writing of women in both the mystic and pioneer strains, or at the very least, dismisses it as anomalous, masking the fruitful tension between extending and limiting language in innovative poetry by excluding or devaluing poetry in which that conflict is highly motivated. The masculinizing of both pioneering and mystic poetics and the attendant marginalization of women's writing not only make it more difficult to see the paradoxical role of silence in poetic innovation but also cloud the complex role of silence in the work of women writers.

The concept of poetry as a pioneering force that pushes into and civilizes silence has largely aligned women with the wilderness to be explored and exploited and, therefore, has not taken seriously the language of women writers as itself exploratory. Though the identification of the landscape as feminine is not uniquely American, Annette Kolodny claims that early American writing is distinguished from European writing in its literalization of the metaphor of woman as wilderness:

the move to America was experienced as the daily reality of what has become its single dominating metaphor: regression from the cares of adult life and a return to

the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape. And when America finally produced a pastoral literature of her own, that literature hailed the essential femininity of the terrain in a way European pastoral had never dared, and, from the first, took its metaphors as literal truths. (*Lay* 6)

The metaphor of the pioneer, the explorer and settler, is shaped by this feminized landscape. The experience of the actual land as virginal—a mysterious, untouched landscape that requires exploration and cultivation—becomes doubly metaphorical when the territory is linguistic, and the unexplored and fertile ground of silence—the unspoken, the taboo, the ineffable—often retains a mythical “essential femininity” that makes it difficult for women’s writing to be read as pioneering. Kolodny explains that the myth of the feminine wilderness does not allow for female explorers: “the myth of the woodland hero necessarily involves a man [. . .] and a quintessentially feminine terrain apparently designed to gratify his desires. The myth thereby—like the fantasy—excludes women. In the idealized wilderness garden [of Eden] [. . .] an Eve could only be redundant” (*Before* 5). Like the “woodland hero” myth, the metaphor of the poet as pioneer excludes women as redundant because the feminine is already present: the feminine embodies the very silences that are to be explored and civilized by language.

In mystic poetics the feminine is similarly coded as non-linguistic, though in this case irreducibly other than rather than subjected to the incursions of language. The unknowable, or unspeakable, is feminine, and he whose speech gestures toward the indescribable must differentiate himself from primal ineffable unity with it: thus, poetic language is contingent on separation from the non-linguistic feminine.²⁶ Women are part of the mysterious natural world, frequently figured as flowering plants or bodies of water,

and the language of the poet is counterposed to this feminized wilderness. The poet may value the vitality of the wilderness, even seek to approximate it, but the aspiration to approach the feminine rhetorically situates the poet as masculine. The poet must begin as other; the creative mind is a human, rational, linguistic “he” opposed to a primal, irrational, non-linguistic “she” to which his language points and in which his ego and its attendant linguistic capacity may be enveloped, silenced, and eventually renewed and reauthorized. Snyder’s “Poetry and the Primitive” exemplifies the use of a feminine ground against which the male poetic figure is defined. Under the subtitle “Making Love with Animals,” Snyder explains that the function of the poet is to commune with the nonhuman and thus nourish the social with the natural: “Poets have carried this function forward all through civilized times: poets don’t sing about society, they sing about nature—even if the closest they ever get to nature is their lady’s queynt” (56). Here the poet is definitively, inherently masculine, and the female body is a small subset of the natural world that the poet should “sing.” Snyder is aware that this identification is culturally constructed and symbolic when he explains that poetry is a reaching out to the other that “breaks through the ego-barrier.” “Widely speaking,” he admits, the other can be “a mountain range, a band of people, the morning star, or a diesel generator.” “But,” he continues, “this touching-deep is a mirror, and man in his sexual nature has found the clearest mirror to be his human lover. As the West moved into increasing complexities and hierarchies with civilization, Woman as nature, beauty, and the Other came to be an all-dominating symbol” (57). For Snyder, the “sexual nature” of man focuses otherness in a symbolic “Woman” and constructs interaction with the other as heterosexual intercourse. The poet sings about his “lady’s queynt” not only as a part of the natural

world but as a representation of nature itself as receptive to his penetrating poet's mind. However, Snyder does not question what the effect of perpetuating this "all-dominating symbol" might have on lower-case women who themselves are poets, egos seeking a "touching-deep" with an other. Instead, he conjures the poet as the male lookout whose gaze takes in the wilderness with "the photograph of a young female torso hung in the lookout window, in the foreground. Natural against natural, beauty" ("Lookout's" 10). Both pioneer and mystic poet are masculine, making it difficult not only for women to write in these modes but for their writing to be recognized as participating in them.

But, perhaps the greatest deterrent to a serious consideration of women writers and the place of silence in their work has not been masculinist dismissal but the fact that feminist literary criticism has focused on the role of silence in subjugation. The concept of speaking out has been fundamental to feminist thinking, perhaps especially so in literature, which is inextricably bound to questions about who is allowed to speak and about what; a key strain of feminist literary criticism has argued that silence is a negative effect of oppression from social and political sources. Influential anthologies like *No More Masks!*, a 1973 collection intended to rescue the work of women poets from obscurity and break the silence about the real lives of women, exemplify the tone of much feminist poetry and criticism. Later anthologies are even more explicit in valorizing speech and casting silence as the enemy, as a survey of titles like *Stealing the Language* (Ostriker), *Outspoken Women* (Hall), and *The Voice that Is Great Within Us* (Carruth) attests; much feminist literary effort has understandably focused on the recuperation and reinstatement of writers whose works have been ignored by the male-dominated canon, as well as encouraging writers who have been systematically denied the right to speak,

whose lives have been lived in silence. This has indeed been an important goal; writers like Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde demonstrate the power of women writing about women, and the invaluable work of critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discovers (or, in some cases, remembers) the contribution of women writers to our literary heritage. Rich's 1976 essay "It Is the Lesbian in Us" describes the limitation of expression—particularly linguistic representation—as a violent exercise of power:

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but *unspeakable*. [. . .] In a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence. (199, 204)

Nevertheless, despite its historical and current political importance, the conception of the creative work of women as a means of speaking out against the social and culture forces that would silence them can itself become limiting: most significantly, this conceptualization cannot apprehend the silences that are endemic to poetic language, making it impossible to see the intensely ambivalent relationship to silence that often motivates women's poetic practice.

More recent feminist criticism, however, has focused on themes related to silence, such as denial, reticence, defense, and refusal, and that criticism has often centered on the usefulness of these strategies for women's writing.²⁷ The 1994 collection *Listening to Silences* gathers contemporary feminist responses to women's literary silence—responses inaugurated, for editors Hedges and Fiskin, by Tillie Olsen—that both contextualize and

question the assertion that silence is primarily an extrinsic force on women's writing. And Janis P. Stout begins her *Strategies of Reticence* by positioning her argument as a counterpoint to the tradition of reading silence as oppressive: "My emphasis here [. . .] will not be on silences and reticence as effects so much as on silences and reticence as consciously or unconsciously chosen strategies for effect" (viii). The feminist conversation about silence has certainly become more varied and complex in recent years. However, many studies of silence in women's writing continue to cast silence as an extrinsic oppressive limitation, and those who consider it an intrinsic and useful strategy for women writers, perhaps in an effort to distance themselves from the still-potent legacy of silence as violence, do not assess the effects that an unresolved tension between these opposing functions of silence can have on women writers.

These critical resistances limit feminist scholarship and poetic scholarship more generally because they remove the writing of women from a conversation to which it should contribute: the basic dynamics of poetry's relationship to silence, already intensified in American poetry because of the importance of the wilderness concept, are further intensified in women's poetic experiments because the cultural position of women raises the stakes on both sides. Women's writing is especially motivated to perform both of the paradoxically opposed interactions with silence. On the one hand, women are often particularly driven to use language as a tool to break silences, to create innovative forms that expand the territory of women's language. On the other, they are markedly motivated to preserve and respect the silences with which they have been identified and that they may regard as the source of their poetic authority.

The argument that women writers share a particular relationship to language runs the risk of repeating the essentializing that allows both pioneer and mystic poetic models to dismiss women as writers. However, by taking the existence of “women writers” as an identifiable category, I do not seek to employ it as a natural category or make it coterminous with biological sex. Instead, I put questions of whether a person is naturally a woman or what femininity *is* aside in favor of exploring how the category of “woman” has been employed in literature and how that category might influence the way writers who identify themselves as women write, as well as how it might influence the way writers who are identified as women are read. Rather than taking the actuality of the categories “male” and “female” as given, I am interested in how the pervasive rhetoric of the differences between men and women’s relationships to language has influenced the way writers use language. The control of language and its uses and the role of the unsaid have figured largely in questions of authority that have significantly affected writers, regardless of the empirical validity of gender categories. While it is, in some cases, crucially important to undermine the rigid division of gender into male and female, in this study I will use the terms “men” and “women,” “masculine” and “feminine” with the understanding that, while the meanings of those terms are fluid and by no means essential or natural, their sway in the discourses of literary authority and other types of self-formation is pervasive and not to be denied simply by caveat. I will seek a middle way that, while avoiding essentializing a supposedly natural woman’s language, can still speak of women writers and the way women write.

In this sense, then, women’s writing, because of the way femininity has been constructed in relationship to language, is profoundly conflicted about silence. The

rhetoric of speaking out certainly helps us to see one side of the story. Because of social oppression and cultural and political silencing, women's writing promotes a pioneer concept of silence, making it a boundary that language should cross or a wilderness to be explored and cultivated. Though feminist rhetoric has historically encouraged the equation of breaking silences with lyric authenticity and, until recently, underestimated formal innovation as a tool for feminist intervention, experimental forms are increasingly taking a central role in language-focused strains of feminist criticism, not only because their themes may give voice to the silenced but because they redefine the possibilities of language; poetic experimentation can challenge cultural values imbedded in and enforced by received forms and conventional language.²⁸ Formal innovation seeks to extend the reach of language into the unspeakable, and the experiments of women writers frequently are driven by the need to articulate effectively women's lives, bodies, and minds. Despite its marginalization in favor of accessible poetry that represents women's experiences and despite the masculinist history of frontier rhetoric, feminist formal innovation is part of an American tradition of pioneering poetry.

The importance of this tradition to innovative American women poets is clear in the writing of a poet like Susan Howe. Howe's *The Liberties*, for instance, expands women's literary territory in that it seeks to open canonical male-authored texts to the feminine voices they occlude. There are many voices that speak in *The Liberties*, but the book is largely constructed as a conversation between two erased or silent women: Shakespeare's Cordelia, the silent, faithful daughter of King Lear, and Jonathan Swift's lover Stella, the record of whose life was practically erased by Swift's destruction of her papers and letters. Rachel Blau DuPlessis observes of the women in Howe's book, "They

have in common a female relation to dominant story, muted and trying a voice, storied but claiming their telling” (“Howe” 162). Howe’s formal experiments, then, try out a voice for these muted women, rupturing, honing, and reshaping the language—particularly Shakespeare’s and Swift’s—to make it newly capable of breaking the silences of both literature and history, Cordelia and Stella. The following is taken from the “White Foolscap: Book of Cordelia” section of *The Liberties*:

Lir was an ocean God whose children turned into swans

heard the birds pass overhead

Fianoula Oodh Fiacra Conn

circle of One

threshing the sun

or asleep threshing nor

nor blood nor flesh nor bone nor

corona

chromosphere

Cordelia

no no no (30)

Here the “Book of Cordelia” puts language in the silenced woman’s hands, giving her the ability to rename the very name of the Father, transforming it from “Lear” to “Lir,” which also puts Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in dialogue with its sources in Celtic myth, diffusing the authority of the playwright.²⁹ The form of the poem demonstrates Cordelia’s mastery of poetic language both by performing it and undermining it: the flexibility of the lines establishes a loosely iambic and anapestic rhythm and play with rhyme (“heard the

birds pass overhead,” “circle of One,” “threshing the sun”) and then disrupts that poeticity with rhythmically jarring doubts (“or asleep threshing nor”) and the insistent accents of refusal in “no no no.” As DuPlessis explains, Howe’s work is characterized by her use of “[n]ot only ballad, not only epic, not only genres affiliated with heavily gendered griefs, but / a feminist appropriation of / every genre large and small” (130). DuPlessis’s use of the word “appropriation” is telling: poems like Howe’s are claiming territory, even in the “small” genres of meter and the sentence. For many women, there is much to be gained in a pioneer poetic: by creating new forms and using poetic language in new ways, innovative poets can make language into a tool that is newly capable of exploring the silences women writers face. In this sense, women’s formal experiments, perhaps even more than accessible woman-centered themes, place silence in the role of unexplored territory that can be made communally useful by the linguistic efforts of the poet.

But a better understanding of the innovative poetics of American women writers must acknowledge their writing as more than just a victory over silence. It is also a reach toward silence, toward the unspeakable, that affirms the importance of the unknown and the unknowable. This is particularly important for women poets because of the ways that they themselves, as women, have been identified with silence; again, “woman” is often of a piece with the formless, the chaotic, and the unspeakable. As we saw in Snyder’s “Poetry and the Primitive,” this symbolic identification of women with the silences of the other-than-human wilderness makes human language a masculine tool for an inherently insufficient expression of non-linguistic, feminized otherness. Though some women writers may wish to distance themselves from identification with the unknowable by

asserting the primacy of logos, reason, or the ability of the mind to apprehend and communicate experience, the mystical method of bringing silences into language may also be attractive to women writers as an affirmation of metaphorically feminine pre-, non-, or alinguistic ways of knowing.³⁰ Because human language has been coded as masculine in opposition to a symbolically feminine unspeakable otherness, women writers are often particularly motivated to use innovative forms to allow that feminized otherness, the silent and silenced wilderness, to be present in poetry in a way that resists translation or appropriation by symbolically male language.

Thus, for some women, a mystical poetics is crucial, for they are doubly concerned with evoking silences as an authorizing feminine force and with protecting those silences from colonization or civilization through language. Poets like Maureen Owen demonstrate the importance of preserving silence in American women's innovative poetics. Owen's "Postscript to the rest of my life," dedicated "*for Grendel*," appears at first to give voice to the silenced "Beast":

If we were Beauty and the Beast. I would be
the Beast. Heart smoking in the dim chamber
the candlelit hall hurling backward from the
door. The Beast I always loved I
hated that wimp he turns into when he dies
by the pond. The secret of the matter is
to be real in diguise! All the boats
in the marina were wearing blue masks. We
passed the same houses we had passed coming

went by the same unshaven yards. But now
 the sea seemed only a big cup of tea for the
 fishes & in the gathering fog the lake
 simply a part of a distinct figure's shoe that
 had melted forming a pool. Slowly
 an idea began to turn in my brain. It was the
 same story only this time
 written from the monster's point of view. (25)

The speaker aligns herself with “the Beast” before he has been returned to his supposedly true form as the Prince, “that wimp he turns into.” She aligns herself, that is, with the unrecuperated monstrous or wild and against the process of making it capable of participating in sanctioned culture. Both the form and the content (or, more accurately, what’s not contained in the poem) belie the idea of breaking the Beast’s silence: the speaker does not, in the end, fully give voice to this beastliness. Though there is an idea turning in the speaker’s brain of a story she could or might like to tell, the poem does not tell that story. We do not get anything “written from the monster’s point of view.” The presence of this *unwritten* story haunts the poem in the blanks that split the otherwise fairly conventional syntax and sentence structure, intimating there is something that is not being said. The poem cannot tell the story of the Beast precisely because it values that story as the untold, as “dim” and “candlelit”; to tell it would be, in a sense, to turn the Beast into the Prince, to put the unspeakable into words and thus remove its power. For many women writers the evocation of the unspeakable or the unknowable in language is a

valuable tool for accessing an extra-linguistic force, a wilderness coded as non-rational and feminine, and defending it from the domestication of language.

The choice of how to relate to silence is thus fraught. If a woman poet pushes language into what has been silent, her poetry may bear a conflicted relationship to the silence that her language explores and settles: she may feel the need to experiment and extend the reach of her voice, but she may also feel the need to preserve and respect the feminized and mysterious unspeakable of which poetry has so often cast itself the ravisher. Similarly, if a woman invites or invokes silences in her poetry, she may also be ambivalent to such an invitation: she may want to utilize the authority of the unspeakable, but she may also feel particularly strongly the need to claim a space for her own voice within that silence. Experimental women writers, then, may use language to break the silence, but they are also identified with that very silence and may consider it a source of power.

In this sense, the situation of the experimental American woman poet is the situation of poetry writ large. All poetry works to extend the reach of language, at the very least to say something new; American women writers are especially motivated to do so both because their work participates in an important pioneering tradition and because it constitutes resistance to social, political, and personal oppression. All poetry—by virtue of its heightened awareness of language—suggests it addresses something that cannot or should not be said in quotidian language; American women writers have been identified with non-linguistic wilderness and thus may be particularly driven to affirm the power of silence, which has been posited as an endangered but vital center of American life and identity. It is my purpose to articulate how formal innovation by American women poets

manages this fraught and paradoxical relationship to silence. Kathleen Fraser's formation of the literary periodical *HOW(ever)* in the 1980s recognized that second-wave feminism's lionizing of accessibility marginalized the work of innovative or experimental women writers, and contributors to that enterprise have done much to promote serious attention to the work of experimental women poets. Poet-critics like DuPlessis and Joan Retallack have argued that feminist literary practice must, to some degree, move beyond accessibility into forms of silence.³¹ But this kind of critical work does not analyze the innovative forms of women writers as working toward a simultaneously pioneering and mystic poetics. Reading poems by women writers that simultaneously break and cultivate silences will open a dialogue between a historically feminist understanding of silence as oppressive, traditionally male-dominated theories that put silence at the heart of poetic impulse and human understanding, and women's avant-garde theoretical conceptions of linguistic experimentation as a feminist project.

Though the following chapters will treat writers whose work, in one way or another, maintains an unresolved tension between extending and limiting language, even those writers commonly positioned at the extremes are influenced by the need to modulate between ways of relating to silence, particularly in their formal choices. Rich's poems famously break certain silences imposed on women, and her devotion to accessibility is part of her intention to make women's experiences, what she calls "a whole new psychic geography to be explored," legible and visible in literature ("Awaken" 35).³² Her goal is to "move out toward what the feminist philosopher Mary Daly has described as the 'new space' on the boundaries of patriarchy" (49). However, even at her most determined to push language past the "boundaries of patriarchy," Rich

allows for the value of silences in both her themes and her form. "Diving Into the Wreck" is largely concerned with creating language for women's experiences (23). The speaker of the poem is a diver, exploring a wrecked ship that has been called "the life of one woman, the source of successes and failures; it is the history of all women submerged in a patriarchal culture; it is that source of myths about male and female sexuality which shape our lives and roles today" (McDaniel 16). The speaker investigates new territory below the waves, and her actions are explicitly related to language: "I came to explore the wreck. / The words are purposes. / The words are maps." But even in a poem so evidently concerned with shining a diver's lamp on what has been concealed, the language also points toward the essential truth of what remains unilluminated. Rich accomplishes this imagistically by foregrounding the silence and the blackness of the sea: though the speaker claims "words as maps" and trusts in "the beam of [her] lamp," she finds herself "blacking out." The unspeakable force of the sea, which threatens to dissolve the speaker's consciousness, is presented as an antagonist to her searching and mapping with words, but it is also identified with the speaker. Nancy Milford characterizes Rich's sea imagery as explicitly, mysteriously feminine: "these are primal waters, life-giving and secretive in the special sense of not being wholly revealed. The female element" (201). While one might at first expect a "life-giving [. . .] female element" to be a positive atmosphere for the speaker of Rich's poem, if the sea is an embodiment of something not "wholly revealed," it is a difficult milieu for one whose words are maps. As the speaker descends into the ocean, her conventional abilities fail her, and she must "learn alone / to turn [her] body without force / in the deep element." In order to be granted the authority to speak, she must, like Emerson's poet, yield herself to the element in which she is

immersed. Articulation of what lies outside the boundaries of language is accomplished by surrendering one's strength. This language of movement without force undermines the speaker's authority as an explorer: she invades the unspeakable but is submerged in and surrounded by it and robbed of her power.

The final stanza of the poem shows a heightened tension between cultivating and curtailing language:

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear. (23)

The pioneer is immediately evident. The speaker exhorts one who would “find [the] way” and makes a list of tools she or he should carry on the mission. The knife can easily be accounted for as a necessary tool for an explorer: she needs it to defend herself in the wilderness and to cut a path through it. And the camera is a machine for making a record of what will be discovered or revealed. However, the last item on the list signals a hidden conflict in the poem. The “book of myths / in which / our names do not appear” could be read as an indictment of the inaccurate myths of culture that have gone before. The purpose of exploration then, could be to inscribe those names that have been left out, to map what is missing from the story and make it newly legible. But the book of myths is

listed among the explorer's tools, which implies that it is useful for her task: apparently, in order to understand the "scene" fully, the diver needs a book in which her name does not appear. She needs to be unwritten, her name effectively silent, in order to make her discovery, uninfluenced by the naming and attendant mythologizing that has gone before. Paradoxically, the one who explores silence carries silence, the non-appearance of a name, among her tools. Finally, the line breaks isolate "our names do not appear" from its prepositional context "in which." The effect of this is to make it the final result of the explorative efforts: though the diver has gone searching, mapping with words, in the end "our names do not appear." The truth, then, remains unworded; it cannot be put in the book. Thus the poem, though concerned with speaking out, still preserves a silence.

This duality is not only thematically present in the poem but haunts its formal choices as well. The punctuation signals an oscillation between mapping with words and submersion in silence. The first three stanzas, which describe the machinery of exploration, use five commas and nine periods that combine with line breaks to form clearly punctuated sentences, employing unmistakably subordinated clauses and clear relationships between parts of the utterances. The speaker's words carefully delineate the territory she enters. However, when the speaker begins to descend into the sea in the fourth and fifth stanzas, there are only two periods and two colons. Punctuation as mapping has been replaced by the "turning without force" that the sea requires. Line breaks create semantically weak divisions between clauses, which allow for ambiguity of meaning and the flow of semantic connections across line breaks. The commas are absent altogether. As if in compensation, the sixth stanza alone includes five periods as it reasserts language as something capable of making the unknown intelligible: "I came to

explore the wreck. / The words are purposes. / The words are maps.” But these lines do not fully reinstate the use of punctuation to clarify and create hierarchical meaning. Instead, the disruption of normative punctuation allows Rich to arrive at one of the most evocative and attended-to lines in “Diving into the Wreck,” “I am she: I am he.” This line begins the final full sentence of the poem:

I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes

whose breasts still bear the stress

whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies

obscurely inside barrels

half-wedged and left to rot

we are the half-destroyed instruments

that once held to a course

the water-eaten log

the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are

by cowardice or courage

the one who find our way

back to this scene

carrying a knife, a camera

a book of myths

in which

our names do not appear.

The punctuation of this final sentence creates a crucial ambiguity that results in a grammatical silence. The rest of the poem uses no periods, making everything that follows the colon after “I am she” into an example demonstrating that statement. However, the use of a capital letter at the beginning of the final stanza implies the beginning of a new utterance, making all that follows “We are, I am, you are” separate from the one beginning with “I am she.” In the first reading, the various identities articulated in the last stanzas of the poem, male and female, singular and manifold, are all grammatically subsumed under the category “she.” In the second reading, however, the androgyny and multiplicity of the “we” is grammatically separate from “she.” The oscillation in the poem between words as maps—the tools of grammar as capable of establishing stable relationships between words and their meanings—and words as turnings without force, surrendered to the silencing space of the sea, allows for both of these readings to exist simultaneously. If what the poem investigates is the occluded meanings of the statement “I am she,” then Rich’s punctuation allows her to make claims about what is included in that category while also insisting on its malleability and undecidability. That undecidability is so strong that it even dissolves agreement between subject and verb, one of the most stable unities in English grammar, leaving us with Rich’s most obviously innovative lines: “We are, I am, you are / by cowardice or courage / the one who find our way.” Identity in these lines is simultaneously singular and multiple.³³ Rich pushes at the most basic units of poetic form in order to allow her poem to claim an investigative, revelatory relationship to the silences of the submerged while

also leaving some things underwater. In Rich's poetry we can see that even the most pioneering woman poet makes use of the mystic mode and that even the most accessible poetry modifies its forms in order to make room for the necessary paradox of both exploring and evoking silences.

On the other end of the spectrum, Joan Retallack's criticism and poetry, unlike Rich's, are radically and self-consciously experimental and more interested in promoting and valuing poetic silences than in breaking them. In "RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM:" Retallack rejects feminisms that are dependent on representational poetics, claiming that their over-determination and their insistence on speaking out maintain women readers as passive. Instead, she valorizes writing by women that does not speak about or reveal silenced or suppressed experiences but rather elicits active participation from its readers, writing that conspires rather than inspires: "To conspire (to breath together) is to participate in the construction of a living aesthetic event. But this requires a different kind of form—one not so authoritatively intelligible, one that in other wise enacts a continuing articulation of silence" (356). Retallack promotes an "open, multiple, juxtapositional, unexpectedly, teeming noisy silence" that is explicitly constructed as feminine and a "woman's feminine text [. . .] designed to interpolate itself into emptiness/silence—to let emptiness/silence in" (362, 357). In Retallack's rethinking of feminist poetics, silence is not something to be broken but something to be cultivated, something to be invited into the poem in order for the work to be effectively, actively feminine and feminist. Silence, especially as refusal of meaning, is useful for disrupting the entire system of authoritative language because it does not merely appropriate the intelligibility of authoritative patriarchal forms for expressing women's experiences. The

unspeakable is thus coded as a powerful feminine force valued for its very unspeakability.

However, despite Retallack's forceful statements in favor of a mystical relationship to silence, her work betrays an exploratory urge. In fact, in her essay "The Poetical Wager," she explicitly characterizes the poet as gaining new territory for language: "the realm of the unintelligible is the permanent frontier," and it is the feminist poet who can best push past those boundaries to "articulate silence" (111-12). Retallack's formal choices in many of her poems activate two distinct meanings of this phrase. On the one hand, to articulate silence means to make the unspeakable present; on the other, it means to explore and express something, putting it into words rather than invoking its wordlessness.³⁴ While a poem like "A I D /I/ S A P P E A R A N C E" clearly points to an emptiness or an indeterminacy with which a reader may actively conspire to create meaning, it also demonstrates a desire to speak the unspeakable and destroy certain silences with language. "A I D /I/ S A P P E A R A N C E" is dedicated to Stephen Fitterman, an artist who died of AIDS five years before the poem's 1998 publication. The poem is divided into seven parts: the first is the only one composed entirely of whole words (some of which are taken from Niels Bohr's "The Atomic Theory and the Fundamental Principles underlying the Description of Nature"), while the following stanzas contain fewer and fewer words and letters until the last has none at all, only numbered blanks corresponding to the seven numbered lines of the foregoing stanzas. An author's note included at the end of the volume in which the poem first appeared explains its structure in terms of disappearance: "The disappearance moves through the letters of the alphabet (and the source text) in this way: Beginning with letters A I D S, it spreads

to adjoining letters B H J C E R T, to F G K Q U, to L P V, to M O W, to N X, to Y” (*How* 156). The poem’s concern with AIDS, a disease that American culture often does not wish to acknowledge, and with disappearance, especially the literal erasure of language, make silence central to both its subject and its structure.

As we might expect based on Retallack’s formulation of silence as necessary to feminist poetics, the structure of “A I D / I / S A P P E A R A N C E” allows for an expressive silence: rather than seeking to explain or fill in the blanks in the discourse on a subject like AIDS, the poem creates more and more empty space. Though this silencing process is difficult and even painful (after all the name of Stephen Fitterman, the only recognizable human subject in the poem, is being erased letter by letter), it is crucial in the poem that the language already accreted around its subject be silenced. Bruce Walpert describes the two major types of discourse represented in stanza one as scientific and lyrical (698-700). The presence of text from Bohr’s essay on the process of describing nature introduces a scientific tone, which is then abruptly taken over by subjective, personal language and natural imagery: lines move without punctuation from “an essential / element of discontinuity especially apparent through the discussion of the / nature of light” to “she said it’s so odd to be dying and laughed still it’s early / late the beauty of nature as the moon waxes turns to terror” (54). The poem next proceeds systematically to erase those discourses until, finally, it silences the types of language that have been considered valid for dealing with a subject like AIDS—both the scientifically objective and the lyrically subjective—clearing away received language to create a silent space in which the disappearances the poem records exceed linguistic codification of the experience of disease and death.

However, just as the pioneering urge appears in Retallack's criticism, this poem also has its exploratory notions. It is, despite its claims for the importance of silence, a poem that pushes poetic language to become capable of articulating what was previously silent. Though Retallack avoids explanation or statement in favor of opening the poem to silence, in order to make language capable of such an opening, she must reshape it, and, much like Cage does with the use of musical staff structure in "Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing?," extend its ability to evoke absence. The poem is primarily concerned with inviting and allowing silence to disrupt other forms of discourse; however, in order to do so, it must explore and push past the boundaries of what can be said. Rich and Retallack have largely chosen to align themselves most fully with, respectively, the pioneer or the mystic mode, but their situation as women writers encourages and perhaps even demands that their poems, if only briefly or unwillingly, acknowledge the dual role of silence and the paradoxical responses it makes possible.

American women's innovative writing is more than just the silent prayer of the pioneer or the map and compass strapped surreptitiously to the side of the mystic. In the work of the women that follows, the conflict between the mystic and pioneer is fundamentally unresolved, driving innovative forms and techniques that allow their poems simultaneously to extend and limit language. In Chapter II, I explore Dickinson's figurative grammar, particularly her self-referential comparisons, as a response to conflicting needs to vaunt the expressive capability of the poet and to suggest its inadequacy. This is especially important for articulating a longing for union with something other than the self while preserving the boundaries that protect individual identity from dissolution. Lorine Niedecker shares Dickinson's respect for the separate

identities of her subjects, which, for each of them, pulls against a delight in the descriptive and evocative capabilities of language. In the work of both poets, complex and contradictory relationships to speech and silence are grammatically figured. But while Dickinson's feelings about linguistic expression are inflected by the religious character of her time and place, Niedecker's are marked by literary movements like Surrealism and Objectivism and the kinds of relationships they advocate between poet and world. In Chapter III, I investigate Niedecker's use of connectives, such as conjunctions and prepositions, both to expand and undermine language's ability to create relationships among objects. Like Niedecker, Gwendolyn Brooks's poems show the influence of Emily Dickinson; while Niedecker echoes Dickinson's spare, slippery style, Brooks borrows her linguistic extravagance and playful irony. All three poets are concerned with stretching language toward new capabilities while preventing the extraordinary, idiosyncratic, or singular from being appropriated into shared language, but for Brooks the motivation to extend and limit language is intensified by the way ideas about race and gender shape her notions of selfhood and representation. In Chapter IV, I discuss Brooks's foregrounding of poetic artifice as a means to figure contradictory responses to language as well as a fraught relationship between individual and communal identity and expression. Finally, in the concluding chapter, I review the themes and techniques explored in the work of Dickinson, Niedecker, and Brooks, and I briefly anticipate how these concerns are at play in multilingual literatures in the United States. As the twentieth century becomes the twenty-first, the factors that influence the role of articulation and reticence in the work of American women writers change. However, American women's formal experimentation continues to be motivated by a deep-seated

ambivalence toward both speech and silence that constitutes common cause not only amongst the particular poets considered here but amongst their contemporaries and competitors.

Notes

¹ The voices outside the door recall Frost's "The Sound of Sense": "The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words." For Frost, this "pure sound" is the "raw material of poetry" (10).

² See Derrida's *On the Name*, especially the final chapter, "Khora," for the development of these claims, much simplified here.

³ Critics like Mortley restrict silence largely to the linguistic realm. For instance, he claims that the attempt at silence or transcendence in painting is "little more than coquetry" that fetishizes the trappings of the mystic without actually seeking for ontological knowledge of what lies beyond representation (268).

⁴ Some examples are Hejinian's "The Rejection of Closure," Merwin's "On Open Form," Simic's "Negative Capability and Its Children," Waldrop's "Thinking of Follows," and the essays collected in McHugh's *Broken English*.

⁵ In particular, Glück names Rilke, Berryman, Oppen, and Eliot.

⁶ See Billington's *The Frontier Thesis: Valid Interpretation of American History?* for a survey of the major responses to Turner's thesis and a brief history of its reception among historians up to the 1960s. See Lewis's introduction to *American Wilderness: A New History* for more contemporary responses to Turner's thesis (and other recent formulations of wilderness).

⁷ The definition of wilderness as untouched by humans was written into law with the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act that defined wilderness "in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape [. . .] an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (qtd. in Lewis 4-5).

⁸ Though my argument does, to some degree, participate in the narrative of American exceptionalism by positing that American poetics is uniquely anxious about silence in part because of the importance of the wilderness in the formation of American self-conceptions, I do not wish to suggest that the concept of wilderness is determinate or that it affects all "American" groups and individuals in the same way. Kolodny's essay "Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions: Notes Toward a New Literary History of the American Frontiers" rightly calls for a pluralization of the concept of the frontier, as well

as what counts as American. However, I do not seek to theorize the frontier or investigate historical responses to wilderness. Instead, I follow Kolodny's suggestion in both *The Lay of the Land* and *The Land Before Her* that fantasies about wilderness have their own power, to some degree independent of social complexities and material realities. It is the ambivalence toward silence present in the dominant fantasies and myths about wilderness in America that concerns me here.

⁹ Though not explicitly related to silence, the debates over preservation vs. conservation and "wise use," wilderness vs. wildness, wilderness theory vs. activism, and other controversies in the discourse around the use of ecological resources are further echoes of this conflict.

¹⁰ Chapter 2 of Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, "A Wilderness Condition," details the Puritan conception, brought over from the Old World, of the wilderness as ungodly. Similarly, Dean summarizes "Pilgrim" responses to the wilderness with Nathaniel Morton's phrase "hideous and desolate" as a contrast to Thoreau's characterization of wilderness as "near to good" (73). While there is certainly evidence for a negative Puritan view of the wilderness, it does not tell the whole story: Calvinist theology does not allow for the mysterious, unknown, and inhuman to be solely interpreted as devilish. Kolodny also provides an interesting counterpoint to Puritan hatred of the wilderness: she uses John Winthrop's "land of Canaan" and other Puritan Eden imagery to contrast male Puritan fantasies of a welcoming and holy wilderness with female fantasies of a threatening and enclosing wilderness (6).

¹¹ Like "pioneer" and "mystic," Dean's terms, "romantic" (or "mysterious" or "sublime") and "scientific" (or "rationalist," or "naturalist"), distinguish between attitudes that preserve and venerate the silence of the unknown and those that explore it.

¹² In "How to Avoid Speaking," Derrida explains that his work does not fit under the rubric of "negative theology" because it does not posit a hyper-essential being beyond being (3-12). Deconstruction and related ways of reading are, however, mystical in a poetic sense: that is, Derrida's writing may not claim there is being beyond being, but it does argue for a being beyond language, or perhaps a non-being beyond language, that requires a mystical avoiding or voiding of language and cannot, ultimately, be expressed.

¹³ I am concerned here with drawing out self-consciously American mysticisms that are responding more or less directly to the concept of wilderness. See Bridges's *American Mysticism: From William James to Zen* for a wider treatment of American mysticism, especially as it relates to Eastern mystic philosophies and traditions.

¹⁴ Mortley argues in Appendix II of his series *From Word to Silence* that contemporary discussions of negativity in the arts and literature confuse a negation of particular modes of artistic practice with the Ancient Greek *via negativa* and with mystical silence. He claims that silence in the literary and the plastic arts is impossible, and the investment of contemporary art in silence is not in silence itself but in a self-

referential silencing of particular art forms. While I agree that silence cannot be achieved in art, I do not agree with his assertion that it cannot be suggested (266). It is this suggestion of silence, especially as an indicator of supralinguistic meaning, that characterizes what I am calling mystical poetics.

¹⁵ I use the male pronoun advisedly here. Though my argument will reject the notion that the pioneering poet must be a male figure, the myth of the pioneer, discussed below, is unavoidably gendered. I preserve this gendering because I wish to recognize the effect it may have on women writers who are themselves pioneering poets. Similarly, though the politics of grammar do not force the issue here, the archetypical pioneer is white, and Chapter IV will address the effect of this racial positioning of authority in Brooks's work.

¹⁶ Many of the most well-known theorists and writers of mystic or apophatic language and literature are European: Valéry, Beckett, Lyotard, Celan, and Jabés, for instance. In addition, mystical attitudes in general have Old World Catholic connotations, as opposed to materialist New World Protestantism, perhaps in part because narratives of American exceptionalism have stressed the pioneer mode as native and either ignored American mysticisms or discussed them as outgrowths of foreign influence. Transcendentalism is a major exception, but perhaps the mysticism of Transcendental thought is more easily recuperated as an authentically American phenomenon because it is so firmly based in positivist individualism.

¹⁷ McCall's *The Silence of Bartleby* explains why so many of the theoretical readings that proffer interpretations of Bartleby's silence fall short and argues for a critical negative capability that respects the refusal of meaning at the center of Melville's story.

¹⁸ Chase claims that the American romance can be understood in relation to the British novel, in that the British novel concerns itself with the resolution of social schisms into unity, while the American romance aims for neither an accurate picture of the social nor resolution. Instead, American literature seeks to express what is outside the bounds of the social and thus, I would argue, outside the realm of shared and socially communicative language.

¹⁹ The foregrounding of artifice in order to demonstrate both linguistic virtuosity and the limits of that skill will be discussed more fully in Chapter IV in the context of Brooks's work.

²⁰ French Surrealism and Italian Futurism are two notable movements that valorized language as a tool for dissolving or exceeding boundaries.

²¹ Steinman's *Made In America* reads American modernist attitudes toward science and technology as responding to a particularly American pragmatism, commercialism, utilitarianism, and populism. However, Eliot's identification of poetry

with experimental science also takes part in a broader international modernist involvement with science and appropriation of scientific metaphors, driven, in part, by a devotion to the new and the need to argue for the relevance of the arts in a newly scientific and technological world. See Pound's "The Serious Artist" for a classic example of modernist poetic authorization through alignment with technology and the scientific method.

²² Where Emerson lists "action, [. . .] looks and behavior" among the things that are loved about the poet, Eliot seeks to depose the personality. He argues in direct opposition to Emerson, "The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality" (115).

²³ Wolosky argues that Eliot's treatment of language participates in a Christian ascetic/mystic tradition. While I agree that Eliot's "positive claims for language come to undermine themselves, against the [Christian] tradition's (and Eliot's) expressed intentions," I focus here on the force of Eliot's "expressed intention" to reshape language in order to penetrate and explore what lies outside of it (11).

²⁴ Though the branches signify "a hundred summers," they do so largely as a function of their physical properties—for instance, their longevity and the sounds they make as they burn—rather than as a function of the poet's meaning making.

²⁵ The suppression of connective language, such as prepositions and conjunctions, to undermine the reification of natural objects in language will be discussed at length in Chapter III on Niedecker.

²⁶ Perhaps because of this rhetorical separation from the feminine, major critical revaluations of silence as central to contemporary literary practice have almost completely ignored the writing of women in a surprisingly conservative attachment to canonical (male) writers perhaps meant to demonstrate that silence is not merely a fringe concern but at the heart of modern discourse. For instance, Budick and Iser's near 400-page collection of essays on negativity in literature does not significantly discuss a single woman author; Hassan's *The Literature of Silence* considers only Henry Miller and Beckett; and Wolosky's *Language Mysticism* takes on male authors exclusively, as does Waldrop's otherwise wide-ranging *Against Language*.

²⁷ From the mid-1980s, studies of silence as a literary phenomenon in its own right (and not simply evidence of oppression or repression of a writer) have become more and more common. Upton's *Defensive Measures*, though not explicitly feminist, focuses exclusively on the defensive strategies of female poets. Toker's *Eloquent Reticence* does not primarily discuss writing by women, but her interest in narrative gaps as strategies for eloquence and her treatment of such gaps in Jane Austen's work show the rising

acceptability in the last few decades of discussing silence as a function of something other than oppression or repression in women's writing.

²⁸ Works like Frost's 2003 *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*, Rankine and Spahr's 2003 edited collection *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, Kinnahan's 2004 *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse*, and Keller's 2010 *Thinking Poetry: Readings in Contemporary Women's Exploratory Poetics* enrich and expand a tradition of "criticism of modern and contemporary literature [that] has often ignored experimental poetry by American women" in favor of a "focus on a poetics of personal experience, frequently grounded in identity politics" (Frost xii).

²⁹ It is, of course, not coincidental to Howe's revision that *King Lear* makes silence the sign of Cordelia's daughterly devotion. While Howe, in a sense, explodes the play's claim that the truest affection is unspeakable, the silence of Shakespeare's Cordelia points to a larger poetic problem that is compelling for many feminist writers, that is, the desire to capture the authenticity of silence in language.

³⁰ The French feminist elaboration of *écriture féminine* makes just such an identification of the feminine with disruptive silences and promotes the interruption of supposedly patriarchal language with a feminine or feminized non-language that is aligned with primary maternal unity. Though Kristeva and other theorists of *écriture féminine* often appear to be suggesting that male writers are better equipped to wield such a dangerous tool as feminine language, women writers have long seen the benefits of aligning their word-work with the mystical, terrifying formlessness and divine alogical multiplicity of which they are accused.

³¹ See especially DuPlessis's "Language Acquisition" and Retallack's "RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM."

³² Rich's conflation of pushing past patriarchal boundaries and accessible writing is evident in her characterization of feminist writing as that which *represents*, especially in images, women's experience. For instance, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision" traces Rich's development as a feminist writer in terms of how "directly" she is able to write "about experiencing [herself] as a woman" (44). In contrast, Retallack, discussed in more detail below, argues that experimentation is feminist, and she explicitly rejects the notion that feminist writing must create recognizable images of women ("RE:THINKING" 348-58).

³³ Rich's transgression of subject-verb agreement to advance a larger rhetorical and thematic concern echoes Dickinson's grammatical figuration, explored in depth in Chapter II.

³⁴ Both of these interpretations refer to articulation as expression rather than the other meaning of "articulate," to attach with joints. This meaning may also be at play

obliquely in Retallack's double relationship to silence in that it suggests giving shape or more precise detail to silence, which, again, could mean evoking or undoing it.

CHAPTER II

“ITSELF IS ALL THE LIKE”:

SELSAMENESS IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

When T. W. Higginson, the editor Emily Dickinson called her preceptor, describes for the *Atlantic Monthly* one of his rare meetings with the poet, she appears more the object of a naturalist’s study than a human being:

She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour’s interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make her withdraw into her shell; I could only sit still and watch, as one does in the woods; I must name my bird without a gun, as recommended by Emerson.

(qtd. in Sewall, *Life* 5-6)

Higginson’s instinct to step lightly among nature’s mysteries aligns him with the Transcendentalists, as he is well aware. In his metaphor, interviewing Dickinson is a field trip during which he must observe but not disturb the natural flora and fauna. But the naturalist’s respect for nature’s mysteriousness battles his desire to name and know it: the language of “direct cross-examination” is the gun that would startle or kill the “enigmatical being,” the bird he is attempting to name. Of course, Higginson is not talking about a bird. He is talking about a woman, one of the great talents of his age. She is portrayed in his estimation as a kind of baffling creature, and his own strange imagery—confounding shy turtle and elusive bird—echoes this inscrutability.

Yet, Emily Dickinson shares Higginson’s need to name his bird, and she also shares his anxieties about the effectiveness and ethics of putting a name to the “enigmatical.” Her development of finely tuned linguistic instruments for shaping her

observations of the world around her and her simultaneous insistence on the unspeakableness of certain experiences are inflected by her position as a poet and a woman, as both an explorer of nature and a natural mystery herself. Unlike Higginson, she is not only the naming voice of the woodsman; she is also the silent bird.¹

This dual identity often precipitates both rhetorical and formal ambiguities in poems that dramatize the human relationship to nature. “‘Nature’ is what We see –,” for instance, is equivocal in that, on one hand, it uses the language of sensory experience to define what nature is, and, on the other, it claims that nature is ultimately defined by its very transcendence of the artifice of language:

“Nature” is what We see –

The Hill – the Afternoon –

Squirrel – Eclipse – the Bumblebee –

Nay – Nature is Heaven –

“Nature” is what We hear –

The Bobolink – the Sea –

Thunder – the Cricket –

Nay – Nature is Harmony –

“Nature” is what We know –

But have no Art to say –

So impotent our Wisdom is

To Her Sincerity – (*P721*)²

The poem is apparently didactic; it teaches what nature is. Nature is, in the first two stanzas, defined by human perception: in the first stanza, sight, in the second, hearing. In each case, the information gathered by the senses allows the speaker to name nature, both with a predicate nominative construction and by labeling it with a series of isolated nouns. But these declarations are problematic for the speaker, as evident from the first “Nay,” which belies the confidence of the preceding lines. Each of the first two stanzas ends with a renaming or revision that ostensibly opposes the abstract or even the superhuman to more concrete perception by substituting “Heaven” and “Harmony” for “what We see” and “what We hear.” This pattern of assurance followed by revision establishes a speaker who simultaneously relies on language to name and define what she experiences and is mistrustful of its ability to do so accurately, perhaps even mistrustful of sense perception itself.³ But the final stanza, as if a corrective to this uncertainty, is more decidedly didactic than those preceding it. It offers what could be read as an apology for the poem’s earlier waverings, claiming that human art and wisdom, and by extension the words of the poem itself, are “impotent” in the face of nature’s sincerity. The irony of writing a poem about the difficulty of putting things into words is a common one in Dickinson’s work, but the proposition that nature is what we “have no Art to say” raises the stakes of that irony by absolutely and explicitly contradicting the professed purpose of the poem to say what nature is.

The formal contours of the poem destabilize its apparent rejection of the art of words. The interior lines of the first two stanzas elide all syntactic connection and rely instead on pure nomination. This parataxis may indicate the failure of the art of language: the organizing powers of language are reduced to mere pointing at natural objects. But it

could also celebrate the power to name: language is so powerful that it can call eclipses to the eye and thunder to the ear with the bare utterance of a noun. These sequences of nouns also help establish rhythms that leave it unclear whether the poem advocates for nature or art—or whether it divides the two at all. The lines of the first two stanzas—which, despite their self-negations, are most confident in their ability to say what nature is—are almost unrecognizable as Dickinson’s standard alternating four- and three-stress lines.⁴ The lack of coordinating or subordinating connective words and the use of dashes in the first three stanzas disguise the rhythmic pattern and, in some cases, dispense with it altogether. “Thē Hīll – Thē Aftērnoon –” and “Squīrrēl – Ēclipse – thē Būmblēbēe –” can be scanned as three-stress, basically iambic (with the exception of “Squīrrēl”) lines, but their paratactic structure and the use of dashes syncopate them, interrupting what might otherwise establish the expectation of a regular rhythm. The second stanza departs even further from rhythmic regularity. “Thūndēr – thē Crīckēt” has only two stresses, and the caesura created by the dash isolates those stresses and prevents the cumulative rhythmic effect of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables. The fact that the rhythm is jarred in these stanzas implies that nature may indeed transcend the art of language. Further, the heavy initial stress on the word “Nay” in lines four and eight, in addition to creating a pause, even suggests a stutter: the lines purport to say what nature is, but we may hear “Na – Na –” as false starts to saying the word “Nature,” making the first two stanzas, despite their assurance, halting and unsure, as if poetic art were unequal to the task.⁵

Even so, the rhythm of the final stanza, the stanza that seems most unequivocally to put nature beyond words, returns to a melodic, easily perceptible iambic rhythm. The

formal hesitation and uncertainty of the first two stanzas is finally affirmed on the rhetorical level by the claim that nature's sincerity transcends "our" wisdom and art. But here the form of the poem retrenches and instead argues that language, particularly a highly artificial language pattern like iambic meter, does have the power to organize and name experience. While the poem ends by declaring human art and wisdom impotent in the face of a sincerity that, by definition, is supralinguistic, this declaration returns us to the assertive rhythms of the very wisdom and art it denounces as impotent.⁶ We can almost tap our feet or sing along to this memorable declaration of art's failure:

“Náture is what Wē knōw – / Bŭt hāve nŏ Árt tŏ sáy – / Sŏ ímpŏtént ōŭr Wísdŏm ís / Tŏ Hér Sínćerítý.” Such lines make doubtful their own claim that human wisdom, artfully expressed, is impotent, and this kind of duality is fundamental to Dickinson's work.

Because Dickinson is identified with both explorer and bird, namer and nature, her poems are often anxious about rendering nature, and by extension all experience, in words. Her authority as a poet depends on the assumption that language, in her hands, can be revelatory, but she authorizes her experiences as particularly intense by claiming that they transcend human language and must be passed over in silence. Too, her culture's identification of woman with nature and experience, rather than with the experiencing mind, makes it all the more important for her to guard such experience from appropriation in language by shrouding it in silence. This complex relationship to speech and silence profoundly affects Dickinson's formal choices and drives many of her characteristic experimental techniques.

More than any other American poet, Dickinson is known for her silences. Critics have pathologized and praised those silences, but they cannot ignore them. Even

biographical fascination with Dickinson and the popular appeal of her poems must be fundamentally understood in terms of silences. Biographers and readers choose variously to fill in the blank of Dickinson's life and writing, but Dickinson, in both her letters and poems, refuses to fill them in herself. At times she seems almost to tease with her silences, as if to say, if you don't know, I can't tell you. Dickinson's famed reticence is a commonplace of American literary studies and the popular imagination, and much clamor has been raised speculating on the cause of her silences. Nominations have included a tragic love affair (with various lovers put forward), a tyrannical father, and a debilitating illness or physical condition (among the options are agoraphobia, ocular difficulties, and epilepsy). Mabel Todd's 1881 letter to her parents neatly summarizes the popular perception of Dickinson in her own time that has, despite the protests of her family, literary executors, and contemporary critics, persisted:

I must tell you about the *character* of Amherst. It is a lady whom the people call the *Myth*. She has not been outside of her own house in fifteen years, except once to see a new church, when she crept out at night, & viewed it by moonlight [. . .]. She dresses wholly in white, & her mind is said to be perfectly wonderful. She writes finely, but no one *ever* sees her [. . .]. No one knows the cause of her isolation, but of course there are dozens of reasons assigned. (qtd. in Sewall, *Life* 216)⁷

Todd reports to her parents what she and the people of Amherst themselves seem to recognize is at least partly invention: she calls this version of Dickinson a "character," and the people call her the "Myth." The story of Dickinson's withdrawal and silence is recognized as fictional, but it is no less compelling for that, and Todd retells the tale with

evident pleasure. By the time of Dickinson's death, however, the origins of the myth as gossip had been obscured. Emily Fowler Ford's elegy "Eheu! Emily Dickinson," published in 1891 in the *Springfield Republican*, makes Dickinson's personal idiosyncracies the subject of the poem and takes her peculiar silences, not her newfound appeal as a published poet or the quality of her work, as inherently of interest to the *Republican* audience. The poem speaks directly to the departed Dickinson, simultaneously lamenting and fetishizing her withdrawal from society: "Oh friend [. . .] You shun the eye, the voice, and shy elude / The loving souls that dare not to intrude / Upon your chosen silence." It is Dickinson's chosen silence that makes her especially refined, and it is her "hiding" that is evidence of the quality of her mind, unsuited to the "rude" and "crude" intrusions of "common daily strife" (qtd. in Sewall, *Life* 379). Ford's poem was published hot on the heels of the success of Dickinson's posthumously published work and lays claim to an intimacy with Dickinson ("Oh friend") by, paradoxically, citing a familiarity with Dickinson's refusal of intimacy. Thus, even the earliest reception of Dickinson's work is marked by a popular appeal that plays upon a myth of shyness, extreme sensitivity, silence, and elusiveness that persists today.

But Dickinson's silence is not entirely mythical. Richard Sewall's careful biography of Dickinson begins with reticence as a Dickinson family feature, and the bare facts of Dickinson's life bear out the notion of reticence, if not total seclusion. Sewall makes reticence a New England trait and an extension of Protestant thrift: "Although doubtless there were garrulous New Englanders—there certainly are—the habit of thrift extended to speech. They hated to waste words, a quality which became perhaps ED's most obvious New Englandism" (21). Emily Dickinson was a member of a family and a

culture that were noted for their reserve, but even in such a setting, she stands out. She often declined to descend the stairs to meet visitors at her house, and she famously would not venture to her brother's house next door even for so eminent a personage as Ralph Waldo Emerson. While she carried on lively and intimate correspondences with many of her family, friends, and acquaintances and even with public figures, she also seems to have reserved her communication to a chosen group of people, and even they could not count on being received; those not elected to what one poem calls the "soul's society" were almost always met with silence (*P409*).⁸

Readers of Dickinson's poems often feel they have been denied entrance to this inner circle and that her poems are, ultimately, not fully interpretable by those on the outside. Often the tenor of a complex metaphor will not be supplied, or a poem will begin with pronouns unmoored from the nouns they ostensibly replace or deictic terms like "this" that point only to an absent referent. While for some readers these referential silences make Dickinson's poems self-centered or even, as David Porter puts it, "autistic," many of Dickinson's most influential critics have taken these silences as the very substance of her poetry. As Sharon Cameron explains in her introduction to *Choosing/Not Choosing*, "to look at the history of Dickinson criticism is to see that what is memorialized are her ellipses, her canceled connections" (3). Among others, Cameron cites Hartmann on "revoked referentiality," Leda on the "omitted center" of the poems, and Weisbuch describing them as "sceneless." These and other critics begin from the assumption that Dickinson's poems lack reference or, at the very least, that reference is oblique, fragmented, and difficult to trace in her work.⁹ Silences are also a central element of Dickinson's form: her dashes allow her to elide grammatical connectives and

leave coordination and subordination unspoken and undecided, her condensed and multivalent syntax permits so many—often contradictory—readings that it could almost be said to refuse meaning, and the absence of titles only adds to the sense that her work sidesteps language while also reveling in it.

It is this formal incarnation of silence that has made Dickinson's work so influential for twentieth-century poets and critics, especially experimentalists and feminists. While early critics were impatient, dismissive, or downright patronizing about Dickinson's style, especially its gaps and absences, her silences have been vital to her critical and popular reevaluation in the late twentieth century.¹⁰ Postmodern readers have valued her indeterminacy, her refusal of narrative, and her estrangement of reference as laying the groundwork for contemporary poetic attitudes. These are, for many readers, evidence of what John Mulvihill calls a "distrust of names and knowledge" that echoes familiar twentieth- and twenty-first-century skepticisms (75).¹¹ But the most important reevaluations of Dickinson have been feminist, and these have also valued her silences as forms of protest or proto-feminist resistance to patriarchal norms. Susan Juhasz revises the myth of Emily the tragic maiden: "I see her movement into her house and then her room as paralleling the movement into her mind that her poems document, because both actions were undertaken for the purpose of maintaining her self against pressures from the world to lose it" (*Undiscovered* 11). For Juhasz, as for many other feminist critics, Dickinson removes herself from the world because the world, warped by sexist philosophies and institutions, is not suited to a woman such as herself. Susan Howe also reads Dickinson's silences as active and powerful: "I think she may have chosen to enter the space of silence. A space where power is no longer an issue, gender is no longer an

issue, voice is no longer an issue, where the idea of a printed book appears as a trap” (60). Thus, what might have been a disheartening story of a talented woman silenced by an unprepared public and short-sighted editors is converted into a feminist triumph. Adrienne Rich provides one of the most enduring metaphors for the feminist potential of Dickinson’s silences in her essay “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson.” She makes Dickinson’s volcanic imagery—a smoldering that can destructively erupt—into a figure for Dickinson’s poetics and, as the title of the essay suggests, argues that this explosiveness is domestic and feminine. Rich claims that Dickinson’s poetry is powerful precisely because that power is tightly controlled. Admittedly, eruption implies forceful speech, not silence, but such speech takes its force from the pressure under which it is suppressed. The volcano does not have power in spite of its hidden or underground nature but because of it.

While it may seem counter-intuitive that silences should be a major part of a poet’s appeal, Dickinson’s silences are often considered her most pioneering linguistic innovations and cited as evidence of her regard for words themselves. Charles Anderson argues that Dickinson develops a “Capacity to Terminate” “into a highly elliptical style, pruning away all excess in her passion to get down to the clean bones of language” and that such pruning amounts to a “rejuvenation of language” (148).¹² Similarly, E. Miller Budick claims that Dickinson’s “placeless eventless poetics” elides reference not because words fail her but because she is dedicated to words above things: words are valuable not for what they refer to but in and of themselves. This “rejuvenation of language” traces a line of descent from Dickinson to American modernists and a whole tradition of innovation in American poetry that privileges the word itself, rather than what it may

describe or explain, in order to revive language and make it capable of something new. Techniques that silence ordinary communication, reference, clarity, or decidability are marshaled to push language into articulating extraordinary things or speaking in extraordinary ways. This makes Dickinson's silences exploratory or pioneering uses of language not refusals of it. Joanne Dobson argues that Dickinson's personal reticence and removal from much of public life allowed her to disregard the requirements of communal meaning and thereby develop a revolutionary idiosyncratic language. According to Dobson, Dickinson's "expressive mandate was" not to leave language behind but "to develop a language adequate to communicate the uniqueness of [. . .] individual existence" (97). "Her characteristic omission of subject and her use of the devices of tonal dissonance and sequential disordering of syntax and narrative," the very same techniques that Howe takes as evidence of Dickinson "enter[ing] the space of silence," are, in Dobson's reading, "designed to *articulate* that which is, and to some degree remains, unarticulated: the 'silent side' of individual experience" (127). Dickinson's silences, inasmuch as they are taken as resistance to the appropriations of public and patriarchal language or boldly individualist experiments claiming new territory for the enlivened word, make her an essential figure in many twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetic genealogies and pantheons.

But we must be careful not to read Dickinson as though she were a modern woman, born in the wrong time. The contradictory impulses that affect Dickinson's poetics so profoundly, the inclination to veil and the impetus to articulate the "silent side" of experience, are very much a part of her nineteenth-century context. While many modern readers claim Dickinson as a proto-feminist radical and her silences as a form of

resistance to anti-female elements of her culture, neither her decision to delimit her sphere of action nor her sometimes obscure style necessarily departs from nineteenth-century models of proper feminine behavior.¹³ In *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence*, Dobson describes a feminine culture of silence to which Dickinson could not have been entirely immune: “anxiety that a full disclosure of woman’s nature might contradict culturally prevailing assumptions of feminine morality was intense, producing in middle-class society an ideology of feminine reticence so powerful that Higginson calls it a ‘gospel of silence’” (57). For a woman writer, such a “gospel of silence” could be crippling and, for many, it was. For others, the expectation of reticence inspired a poetics of resistance, unveiling, or speaking out.¹⁴ Dickinson’s poetry seems instead to affirm the “ideology of feminine reticence,” despite poems that bare the “soul at the ‘White Heat’” (P401). According to Dobson, “in an era when reticence was considered a primary requirement for the respectable female, Dickinson’s stylistic strategies allowed her to address proscribed areas of women’s personal experience, particularly anger and forbidden passion, safely—but also with honesty, precision, and strength of feeling” (xvi). In this reading, Dickinson does not valiantly escape her corseting culture but exploits its prescriptions for feminine discretion, indirection, and silence as strategies for expression. Her silences, then, are consistent with nineteenth-century requirements that women’s experiences be modestly hidden even as she develops a language of intense experience that depends largely on silences for its intensity.¹⁵

Though we may balk at the notion that Dickinson’s silences are consistent with nineteenth-century gender restrictions, her reticence also aligns her with elements of her culture that we cannot consider primarily gendered. Sewall argues that Dickinson was a

member of both a family and a regional culture marked by reticence.¹⁶ Too, her deeply personal yet unrevealing poetics is in part a natural development of a religious culture that advocates constant self-examination and interrogation of spiritual or religious experience while teaching modesty and self-denial. Her mistrust of the wisdom of language may also arise from the Puritan dogma that God is fundamentally unknowable. Dickinson's poetic speakers, like the Puritan seeking assurance that she is one of the elect, may weigh and measure, evaluate and reevaluate, but in the end they often decide that only the voice of God can speak the final word.¹⁷ True understanding, despite the injunction that humans should seek after it, is deferred to the divine. Even though it often leads to idiosyncratic language that confounds interpretation, Dickinson's intense scrutiny of interior states aligns her with some of the more conservative elements of her culture. But the idea that the unknowable is the ultimate and unattainable goal of knowledge, while it corresponds to Puritan concepts of deity, is also taken up by burgeoning new philosophies.

As strange as her contemporaries often found her poetry, it participates in a kind of mysticism that they might have recognized and, especially the more liberal among them, might have affirmed. Like her contemporaries Emerson and Thoreau, Dickinson is drawn to the mystical elements of Puritanism that, in transcendentalist writings, become even more explicit, though the unknowable superhuman is often called nature rather than God. Dickinson's poems, as we saw in "Nature – is what we See," often argue that silence is not only a marker of becoming modesty or encompassing introspection but of the presence of something that exceeds human expression. This is mystical in that it posits a form of communion with something nonhuman that can only be experienced, not

explained. Indeed, Louise Bogan's description of Dickinson's mystical poetics recalls Emerson's transparent eyeball more forcefully than it does Jonathan Edwards's sinners in the hands of an angry god: "moments of still and halted perception" like "the slant of light on a winter day, the still brilliance of a summer noon, [and] the sound of the wind before the rain [. . .] share the shock of insight, the slight dislocation of serial events, the sudden shift from the Manifold into the One" (138). When Dickinson writes in this mode, her poetry points toward something suprahuman as inspiring and authorizing her language. Thus, she affirms one of the fundamental tenets of the philosophy of her age, both at its Puritan roots and its Transcendentalist flower, that the human must always reach past itself and that it must, in some ways, always be found wanting.¹⁸

Though some poems, like "Nature is what we See," are uncertain about the claim that experiences are validated when they exceed communication, others more unequivocally celebrate mystical unrelatability as approaching the eternal:

If I could tell how glad I was
I should not be so glad –
But when I cannot make the Force
Nor mould it into word
I know it is a sign
That new Dilemma be
From mathematics further off
Than from Eternity (*P1725*)

The poem compares two types of problems that are difficult to distinguish from one another. Lines 1-2 describe the first difficulty or dilemma: language diminishes

experience, thus gladness is lessened in the telling. The subsequent lines appear at first to elaborate or restate the original problem: the poem is still addressing the insufficiency, now called a “Dilemma,” of linguistic creativity. However, the use of “but” to transition from the problem of telling gladness and the adjective “new” to describe the “Dilemma” of molding “the Force” into words indicate a contrast between these very similar poetic tasks. The most obvious difference between these communication challenges is their subject matter. The first deals with the possible diminishing effects of language on a basic human experience, gladness, while the second contends with a mysterious abstraction of power—a “Force”—that, rather than merely being lessened by the speaker’s words, is entirely beyond her creative powers.¹⁹ The change in verb tense reflects this difference. The poem begins with a conditional clause “If I could” and continues in the subjunctive. These verbs denote uncertainty and possibility. The speaker describes what *would* happen *if* she could tell her gladness, rather than what *does* happen when she cannot. In contrast, after the transition the verbs are more absolute. Where the speaker speculates and calculates about what would happen if she could tell her gladness, she knows what happens when she cannot exert her creative powers upon “the Force.” The conditional verbs suggest that the first dilemma is closer to mathematics, a symbolic or figurative system that may also stand in for language; the calculation of the amount of gladness falls within the purview of established systems, however difficult. The shift to the present tense indicates that the speaker discards conditional weighing and calculations in the face of a “Force” that exceeds her grasp; because this dilemma is “from mathematics further off / than from Eternity”—that is, it is comparatively closer to eternity than it is to human symbolic systems like mathematics—the speaker can no

longer weigh the effects of speech and must instead describe the failure of language as inherent in the attempt to put “Force” into words. When the speaker’s creative and linguistic powers fail to mold something that exceeds them, this is a sign of an eternal dilemma: it is the lack of words, or signs, that is itself a sign of nearness to the post-human. Though she is often unorthodox, Dickinson’s worshipful silences and her protestations that mere words are not enough share her culture’s hope for rapture and its recognition of the limits of human knowledge.²⁰

But as we’ve already seen in a poem like “Nature is what we See,” the silences in Dickinson’s work, whether modest or mystical, are only part of the story. She also knows the dangers for a poet in vaunting silence as the evidence of knowledge: she can’t unequivocally affirm the superiority of unmediated experience without undoing her own voice as a poet and dissolving into the nature she also seeks to name—not merely to be absorbed into. Certainly, though she relies on language as a necessity of expression, she also often enjoys it for its own sake. This tension between the “Sincerity of nature” and human “Art to say”—that is, between inscrutable silence as a prerequisite for divine authority and assurance in linguistic ability to interpret and shape experience—is not unique to Dickinson but rather a predominant conflict in nineteenth-century culture. For instance, the furor over philological interpretation of the Bible demonstrates not only the rising faith in human knowledge as a tool for accessing the divine but also the anxiety and resistance that such a shift caused.²¹ Barbara Packer explains that much of the religious debate at the beginning of the nineteenth century centered around textual studies of the Bible, particularly German philological and historical criticism. The basic premise of reading the Bible in this way, that the human intellect may discover divine mysteries,

is at the root of a shift toward human-centered religious philosophy. Packer's description of the excitement that such studies aroused is telling in that it links scriptural mysteries to the natural mysteries that nineteenth-century Americans were also engaged in discovering: "Watching the textual obscurities of centuries melt before the blast of the new historical criticism gave the young scholars of the era a confidence that, like the mysteries of nature, the mysteries of Scripture were soluble" (349).²²

This confidence is at play when Dickinson's poems claim to say what nature is and when they claim to lay bare some hitherto unspoken aspect of human experience. She shares with the Transcendentalists and other vanguardists of her time an excitement about the expansion of what was humanly possible. And this enthusiasm characterizes the core of Dickinson's culture as well. Westward expansion, the domestication of wild lands, an explosion of new inventions, and the rapidly developing and shifting sense of American identity can all be said to rely on the assumptions that undergird the philological turn: namely, that human tools are equal to the nonhuman mysteries that surround us.²³ In this context, Dickinson's stylistic experiments are not concessions to the inscrutable or a surrender to divine agency but rather pioneering inventions that extend human agency and make more things accessible to language. Certainly, Dickinson's poetry can be inflected by the rhetoric of pioneering exploration. In one poem she calls God a "frontier" (*P1050*), and in another she exhorts the conquistador Hernando de Soto—and, by extension, all explorers—to look inward to find the most untouched soil of all: "Soto! Explore thyself! / Therein thyself shalt find / The "Undiscovered Continent" – / No Settler had the Mind" (*P814*). She even calls Christ a "Tender Pioneer" because he has blazed the trail of death for others to follow (*P727*). But Dickinson's alignment with the

pioneering impulses of her time is clearest in her experimental impulse itself, her search for language capable of exploring the “Undiscovered Continent” of her own mind.

Given her cultural milieu, it is not at all surprising that Dickinson’s relationship to language and silence is deeply conflicted, and her letters bear out this ambivalence. In a letter saved by her friend Joseph Lyman it appears that Dickinson considers a growing appreciation for language to be part of growing up: “We used to think, Joseph, when I was an unsifted girl and you so scholarly that words were cheap & weak. Now I don’t know of anything so mighty” (Sewall, *Lyman* 78). She apparently has learned better, now that she is a more sifted person, than to disregard the might of words. And this might is, further, not heavenly or transcendent but couched in the terms of earthly power and earthly beauty: “There are [words] to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting princelike among their peers on the page. Sometimes I write one, and look at his outlines till he glows as no sapphire.” This love of words is also explicitly connected to her own poetic skill: she admires words in and of themselves, and she particularly admires the beauty of her own writing.²⁴

But her letters also reveal a mistrust of language, especially direct language, that runs deep. One of her early letters to Higginson, on the whole a reticent and even coy reply to what seems to have been a request to describe herself in more detail, shows how “the wiles of Words” could also be used to avoid certain kinds of speaking (*L555*). She refuses exact or telling detail about herself, offering deliberately evasive responses to mundane questions: “You asked how old I was? I made no verse – but one or two – until this winter – Sir.” She lists her companions as “Hills,” “the Sundown – and a Dog,” which she claims are “better than Beings – because they know – but do not tell.” If

knowing but not telling makes something better than a being, Dickinson herself vies for this distinction in her singularly indirect letter. In the very letter where she claims her “Lexicon” as her “only companion,” she refashions words to the purposes of silence and refusal (L261). In fact, an August 1862 letter, also to Higginson, specifically links refusal and silence to holiness. In it Dickinson justifies her habit of “shunning Men and Women” by explaining that “they talk of Hallowed things, aloud – and embarrass my Dog,” whom she praises as “dumb, and brave.” Given such a statement in favor of hallowed silences, when her next paragraph evokes “a noiseless noise in the Orchard” one might expect that noise to remain noiseless and not be subjected to the talk she has just shunned, but it is that very “noiseless noise” that is her special purview as a poet. Though her dog Carlo may be admired for his dumbness, Dickinson herself has no trouble finding words for her experiences: “I think you would like the Chestnut Tree, I met in my walk. It hit my notice suddenly – and I thought the Skies were in Blossom – Then there’s a noiseless noise in the Orchard – that *I let persons hear*” (L271, emphasis added).

Indeed, Dickinson’s poetic experimentation is driven, at least in part, by the contradictions of letting us hear a noiseless noise: the intricacies of such a task require innovation. This experimental drive is evident in Dickinson’s more obvious formal deviations from the conventions of the poetry of her time, like her dashes and her idiosyncratic capitalization. But her dual relationship to silence also motivates her experimentation with more conventional poetic devices like metaphor, in particular her development of metaphors of selfsameness, or comparisons of a thing to itself, that function simultaneously as statements that a thing is literally itself. That Dickinson’s poetry negotiates between speech and silence, multiplicity and singularity, is not

necessarily surprising. Dickinson criticism is overwhelmingly concerned with dualities in her work, her divided loyalties, and her characteristic attempts to pursue seemingly exclusive poetic goals simultaneously.²⁵ Scholars consistently return, and rightly so, to understanding how the poems position themselves between or among competing concerns, especially with capturing the music of mortal, natural life while positing, and often apparently longing for, an unspeakable force or experience that may lie outside the circumference of that life. However, the suitability of statements of selfsameness to expressing in language the simultaneous desire for and resistance to the silences of supralinguistic phenomena remains unexplored.

Dickinson's development of figures in which a thing is related to itself must be understood in the context of the paramount importance of metaphorical relation to her work. Readers of Dickinson's poems are often struck by her figures; many of her poems work by crafting strange and compelling relationships that simultaneously clarify and mystify mental experiences. To read her work is to contend with the relational nature of her poetics. Her figures may be traditional metaphors ("Grief is a mouse"), similes ("Twas like a Maelstrom with a notch"), extended metaphorical conceits ("My Life had stood a Loaded Gun"), synecdoches ("How fortunate the Grave"), or symbols ("The Daisy follows soft the Sun"), but they can all broadly be called metaphor in that they understand, explain, or name by relation.²⁶ It is clear that relation is, if not structurally constitutive of, at least characteristic of Dickinson's poetry. This is borne out by the many critics who have claimed that metaphor is the dominant trope of her poetics and is the unifying rhetorical strategy in her seemingly disjointed corpus. Robert Weisbuch is one of the first to argue that metaphorical figures unify Dickinson's work, and Dickinson

criticism, though wide-ranging, often takes metaphoricity as a central assumption or defining problem.²⁷ Whether we consider her metaphors to be extensions of a mind, a perceiving subject, a biography, a historical situation, a theological tradition, or simply a defining feature of poetic language, understanding by relation, it seems, is a principal strategy for Dickinson.²⁸ Even those critics who argue that her metaphors are not communicative, that they fall short of or exceed referentiality in favor of hermeticism, often assume that Dickinson's poetics is relational, though the terms of those relationships may be obscured.²⁹

But, even if we conclude that Dickinson's metaphors are not referential, we cannot read under the assumption that Dickinson's poems have nothing to say or that her figures attempt no kind of reference at all.³⁰ Dickinson herself expected her poems to communicate. When Higginson asked her to clarify an utterance that went "beyond [his] knowledge," Dickinson responded with incredulity: "you cannot mean it? All men say 'What' to me, but I thought it a fashion" (*L271*). Though she is apparently familiar with not being understood (and takes some pride in this), the word "fashion" implies that such misunderstanding is sometimes feigned or disingenuous. Her shock that a man like Higginson would fail to understand her indicates that she expects her poems to communicate, at least to a serious reader. But even if we take Dickinson at her word and assume that her poems are more than (or at least other than) a private language, even if we reject the notion that Dickinson's metaphors are escapist or otherwise irresponsible, we cannot deny that Dickinson's poems at times seem to make a spectacle of their own failure, to throw up their hands and say "what" to themselves. Many of them suggest, by withdrawing from comparison and disavowing the usefulness of figurative language, that

poetic relation inherently fails to grasp experience. Among the many reticences and refusals that Dickinson employs, statements of selfsameness—that is, apparently tautological propositions that a thing is itself—seem most explicitly to deny poeticity; however, within the larger context of Dickinson’s work, selfsameness must also be read as metaphorical. Because selfsameness is, in Dickinson’s poetics, simultaneously literal and figurative, it is a particularly useful strategy for establishing one of the primary tensions in Dickinson’s work: the tension between respect for the hallowed silences of singular being and delight in the sapphire words required by variety and difference. In short, selfsameness dramatizes the paradox of the “noiseless noise” that Dickinson “let[s] persons hear.”

A statement of selfsameness is an explicit claim that a thing is itself: “grief is greif.” Such claims are generally not taken to be metaphorical because metaphorical expressions involve two different terms, the familiar tenor and vehicle.³¹ Statements of selfsameness are not traditional metaphors because they do not preserve one of the key components of metaphor: the simultaneous assertion of identity and recognition of difference. For instance, Dickinson’s poem that begins “Grief is a Mouse” uses a series of metaphorical statements to explore the nature of grief through relation to something other than grief: “Grief is a Mouse,” “Grief is a Thief,” “Grief is a Juggler,” “Grief is a Gourmand” (*P743*). Each of these identifications depends for its power on the difference between tenor and vehicle. Inferences are made about grief that would not be possible were those differences to be erased: figures in which the subject and predicate nominative are very similar—“grief is sadness,” “grief is mourning,” or “grief is missing something”—would be less effective metaphors, perhaps not metaphors at all, because

they would not preserve the difference that makes the identity expressed in metaphors meaningful. Thus, while “Grief is a Mouse” is metaphorical, a statement of selfsameness like “grief is grief” functions differently.

Yet, if we read selfsameness literally, as tautology, then a significant number of Dickinson’s poems profess that language is not, after all, a useful tool for understanding and communicating difficult or deeply personal experiences. These experiences are marked as particularly significant or valuable precisely because they are those things we “have no Art to say.” Should we seek to understand love, for instance, we find that “Love reckons by itself – alone”:

Love reckons by itself – alone –
“As large as I” – relate the Sun –
To One who never felt it blaze –
Itself is all the like it has – (P812)

Like the sun, love is said to be incomparable to any other thing; extreme, blazing experiences are selfsame. They cannot be explained metaphorically because there is nothing adequate to the equation: “Itself is all the like it has – .” Metaphor is conflated with speech by the double senses, “tell” and “compare,” of the verb “relate”; it is clear that to communicate is to compare when the speaker’s challenge to convey the experience of the sun to a person who has not experienced it—to “relate the Sun – / To One who never felt it blaze – ”—fails in the face of the sun’s incomparability. While lesser experience may perhaps be told by comparison, “large” things can only be measured according to themselves; they are unrelatable. If a thing cannot be compared, it cannot be told. Love is love: it is identical to itself and comparable only to itself. To

name it exhausts the possibilities for explanation because it is only, fully, and exactly love. Taken literally, such an assertion leaves little room for poetic language; instead, it elevates experience as silently self-sufficient and outside the knowing-by-relation that is the province of artful language.³² It vaunts hallowed silences and appears content leaving the noiseless noise relatively unheard.

“Love reckons by itself – alone –” is not unique in its assertion of the selfsameness of its subject. Other objects or experiences that can only reckon by themselves include the soul, self, death, divinity, and beauty. The poem beginning “The Consciousness that is aware –” (*P817*) calls the soul’s properties “adequate unto itself” and names death, or “the interval / Experience,” “Adventure most unto itself.” Death not only pushes the soul into identification with itself but is itself incomparable: the tiger’s death in “A Dying Tiger – moaned for drink –” (*P529*) can only be explained by the fact that he is dead. In “Behind me – dips Eternity –,” the Christian mystery of the division between God the Father and God the Son is reckoned self-referentially: “In perfect – pauseless Monarchy – / Whose Prince – is Son of none – / [. . .] Himself – Himself diversify – / In Duplicate divine” (*P743*). Beauty too is incomparable. Two poems explicitly treating the nature of beauty, “Beauty be not caused – It is –” (*P654*) and “The definition of Beauty is” (*P797*), both claim that beauty is self-defined and unrelatable. And lest we think that only the great themes are self-descriptive and self-sufficient, we should also note that “A Bee his Burnished Carriage” (*P1351*)—though it relies primarily on the metaphor of a masculine bee making a conjugal visit to a feminine rose—begins with the assertion that the bee and his metaphorical vehicle are one and the same: “A Bee his Burnished Carriage / Drove boldly to a Rose – / Combinedly alighting – / Himself –

his Carriage was.” In this arresting image, a bee is likened to a gentleman-suitor arriving in a carriage to pay court to a lover. But while a gentleman must alight from his carriage and thus separate himself from his vehicle, this is impossible for the bee, who is both passenger and vehicle. Even when the poem returns to the metaphor of the bee as gentleman, this first image insists that the bee is also only itself, a bee, and decidedly not a human lover. If we think of metaphor in the sense of carrying over or transportation (as the nomenclature of tenor and vehicle makes explicit), for the bee to be its carriage is to be a metaphor for itself, short-circuiting the familiar comparison of bee and rose to male and female lovers. Though metaphor is predominant in Dickinson’s work, many of her poems also collapse comparison and suggest that the world is indescribable by metaphor and that things are complete in themselves. “Hope” may be “the thing with Feathers” (P314), and “Grief” may be “a Mouse” (P753), but “Blue is Blue – the World through / Amber – Amber – Dew – Dew – ” (P733).

Poems that name experiences as incomparable or claim that a thing is selfsame are, at least on some level, about the insufficiencies of language to relate the large things of life; they are about the failure of the voice of the poet and the boundaries past which poetic authority cannot reach. They partake of the mystical strain in Dickinson’s poetry and in her culture at large that refuses to “speak of Hallowed things” and celebrates unspeakability as evidence of divinity or the suprahuman. As Cameron explains, some of Dickinson’s poems evade metaphor because, “insofar as names involve distance from and interpretation of what has been apprehended, they are precisely what certain experiences [. . .] will not yield” (*Lyric* 49). Certain experiences (again, which run the gamut from eternal perfection to pollination) resist the naming and renaming process of metaphor.

But to call them unrelatable seems to deny the usefulness of those Dickinson poems that do rely on relation for their explanations. However idiosyncratic those relationships are, they are not empty exercises or momentary distractions from a fundamental inability of poetry to communicate. There is understanding at stake in Dickinson's metaphors: her poems pose real questions, and her metaphors are real answers to those questions even if they are not ultimate answers.³³ Dickinson's statements of the self-sufficiency of experience cannot be simply admissions that poetic language fails as an explanatory tool, or they would render useless the majority of her lifelong work to make the noiseless noise *heard*. But if statements of selfsameness are not confessions of the inherent insufficiencies of language, how can we reconcile her insistence on the self-sufficiency and incomparability of experience in some poems with the overwhelmingly metaphorical character of her poetry? We can reconcile them by understanding selfsameness as figurative, in addition to being literally true. If Dickinson's statements of selfsameness are also metaphors, self-reference makes more things speakable; it makes even the idea of the insufficiency of language the subject of figurative exploration. Selfsameness as figure does not deny the creative and communicative possibilities of metaphor but dramatizes metaphor's multiplicity in tension with the singular self-sufficiency and inexpressibility of experience conveyed by literal selfsameness.

But why should Dickinson's figures of selfsameness be read as metaphorical expressions and not simply literal assertions of self-sufficiency and singular identity? First, the very fact that Dickinson's statements of selfsameness are read or heard in the context of poetry makes it unlikely that they will only be taken literally. The conventions of poetic reading permit figurative interpretations for almost any utterance, especially

when its literal relevance or truth is in doubt. Context is crucial in determining whether a statement is metaphorical: “Figures of speech arise in an ecology: the preceding discourse, environmental events, and the like” (Katz 22). The preceding discourses of poetry in general and Dickinson’s poetry in particular contextualize each utterance, suggesting that statements of selfsameness cannot unequivocally be taken literally. The poem that begins “Love reckons by itself – alone – ” is part of a body of work in which love is reckoned by life, death, a prism, and calvaries; death is reckoned by surprises and secrets, gifts and debts; eternity is reckoned by clocks, seasons, and seas; and grief by a gourmand’s luxury and a martyr’s speechless ashes.³⁴ The relational character of Dickinson’s work makes selfsameness not only literal but also a particularly dramatic use of metaphor, intensifying its identifying function while, at the same time, preserving the differences that make relation possible.

A claim like “love is love” is therefore not only a literal statement of love’s selfsameness and incomparability but an identification of love with love that—like more obviously metaphorical two-term figures—relies on difference as well as similarity. To read selfsameness in light of Dickinson’s characteristic relational strategies undermines claims of incomparability and reinforces her assertions that singularity and selfhood are not stable, self-evident categories. To say a thing is itself is not, for Dickinson, to exempt it from comparison. Dickinson’s innovative pronoun “ourself,” a pluralized first-person singular, indicates that even personhood is susceptible to difference.³⁵ The effectiveness of “ourself” for diffusing identity is especially evident in the poem beginning “This Chasm, Sweet, upon my life” (*P*1061). The “gaping sides” of the chasm into which the sunrise has dropped “Disclose as ’twere a Tomb / Ourself am lying straight wherein / The

Favorite of Doom – .” Here the double nature of the pronoun “ourself” is particularly pronounced because it is used as the subject of the verb “to be,” the only verb in English that defines number in its first-person conjugations. Though in other poems a reader may be tempted to recuperate the difficulty of a simultaneously compound and singular identity by simply reading “ourself” as an idiosyncratic “we,” the verb “am” indicates a singular subject, making such recuperation grammatically impossible and leaving the tension between “our” and “self” unresolved: one cannot read the line “*We* am lying straight wherein” as one might replace “Ourself” with “we” or “us” in lines like “Ourself cannot decide” or “Between Ourself and Heaven” (*P518, P1000*).³⁶ This kind of usage exemplifies the instability of identity that is characteristic of Dickinson’s poetics in general and that informs interpretations of statements of identity as more than literal. In a corpus marked by relational thinking and by the division even of oneself, a poem that claims self-sufficiency or self-definition should not be taken literally, or at least not only taken literally. Reading statements of self-identity as comparisons brings apparently incongruous poems like “Love reckons by itself – alone –” under the rubric of Dickinson’s poetics of relation, making it possible to understand them as more than abdication of reference or the negation of poetic authority. Metaphors of selfsameness, by identifying a thing with itself, do not simply deny the usefulness of metaphorical language in favor of supralinguistic mystical knowledge; they are also pioneering in that they take new territory for language by extending metaphor into new domains.

The most important purpose of that extension is to negotiate the paradox of relating, in the sense both of telling and comparing, the unrelatability of some experiences. The experiences of death, immortality, and love are frequently figured as

unrelatable, singular, or selfsame because each of these experiences threatens the differences upon which language depends; each promises a silent and silencing unity. Dickinson's poems about death, which are sometimes indistinguishable from poems about love, are perhaps most anxious about the possibility of pure self-identity:

This Consciousness that is aware
Of Neighbors and the Sun
Will be the one aware of Death
And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval
Experience between
And most profound experiment
Appointed unto Men –

How adequate unto itself
It's properties shall be
Itself unto itself and None
Shall make discovery –

Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be –
Attended by a single Hound
It's own identity. (P817)

The poem details a purifying process by which consciousness, or the soul, separates itself from all other things and becomes entirely self-defined. The same consciousness that is aware of others in life will be aware of its separation from others in death. The deictic “This” insists that death is not a process of transformation or transfiguration: life and death provide different experiences—Neighbors and the Sun in life, only consciousness itself in death—but the experiencing consciousness (this one) retains, and is defined by, its own identity. What is in doubt is the poem’s attitude toward this isolation or self-identity. While the poem does not exactly celebrate death, the first three stanzas express reverence that this consciousness—the very same one accustomed to awareness of things outside itself—would undertake the adventure of leaving behind such relationships in favor of self-sufficiency. Their tone is, though guarded, full of admiration for the bravery required by this “profound experiment” and, in the final stanza, “adventure.” The language of experiment and exploration relates more conventional views of death as a journey—“traversing the interval”—to an American exploratory spirit and experimental curiosity, but, instead of journeying toward heaven and the possibility of reunion with lost others, the soul journeys toward isolation. While the vocabulary of exploration and experiment can evoke danger or risk, the dominant chord for the first three stanzas of the poem is anticipation and excitement at the possibility of profundity that death offers to consciousness.

The final stanza begins firmly within the purview of this positive attitude toward the isolation of the consciousness in “Adventure most unto itself.” But in the second line of the stanza the word “condemned” makes what previously appeared to be an exhilarating, if unfamiliar, experiment into a punishment or unavoidable fate. Nothing in

the foregoing stanzas has suggested that the experiment of death should be viewed as a sentence or doom. This surprising shift revises adventure to include the concept of a determined fate: the soul is condemned to be an adventure most unto itself—that is, to become entirely isolated in self-definition. The adventure of identity that was portrayed as pioneering and brave is now characterized as menacing and inescapable. In this poem, selfsameness is both the final adventure and a kind of doom. Here and elsewhere, Dickinson is uneasy about unity, in part because it precludes relation and, thus, language. The consciousness that is aware of neighbors is a consciousness that is invested in language, but, when it has braved the adventure of total self-sufficiency, it has no one with whom to speak. The experiment of death is profound because it is undiscoverable by any other. It cannot be revealed or spoken about because the consciousness is entirely alone. While it is clear that Dickinson's speakers are often drawn toward the silences of identity, they are also drawn toward the multiplicity of mortal life and the language in which it must speak.

It is this doubleness that makes the "single Hound" so ambiguous. On one hand, the hound is a figure for unity because it is the soul's own identity. On the other hand, the hound, an attendant for the consciousness in death, pulls the poem back from total identity: the self cannot be completely isolated if it is attended by another. The image is not one of isolation but of companionship. And if we read the second line of the last stanza as part of a syntactic unit with the third line, the undecidability of the hound's role is intensified. Instead of the soul being condemned to "Adventure most unto itself," now the hound's attendance is the punishment or fate: "the Soul condemned to be – Attended by a single Hound." In this sense, the attending hound doesn't rescue the self from being

condemned to complete isolation but rather it prevents the self from attaining adventurous self-identity. The action is the same: the fact that the consciousness can be attended, even if that attendant is itself, indicates that it has not fully attained self-identity. The hound is a figure for selfsameness, the self become entirely self-defined, but as a figure it also preserves a difference about which the poem is of two minds. The persistence of relation is simultaneously a form of human resistance to the doom of eternal union and a condemnation to the doom of being attended, to the mortal state of relation. This ambivalence is also evident in the two meanings of “hound”: beloved familiar and persistent nuisance. The multiplication of identity that the hound represents protects the self from a poetically fatal dissolution, but it also blocks its fated, and perhaps wanted, apotheosis into singular being. As in statements of selfsameness that are both literal and figurative, the figure of the hound posits a silencing unitary identity (the self attended by the self), but (as either companion or pursuer) it simultaneously maintains the relational structures—about which the speaker is apparently uncertain—that are the province of language.

Like the figure of the hound, other types of selfsameness are useful because they can sustain the tensions between garrulous variety and silent singularity that underlie Dickinson’s explorations of unrelatable abstractions like death, heaven, and love.³⁷ Joanne Feit Diehl praises the audacity of Dickinson’s figures in what she calls the “quest to ascertain the strength of the isolate imagination, her quest to discover what will suffice, if not prevail, against the forces of time, death, and silence” (“Ample” 9). However, Dickinson’s poems do not merely defend against leveling abstractions like time and death; they also show what Cameron calls a “desire for the temporal completion which

will fuse all separations into the healing of a unified whole” (*Lyric 1*). They figure the seduction of the very silencing singularity against which they also struggle. When read literally, statements of selfsameness push as close as they can to mystical, incomparable, unspeakable union because they assert complete self-identity and, thus, transcendence of language as a means of communicating experience. But this completion—the fusion effected by death, immortality, or love in many poems—is “liberated from the mortal encumbrances of both flesh and *language*” (3, emphasis added): as Cameron argues, one of the central problems of Dickinson’s work is the attempt to represent a fusion of self and other in language, which reflects and constitutes difference.³⁸ The silence of pure identity is impossible to express fully in language, but claims of selfsameness approach as close as they can in words to the longed for undoing of language.

And language is not just a lamentable necessity that will be shed upon transfiguration. Despite the mystical aspiration toward a unified identity that surpasses language by erasing difference between self and other, Dickinson’s poetry is also wary of the comprehensive expansion of one identity—whether the self or something outside it—to encompass all of experience. The careful admiration of adventuresome death in “This Consciousness that is Aware” disappears in a poem like “Silence is all we dread”:

Silence is all we dread.

There’s ransom in a Voice –

But Silence is Infinity.

Himself have not a face. (*P1300*)

Voice is here posited as salvific, countering the loss of self that infinite, faceless silence threatens. While statements of selfsameness, when taken literally, seem to long for this

silence, selfsameness as a metaphor preserves one of the fundamental prerogatives of poetic language—the explanatory or revelatory power of comparison—even as it longs to abolish difference. As Jeffrey Duncan explains, Dickinson’s metaphors are characterized by a “double-motion”: “In the language of her poems [. . .] she depicts the divisions that language causes—between subject and object, for instance, the empirical and the ideal, life and death—and the identifications it simultaneously effects, of subject with object, the empirical with the ideal, death with life” (114). Metaphor depends on the “divisions that language causes”; it is through difference that the relations of language are possible. If the “identifications it simultaneously effects” overcome those distinctions, then language collapses into silence, life into death, and the multiplicity of empirical reality into the monolithic self of God. Metaphors of selfsameness can explore that collapse without themselves giving in to it and altogether abandoning poetic language as a means to understanding. In statements of selfsameness that are simultaneously literal and figurative, Dickinson’s poems have it both ways. Literal statements of selfsameness depict near-total unity and edge toward its silences by denying the relational power of language; read metaphorically, these statements affirm difference by relating a thing to itself. When taken literally, these statements invoke the wish to transcend speech; as figures they extend the reach of language, making it capable even of enacting the yearning for its own destruction.

The simultaneous promise and risk of the erasure of difference have most often been understood in terms of Dickinson’s anxiety about sexual, especially heterosexual, relations. This anxiety is perhaps most explicit in Dickinson’s letters, where it is clear that the possibilities of erotic self-destruction are also inflected by Dickinson’s conflicted

relationship to silence. In an 1852 letter to Susan Gilbert, Dickinson famously describes “trembl[ing]” at the idea that she too may be “yielded up” to the destructively transfiguring force of marriage that Susan faces (*L93*). The feminized flower withers and is consumed by the sun, the “man of noon,” obliterated by the consummation it seeks. Many readers of this letter have focused on the fact that Dickinson appears to argue that sexual or marital union require the destruction of autonomy, often specifically feminine autonomy.³⁹ Thus, Dickinson’s not marrying may be read as a victory over the dangers of unity and her metaphors of selfsameness as weapons in defense of feminine identity.⁴⁰ However, the letter ends with lines that indicate unity is more than just a threat to be overcome:

God is good, Susie, I trust he will save you, I pray that in his good time we once more meet each other, but if this life holds not another meeting for us, remember also, Susie, that it had no *parting* more, wherever that hour finds us, for which we have hoped so long, we shall not be separated, neither death, nor the grave can part us, so that we only *love!*

Though fear and resistance undercut the call for communion earlier in the letter, when Dickinson addresses her relationship with Susan, her ambivalence seems to be replaced by a more genuine entreaty for distinctions to be abolished in a final identification. In a letter written a few months after the “man of noon” letter, Dickinson still asks to be united with Susan even though she explicitly recognizes that this will make language not only impossible but unnecessary:

Susie, forgive me Darling, for every word I say – my heart is full of you, none other than you in my thoughts, yet when I seek to say to you something not for the

world, words fail me. If you were here – and Oh that you were, my Susie, we need not talk at all, our eyes would whisper for us, and your hand fast in mine, we would not ask for language. (94)

Dickinson resists the silencing power of death, love, and eternity, but she also embraces that silence as a consequence of authentic being, a togetherness that cannot be accomplished by mortals embedded in the inescapable divisiveness of language. Still another of Dickinson's letters, this one written to Emily Fowler Ford, attests that the silence surpassing language can only be achieved through true affection and oneness. The letter begins with a blank space to which Dickinson later refers: "That is'nt an *empty* blank where I began—it is so full of affection that you cant see any—that's all" (L32).⁴¹ Silence here is a measure of the depth of feeling. Empty space is offered as evidence of fullness of affection; by comparison, affection expressed in language is less full (or at least less fully expressed). As in the letter to Susan Gilbert, silence is proof that the distinction between beings has been dispelled by love, making language unnecessary. A silencing singularity is the ideal state of love and friendship.

If silence is a sign of love, communion through such identification may be read as mystical, with silence as evidence of exceptional or even divine experiences. As such, it also indicates the insufficiency of language; Margaret Homans reads the silence Dickinson often attributes to communion between women as fatal to poetry. She understands metaphor in Dickinson's poetry in terms of a sexual dynamic: metaphor is aligned with heterosexual hierarchies because it "preserves a relationship of distance and hierarchy between the two elements of a comparison while seeming to bring them together" ("Vision" 124). In contrast, "the poems about two women are characterized by

a lack of distance so complete that there is only one identity and one set of terms for the two figures. This rhetoric of sameness may be considered a form of metonymy but [it] points ultimately toward a lack of language” (124). Thus, Homans claims, relationships between subjects that are categorically the same (that is, both female) fail as metaphoric structures because they collapse difference, and “it is the overcoming of hierarchy, not the absence of it, that is conducive to poetry.”⁴² While this helps define the importance of a gendered subjectivity to experiences of difference and unity, it does not acknowledge the importance of selfsameness as a relational figure. If we read depictions of relationships between categorically identical elements not as metonymy but as metaphors, we can understand the destruction of identity risked in the encounter between women, between Queen and Queen (*P596* and *P693*), not as merely the absence of hierarchy but a carefully inflected investigation of the necessity of difference. Here is an attraction for self-destruction that is removed from heterosexual dynamics of female sacrifice to an encompassing male identity. Poems that relate women to women, like other metaphors of selfsameness, do not merely assert self-sufficiency or extra-linguistic completeness; they make it possible to value difference without valuing hierarchy and to seek a perfection beyond language that does not depend on the subordination of one term of the relation to the other. The identification of woman with woman is literal: their sameness allows them equality and communion. However, as in other figures that relate selfsame terms, difference is also preserved by the relational structure of metaphor.

Indeed, though Dickinson advocates silence as a sign of understanding and communion, she does so in letters, inherently signs of separation between sender and receiver. Perhaps it is less risky to ask for the dissolution of identity with the buffer of

actual separation. And separation is, itself, its own kind of satisfaction. After all, as one aphoristic poem puts it, “A letter is a joy of Earth / It is denied the Gods –” (*P1672*). Letters are a specifically mortal joy; presumably they are no longer needed when one is unified with all of being, or even with a beloved. Dickinson’s poems frequently represent deferral of consummation as the key to desire, and union is often depicted as either thwarted by forces outside the speaker’s control or actively put off. In the poem beginning “I cannot live with You –,” the speaker details the reasons and ways that she and another must remain apart (*P706*). She can neither live nor die (“rise”) with the other. Finally, because being with the other would disturb and invert Christian cosmology—making a hell of heaven or a heaven of hell, as it were—they must interpose a difference between themselves:

So we must meet apart –
You there – I – here –
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are – and Prayer –
And that White Sustenance –
Despair –

In this final stanza, joining with the other is not presented as impossible but, rather, something that must be denied the self. Speaker and beloved are near; even so, they “must meet apart.” The separating door is even ajar. This small, empty space—an open door frame—is oceans, prayer, and despair, and it is this very despair, the agony of difference, that sustains the speaker.

This tension between the aspiration toward singular being and the mortal necessity of difference drives poems as early as Dickinson's first known poem "Awake ye muses nine, sing me a strain divine" (P1). This is a valentine and treats the subject of the ubiquity of love: "Oh the Earth was *made* for lovers, for damsel, and hopeless swain, / for sighing, and gentle whispering, and *unity* made of *twain*." "[A]ll things" on the earth apparently participate in the process of courting, "the *two*, and then the *one*," except for the unnamed "thou" of the poem who is the only thing in the world that God has made "single." Even "death claims a living bride," and Heaven is a "knight" courting the "damsel" Earth. Here, courting begins the process of making two into one; thus, death claims his bride by erasing the differences between her and himself, and Heaven seeks the same dissolution of Earth. The speaker of the poem calls this merging of two into one God's "precept" and promises that "who obey shall happy be, / who will not serve the sovereign, be hanged on fatal tree."⁴³ Though the poem ostensibly seeks to convince its addressee of conjugal bliss, there is a lurking peril: there is no available choice that does not result in death. You must erase singular identity by joining with another—a kind of death—because it is mandated, and, if you resist that mandate, you will be executed. The last two lines explicitly link love to death; the poem's "thou" is exhorted to choose a lover and, when that love is consummated in the "bower," the speaker of the poem explains, the addressee will "bid the world Goodmorrow, and go to glory home!" Sexual or marital combining does not result in new life but in a farewell to the world and abandonment of life for a spiritual home. In this valentine, love, like heaven and death, promises the erasure of identity. This early playful poem is already grappling with the

longing for union and the resistance to its fatal completion that drives many of Dickinson's major thematic, rhetorical, and formal concerns.

As literal statement, selfsameness teeters on the edge of resolving difference into singular identity by positing the self-sufficiency of certain things or experiences; however, as metaphor it preserves a division that permits the exploration of the consummation of death, immortality, and love without the erasure that these forces portend. In a sense, such metaphors create erotic sustainability, where longing, which is dependent on difference, can be maintained while the destruction of distinctions can be held at bay. The following poem argues for the unification of singular identities by claiming that the difference between the earthly and heavenly can be overcome:

Out of sight? What of that?

See the Bird – reach it!

Curve by Curve – Sweep by Sweep –

Round the Steep Air –

Danger! What is that to Her?

Better 'tis to fail – there –

Than debate – here –

Blue is Blue – the World through

Amber – Amber – Dew – Dew –

Seek – Friend – and see –

Heaven is shy of Earth – that's all –

Bashful Heaven – thy Lovers small –

Hide – too – from thee – (*P733*)

The poem exhorts its “Friend” to follow the example of the bird, though the task may be difficult, and to dare greatly in order to reach a goal. Though the goal appears far off, “out of sight,” in the first stanza, the reassurances of the second stanza suggest that the distance is not so great: between the friend and what he seeks is only shyness, which can be overcome by daring. “Blue is Blue,” read literally, closes that gap and argues for identity. The heavenly is attainable because it is the same as the earthly. The further iterations of that identity “Amber – Amber – Dew – Dew” even elide the nominal separation of the identifying verb, making a forceful formal argument for the proximity of the earthly to the heavenly. The literal reading of the statement “Blue is Blue” concurs with the poem’s attitude that the distances between seeker and thing sought can and should be erased through identity.

But the assertion that “Blue is Blue – the world through / Amber – Amber – Dew – Dew –” does not only assure that things are themselves and thus heaven can be reached; it also risks the destruction of earthly identity, which is made possible by its difference from the heavenly. If “Blue is Blue,” then the world is “through,” finished, destroyed in its consummation with heaven. The final lines of the poem hint that neither heavenly nor earthly participants in this game of hide and seek are certain they want to find each other and be joined. Selfsameness, though an accomplishment to be sought after, destroys the individual and diverse existence of the world and, by extension, the voice of the poet who relates. The metaphorical reading of the claim “Blue is Blue” prevents such destruction because it creates separation and relation; one cannot say “Blue is Blue” without dividing Blue to serve as both noun and predicate nominative—a separation that fundamentally

undermines the assertion of unity and makes blue metaphorically blue as well as literally itself. For blue to be related to blue, it must be divided from itself. If heaven and earth can be shy of each other, then they must not be the same: they maintain their individual identities though the poem advocates reaching out and grasping the heavenly. The metaphor of selfsameness expresses a wish to merge the actual with the ideal while resisting the destruction that union brings. It can make comparison out of incomparability, relate the experience of unrelatability, and make poetry out of the threat of poetry's destruction.

Dickinson's use of selfsameness does not, however, simply replace literal selfsameness with figurative. Instead, selfsameness dramatizes an unresolved tension between literal claims to identity and the difference inherent in the figuration of metaphor. For example, "The Wind – tapped like a tired Man" (P621) ostensibly works by traditionally comparative figures, making the natural phenomenon of wind more comprehensible by personifying it. However, despite its opening assertion, the poem does not understand wind by comparison to human attributes but by comparison to the wind itself. The three middle stanzas of the poem use wind imagery to describe the behavior of the wind-guest: it is as impossible to offer the wind a chair as "hand / A Sofa to the Air –"; the incorporeal guest's speech is "like the Push of numerous Humming Birds at once"; his face is compared to "a Billow" and the music of his fingers to "tunes / Blown tremulous in Glass – ." Though the wind is compared only to aspects of wind and air, the comparisons are not tautological, and they do not merely insist on wind's incommunicable identity; instead, the poem's figures rely on selfsameness to reject anthropomorphism and invite us more deeply to understand wind on its own terms. The

poem makes literally true assertions that wind is wind, and it also compares wind to wind. The figure comes away more windy than it started. For Dickinson, to say “a thing is itself” is both a denial of the power of language and an extension of it.

Similarly, syntactic doubling and identical rhyme are formal instances of selfsameness that underline the tension between singularity and difference.⁴⁴ For instance, in the final stanza of “’Tis true – they shut me in the Cold – ” the speaker supplicates her “Lord” on behalf of those who have harmed her: “The Harm They did – was short – And since / Myself – who bore it – do – / Forgive Them – Even as Myself –” (P658). A paraphrase might read “Lord, the harm they did was short and, since I who bore the harm do forgive them, forgive them as I do (or, as you forgive me).” To paraphrase, one must repeat “forgive them” because it is a part of both the explanatory phrase, “And since / Myself – who bore it – do – / Forgive Them,” and of the prayer, “Forgive Them – Even as Myself – .” Spatially, this double semantic duty collapses two instances of the same phrase into one “Forgive Them,” but grammatically their separate meanings are maintained by the phrases that come before and after them. The structure of the poem overlaps the two, making them literally the same, while preserving the difference between the identical phrases through semantic pressures. The meanings of “Forgive Them” are exclusive; to read them, each must be alternately absorbed into the other. Yet, they can still be simultaneously and individually heard. Such collapsed phrases serve the same purpose at the level of syntax as selfsameness does at the figural level: they allow a deeper exploration of communion and sameness while preventing the dissolution into silence, the oneness that precludes analysis.

Selfsameness echoes tensions already thematically present in the poem, but it also creates an ironic formal counterpoint to relatively straightforward themes or attitudes. In “Of Death I try to think like this” (*P1588*), metaphorical selfsameness, or identity that preserves difference, formally resists the singularity of death even as the speaker seems to celebrate it:

Of Death I try to think like this,
That Well in which they lay us
Is but the Likeness of the Brook
That menaced not to slay us,
But to invite by that Dismay
Which is the Zest of sweetness
To the same Flower Hesperian,
Decoying but to greet us –

I do remember when a Child
With bolder Playmates straying
To where a Brook that seemed a Sea
Withheld us by it’s roaring
From just a Purple Flower beyond
Until constrained to clutch it
If Doom itself were the result,
The boldest leaped, and clutched it –

The speaker begins with a mental experiment; she tries to think of death as a brook that separates a child from a flower, making death the overestimated force (“a Brook that seemed a Sea”) that prevents the seeker from grasping the thing sought. Dickinson frequently figures death as a border between mortal life and a more desirable afterlife, but here formal elements, especially rhyme, undermine the vision of death as a minor obstacle to be hurled in the victorious attainment of immortality’s rewards. Though the poem hints at the possibility of “Doom” for the child who dares to leap the brook, it ends with the boldest child’s success in gaining what she seeks, the “Purple Flower.” The poem’s rhymes, however, create a counterpoint to the triumph of the child.

For words to rhyme perfectly they must be both different and similar; their final accented vowel sounds and subsequent consonants must match, and their initial sounds must differ. If we consider the form of the words to be reflective and constitutive of their content, then to rhyme a word with another not only demonstrates the similarities and differences between the sounds of the words but between what the words mean. Just so, the first rhyming pair of the poem, “lay us” and “slay us,” emphasizes the difference between the tenderness of “lay us” and the violence of “slay us” but also establishes an anxious similarity between the two conceptualizations of death; it is, after all, only a tiny “s” that separates them. But the final rhyme of the poem, “clutch it” and “clutched it,” approaches identity. The selfsameness of the rhyme reminds us that the child’s victory is also her doom; she has leaped the stream of death, but clutching the flower precludes the possibility for further wanting, for that “zest of sweetness” separation allowed. It is no coincidence that a poem ending in the consummation of this life with the next concludes with near identical rhyme. The rhyme of “clutch” with “clutch” insists that, when

consummation with the next life is accomplished and earthly discord and difference are resolved, the complex beauty of difference, embodied in both the exact rhymes and off rhymes that play on the edge of unification but do not submit to it, is dissolved into the deadness of repetition. The poem cannot, as it sets out to “try,” entirely celebrate leaping the brook of death, and the final rhyme’s selfsameness preserves the menace of that leap. However, neither can the form of the poem allow the erasure of difference that it warns about. Though “clutch it” and “clutched it” are almost referentially and aurally identical, difference is still preserved by the change in tense and the disruptive tap of the “ed” interposed in the otherwise identical rhyme. Thus, selfsameness, both literal and metaphorical, allows the speaker of the poem to stand on the brink of doom, to contemplate what it might mean to end the tension of separation that makes poetry possible, even to mimic that final consummation of death into silence while still preserving the noisy differences of life.⁴⁵

Statements of selfsameness that are both literal and figurative are one of the many strategies that Dickinson employs to negotiate this central tension in her work, and their precise balance between silence and linguistic relation is emblematic of Dickinson’s fidelity to the complexities of human experience. Her poetry is multifarious and often contradictory, and it would be an oversimplification to claim that a simultaneously literal and metaphorical reading of statements of selfsameness solves the riddle of Dickinson’s conflicted relationship to the pressures of love, death, and eternity or the unrelatability of experience. In fact, one of Dickinson’s most troubling later poems suggests that metaphors of selfsameness do not always prevent the silences of self-sufficiency:

To see the Summer Sky

Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie –

True Poems flee – (P1491)

At this late moment, the inexpressibility of the summer sky seems to elude the communicative work of metaphor entirely and to endanger the whole project of poetry by aligning truth itself with an incomparable, unrelatable, fleeting vision; here, the self-sufficiency of experience is literal, and no metaphor of selfsameness preserves the tension between singularity and multiplicity, silence and language. This mystical strain—the authority of unmediated experience and the wish to keep such experience undiscovered—is at the center of Dickinson’s poetics. But, as the sheer volume and complexity of her work attests, she cannot ultimately abandon the drive to try, again and again, to stretch the capacity of language for expressing the inexpressible. The poem beginning “To tell the Beauty would decrease” articulates the finely balanced poise between mystical and pioneering poetics that makes Dickinson’s poetry so important for twentieth-century women writers seeking their own way both to dispel and maintain the silences that shape their experiences as women and as poets:

To tell the Beauty would decrease

To state the spell demean

There is a syllableless Sea

Of which it is the sign

My will endeavors for it’s word

And fails, but entertains

A Rapture as of Legacies

Of introspective mines – (P1689)

The first four lines indicate that language—telling and stating—diminishes beauty. They argue for the insufficiency of words and the sacrosanctity of silence; they recognize the limits of language and allow a space for otherness to remain unincorporated into the self. In the mystic mode, the speaking self necessarily fails in its endeavor to find words: “Beauty”—itself unspeakable without dilution—is the sign of a “syllableless Sea” that not only should not but cannot be told. But the final four lines admit to the value and pleasure of this failure, the rapture of the endeavor, and the pioneering push of the will that digs deep in the mines of the self and seeks the legacy of that digging. Even the first four lines of the poem, though they declare language diminishing, are haunted by the endeavor for the word: the thing that is demeaned by statement is called a “spell,” and the “syllableless Sea” flaunts its sibilant syllables, insisting on its own linguistic materiality. However doomed to failure, the will to language persists.

Notes

¹ Homans discusses two main difficulties in claiming poetic identity or agency for women writers in the nineteenth century: “Her association with nature and her exclusion from a traditional identification of the speaking subject as male” (*Women Writers* 12). She argues that “where the masculine self dominates and internalizes otherness, that other is frequently identified as feminine, whether she is nature, the representation of a human woman, or some phantom of desire.” She also claims that identification with “Mother Nature” is not a helpful model of creativity for women because “she is prolific biologically, not linguistically, and she is as destructive as she is creative” (13). I agree with Homans when I argue that complete identification with nature would silence Dickinson as a poet. However, I contend that Dickinson’s identification with nature is a creative one because her formal innovations take advantage of the prolixity of nature while simultaneously maintaining her status as a speaking subject.

² Dickinson poems are cited according to their number in Franklin’s 1998 variorum edition, abbreviated P. Letters are cited according to their number in Johnson’s 1968 three-volume edition of the letters, abbreviated L. The idiosyncracies of Dickinson’s spelling and mechanics (such as “it’s” for “its”) have been maintained as they are in Franklin’s versions.

³ While replacing “What we See” with “Heaven” would suggest a mistrust of sense perception because it rejects the concrete and human in favor of the abstract and divine, the relationship between “What we Hear” and “Harmony” is less decidable. Harmony could describe a more rich and complex but still humanly perceptible aural experience, but it could also name a superhuman sound, as in the harmony of the spheres, or the abstract notion of harmony, as in correspondence or unity. Thus, the second stanza may repeat the logic of the first by preferring the heavenly to the earthly, but it may instead, or in addition, argue that complex, artful sensory experiences are preferable to simple ones.

⁴ Some have argued that Dickinson’s characteristic form is derived from the hymn measure used in the ubiquitous Watts hymnal; see especially Johnson (*Biography*) and England. Others claim that her use of common measure—quatrains of alternating four- and three-stress lines, frequently rhymed *xaxa*—could have been inspired by other sources, such as the British Romantics or popular ballads; see especially Small.

⁵ In a variant, breaks that Franklin calls “physical line divisions”—line breaks that appear to be dictated by the physical limitations of the page rather than by prosody—emphasize the tension between certainty and uncertainty about the ability of human senses and human language to define or describe nature. These breaks highlight the question underlying the poem’s declarative beginning, foregrounding the question—“Nature is what”—contained within the statement that “Nature is what we See.” The new line “Nay – Nature is” also draws attention to the self-sufficiency and incomparability of nature by separating it from the comparator terms “Heaven” and “Harmony.”

⁶ As I explore in Chapter IV, Gwendolyn Brooks also employs traditional forms and recognizable rhythms to emphasize linguistic artfulness, often, as Dickinson does here, to create a counterpoint to an apparent rejection of artifice.

⁷ Lavinia and Austin Dickinson both answered gossip about their sister’s withdrawal from society by insisting that she suffered no great tragedy or loss and that her pronounced reticence was, as Lavinia put it in a letter to Caroline Dall, “only a happen” (Bingham, *Brocades* 319).

⁸ As I discuss in Chapter III, Lorine Niedecker, like Dickinson, led a relatively isolated life characterized by limited sociality paired with prolific correspondence. For both women, letters appear to have been the primary means of forging and sustaining intimate—and highly linguistic—interpersonal connections without endangering the silences and solitude that each saw as necessary to her poetry.

⁹ See also Juhasz, Cody, Eberwein, and Hagenbüchle.

¹⁰ See especially Winters and Aiken for examples of critical condescension.

¹¹ Mulvihill is referring specifically to Dickinson’s refusal to title her poems.

¹² The phrase “Capacity to Terminate” is from *P1238*, which begins “To make Routine a Stimulus.”

¹³ Wolosky argues that when Dickinson appears to conform to proscriptive notions of femininity, she exaggerates them so heavily that they are implicitly criticized. While I am sympathetic to this view, especially regarding Dickinson’s posing as girlishly innocent or as the daisy at the feet of her master, it does not account for the ways that her genuine personal reticence and even some of the peculiarities of her style are consistent with nineteenth-century gender norms. Austin Dickinson listed his sister’s occupation as “At Home” on her death certificate, and I’m not certain she would have amended such a description (Martin 82).

¹⁴ See especially Dobson’s discussion of “Nonconforming Writers” (22-25).

¹⁵ The cultural script for women was full of gaps, silences, and taboos. Some of those taboos are unsurprising—sex and desire, strong negative feelings like anger or hatred, ambition in traditionally masculine spheres—but an episode recorded in Dickinson’s letters illustrates the range of subjects that might be considered unspeakable to a respectable woman: “Austin and I were talking the other Night about the Extension of Consciousness, after Death and Mother told Vinnie, afterward, she thought it was ‘very improper’” (*L650*).

¹⁶ Sewall argues that reticence was a family, regional, and religious trait compounded in Dickinson as a poetic trait. “In Emily’s family it [reticence] extended to all things personal [. . .]. Indeed, it may have been at the heart of the family problem, which in turn may have been at the heart of the latter-day Puritan problem, when human nature, failing to meet the rigorous demands of the pristine discipline, began to hide its inadequacies behind smooth surfaces” (*Life* 41).

¹⁷ For the Puritan, total assurance about one’s election to the body of Christ could only come after death despite a lifetime of spiritual self-investigation, public proofs, and declarations of faith. While Dickinson’s speakers are often flippant when they address the Judeo-Christian God explicitly, they too defer true knowledge about the state of the soul until after death. However, unlike the Puritan, Dickinson the poet creates speakers capable of posthumous address, thus taking on an authority about the soul’s state impossible to more orthodox seekers. See Deihl’s *Women Poets and the American Sublime* for a discussion of what she calls Dickinson’s proleptic poetics.

¹⁸ Packer singles out Coleridge’s distinction between reason and understanding as attractive and influential to early Transcendentalists, but her discussion recalls the Puritan doctrine that God’s ways are beyond human understanding at least as much as it suggests Transcendentalist mysticism: “*Of course* religious concepts like the Trinity, the Atonement, and Original Sin appear contradictory to the Understanding; they are spiritual

doctrines rather than natural ones and must of necessity appear absurd to the faculty devoted to judging the natural world” (354).

¹⁹ In *P436* the speaker claims “I found the word to every thought / I ever had – but One – .” As in *P1725*, experiences of human origin—like thoughts and gladness—are more accessible to language than powers or experiences that originate in something other than the self—like “Force,” nature, or eternity.

²⁰ Wolosky argues that Dickinson “works within an inherited system of figural representation. Its remote origins in Puritan America, urging a figural encoding of events in nature, history, and the self as signs, or types, for ultimate things, could be felt especially in the habits of orthodox, ante-bellum Amherst [. . .]. The figural or typological impulse did not simply die in the nineteenth-century.” I agree that Dickinson’s poetics is to some degree an outgrowth of Puritan attitudes; however, it is not only figuration that Dickinson inherits but a simultaneous mistrust of figures for divine truths. While Wolosky claims that Dickinson’s doubts about “interpretive coherence” and her sense that “the world may resist interpretation” align her with more modern poets (447), I argue that this doubt is also inherent in the very nineteenth-century figural system against which Wolosky positions it.

²¹ See Packer’s chapter on the “Unitarian Beginnings” of Transcendentalism in the *Cambridge History of American Literature*.

²² This conflict is not only the problem of a heretic fringe; it is in fact embedded in the logic of Puritanism itself.

²³ However, as I discuss in Chapter I, Thoreau expressed scorn for those who believed they could find out the meanings of the scripture.

²⁴ Her claim that as a girl she dismissed words as weak and only later learned their power is somewhat disingenuous. Though Sewall’s biography of Dickinson argues that language became increasingly important to her, he also demonstrates that “she rejoiced in the sheer thrill of words wonderfully put together” from her earliest letters and throughout her life: “In the beginning was the Word has been said of her, and rightly. When she was fifteen she wrote Abiah Root, thanking her for a letter, ‘At every word I read I seemed to feel new strength.’ Many statements and certainly the practice of her later years indicate that the particularizing of ‘every word’ was not casual. ‘A Word is inundation, when it comes from the Sea.’ ‘You need the balsam word,’ she wrote to her bereaved cousins. ‘How lovely are the wiles of Words!’ she exclaimed to Mrs. Holland. Some such enthusiasm was surely behind her remark that for several years in the late 1850s her ‘Lexicon’ was her only companion. As late as 1883, thanking Mrs. Holland for her ‘full sweetness, to which as to a Reservoir the smaller Waters go,’ she paused to say, ‘What a beautiful Word “Waters” is!’” (675).

²⁵ Cameron's influential *Choosing/Not Choosing* is emblematic of how crucial the concept of Dickinson's writing as balanced between multiplicity and singularity has been. But earlier criticism like Weisbuch's 1979 *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* shares a picture of Dickinson's work as determined by its movements between the particularities of individual experience and the leveling forces of abstraction, and more recent scholarship has often maintained this focus. In 2000, Alfrey, describing Dickinson's revisions of the romantic sublime, explains that she utilizes a feminine intersubjectivity to encounter inexpressible otherness fully while resisting domination by it (56-57). Von der Heydt considers how Dickinson's nature poetry uses spatiality, especially the experience of the shoreline, to counterpoise "her power with sensuously satisfying objects [. . .] to her encounter with oblivion" (105).

²⁶ Poems listed here are *P753*, *P425*, *P764*, *P1079*, and *P161*. Each of these figures is itself the subject of study in contemporary investigations of language and thought; the term "metaphor" often refers to a particular kind of metaphorical expression composed of a subject and predicate nominative, but it also refers to the entire class of figures of speech "in which a word or phrase is shifted from its normal uses to a context where it evokes new meanings" ("Metaphor"). Further, in contemporary metaphor theory, "metaphor" also often refers to relational thought processes themselves, which Lakoff calls "cross-domain mappings," and not only to the language in which they are expressed ("Contemporary" 203). I begin by using "metaphor" in its larger sense as a cognitive process, but my analysis will focus on its linguistic instantiation in metaphorical expressions. Though the differences between strict metaphorical expressions (non-literal statements composed of a subject and predicate nominative, also called "nominative metaphors") and figures like simile and synecdoche are significant, my focus here is on the basic structure that unites them: the play of similarity and difference that makes them meaningful as figures.

²⁷ Weisbuch reads Dickinson's poems not as records of particular completed thoughts but as instances of thought in action, which is, for him, analogical or comparative in nature. Similarly, Freeman focuses on metaphor as the fundamental feature of Dickinson's work. She uses conceptual metaphor theory to claim that Dickinson's poems are built on structural schematics that are metaphorical extensions of basic human experience. Sharon-Zisser also claims metaphor as structurally central to Dickinson's poetics, ultimately reading her use of metaphor as metalinguistic commentary on the power of language itself. Cameron suggests that the "characteristic Dickinson angle" is comparative and that the difficulty facing Dickinson's comparisons is their need to comprehend both incomprehensible abstraction and "the particularities of the temporal world" (*Lyrical* 5). Feminist scholars have been particularly interested in the gendered implications of metaphor in Dickinson's work. Juhasz and Barker have argued that Dickinson's metaphors are strategic revisions of a culture that did not cultivate poetry in women or the feminine in poetry. Juhasz argues that Dickinson uses metaphor to create a feminine linguistic space, a counter to masculine speech predicated on the silence of the other, where communication between subjects is possible ("Adventures").

Barker reads light as the structuring metaphor for Dickinson's relationship to her family, her art, her culture, her body, divinity, sexuality, love, and eternity.

²⁸ Hagenbüchle argues that Dickinson's dominant poetic structure is metonymy rather than metaphor. Because she wishes to preserve the fundamental mystery of experience, Dickinson favors inferential rather than comparative figures. I agree with Hagenbüchle that Dickinson's poetry is marked by a respect for inexpressibility. However, where he claims that Dickinson's poetry develops toward metonymy in order to avoid the "stated relationship of equivalence in metaphor," I focus on Dickinson's strategies for evoking the inexpressible *through* metaphor itself (36). Though we agree that Dickinson's poetry tends toward silence, mystery, and absence, I focus on metaphor because it is in comparative figures that the desire for the self-sufficiency of experience is most in tension with the desire for linguistic expression that Hagenbüchle also recognizes as inherent in poetic work: "As a 'musicienne du silence,' [. . .] Dickinson could not function as a poet; so she tries by stylistic means to approximate this ideal as closely as possible" (40). Metonymy may allow Dickinson to approximate the ideal of silence, but it is through metaphor that she holds silence most dramatically in tension with poetic speech.

²⁹ Cody claims that Dickinson's use of metaphor, especially metaphors for sexuality, is part of a smoke-and-mirrors act, a diversion from the truth of her fears and anxieties. In *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, Porter initially reads Dickinson's use of analogical figures as a record of the mind's negotiations between the physical and the spiritual, the actual and the ideal. But in his revisionary later study, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom*, he argues that Dickinson's metaphors are a closed referential system, divorced from the world of shared lived experience; they become a solipsistic record not of the human mind's figuring capacity but of Emily Dickinson's mind, fully interpretable only by Dickinson herself and decodable only by a literary forensics that resurrects the distant metonymic forefathers of her most mystifying metaphors and dusts their bones for clues.

³⁰ Though Dickinson's figurative language has frequently been accused of failure in that it allows the poems (and their readers) to ignore or dismiss important political realities like the abolitionist struggle and the Civil War, recent work by scholars like Richards and Barrett suggests that Dickinson's figures may have a wider political reach than previously understood. Similarly, feminist scholars have read Dickinson's supposed obliquity as an invaluable technique for claiming authority: see especially Juhasz, Barker, Eberwein, and Rich for sustained feminist treatments of Dickinson's strategic withdrawal from reference.

³¹ While there are competing theories about how exactly metaphor works, most confirm the traditional two-term structure. Long-standing conceptions hold that metaphorical language is a type of rhetorical flourish, useful for illumination of difficult or novel concepts but ultimately interpreted in terms of its accuracy in reflecting real similarities between what it compares. In this view, metaphor simply makes it easier to

perceive a previously existing, objective similarity between a familiar object or concept and a less familiar one (Johnson, "Introduction" 24-25). The major strains of contemporary metaphor theory disagree with many of the basic assumptions of classical metaphor theory, most importantly that metaphor is only linguistic and that it works through similarity. Black's interaction theory claims that metaphor is not a unidirectional picking out of properties, where the characteristics of a well-known thing help us to see that another thing has those same characteristics, but a bidirectional interaction between both of the compared objects or experiences that is at least partially constitutive of the perceived similarities and differences between the analysands (72-77). In Lakoff and Johnson's formulation of embodied cognition, conceptual metaphor is the process by which our cognitively basic bodily experiences, like motion through space, temperature, and object manipulation, are extended to less direct experiences, like time, human relationships, and thinking itself, and constitute the very ways we understand and reason about those experiences. Glucksberg and Keysar's categorization theory argues that metaphor works by the inclusion of the tenor in a category synecdochally represented by the vehicle. Though these theories are fundamentally opposed on many counts, they all view metaphor as comparative in the sense that it involves an interaction of some kind between distinct domains. Katz's "Review" is an excellent overview of the development of metaphor theory in the twentieth century. See also Gibbs and Lakoff.

³² Even in a poem that posits self-reckoning as true knowing, singularity is in tension with multiplicity: love is like love alone, but it is also like the sun in its very incomparability or selfsameness.

³³ Deppman explores how even Dickinson's definition poems (often dismissed as giving in to terminal vagueness or admissions of undefinability) use indirection, complication, contradiction, and paradox to explain and analyze, not merely gesture toward, confusion or unknowability ("Change").

³⁴ Examples of love's reckoning: *P287, P442, P325*; Death's: *P704, P166, P644, P426*; Eternity's: *P302, P457, P720*; Grief's: *P753*.

³⁵ At least thirteen poems make self into "ourselves": *P282, P337, P354, P369, P392, P407, P518, P522, P544, P600, P740, P1000, P1061*. In the poem beginning "One need not be a Chamber," the memorable line "Ourselves behind Ourselves concealed" makes the division and doubling of the self startlingly corporeal (*P407*).

³⁶ Dickinson also frequently uses other *-self* pronouns: "itself," "myself," "themselves." These are sometimes used like "ourselves" to create both unity and separation, but, as unambiguously singular pronouns, "itself" and "myself" do not demonstrate as forcefully the simultaneous multiplicity (our) and unity (self) that draws Dickinson. "Themselves" is both multiple and singular, but, as a third-person pronoun, does not as clearly implicate the speaker or presiding consciousness of the poem in its identity pranks.

³⁷ In *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson*, Deppman argues that Dickinson's poetry is intellectually driven and not solely, or even primarily, a poetry of feeling. I would add that metaphors of selfsameness are a powerful tool in the service of such an intellectual drive; the tensions that they are suited to sustain are a part of the complex philosophical, theological, epistemological, and ontological work that Dickinson's poems "try to think."

³⁸ See especially Chapter 4, "The Mourning That is Language."

³⁹ Homans's description of this loss of autonomy as "sacrifice" is characteristic of critical treatments of the dominant tropes in the "man of noon" letter (*Women* 175-76).

⁴⁰ Martin argues that the Victorian feminine ideal of selflessness, taken to the extreme by Dickinson, becomes a kind of mystical union where lines between self and world are erased. If mystical union is part of the logic of self-sacrificial care-giving, this may be another reason for ambivalence to such erasure of self.

⁴¹ Erkilli reads these letters to Sue and to Emily Fowler as representative of Dickinson's special communication with women, a "speaking among women that cannot be heard and thus cannot be interrupted by the potentially dangerous 'ear' of a listening (male) world" (24-31). In contrast, I argue that what makes this communication special is that it is *not* speaking.

⁴² Homans goes on to identify strategies in Dickinson's death poems as more effectively overcoming hierarchy than poems about relationships between women, in which hierarchy is merely absent.

⁴³ This imagery also hints at the crucifixion of Christ and implies that his sacrifice may have been a punishment for separating himself from God.

⁴⁴ Deppman also points out the importance of form to Dickinson's "thematic obsession with things that refuse to reveal themselves to her" (*Trying* 7).

⁴⁵ The line breaks and emendations in the manuscript version of this poem further utilize metaphors of selfsameness to undermine the achievement of final unity. Line 15 is broken in the middle, leaving "If Doom itself" to emphasize the relationship of self-sufficiency to Doom. And, though I have not been able to see the poem in manuscript, Franklin's variorum edition indicates that line 7, "The same Flower Hesperian," is written "flower Flower Hesperian," interrupting the rhythm of the poem to insist on and simultaneously question the unified and unifying identity of death's flower by doubly representing it. It may be that Franklin has correctly chosen to view this doubling as an error and that he is right to delete it from even the variorum edition. However, to my mind, the repetition of "flower" too conveniently reinforces the effects of other formal and thematic elements in the poem to be merely a mistake.

The fact that Dickinson's manuscripts often supply variants or, perhaps more accurately, simultaneous multiple possibilities (at once chosen and not chosen in Cameron's terms), suggests that the rhetorical power of establishing tension between unity and multiplicity through both attempting and undermining selfsameness is vital to Dickinson's work.

CHAPTER III

SHACKLE AND FLOOD:

LORINE NIEDECKER AND CONNECTIVE LANGUAGE

Jane Knox's biography of Lorine Niedecker, published in 1987 by the Dwight Foster Public Library in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, begins with an epigraph from one of Niedecker's long poems, "Wintergreen Ridge." Contemporary critics often defend Niedecker's work from what they see as an imprecise popular view of Niedecker as a regional nature poet, and one might expect Knox's biography, published for a local audience invested in identifying Niedecker with her Wisconsin home, to sketch just such a picture. But, instead of the "horsetails" and "club mosses" everywhere available in "Wintergreen Ridge," Knox chooses these more abstract lines to begin her biography:

Nobody, nothing

ever gave me

greater thing

than time

unless light

and silence

which if intense

makes a sound (253)¹

Nature, especially the flora and fauna of her native Black Hawk Island, figures largely in Lorine Niedecker's poems as subject matter, but the lines that Knox chooses speak to

Niedecker's style instead of her subject. Indeed, the phrase "silence // which if intense / makes a sound," could be considered an *ars poetica*. These lines point to a central dualism in Niedecker's work: Niedecker's silences are intense, but the condensation of her language also brings individual words, both their meaning and music, into a resounding clarity. Niedecker's poems are quiet; they are spare, careful, often oblique, and their short lines and small stanzas usually leave them surrounded by the silence of white space. But the language of these concise acts of expression is rich with sound: affective alliterations and complex verbal music, snippets of speech, the noise of animal life, and the babble of languages invoked by Niedecker's play with etymology. This opposition indelibly marks Niedecker's poetry, particularly her explorations of poetic form. She often described herself as pulled between competing aesthetic modes—a concision approaching silence and a delight in language—and her formal innovations were a means of negotiating between or reconciling these alternatives.

Lorine Niedecker is better known for reticence than garrulousness; in fact, in "Poet's Work," she herself characterized the poet as one who learns "to sit at desk / and condense" (194). Much of Niedecker's work supports the notion that she labored in a poetic "condensery," distilling profuse ordinary language into its more precise poetic essence. But, though a poem like "Something in the water" confirms the importance of silence, even in its extreme terseness language flourishes:

Something in the water
like a flower
will devour

water

flower²

The poem is cryptic, briefly signaling an unnamed “something” that “will devour.” The information the poem provides about its purported subject, “something in the water,” is strictly circumscribed. While the simile, “like a flower,” evokes an aquatic blossom, the only certain thing is that the “something” is not a flower; it is only like one. Further, because of the grammatical ambiguity of the first three lines, the phrase “like a flower” could apply to the noun “something,” the prepositional phrase “in the water,” or the verb “devour.” Thus, the something could simply be like a flower, it could be located in the water like a flower, or it could devour like a flower does. In this final instance, the isolated nouns of the last two lines, “water” and “flower,” may be the things that a flower, and by analogy the “something,” devours. But they may also simply be ambient description, setting the scene for the action of the first three lines. Ultimately, the poem undermines its own sparse imagery, suggesting a devouring but refusing to articulate exactly what devours what. This fecund confusion depicts fundamental natural relationships—like those between plant and water—as dangerous, interpenetrative, and involving a “something” unavailable to the observer’s language.

Formal silences—particularly brevity and omission—are crucial to the poem’s treatment of this ineffable interaction. Brevity here works primarily to short-circuit linguistic connections. The shortness of the individual lines separates the objects of the poem, interrupting the linkages that syntax effects. The phrase “Something in the water like a flower will devour” establishes grammatical relationships, however uncertain, but

the curtness of the lines suppresses those interactions in favor of self-contained phrases. This brevity also creates more white space—emphasized by the extra spaces surrounding the final single-word lines—which visually separates the individual lines of the poem, pulling against the relationships implied by the sense of the words. The effect of these silences is to shield “something,” “flower,” and “water” from impinging language, creating a countercurrent of stubbornly isolate identity amidst the poem’s interpolations. Like brevity, strategic omissions deny connections, but they also create them. The poem refuses to provide narrative context that might clarify the significance of its images, and it omits the conjunctions and punctuation that would integrate its short lines into a sentence with determinate grammar and meaning. This elides the particular relationships that such context and grammar would establish, but it also makes various, mutually exclusive interactions possible. Any punctuation would inevitably limit the possible readings of the poem, resolving at least some of the uncertainty. For instance, even the simple addition of a final period would convert the poem into a single sentence, requiring the integration of “water” and “flower” into the grammar of the previous phrase, foreclosing the possibility that they exist independently. And certainly, the inclusion of conjunctions or prepositions, especially in the final two lines, would more strictly delineate the proliferating meanings. The poem excludes these elements, silencing important relational functions of language like subordination and coordination and leaving the interactions between its objects indeterminate. The effect of omissions that allow multiple readings is similar to concision that works against linguistic interaction: they refuse to say what the mysterious “something” is, leaving it to float beside “flower” and “water” in a wash of malleable connections.

However, though the principal uncertainty of the poem depends on strategic silences, the result of that uncertainty is a focus on the free play of language and its musicality; the very abundance of meanings achieved through brevity and omission reveals the copiousness of even the most restricted language. When narrative context, conjunctions, and punctuation are excised, the connections they effect are not. Additionally, the destabilization of the syntax and grammar disassociates the words from their usual communicative functions and foregrounds instead their musical qualities. Unmoored from descriptive or argumentative purpose, the rocking, loosely iambic rhythm of the lines is more easily perceptible. The rhythm counters the isolating effect of the line breaks because each line ends with an unstressed syllable and begins with a stressed syllable, implying a rhythmic continuity. Rhyme furthers this musical unity. While the possible meanings proliferate, fully half of the words sound a single dominant rhyme: “flower” rhymes with both “devour” and “water,” linking them in a structural similarity that forms a counterpoint to the poem’s multiplicity of meanings. Language serves here to work against the dissolution of the discrete object by creating a unified musical identity, and yet that very music crosses the boundaries of individual words. Even where silences are clearly paramount, Niedecker relishes the possibilities of language. Brevity and omission work in this poem to limit the impositions of language, but they also allow the poet’s language to come into its own. The poetic properties of language here dramatize the predominant conflict of the poem between a world in which individual identities—something, water, flower—remain separate and yet are inextricably and inexplicably linked, nourishing and devouring one another.

Opposing allegiances to silence and sound are a driving force in Niedecker's poetry that is often obscured by too narrow a focus on her biography and subject matter. But Knox's choice to address this conflicted relationship, rather than Niedecker's family ties or her observations of the natural world, reminds us that Niedecker has always had astute readers, attentive to her formal choices. Though she lived and wrote in relative obscurity, such readers have succeeded in establishing a place for her, if belated and somewhat tenuous, in the American poetry canon. In her 1992 *Kenyon Review* article "Lorine Niedecker the Anonymous," Rachel Blau DuPlessis casts Niedecker as a literary outsider:

She is unknown. She is therefore erased. Every time she is mentioned, she must be re-introduced. Proposed as a value. Re-explained. Unerased—a curious process in critical construction. These moves mean that a lack-luck aura of victim will hang over the writer; she becomes pathetic, a welfare case. (99)

However, in 2006, when the article was reprinted by DuPlessis in *Blue Studios*, this statement of Niedecker's critical invisibility had been dropped. Several important publications have contributed to the realization of Lorine Niedecker's importance to twentieth-century American poetry.³ Unlike early reviewers and critics, who often characterized Niedecker's poetry as charming but small, unconsciously perceptive but intellectually passive, new work on Niedecker takes for granted that she is a mature, self-aware poet with a fully developed aesthetic that is responsive to and influential on American poetics more generally.⁴ In particular, critics are reevaluating Niedecker's influence on late twentieth-century experimental poetry and positing her work as exemplary of an ethically engaged innovative poetics.⁵ She is also much admired among

poets, as evidenced by the collection of poetry, *Epitaphs for Lorine*, published after her death and the volumes of more recent periodicals given entirely to poems by, about, and for Niedecker.⁶ Lorine Niedecker, it seems, is no longer “a welfare case.” The circumstances of those decades of obscurity are, however, instructive.

Contemporary critics of Niedecker have observed how factors like gender, class, and socio-economic status contributed to her relegation to the footnotes of American literary history. However, Niedecker’s neglect is not only a result of critical blindness or institutionalized prejudice; it is also a function of the character of her life and work.⁷ Though she worked hard to bring out collections of her poetry, in some cases paying publishers part of the publication costs, Niedecker refused the kind of self-promoting theorization and literary careerism that was important to the reputations of like-minded contemporaries such as William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky.⁸ She published scant critical prose—none of it about her own poetics—and this silence may have contributed to her placement on the margins.⁹ In addition to these refusals of print publicity, Niedecker actively avoided local celebrity, sending her books only to a few close friends and imploring them to keep her poetic vocation under their hats.¹⁰ This reticence is well documented in personal and critical accounts as well as in her letters, and it lends credibility to the highly affective descriptions of her quiet life on Black Hawk Island and her shy, retiring personality that dogged early reviews and criticism.¹¹ Even in contemporary scholarship this characterization sometimes persists, in part because it echoes Niedecker’s own sense of herself.¹² For instance, in response to a picture of the author printed with Zukofsky’s *Some Time*, Niedecker depicts herself as demure: “They can put a creeping mint for me when I have a book” (*Correspondence*

235). But, while the suggestion that her jacket photo should be a creeping mint is shy and self-deprecatory, such an image obscures the confidence of “*when I have a book.*” Since she first began publishing, responses to Niedecker have tended to emphasize her “creeping mint” pose and minimize her outspokenness and self-confidence. While there are many possible explanations for such an emphasis, including sexist and classist condescension, this is not only a case of biography and biology influencing the reception of poetry: the emphasis on Niedecker’s personal and professional reticence is also a response to the poems themselves.¹³

In addition to shaping the picture of Niedecker the person, silences and refusals—such as a terse style, very short poems, and the elision of connective language—have dominated discussions of Niedecker the poet, and responses to these silences are wide ranging. While critics like Heller and Cox take Niedecker’s formal silences to reflect her supposedly retiring personality, much of the more recent critical interest in Niedecker centers on quietness, obliquity, and even self-effacement as integral to her poetics. DuPlessis makes a compelling case for self-deprecation and shyness as strategic career moves for Niedecker, and her evaluation of folk forms, ballads, and haiku has been influential in establishing Niedecker’s quietness and condensation as a deftly wielded poetic tool (“Fusion”). Recent writing has similarly posited Niedecker’s condensed forms and strategies of omission as feminist and anti-consumerist rejections of mainstream American values.¹⁴ But perhaps the most influential and thoroughgoing discussion of the integral role of silence in her poetics is Peter Middleton’s essay on Niedecker’s use of the folk.¹⁵ Middleton argues that Niedecker’s silences mark an “absence of intersubjectivity” and a refusal to “[appeal] to the universalizing languages and frameworks of modern art

and the avant-garde” (172). They are part of a folk aesthetic that preserves the particularity of the local by resisting the notion of universal communicability.¹⁶ He claims that Niedecker’s poems run counter to avant-garde “blandishments” by refusing certain kinds of speech and, at times, refusing to speak altogether: her silences resist the apprehension of experience in language by confronting the reader with what she does not and cannot know.¹⁷ For Middleton, as for many other readers, Niedecker refuses language, particularly narrative or direct language, because it violates the integrity of some objects or experiences.¹⁸ While responses to Niedecker’s silences are sometimes fundamentally opposed—with some readers taking them to be unconsciously expressive of her personality and others taking them to be radically and intentionally political—the body of Niedecker criticism is often unified by the sense that “In Niedecker’s poetry [. . .] the silences that surround the words are at least as important as the words themselves” (Hatlen 53).

Certainly, Niedecker would not have resisted the idea that her poetry is marked by silences. She regarded silence as one of the highest attainments of good poetry, and she saw it both as an aesthetic ideal and as a necessary condition of poetry’s reception and production. In a 1968 letter to Corman, she makes silence a primary tool of the poet’s craft: “Here—I think this is it—the ultimate in poetry. The hard and clear with the mystery of poetry—and it’s done largely with words omitted. Stark, isolated words which somehow must connect with each other and into the next line and the sense of sound” (*Between* 145).¹⁹ For Niedecker, omission is the method by which “the ultimate in poetry” can be reached: detaching words from each other and creating mystery in the “somehow” of their connection. An aesthetic of omission is everywhere evident in

Niedecker's poetry, but it is particularly striking when one compares her letters to her poems. Her often chatty and personal letters supply biographical contexts for many of her poems, but these details are, almost without fail, not included in the poems themselves. For instance, during her friendship with the dentist Harold Heine in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Niedecker sent Corman a poem in which the speaker's friend has "dentist fingers." However, upon reconsideration, she decided the inclusion of that biographical detail was a mistake and anxiously solicited Corman's address in Japan from Zukofsky so that she could correct it. She describes the situation to Zukofsky as a professional misstep: "Sometimes I can be so blind, especially on something directly out of life. There's a pitfall for poets—directly out of life" (*Correspondence* 271). Silences—in this case, omissions of biographical detail—are a necessary and sometimes difficult part of creating poetry out of experience, and Niedecker saw a failure to omit certain details as a failure of craft, "a pitfall." Silence about her personal life was fundamental to her method, and talking about something like her affection for Heine was a temptation to be avoided for the sake of poetic integrity. And while omissions of biographical detail could be motivated by a simple need for privacy, Niedecker's silences extend well past a resistance to personal revelation. In her work on one of her longest poems, "Lake Superior," she condensed 260 pages of notes into five pages of terse poetry.²⁰ Significantly, however, most of what she omits is not biographical—she excises historical and geographical research and narrative transitions, as well. These omissions are not a matter of personal delicacy; they are fundamental to an aesthetic practice steeped in silence.

A short piece Niedecker wrote after the death of her mother depends on the omission and “stark, isolated words” that she advocated to Corman:

I hear the weather
 through the house
or is it breathing
 mother (150)

The poem is quiet: the scene is so muted that the speaker can hear a sound hushed enough to be either weather or breathing. And the formal silences in the poem—its extreme brevity, its uncertainty of reference, and its lack of punctuation—intensify this effect. These four lines are a powerful evocation of grief partly because of what they leave out: in particular, definitively articulated relationships between the objects in the poem. The only line in which two nouns are decisively related is the first, in which “I” and “weather” have a clearly delineated connection. Each other line sets apart single nouns, “house,” “breathing,” and “mother,” leaving their relationships tenuous by interrupting or destabilizing them with line breaks and diffuse prepositions. Is the weather coming through the house, or does the speaker hear through the house to the weather outside? Are the weather and breathing mutually exclusive options for what the “I” is hearing, or is the weather breathing? The word “mother” is suspended alone at the end of the poem on its own line, unrelated to the rest by syntax or punctuation. It may be an address—the speaker whispering to a present mother to ask her what she hears or whether the breathing is hers; an apostrophe—the speaker remembering an absent mother in response to the realization that no one else is breathing in the house; or a quotation—the word that the weather is breathing. The poem omits the biographical detail, the elaboration of

images, and the punctuation that would resolve these variables. The only certainty in the poem is the basic sensory relationship of the first line, hearing the weather. We must make our own decisions about how the objects in the poem relate, or we must concede that they exist together indeterminately. “Mother” may or may not be a question, and there may or may not be a voice that will answer it. The omissions of the poem, then, enact an experience of grief, of uncertainty and isolation, rather than simply relating it. In this poem, as in many others, silences are a central tool of Niedecker’s craft.

Silence was interior to good poetry for Niedecker, and it also surrounded it. Her experience of poetry, as both a reader and writer, was quiet and intensely private. Unlike many of her contemporaries and correspondents, Niedecker did not give frequent public readings, and she generally preferred to read poems silently. When Corman visited her in Black Hawk, he pressed her to record herself reading some of her poems.²¹ By all accounts, the experiment was not particularly successful. Niedecker had little experience reading aloud, and she was uncomfortable with the way intonation and pronunciation could create ambiguities not present in the poem as written.²² Her dislike for recording her poems, and for readings in general, was based on the belief that silent reading allows us to experience a poem more fully: “I like planting poems in deep, silence, each person gets at the poems for *himself*. He has to come to the poems with an ear for all the music they can give and he’ll hear that as Beethoven heard tho deaf” (*Between* 241).²³ Though she uses the language of sound to describe the effect of planting poems in silence, “music” and hearing are removed from an exterior physical experience and relocated inside the silent mind, a space available to the deaf as well as to those who can literally hear music.²⁴ Silence, here, allows for an intensely personal and private encounter with

poetry—the emphasis on “for *himself*” is Niedecker’s own. In 1967, toward the end of her life, Niedecker wrote Corman reaffirming the importance of silence to both reader and writer:

Poems are for one person to another, spoken thus, or read silently. How would [your poems] be read to a hall filled with people? If I close my eyes I look for the words on the page. If the silence could be governed among the people, if your voice came from somewhere not seen, i.e. radio, or out of suffused light—perhaps OK. If your ear is acute you sound your poem in silence. (*Between* 121)

She valued poetry as a private, quiet exchange between people, not as a public declamation. Though Niedecker was apparently unmoved by church rituals and the Christian sensibilities that surrounded her, her language here, as she imagines the ideal reading of Corman’s poems, has something of the silence of the cathedral about it. Though she speaks of technologies and arrangements that might insure the reverential silence she believes necessary to a successful reading of Corman’s work, these are meant primarily to reproduce the true chamber of poetry, the individual ear. If the “ultimate” in poetry is attained by “omission,” it is also apprehended in silence.

An atmosphere of silence was equally important to the production of poetry as to its reception, and Niedecker cultivated the solitude that made possible the wide stretches of silence she required. It is this type of regard for silence that has contributed most to the picture of Niedecker as a recluse. However, her choice to limit her social life was more than a quirk of personality; it was a professional necessity. In fact, solitude and silence ran counter to some elements of Niedecker’s character—her joy in conversation, her need for intellectual stimulation by sharing her reading and thinking with others—and she

spoke often in her letters of the difficulty of preserving the solitude and silence she needed to write. She wrote to Zukofsky of her efforts to keep coworkers, neighbors, and acquaintances at a distance, even when she felt an affinity for them, because such attachments were, in the end, useless for her poetry.²⁵ Even when, late in her life, Niedecker married, the decision seemed to surprise her, in large part because of its possible threat to the silences that her relative seclusion provided. She expresses to Zukofsky a fear that her “human(!) happiness” might be “upsetting to the other thing [she’s] built up,” which might, given “another couple years,” entirely separate her from the “silly coming and going” of ordinary society (*Correspondence* 331). Marriage is desirable because it provides “human(!) happiness” but troubling because it involves her in relationships that are dangerous to her writing. Though she decides to marry Al Millen, she still wants to preserve the silences in her life that are so important to her poems.²⁶ Niedecker recognizes the anti-sociality of her resistance to the “silly coming and going” of the people around her, equating it with selfishness in a letter to Corman, but she cherishes this selfishness as the prerogative of the poet:

I think both LZ’s and my last years are going to be very selfish ones. We’ve reached an age—8 years (with me) to 70. It would be nice to imbibe from whatever source we can something of that silence that you, still young, already have. Not that I’m doddering, or as sick as Z. Silence I mean in which to write our poetry. (*Between* 61)

Silence, here, is an intimate part of the poems themselves and of the circumstances of their composition.

However, though Niedecker makes silence the long-deserved reward of a poet's old age or the precocious and admired attainment of youth, she also subverts that stance in the same breath. She wants to be clear about the meaning of silence for herself and for Zukofsky, but in the process of elucidating the value of quiet and restraint, her language takes on a life of its own. For example, though clarification generally limits the possible meanings of a statement, Niedecker's qualifying phrase, "[s]ilence I mean in which to write. our poetry," multiplies them. The period between "write" and "our poetry" suggests that "our poetry" is the object of the verb "write"—as if the phrase were written "Silence I mean in which to write our poetry"—and that it is a summary of the previous phrase, making "our poetry" equivalent to "silence in which to write." Niedecker's anxiousness to delineate what silence means to her, as well as the ambiguity of her explanation, show its importance to her thinking, her poetry, and her life. Conversely, the variability of meanings available in Niedecker's argument for silence points to a strain that runs counter to her sparseness and demonstrates her affinity for language. Indeed, Niedecker's statement on behalf of silence not only explores and extends the meaning-making power of language; it also celebrates its music. The prosaic tone of the letter may obscure musical elements that lineation helps reveal:

We've reached an age—

8 years (with me)

to 70.

It would be nice

to imbibe

from whatever source we can
something of that silence
that you, still young, already have.

Not that I'm doddering,

or as sick as Z.

Silence I mean

in which to write.

our poetry.²⁷

More than casual assonance is evident throughout these lines, and it often resolves into rhyme: “me,” “70,” “Z,” and “poetry” are full rhymes, and “nice,” “imbibe,” and “silence” may be heard as off rhymes. There is also an iambic/anapestic rhythm underlying these lines, especially in the last sentences. That Niedecker’s prose should contain poetic elements is not, in itself, remarkable, but it is revealing that such concentrated linguistic music would appear in lines touting silence. Despite her frequent statements in favor of silence, Niedecker was drawn toward aural music and the aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual possibilities of language—particularly spoken language—individual words, and even phonemes. Though she praised silence in others and sought it in her own work and life, Niedecker also prized language for its ability to connect human beings to others, its beauty as an object in itself, its expressive power, and its rhetorical and intellectual flexibility.

Despite her relative isolation in Black Hawk, it is clear that Niedecker treasured her relationships with others, many of which were developed almost entirely through

words exchanged in letters. Cox describes her letters as distinctive because of her “delightful deshabelle style, talking to someone, not just talking,” and written correspondence was a primary means of establishing intimacy and connection in her life (*Between* 191). Niedecker’s letters to Zukofsky and Corman are perhaps the best examples of this, but she also carried on extensive correspondence with other writers and publishers all over the world, as well as with some of her neighbors. Her letters create a sense of community: she speaks with the personal, intimate style that Cox notices, and she quotes extensively from conversations she’s had with others and reproduces parts of letters she has sent and received, inviting other voices into dialogue with her own. And, while an evident appreciation for written language as a means of creating relationships is not unexpected in Niedecker’s letters, it is more surprising to find such pleasure in the relational aspects of language in the poetry of a writer who so often avowed the importance of silence in her work. In a letter to Zukofsky about returning to writing after a fallow period, she connected her own creative vitality to the ability to include rather than to omit:

You know something—I don’t know how the old time poets did it—the poetic vein was the soft-spoken, hushed, sweet-worded kind of thing, almost artificial, but maybe in their time it was earthy enough for poetry . . . now I find when one hasn’t been writing for awhile, you start off in something like that soft vein, but as soon as you get used to writing again, you pick up everything for poetry, get into everyday speech etc. (*Correspondence* 147)

This “pick up everything” attitude characterizes many of Niedecker’s poems, even though they may also be described as “hushed.” One result of picking up everything is

that “everyday speech” becomes a source of inspiration and material. Niedecker often noted the speech of those around her and converted it, sometimes with very little change or none at all, into poetry. She cherished the silence provided by privacy, but she valued the language that surrounded her and the connections it effected between people.

Niedecker’s reading also makes it clear that written language was, for her, a tool for establishing relationships. She was often moved by the words of others, perhaps most dramatically evident in her reaction to Zukofsky’s 1931 essay in *Poetry*. Throughout her life Niedecker read poetry, philosophy, and natural and political history and responded actively to what she read, often by initiating correspondences with writers she admired or with whom she felt an affinity. As in her correspondence, in her reading and note-taking she did not favor terse language but instead took copious notes, reveling in the words of others, copying down long quotations, and sending copies of her annotations to Louis and Celia Zukofsky, among others. Like the folk sayings and chat of her family and neighbors, the words of philosophers and historians were a source of material for her poems. Given her claims for the importance of omission, she was remarkably open to inclusion from a variety of sources, especially dialogue. She opened her poetry to language—from everyday speech, to correspondence between kindred minds, to the words of long-dead philosophers and historians. Such openness opposes a communicative, even voluble strain to the reticences and refusals that are equally important in Niedecker’s work.²⁸

In addition to the babble of human communication, Niedecker was also drawn to the music of language itself, highly conscious of the noises that words made. An offhand description to Zukofsky of her encyclopedic reading illuminates how important dialogue

with other writers was to Niedecker, but it also deemphasizes communicative language in favor of musicality:

Yes, Hudson, he's coming up on my reading list. Gilbert White just at hand. Fabre, Humboldt favorites too. Encyclopedic stuff too. But all this won't be remembered, likely, when I open the door out home beside the marsh some spring night and hear the sora rail running down the scale—the spoon-tapped water glass. (*Between* 146)

Niedecker relished the noise of nature, enjoying the clatter and cacophony of her marsh, but her appreciation of nature's sounds is most fully realized in language. She indicates that the sora rail's music trumps mere words, but her language for the rail's sounds makes its own music.²⁹ The rhyme of "rail" and "scale" signals a shift away from "encyclopedic stuff" and toward the more performative use of language evident in the final phrase: the "spoon-tapped water glass" is an instance of language with the power to absorb, inspire, and please Niedecker at least as much as it is a description of natural sounds that have that effect.³⁰ The syncopated rhythm of the phrase (with four syllables stressed out of five), the assonance of "tapped" and "glass," and the dramatic oral shift from the very low vowel of "spoon" to the high vowel of "tapped" emphasize the linguistic virtuosity of the poet. Niedecker appears to be less concerned with evoking a natural phenomenon here than with exploring the possibilities of the sounds her own words make.

Niedecker's interest in language, however, exceeded the musical; the meanings of words were also important for understanding and describing the world around her.³¹ Though she admires Corman for his silences, she approves of Dahlberg, when he is "at his best," because "he knows words—earthy, wonderful, rich words—'cormorant'

words!!” (*Correspondence* 284). Dahlberg’s vocabulary is rich because it names precisely; he says “cormorant” rather than simply “bird.” While an emphasis on words as music often silences the communicative aspect of language, as in nonsense, the usefulness of words—their manifold meanings, their histories and their connotations, their precision—pulls against Niedecker’s attraction for silence. This usefulness is evident throughout Niedecker’s poetry in her puns and intricate word play, such as her famous “condensery.” Even in her letters, she often explores the subtler possibilities of words, allowing their meanings to multiply. For example, she wrote Corman about a trip she took with her husband, Millen: “Yes, the Lake Superior trip was a great delight if I can make the poem. Traverse de Millens! A millennium of notes for my *magma* opus” (Faranda 94). She plays the changes on these words—“Millens” becomes “millennium,” echoing both plenitude (thousands) and familial proprietariness (Millen), and “magnum” is converted into “magma,” merging the Greek word for greatness with the geological theme of her observations. Though writing to a poet whose silences she so admired, Niedecker exults in the possibilities of language, not only musically but intellectually. The fact that she converted hundreds of pages of notes on her trip to a few pages of poetry dramatically illustrates Niedecker’s aesthetics of omission; however, the fact that she wrote so many pages of notes in the first place—as well as reading extensively in the regional history and geography of the area, copiously annotating her reading and even consulting local experts—also indicates that her condensation is not born entirely out of silence. Rather, it is won from a welter of language and sound. This is not to say that Niedecker’s poems do not strive for and attain the silence that she valued so highly but to point out that silence in Niedecker’s work is always in tension with a vibrant

communicative life and profuse, saturated language that is fundamentally attractive to her. She wrote whole poems that seem almost swallowed by their own silences, like “We must pull / the curtains— / we haven’t any / leaves” (242). But she also wrote short stories, lively radio plays, and poems with rhymes like “in Dakota” / “take you where you want to go ta” (152).

A poem like “How bright you’ll find young people,” included in Niedecker’s “For Paul” series, illustrates a very different relationship to language from poems more representative of her condensed style:

How bright you’ll find young people,

Diddle,

and how unkind.

When a boy appears with a book

they cry “Who’s the young Einsteind?”

Einstein, you know, said space

is what it’s made up of.

And as to the human race

“Why do you deeply oppose its passing?”

you’ll find men asking

the man with the nebular hair

and the fiddle. (139-40)

This poem foregrounds language—particularly conversation (intimate, folk, and public) and music—to explore the relationship of the singular person to the human race. The speaker addresses “Diddle,” a nickname of violin prodigy Paul Zukosfky, the son of

Louis and Celia Zukofsky, and she advises him about what she anticipates will be difficult interactions with other children. The speaker begins by ventriloquizing the young people's mocking comparison of a reading boy to "Einsteind." Though the comparison is intended to insult, the speaker takes it up as useful, quoting Einstein's words as instructive, however gnomically, for the boy. By the end of the poem, the speaker, too, is calling the boy a "young Einsteind" by conflating the two figures in the final image: "the man with the nebular hair and the fiddle." In contrast to the strict isolation of objects in "I hear the weather through the house," two of the objects in this poem, the boy and Einstein, are so intimately related as to become one identity. This fluidity of relationship is accomplished through the play of language rather than the restriction of its connections.

Niedecker's poetic here is one of inclusion rather than omission; its resources range from biographical detail, to Niedecker's reading, to the idiosyncracies of folk speech in the quoted "Einsteind." Perhaps most noticeably, the poem's musicality—obvious rhymes like "space / race" and "Diddle / fiddle" and rolling rhythms as in "How bright you'll find young people / Diddle"—creates a sense of levity appropriate to its purpose: assuring a child upon his enrollment in school.³² But that very musicality can also work against the lightness. The rhyme of "unkind" with "Einsteind" heavily emphasizes both those words, sounding the more serious subject of the poem—antagonism between the singular individual and the human race—even as it makes light of this.³³ The kinds of relationships language can propose or create are paramount to the articulation of this scientist-musician boy-Einstein's involvement with the rest of humanity. On the most basic level, the poem functions through dialogue. It casts itself as

an act of direct communication, beginning with an intimate personal address, “Diddle,” and then proceeding through other kinds of conversation: the children tease “Diddle,” Einstein’s words about space are reported to him, and Einstein poses a question to the human race. Last, the men ask “the man with the nebular hair and fiddle” a question that at first appears to be addressed to them. It is in this moment of difficulty, the uncertainty of who is speaking to whom, that the relationships between figures become most unstable. On one level—in that the phrase “And as to” initially attributes the poem’s second quotation, “Why do you deeply oppose its passing,” to Einstein—the poem argues that the singular person is so distant from the rest of the human race that he may question why one would resist its destruction. This attributes a callousness to genius that recalls Einstein’s part in the development of the atom bomb. However, the question “Why do you deeply oppose its passing”—which at first contributes to a portrait of the exceptional intellect’s emotional distance from humanity—turns, in the next line, to a question posed *to* the genius by other men. The music of the poem reinforces this new alignment with the off rhyme “passing / asking,” creating an aural identification of the question with the asking men that further wrenches it away from its initial, more tenuous, connection with Einstein. Whether the question shows men surprised at the exceptional person’s regard for humanity or expressing their own disregard for it, the genius emerges in the poem as a man who is concerned for a human race that fails to connect to or understand him. This reading counters the poem’s simultaneous proposition that the genius is distanced from others, perhaps even made cruel, by his specialness. The driving duality in the poem turns, significantly, on an act of speech that, through the pull of other linguistic forces like grammatical implication or musical similarity, is rendered in two mutually exclusive

ways. In this poem, the strategies of omission by which poetry approaches silence are subordinated to the connections language effects, both grammatically and musically. As in many of Niedecker's poems, language is not excised, it flourishes.

An attention to this countermovement aligned with speech and language has been nascent in Niedecker criticism since the early reviews of her books and has become more and more important in a contemporary understanding of her work. For a reader like Heller, even Niedecker's sparseness is evidence of a trust in the capacity of language: "she is a true keeper of the word-ward, repurifying its contents through scrupulous use, reawakening in her readers the sheer dignity of human utterance" ("Niedecker" 54).³⁴ In this formulation, Niedecker's silences are deployed in the service of language and improved human communication, revitalizing language rather than circumscribing or mistrusting it. This analysis is compelling in that it explains why Niedecker, who is clearly invested in language, would so often define poetic success as the omission or limitation of language.³⁵ But the claim that Niedecker's silences serve language does not account for the elements of her poetics that are far from silent, such as her frequent use of dialogue or overheard language, her dense patterning of repeating and contrasting sounds, and her sometimes elaborately etymological and punning word-play. These elements have encouraged critical attention to sound or voice.³⁶ Indeed, a shift in focus from silence to sound has been important in revising limited concepts of Niedecker's work: as Nicholls argues, attention to the dense materiality of her language and sound-play causes "the beguiling image of the poet as naïve nature-lover [to recede] in favour of the rigorous stylist testing the limits of language" (194). For many readers who credit Niedecker as a "rigorous stylist," the materiality and possibilities of language do not

replace silence as a motivating factor, rather they are held in tension with it.³⁷ Tension, of course, does not necessarily denote conflict, and critics like Skinner and Robertson characterize Niedecker's speech and silence as mutually supportive, creating a poetics of listening.³⁸ These approaches are fruitful because they take into account Niedecker's responsiveness to her aural environment and her delight in sound, while recasting her silences as active ethical response. In the end, however, the concept of Niedecker's poetics as a type of listening too neatly resolves the tension between sound and silence into cooperation and, thus, cannot fully account for the divergence that Niedecker saw in her work between silences and the effusiveness of language.

For Niedecker, the opposition between these two aesthetic attitudes constituted an interior battle because they were mutually exclusive modes that were both integral to her. In 1968, toward the end of her life, she wrote Corman about her struggle to find what she called a "new 'form'":

This strange winter of mine is passing away [. . .] the battle with myself as to the new form I feel but don't quite dare to use [. . .]. The new 'form' may materialize all unconsciously sometime but I've made a turnabout again toward the short poem, don't feel I shd. leave what's been a part of me all these years. (*Between* 155-56)

Her narrative of searching for a new way of writing alludes to a single season, one winter, spent exploring alternatives to the silences of the short poem and a speedy return to the condensed aesthetic that was "a part of [her]." But words like "battle," "feel," and "dare" indicate that conflict between the short poem and the—presumably longer, looser—new form runs deep. If Niedecker "feels" or intuits this style rather than observing, admiring,

or understanding, it is likely as much a part of her as her more customary condensed style. Further, if she doesn't "dare" to use the new form, the outcome of the battle has not been decided so much as deferred out of apprehension and a feeling of loyalty to the familiar. A letter written to Zukofsky four years earlier shows that the interior battle Niedecker describes to Corman was not a mere seasonal affliction but a clash marking Niedecker's entire career:

There is sumpn in me moving to a new place [. . .]. I'm trembling on the verge of something, a form of poetic thinking that depends maybe too much on readers' imagination, but we'll see. I don't know if it's called metaphysical or not, not necessarily, I guess, but anyhow this has been in me from the beginning and somehow it's got to come out. (*Correspondence* 343)

She is uncertain about what exactly she is "trembling on the verge of," calling it, vaguely, "sumpn" and "something" and qualifying her statements with "maybe," "we'll see," "I don't know," "not necessarily," and "I guess." But this uncertainty disappears in her summation of the situation. Her "anyhow" puts her uncertainty to one side in order to state definitively that this "sumpn in [her]" has "been in [her] from the beginning and somehow it's got to come out." Apparently, her accustomed forms have not adequately expressed this unknown other thing, but its eventual expression, in some novel way, is inevitable. Both the short poem, then, and the "sumpn" unexpressed by the short poem—perhaps the language excised in her process of omission—are "in" Niedecker, and she characterizes her poetry, particularly her relationship to form, as a response to their opposing pulls. In these letters, Niedecker describes her internal discord in very personal

terms, but this inner battle was also reflected in Niedecker's ambivalent literary allegiances. In 1966, she summarized her poetic career to Kenneth Cox:

I feel that without the Feb. '31 issue of *Poetry* edited by Louis Zukofsky I'd never have developed as a poet—I literally went to school to William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky and have had the good fortune to call the later my friend and mentor. Well -- there was an influence (from *transition* and from surrealists) that has always seemed to want to ride right along with the direct, hard, objective kind of writing. The subconscious and the presence of the folk, always there. ("Extracts" 36)

Niedecker's evaluation of her poetics recognizes several sources—Zukofsky and Williams, the hard and clear, *transition*, the subconscious, and the folk—and she divides these influences into two strains, most simply summarized as Objectivist and Surrealist, that correspond in important ways to her attraction for silences and language.³⁹

For both good and ill, Niedecker's relationship to the Objectivists, particularly Louis Zukofsky, has been central to her poetics and her reception. As we have seen, Niedecker viewed Zukofsky's 1931 special 'Objectivist' number of *Poetry* and her resulting correspondence with him as integral to her work: without them, she says, she "would never have developed as a poet." That is not to say, however, that she was a convert to Objectivism or acolyte of Zukofsky's. Rather, Niedecker responded strongly to Zukofsky's Objectivist program because the essays that he wrote to accompany the poems he chose for the February 1931 *Poetry* articulate elements already present in her own poetics. That issue of *Poetry* contains, along with poems chosen by Zukofsky, an editor's statement outlining concepts—under the label "Objectivist"—that Zukofsky feels

are markers of good poetry.⁴⁰ Chief among these are sincerity and objectification. In sincerity, he explains, “writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” (“Program” 273). Objectification, on the other hand, is the combination of moments of sincerity into a structured whole that achieves the “totality of perfect rest” and to which “the mind does not wish to add” (276). The poem, like other “discrete objects,” should be whole and entire unto itself. He also argues that objectification can be accomplished in a very small number of lines through “active literary omission,” which gives the reader “facts” and “information” by leaving things out. Zukofsky’s focus on craft and on the poem as a created thing echoes Niedecker’s own meticulous attention to detail in her poetry. In addition, his argument that a single word was in itself an “arrangement” and an object with poetic resonance may have appealed to Niedecker’s interest in etymology and her desire to preserve the particularities of language.⁴¹ While all of these elements of Objectivism resonate with Niedecker’s practice, she seems to have responded most intensely to the Objectivist respect for the integrity of objects—“the quality of things being together without violence to their individual intact natures”—and its resultant silences, particularly avoidance of the subjective (278).

The aesthetic of omission that Niedecker adopted, in part under the instruction of Zukofsky, was a response to the belief in the self-sufficiency of an external world resistant to the interpretation and manipulation of the poet, or “the object unrelated to palpable or predatory intent” (Zukofsky, “Objective” 16). She echoes the Objectivist tenet that the writer should “think with things as they exist” when she writes Zukofsky, “For me, when it comes to birds, animals and plants, I’d like the facts because the facts

are wonderful in themselves” (*Correspondence* 243). Along with Zukofsky and the other Objectivists, Niedecker espouses the idea that the poet should recognize and accurately record the poetic facts around her rather than impose her own thoughts or, worse, feelings upon them. Penberthy describes Niedecker’s adoption of Objectivist techniques as one of several “stratagems of avoidance”:

The role of the poet was always problematic for her, and one can read her poems as a succession of stratagems of avoidance. She rejected the notion of deciphering or interpreting experience. The afflatus of the poet, the attachment to ego, held no appeal. She preferred to attend to what already existed and to find the least intrusive means of reflecting it. (“Part One” 71)

Objectivism articulated a set of tactics that were important for Niedecker throughout her career as a poet, even when she found herself most in tension with them, because they offered her a useful model for a non-intrusive poetics that protected the natural facts from the encroachment of the subjective. If the poet’s job was to create a poem that allowed objects to retain their individual identity, she must, as far as possible, restrict the apparatus of poetic subjectivity—expressive, connective language—in an attempt to let the facts exist in and of themselves. While words, as objects themselves, need not be abandoned entirely, the poet’s voice was an instrument of predation and an indulgence to be excised by a responsible craftsman. Thus, Niedecker’s silences are part of a poetics that has a dual relationship to language, recognizing its boundaries while resisting its power to threaten the boundaries between the poetic self and other integral objects.

Zukofsky and Niedecker shared an interest in a poetics that resists the subjective, as his praise for her *New Goose* demonstrates: “She speaks and sings against all that’s

predatory in ‘Mother Goose.’ Whatever in it is still to be touched or felt she recreates for people today to feel and touch in her—their—own way” (qtd. in Penberthy, “Part One” 42). *New Goose* shows the most direct influence of Zukofsky, and Objectivist principles more generally, of all her published volumes. Many of the poems in the book are small, some as short as a single line, and they almost always avoid interpretation of events, eliding context and commentary.⁴² A poem like “A monster owl” makes explicit the Objectivist-inspired ethics that underlie the book’s aesthetics:

A monster owl
out on the fence
flew away. What
is it the sign
of? The sign of
an owl. (103)

The poem is, in a sense, a manifesto for a poetic attitude that respects the “individual intact nature” of its objects. Unlike, for example, an Imagist poem, which would most likely juxtapose the owl to another image or evoke transcendent realization reached through observation of the owl, Niedecker’s poem makes the owl into a self-referential sign. In this way, she recognizes and short-circuits the subjectivity of a poetics that is concerned with using objects as signs of other things, thus doing violence to their natures. This poem also offers insight into Niedecker’s participation in Objectivism because of the role Zukofsky’s editorial advice played in its composition. A 1938 letter from Niedecker to Zukofsky allows us to reconstruct her original version of the poem and compare it to the final version, in which she accepted changes proposed by Zukofsky. Penberthy

reproduces this original version, which includes several words deleted from the final version, in the notes to her edition of the poems:

A monster owl
Out on the fence
flew away. Now
what's it the sign
of. The sign of
an owl I guess. (375)

The most significant change from this version to the final is the deletion of the phrase “I guess.” While this draft of the poem still argues that the owl is self-sufficient and casts doubt on poetry that makes objects into signs for other things, it also acknowledges the mind that perceives the owl as a sign of itself and suggests that this perception is not infallible. Rather than making a statement about the owl’s unavailability to a sign-making poetics that is a closed system “to which the mind does not wish to add,” this version of the poem dramatizes the workings of the mind that guesses the owl to be self-sufficient. Likewise, the word “now” situates the poem more firmly in time, making it the record of a mind’s immediate response to the owl’s flight and implying the possibility of change in the owl’s status as sign. It also implies a colloquial interlocutor to whom the musing question, “Now what’s it the sign of,” is posed. All of these elements make the owl’s independent status contingent on an observer and perhaps even the subject of conversation. But, in accordance with Zukosfky’s advice, Niedecker deleted “I guess” and “Now,” eliminating language that acknowledges the owl’s relationship to the speaker, removing the speaker entirely. Her compliance demonstrates not simply a wish

to please Zukofsky but the development of a technique of omission that she would continue to use consistently to separate the object of the poem from the subjectivity of the poet.⁴³

However, despite Niedecker's affinity for the anti-predatory techniques of Objectivism—particularly its use of silences to fend off the incursions of language—she also sought what she frequently called “something more.” In an early letter to Mary Hoard, she points out a deficiency in the Objectivist mode and explicitly names Surrealism as, at the very least, a useful supplement to Objectivism:

I had spoken to Phyllis I think about Louis Zukofsky and the Objectivist Movement [. . .]. Objects, objects. Why are people, artists above all, so terrifically afraid of *themselves*? Thank god for the Surrealist tendency running side by side with Objectivism and toward the monologue tongue. It is my conviction that no one yet, has talked to himself. And until then, what is art? (“Local Letters” 87)

In its fixation on objects and its scrupulous avoidance of the subjective, Objectivism is not able to accomplish what, for Niedecker, is essential to art: interiority and self-exploration, particularly through language, or talking. Alternatively (“Thank god”), Surrealism offers Niedecker strategies that do not jibe with Objectivist principles and prejudices. In fact, due in part to efforts to draw Niedecker criticism out of the shadow of Zukofsky and bolstered by the increased availability of Niedecker's letters and early poems, recent criticism has made abundantly clear that Niedecker was greatly influenced by Surrealist ideas, both as a beginning poet and much later in her career.⁴⁴ If Niedecker was frustrated by poets who regarded objects more closely than they did themselves, she could turn to Surrealist proclamations like “Pure poetry is a lyrical absolute that seeks an

a priori reality within ourselves alone” for affirmation of her tendency to look inward. If she felt Objectivist condensation to be restrictive or unequal to the task of monologue, she could turn to Surrealist litanies of words and the belief that the “literary creator” “has the right to use words of his own fashioning and to disregard existing grammatical and syntactical laws” in order to achieve a “rhythmic ‘hallucination of the word’” capable of expressing an interior reality that eludes objective knowledge (qtd. in Penberthy, “Part One” 26).⁴⁵ The Surrealist aesthetic promised tools for looking inward that were stringently denied by an Objectivist focus on externality, which clearly stymied Niedecker despite enabling her own resistance to the predatory subjective.

Surrealist illogic and linguistic expressiveness are as important to Niedecker’s poetics as Objectivist precision and refusal of subjectivity. While Objectivist silences appealed to Niedecker as a discipline, the free play of language in the Surrealist aesthetic appealed to her aspiration to push poetry to represent nonrational mental states. The importance of this countercurrent is perhaps most evident in Niedecker’s early letters to Harriet Monroe, in which she was uncharacteristically willing to articulate her poetics. She sent poems to Monroe at *Poetry* accompanied by an explanation of her “theory” of poetry, which, despite her recent and eager correspondence with Zukofsky, takes a decidedly different direction from his pronouncements:

Poetry to have greatest reason for existing must be illogical. An idea, a rumination such as more or less constantly roams the mind, meets external object or situation with quite illogical association. Memory, if made up of objects at all, retains those objects which were at the time of first perception and still are the most strikingly unrecognizable. (*Correspondence* 21)⁴⁶

As in her letter to Hoard, Niedecker here expresses doubts about the primacy of objects to poetry. Instead, she is interested in poetry that explores the illogic of the *relationship* between mind and object, particularly the meeting between the mind and the unrecognizable objects of memory. The play of language can create illogical associations between objects, which mimics the working of the mind. This “reason for existing” departs from Objectivist notions in two significant ways: it makes the poet’s illogical mind, rather than her intellect, central to poetic composition, and it blurs the boundaries between poet and object, removing objects from their contexts and appropriating them as emblems of a private logic.⁴⁷ The relationship between poetry and the landscape of the mind becomes more explicit in the next letter that Niedecker sent Monroe, this time explaining how her experiments with language in a particular poem (CANVAS) represented distinct levels of consciousness:

for me at least, certain words of a sentence,—prepositions, connectives, pronouns—belong up towards full consciousness, while strange and unused words appear only in subconscious. (It also means that for me at least this procedure is directly opposite to that of the consistent and prolonged dream—in dream the simple and familiar words like prepositions, connectives, etc . . . are not absent, in fact, noticeably present to show illogical absurdity, discontinuity, parody of sanity). (qtd. in Penberthy, “Part One” 27)

While she was responsive to Objectivism’s suspicion of the subjective, Niedecker’s poetic interest went beyond objects to include the relationship between objects and the perceiving mind, and her explanation of the “planes of consciousness” shows that, for Niedecker, the mind—“the constrictions appearing before falling off to sleep at night” as

well as the “deep consciousness,” “monologue,” and the “social banal”—was linguistic.⁴⁸ Surrealism was attractive to Niedecker because it affirmed her desire for a poetry capable of expressing the illogic of the subconscious and because it allowed for a more expansive use of language by which to explore that interiority. In a sense, Niedecker’s Surrealism extended the reach of her Objectivist tendencies, making the mind another thing that the poet could “think with.” Penberthy points out that Niedecker’s attention to her mind was not an indulgence in interpretive or lyrical subjectivity; instead, “her attention to the transitional states of her own mind was exhaustive and exact [. . .]. She had no interest in self-regarding embellishment of these psychic depths, only in disciplined documentation which words [. . .] alone could accomplish” (“Part One” 30). From Objectivism, she took “disciplined documentation,” but from Surrealism she took the authorization to make the inner workings of her own mind her subject and flowing, illogical language her tool for relating what she called the “folk tales of the mind” (“Local Letters” 88).

The influence of Surrealist ideas, particularly interest in the subconscious and flowing, subliminal language as a means of accessing the subconscious, is most evident in Niedecker’s early poems. However, as Niedecker herself indicates in numerous letters, this strain was a constant presence “right along side” her better-known Objectivism. A relatively late poem, “I married,” evidences the tenacity of Niedecker’s interest in interiority and her continued use, albeit highly controlled, of Surrealist-influenced techniques that she aligned with a more freewheeling relationship to both language and the relationships it creates:

I married
in the world’s black night

for warmth

if not repose.

At the close—

someone.

I hid with him

from the long range guns.

We lay leg

in the cupboard, head

in closet.

A slit of light

at no bird dawn—

Untaught

I thought

he drank

too much.

I say

I married

and lived unburied.

I thought— (228)⁴⁹

The poem narrates the speaker's marriage and, though it cites warmth as the purpose of the union, the tone is cool and the images imply that the wedding is a desperate, final play for companionship, "at the close— / someone," that does not yield the hoped-for

results. “At the close” hints that the participants seek solace late in life or perhaps that they are uniting for comfort in the face of a more general cataclysm, signaled by the “long range guns” and “no bird dawn.” But, instead of warmth, by the final lines, the speaker’s life is marked by death: she lives “unburied” and inarticulate, unable or unwilling to finish the thought that the last phrase leaves suspended. In addition to its narrative qualities, the most obvious difference between this poem and a poem like “A monster owl” is its emphasis on a speaker. Where “A monster owl” elided the “I” who made guesses of what the owl might be a sign, this poem begins firmly in the province of individual experience with “I married.” As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the speaker is not simply reporting on objectively observable events but on her own private experience and interpretation of those events with reminders like “I say” and “I thought.” And, while “the world’s black night” could refer to a dark time in history or associate old age with winter or war, the poem turns inward with lines like: “We lay leg / in the cupboard, head / in closet.” Of course, these lines could refer to external circumstances as well; they may be an exaggeration of real, or at least possible, events, or a folk-inspired description of living in a cramped space, but they also evoke a Surrealist aesthetic of disembodied parts, disturbing juxtaposition, and dreamlike instability of boundaries.⁵⁰ The poem uses objects to furnish an interior mental space, rather than invoking them as “wonderful in themselves.”

The speaker does not maintain a careful distance from the poem’s objects: instead, she is free to use language to manipulate and infiltrate those objects in the interest of expressive images. Neither the objects nor the people who appear in the poem remain intact. The boundaries of cupboard and closet are penetrated by the speaker and

her spouse, who “lay” in them. Further, the ambiguity of the verb “lay” emphasizes the dissolution of the boundaries around and between objects in the poem. The verb is primarily intransitive, making “leg in the cupboard” an adverbial phrase describing how “we lay,” but it may also be read transitively: the speaker and her spouse laid a leg in the cupboard and laid a head in the closet. In contrast to the scrupulous boundaries between speaker and thing in some of her other poems, this freedom is almost violent. Throughout the poem this disarming, even threatening, intimacy belies the Objectivist regard for “the quality of objects being together without damage to their individual intact natures.” One is left imagining a night-time wedding in which the speaker gains warmth from her partner. This permeability is reiterated as the bodies of the speaker and her spouse seem to lose their individuality, crammed in the cupboard as disembodied parts converted to disturbing domestic objects—intimating an underlying danger to the folkloric leveling of hierarchies between animate and inanimate things. Too, because language is Niedecker’s tool for accessing and communicating the subconscious or interior, the poem is much longer than many of her others, more willing to use ordinary connector words and clearly narrative sentences that establish relationships between objects and people. The only concession she makes to her usual highly condensed style is to delete the article before “closet,” but all of her other sentences retain the kind of language that she would generally omit. The poem extends the reach of language rather than limiting it, exercising a poet’s subjective control over the objects in the poem. It plays out the logic of marriage, enacting the erasure of identity required by a ritual in which two become one.⁵¹ Though this makes certain figures for relationship possible, such as the conversion of people into domestic objects, ultimately it appears to do harm to the speaker.

Certainly, the choice to establish these kinds of relationships between objects and between subject and object was not one Niedecker made easily. She included this poem in a letter to Cid Corman, where her comments after the poem make clear that she saw it as a departure from her more customary style: “Just a few minutes ago rather spontaneous from a folk conversation and I suppose some of my own dark forebodings. We shd. try to be true to our subconscious? Sorry it is another *I* poem. My god, I must try to get away from that” (*Between* 132). This description of the circumstances of the poem’s composition—emphasizing its spontaneity and its origins in both the “folk” and in the inner workings of her own mind—at first appears to be an affirmation of such techniques. However, the question mark introduces an element of uncertainty that immediately becomes outright repudiation of the focus on the self. Niedecker begins with a statement very much in line with Surrealist principles—“We should try to be true to our subconscious”—but, by the time she reaches the end of the sentence, she is compelled to convert it into a question. Clearly, the problem with being true to one’s subconscious is that it invites the “I” poem, a tendency that Niedecker felt as something she should avoid.

While Niedecker saw Surrealist linguistic freedom (which she connected to both the subconscious and the folk) as a means of correcting Objectivism’s inability to address interiority, she more frequently described Objectivism’s silences as a necessary corrective to a tendency toward effusiveness and self-indulgence. In this light, her statement about “developing” as a poet when she “went to school” to Zukofsky may be significant as an indicator of the role Objectivism played as a learned form, signifying maturity. Objectivism was part of growing up for Niedecker; it required effort and education to steer herself away from an aesthetic that she may have identified with her

more natural, untrained, apprentice self. She often characterized Objectivist condensation and elision of referents as good behavior and considered copious language, particularly personal language, as a surrender to temptation or lack of discipline. This model of conflict echoes an almost religious mortification of the flesh to save the spirit, particularly when she writes to Zukofsky, the preceptor of the Objectivist school. In her comments to him on sending some new poems to the *Quarterly Review of Literature*, stylistic decisions take on spiritual significance, however tongue-in-cheek: “Be nice surprise to youz when you see ’em in print. I destroyed a lot of lines—I’m a saint” (*Correspondence* 300). Omission is saintly and excess of language is sin as we also see in her description of writing “right out of life” as a “pitfall” (271). Poetic craft, particularly omission and condensation, is a devotional practice that shelters the initiate from her baser instincts. Surrealist interiority may allow Niedecker to turn her poetic gaze inward, but it is also fraught with danger, particularly the lure of excess and the indulgence of the poetic ego. Objectivist hardness and concision helped her to resist those enticements and maintain the ethical stance that was so important to her, the regard for the autonomy of the poetic object.

Niedecker, was, by and large, very well behaved in this respect. But, even when reporting on her own saintly omissions to Zukofsky, her ambivalence toward those omissions is apparent: she tells him, “I *destroyed* a lot of lines,” not, “I salvaged” or “rescued” or “healed,” any of which would put her more in line with Objectivist ideals of omission in the service of perfection, totality, or perfect rest. She professes a faithfulness to Objectivist practice, but she also has moments of rebellion. She writes to Zukofsky quoting a letter of rejection from the editor of the *Quarterly Review of Literature*: “Weiss

returns The Element Mother: ‘Perhaps you have cut away too much from these, at least we miss in them some of the cross-grained snazzy detail we enjoy in your work’” (*Correspondence* 233). Her only comment is “!,” but one wonders why she quoted this response to Zukofsky, arbiter of condensation. It may demonstrate her devotion to the correctness of condensation and remind Zukosfky of what she has sacrificed to it, but it also demonstrates, with the corroboration of Weiss, that her work has something that exceeds and even runs counter to the aesthetics Zukofsky advocates. In a letter to Kenneth Cox, she similarly opposes a “solid,” mature style to effusiveness. But, perhaps feeling more free with him to question Objectivist correctness, she admits an attraction and affinity for “flowing” language and “abstraction”: “these French [poets], you know, get something out of abstractions that sometimes I do and that gives me an idea that poetry should be much more mysterious and flowing than any style we more solid citizens have allowed” (“Extracts” 37). Niedecker here identifies with the “solid citizens” who have disallowed a “mysterious and flowing” style, but she also sees something of herself in poetry that gets “something out of abstractions.”

Despite the usefulness of some Objectivist principles, then, her relationship with the silences of Objectivist condensation was complex and, finally, undecided, in part because of the sacrifices it required. Her comments to Zukofsky about destroying lines, notwithstanding their just-joshing tone, reveal a sense of loss. To be a solid citizen she must excise a “mystery” and “flow” to which she is clearly drawn, and, even if Niedecker herself did not directly connect these sacrificed elements to the feminine, Objectivist rhetoric often did. Objectivism, like the Poundian modernism with which it was in close dialogue, authorizes itself as rigorously intellectual and morally and artistically controlled

by opposition to a degraded emotional permissiveness and excess, proposing itself as a needed corrective to a feminized laxity.⁵² The feminization of linguistic excess is part of what Gail Kern Paster calls the “familiar discourse about women’s bodies”:

this discourse [. . .] inscribes women as leaky vessels by isolating one element of the female body’s material expressiveness—its production of fluids—as excessive, hence either disturbing or shameful. It also characteristically links this liquid expressiveness to excessive verbal fluency. (44)

Carl Rakosi’s description of why he found the Objectivist label fitting for his work relies on a similar logic, though it submerges its gendering: “[Objectivism] conveyed a meaning which was, in fact, my objective: to present objects in their most essential reality and to make of each poem an object, meaning by this the opposite of vagueness, loose bowels, and streaming, sometimes screaming, consciousness” (107). In this formulation, the poem should be bounded, specific, and discrete—qualities associated with a masculine principle—and not subject to the indignities of permeability, flow, or emotional subjectivity—considered feminine. It may be that Niedecker’s dreamlike aesthetic of linguistic free association, which she sometimes considered an unruly personal tendency, is in part a rebellious response to the masculinist implications of Objectivist control.

This is not to say, though, that when Niedecker wrote in a condensed style it was because she internalized anti-feminine values. Niedecker’s poetics cannot be simplified into a binary opposition, with Objectivist silences representing masculinist oppression and Surrealist linguistic freedom standing for feminist resistance. Niedecker often expressed a personal distaste for what she saw as excessive or even vulgar, which she too

connected to uncontrolled bodies. When she writes Corman about the “west coast ferment,” this aversion colors her admiration: “I’m buzzing with a new look at the west coast ferment—i.e. Allen Ginsberg’s poems, notably *Kaddish*. It still moves me but why must the show of vitality come by way of misery, dirt, sexiness. No better poetry than the quiet” (*Between* 101). She opposes the “sexiness” of Ginsberg to a “quiet” that she did not feel should be sacrificed for a “show of vitality.” Niedecker’s search for what Objectivism didn’t give her—the ability to look inward, the possibility of flow and vigor—was coupled with a resistance to “misery, dirt, sexiness” and a personally ingrained desire to avoid excess and indulgence.⁵³ While we may question how and why this was ingrained in Niedecker and even posit that it is a result of patriarchal cultural models, for Niedecker, excess, particularly sexual or bodily excess, was a failure of discipline more than a revolutionary act. Moreover, the parts of Objectivism that inspired Niedecker, its quiet aesthetic of omission and its devotion to the facts, “wonderful in themselves,” could also be a form of feminist resistance. If women have been a poetic object par excellence, explored by male subjectivity, then Objectivist refusal to transgress the boundaries of objects and a general insistence on the limits of the poetic subject could be tools of a feminist poetics that seeks to represent without appropriating. This is singularly useful for a woman writer who is suspicious of personal revelation. Neither Objectivist nor Surrealist strategies are definitively feminist, but they complement and contradict each other in Niedecker’s work in ways that suggest a gendered aspect to Niedecker’s complex negotiations with form.⁵⁴ Niedecker’s affinities for particular elements of both Objectivism and Surrealism may share nascent or unacknowledged feminist motives, but the achievement of a poetry that can both expand the range of a

female poetic subject and maintain the boundaries of a feminized poetic object is marked by conflict.

We have seen that the value of silence for Niedecker is constantly in tension with her belief in the usefulness and beauty of language, and her wrestling with both Objectivism and Surrealism plays out a related friction. Objectivism provides strategies for the doing of silence in her poetry that safeguards objects from poetic appropriation, while Surrealism provides strategies for allowing language free play to create connections among objects and between poet and objects. The mystery and flow created by Surrealist juxtaposition and dream illogic help Niedecker approach an ideal of unmediated access to the unrestrained mind, while Objectivist condensation prevents the mistreatment of memory's unrecognizable objects as mere pretexts for self-indulgent subjectivism. Objectivist insistence on autonomy is a tool for feminist resistance to the predatory poetic subject, while Surrealist "streaming" allows the use of feminized modes of thought and expression connected to a repressed female embodiment. It is no wonder, then, that so many of Niedecker's letters reveal uncertainty, doubt, and indecision. In her poems, she often chooses to follow one strain or another, tending now toward the reserved now toward the talkative, now toward condensation now toward expansiveness, now toward objective observation and now toward dreamlike imagery. But, again, this was not a choice that Niedecker could make definitively. Thus, her experiments with form show her working out a means of simultaneously achieving a protective, respectful silence aligned with Objectivism and a flowing, expansive expressiveness aligned with Surrealism rather than merely oscillating between the two.

Even in *New Goose*, arguably Niedecker's most Objectivist volume, her poems combine linguistic restraint and permissiveness. For example, "Don't shoot the rail" appears, on one level, to conform to an Objectivist aesthetic. In fact, it opens with two separate exclamations enjoining a wild-eyed addressee to leave others—a bird and a man—alone:

Don't shoot the rail!
Let your grandfather rest!
Tho he sees your wild eyes
he's falling asleep,
his long-billed pipe
on his red-brown vest. (92)

The poem's "you" appears determined to disturb the peace of both the rail (short for sora rail) and the grandfather, and the speaker seeks to prevent the shooting that would wound or kill the bird and disrupt the grandfather's sleep. The poem's primary objects—"you," bird, and man—are presented as separate beings on the verge of being thrown into relation with each other. The violence that the "you" intends would force unwanted—and, in the case of the rail, potentially deadly—interaction between formerly isolated objects. Instead, the speaker asks the "you" to refrain, leaving both rail and grandfather to sleep undisturbed. Thus, by intervening against violence on the level of narrative, the speaker dramatizes the isolation of individual "intact natures" that Niedecker considers central to her poetics.

However, even as it demands restraint of its addressee, the poem itself performs its own invasions, overlapping its subjects to create a composite grandfather-rail figure.

The descriptive language applied to the grandfather makes him bird-like. The image of a man nodding off with a long pipe tucked against his vest calls to mind a sleeping bird and the color of the vest, red-brown, evokes its plumage. In fact, the upper back feathers of sora rails are generally a dark, reddish brown. These descriptors imply that “Don’t shoot the rail!” and “Let your grandfather rest!” are not separate injunctions but refer to the same action. The speaker may be arguing that the shooter should not harm the rail because it should be respected as grandfather—a relative and an elder. While this regard furthers the poem’s regard for the boundaries of natural objects, it also endangers such boundaries by making its primary figure simultaneously animal and human. This kind of figuration owes more to a dreamlike Surrealist-inspired linguistic freedom, where logical distinctions give way to impressionistic merging, than it does to Objectivist precision.

The poem formally reflects its ambivalence toward maintaining boundaries among objects, both countermanding and reinforcing the speaker’s demand that rail and grandfather be left in peace. The opening lines establish a grammatical ambiguity that unsettles the following description. The meaning of the pronouns in the final four lines depends entirely on whether “grandfather” is another name for the rail or a second subject. This doubt is unresolvable because the words denote a human subject while imagery and sound patterns merge human and animal. For instance, though the word “long-billed” is obviously bird imagery, the grammar of the phrase makes the pipe bird-like rather than the man. The image associates bird and grandfather, but it does so obliquely, scrupulously refusing to directly attribute an avian identity to the human subject. Similarly, the music of the final line identifies man with rail, but its literal meaning subverts that identification. The strong, repetitive consonants in “red-brown”

create an echo that carries over so that it is easy to hear the poem's final words as "breast," a misapprehension that lends itself to reading the sora rail and the grandfather as one and the same. Conversely, the actual word, "vest," does the opposite, settling on a decidedly human identity for the figure by describing his clothing. Thus, the poem identifies its objects—blurring bird and grandfather into a single subject, "he"—while simultaneously maintaining the distinction between the two subjects through precise, objective language that refuses the metaphorical conflation of human and animal. Niedecker doesn't choose between Surrealist and Objectivist modes but plays them against each other to create fruitful metaphorical juxtapositions while limiting the power of language to manipulate objects in this way.

While discussions of the rhetorical, philosophical, and aesthetic influences of literary movements like Objectivism and Surrealism can help clarify the significance of Niedecker's allegiances, these kinds of issues were important for Niedecker primarily insofar as they helped her delineate and answer questions about how poetry should be made. In some ways, attention to theoretical motivations interferes with poetry. She writes Corman about her frustration with such distractions: "Been carrying on a correspondence with Eshleman. Mostly at his behest—technique, why I don't write differently, why he doesn't. I'm no good at it—I write from notes, which seem to always stay notes, grocery lists. I throw up my arms and scream: Write—cut it and just write poems" (*Between* 153). She argues against too much exploration of reasons and philosophies in favor of simply getting the writing done.⁵⁵ But, while she avoided critical discussions, Niedecker was often willing to talk about her poetic practice. Niedecker was an experimentalist, always refining her methods, seeking to extend the reach of her

poems. Indeed, while her discussions of craft are frequently intellectual, sometimes even esoteric, she also refers to her poetic experimentation as an emotional and physical need: “I’ve become lately very—*painfully*—interested in poetry [. . .]. If I don’t get over into the strange and new thing I feel I’ll bust” (149). It is this experimental necessity, the search for a poetry that will get her “over into” the new, that marks her participation in programmatic literary movements. Even when she appears to be declaring herself an Objectivist or nominating Surrealism as an important countercurrent in her work, she is generally not discussing literary philosophies or aesthetic epistemologies as such. Literary currents are compelling for her when they provide strategies for writing, and her involvement in schools of literary thought is, at bottom, driven by questions about how words can and should be put together to make a poem. Particularly, she is interested in discovering how to avoid subjective excesses and respect the particularity of objects while still being able to express the illogical relationships of the mind with a flowing and lively language.

Her response to language—particularly the sentence—makes clear that this conflict is rooted in craft. In the midst of her search for “something else,” she articulates an important metaphor for her poetics: “You [Corman] and Jonathan Williams have thrown off the shackles of the sentence and the wide melody. For me the sentence lies in wait—all those prepositions and connectives—like an early spring flood. A good thing my follow-up feeling has always been condense, condense” (*Between* 33). Niedecker is much better known for her “follow-up feeling” of “condense, condense” than for her use of the relational structure of the sentence. Thus, it may seem that Objectivist practice is largely a successful corrective to the excesses of the sentence. But her diction indicates a

more complex situation: she refers to the sentence as both a shackle and a flood. For Corman and Williams—male writers who favored a spare, condensed, haiku-inspired poetry—the sentence is a constraint that can be thrown off by a triumphant will. Niedecker, too, responds to the sentence as a shackle, but—as a woman writer working within and against the lingering legacy of the conversational and emotional “poetess”—the sentence is also a spring flood, a compelling figure of undeniable energy even in its destructiveness.⁵⁶ Niedecker’s mixed metaphor is a measure of her uncertainty about language itself as represented by the sentence, which is intimately tied to rhetoric and meaning by its grammatical and narrative qualities. Niedecker focuses in particular on “all those prepositions and connectives” because they represent the meaning-making capacity by which discrete objects are put into relationship with each other and about which she is conflicted.

Language’s ability to penetrate the individual nature of objects, as embodied in prepositions and connectives, constitutes a constraint. This limitation is frequently overcome in Niedecker’s writing and in the poetry she admires simply by omitting prepositions and connectives, which describe and, in a sense, dictate how the objects that appear in a sentence interact. Prepositions and connectives are tools of the predatory and controlling consciousness, forcing objects out of themselves by requiring certain kinds of interactions between them. Thus, for Objectivist writers to condense language, particularly by omitting connectives, allows objects to remain self-contained. Just as eliding the subject—cutting the “I” from a poem—prevents predation, removing relational language leaves objects alone with themselves and intact. As Niedecker explains in the letter to Harriet Monroe above, “prepositions and connectives belong

upwards toward full consciousness,” and, as such, they are the instruments of an organizing mind. Inasmuch as she seeks a poetry that deemphasizes or undermines the power of poetic subjectivity over its objects, Niedecker silences the elements of language that clearly evidence that power.⁵⁷

But, for Niedecker, the sentence is also a flood, which points to both the danger and appeal of its excesses. The flood is not an incidental metaphor for Niedecker.⁵⁸ Floods were a constant reality of her life on Black Hawk Island, and they figure prominently in both her letters and poems. The destructiveness of flood waters is obvious, and Niedecker captures this hazard with detailed immediacy: “Torrential rains, water rising at Fort, my husband’s cucumbers & squash swimming. Depend on nothing” (*Between* 41). That final sentence summarizes numerous letters describing the devastation of human efforts—foundations flooded, whole houses unredeemable from the water—and points to a frequent theme in Niedecker’s poems as well.⁵⁹ But Niedecker also captures the less obvious importance of flooding to *life* on the river. She spent most of her life on the flood-prone banks of the Rock River and Lake Koshkonog, and she sees flooding as natural: “We have frogs here now and sora rails giggle. *No* flood this spring, very unnatural” (*Between* 39). While the spring floods may lie in wait to wash away one’s cucumbers, they also represent the return of life and growth after the stagnation of winter. When the floods recede, they leave fertile soil along with ruined houses. The fecundity of the flood appears in Niedecker’s poems as “my rich friend silt” and a “source / to sustain her— / a weedy speech, / a marshy retainer (168, 170). One short poem uses a single image to suggest both a deathly bloat and a bloom carried on the water:

White
among the green pads—
which
a dead fish
or a lily? (184)

Water, especially flooding, represents for Niedecker both deadly excess and teeming life. Thus, if prepositions and connectives are a flood, they are to be fought back but are also an inevitable and irresistible force of life.

Prepositions and connectives are the locus of Niedecker's anxiety about and attraction to the overwhelming qualities of language because they allow objects to move around, into, above, and below each other, mixing them all into a wash of relationship. Niedecker's characterization of the prepositional or connective properties of language as a destructive flood in some ways reiterates the attitudes that make it a shackle. The connections that language makes are still oppressive and something the poet should resist. But where Niedecker figures Corman and Williams's resistance to the sentence as a *fait accompli* ("have cast off"), her own process of dealing with connectives is portrayed in the present tense. The sentence "lies in wait" for her, and her success in confronting it is uncertain. Moreover, her phrasing makes prepositions and connectives sound almost as much a temptation as a threat, echoing her frequent characterization of condensation as saintly. In addition to the danger it conveys, the figure of language as flood accords language its own activity and identity. If language overflows Niedecker's poems, then Niedecker is not a sinner but a beleaguered believer. Niedecker as poet is distanced from the act of excess, a victim of the flood, allowing her poems to revel in

language without necessarily granting power over objects to the poet or speaker. While omission and condensation prevent the subject from using language to invade the object, language may also overpower the subject, thwarting its control over language *as* object. Niedecker's use of flood imagery reverses the agency that so worries her in writing too heavily dependent on the subjective. In this formulation, it is not the speaker of the poem who uses language to penetrate other individual natures. Rather, insofar as the flood represents the richness and danger of language, it overpowers the poet, dissolving her intact nature along with all else in its path. In this way, the poet is able to surrender to language without becoming the predatory subject. Instead, she becomes an object among objects. If the prepositional and connective property of language is a flood, it is not only a dangerous excess to be held at bay by human efforts but an unstoppable, superhuman force that both revives and overwhelms.

The primary effect of the engulfing sentence, particularly its prepositions and connectives, is to establish relationships without implicating the poet in breaching the integrity of the poem's objects. When the usual distinctions—between river and shore, house and yard, even human and animal—are washed away, surprising, rewarding relationships may be formed. This is important to Niedecker because relationship is a means of accessing interiority and understanding how the mind encounters objects.⁶⁰ In fact, she makes relationship as such the language of the subconscious. As we have seen, years before she writes Corman about her difficult relationship to the sentence, Niedecker explicitly names “prepositions and connectives,” the very language functions she aligns with the sentence's dangerous flow, essential to dream language: “in dream the simple and familiar words like prepositions, connectives, etc . . . are not absent, in fact,

noticeably present to show illogical absurdity, discontinuity, parody of sanity” (*Correspondence* 27). The freedom of relationship that marks the interior landscape of the mind is a kind of flood, a metaphor echoed by our term “stream of consciousness” and Rakosi’s disgust at the “streaming, sometimes screaming, consciousness.” Niedecker is drawn to a poetry that can access mysterious interior relationships, and—as language particularly equipped to create “illogical absurdity” and surprising shifting associations among objects—prepositions and connectives are attractive to her. It is possible that Niedecker aligned this simultaneously destructive and enlivening connectivity with a feminine principle. In particular, Niedecker associated nature, particularly water, with her mother and her mother’s life (140).⁶¹ Such an identification corresponds to Objectivist and modernist suspicion of excess or overflow as feminine, and Niedecker’s understanding of relational language may be shaped by a conflicted response to the feminine. Certainly, what seems to enthrall and repulse Niedecker about the flood is its menacing and empowering ability to overrun boundaries. It is clear that when language overflows its bounds, bounds that are strictly set by Niedecker in her condensed mode, she feels the result as disordered and uncontrolled. But her feelings about that disorder are, again, divided. She writes to Corman about a sought-after change in her poetics, an anticipated migration into a new form: “It’s probably only that old *dream* thing that threatens to mess things up but never really does—still, this time when it comes it might” (*Between* 149). She pulls back somewhat from the idea that what she’s feeling is entirely new by recalling her youthful fascination with dreams. And when she recalls “that old *dream* thing” she does not decry the mess it makes but rather appears to regret its failure to “mess things up” as much as it promises. She is hopeful about the possibility of

impending mess though fearful of it.⁶² The connective or relational power of the sentence is both shackle and flood—and as flood it is both vital flow and dangerous overflow.

This makes Niedecker's use of prepositions and connectives particularly significant to her conflicted relationship between speech and silence. On one hand, silencing the connections made by the sentence allows her to throw off restrictive, determinate meaning that compromises the singular identity of objects. On the other, prepositions and connectives, particularly those that establish illogical or overflowing connections, extend the reach of language into the subconscious mind as well as attributing an agency to language itself. Her metaphor for the sentence is mixed because "prepositions and connectives" belong to "full consciousness," something to be cast off, a predation to be resisted; but they also belong to the language of dream, a fluid interaction between mind and mysterious, unrecognizable objects that approaches the ideal art of talking to oneself. Niedecker uses prepositions to work out her desire to throw off the shackle of the sentence—that is, its restriction of an object's agency—without losing the vigor of its flood—its overwhelming of the subject's agency and access to interiority through uncontrollably proliferating relationships.⁶³ She does this by placing prepositions and other connectives ambiguously, undermining the positions they establish. Despite her statement to Corman that her response to the inundations of the sentence has been to condense, her poems are often rife with connectives, which is all the more surprising given how short they generally are. Like many of her poems, "She was a mourner too" uses relational language, particularly prepositions, freely. The elusiveness of the connections made in this poem shelters the integrity of objects from incursions by the subject while creating shifting relationships between identities:

She was a mourner too. Now she's gone
to the earth's core,
with organ notes, buried by church that buries the live,
intoning: That torture called by men delight
touches her no more.

So calm she looked, half smiling: Heaven?

No, restore

my matter, never free from motion,
to the soil's roar. (111)

The poem records the speaker's thoughts upon the burial of another, and the general sense is that the speaker is uninspired by the church's way of understanding death and its aftermath. Rather than the transport of the soul beyond earthly torture (or delight), she posits, or at least asks for, a return to the earth, a dismissal of the body rather than a transcendence of the soul. What is at stake in the poem, then, echoes what is at stake in Niedecker's poetics: individual intact nature and access to something outside ordinary consciousness. The first preposition we encounter in the poem begins line two, "to the Earth's core." The duality of this preposition points up a crucial problem in the poem. We could read that line to say that the dead woman, as a singular self, has gone to the Earth's core. If she can be located in the core of the Earth, she is still identifiable as herself. This first meaning echoes a common religious notion of the persistence of identity after death. However, one could also read that line to mean that the absence of the dead woman is so complete as to extend to the Earth's core. This reading reinforces the dissolution of identity described in the final lines of the poem. In addition to allowing contradictory

readings, the undecidability of the preposition formally enacts a dual response to language. It preserves the singularity of objects, here “she” and “the earth’s core,” which slip the shackle of the relationship imposed by language’s connectives. But it simultaneously intimates a mysterious connection, illogical and undecideable. This impulse is so powerful that the “she” is diffused, untouchable, and swallowed into the soil. The poem’s rhymes also reinforce its indecision about the resolving of the singular into a shared identity. The full rhyme—“core,” “more,” “restore,” and “roar”—and the off rhymes—“live” and “delight,” “Heaven” and “motion”—create shared aural identities, while the only end word without a rhyming partner, “gone,” resists that similarity. The structure of the poem performs a simultaneous preservation of the singular soul and the fusion of that soul with something larger.

At every turn, connective language, particularly prepositions, accomplishes this through uncertainty. The chief figure of the poem, “she,” is defined primarily by relation and preposition—“to the Earth’s core,” “with organ notes,” “by Church”—but these relationships are indeterminate: have the “she” and the “organ notes” gone together to the earth’s core or is she buried with organ notes? If she is buried with organ notes, does that mean that her burial is accompanied by organ notes or that she and the music are buried together? Does the church bury her, or is she buried near the church? Each of these prepositions creates more than one possible connection among the poem’s objects. Further, the grammatical instability created by the prepositions destabilizes the basic relationship between subject and verb, making it possible to read the verb “intoning” as belonging to either “organ notes,” “church,” “the live,” or even “she,” each of which attributes the phrase “That torture called by men delight / touches her no more” to a

different source. If the source is “organ notes” or “church,” the meaning is similar: the church or the church’s music decrees that the buried “she” has escaped the torture of worldly temptation. But if the source of that phrase is “the live,” the imagery changes, and the living people at the funeral are buried by the church while they are intoning that delight is torture and death is freedom from it. If it is the “she” that is connected to the verb “intoning,” the phrase becomes an indirect quotation because it uses “her” rather than “me.” This reading implies that the buried woman still retains her identity and is capable of speech, though indirect.⁶⁴ These ambiguities complicate the interpretation of the poem, and they also undermine the meaning-making function of language, the sentence’s power to impose relationships on the objects it positions. The individual nature of the thing cannot be mastered by the relationships the prepositions dictate. However, refusal of the connective properties of language could also be accomplished simply by deleting the prepositions, leaving the objects isolated from one another. Instead, the inclusion of indefinite connectives allows the poem to dramatize the contact between perceiving mind and object, an illogical subconscious flow in which all things are related but in unpredictable and unstable ways. Multivalent relationships are important in this poem because they echo its themes. But even when such grammatical figuration doesn’t advance the poems’ subjects so directly, Niedecker uses prepositions and connectives similarly, simultaneously short-circuiting and multiplying the relationships that language establishes between subject and object and among objects. Because prepositions and connectives represent the sentence for Niedecker, they are an important tool for managing a complex and shifting relationship to silence and speech.

Like prepositions, conjunctions are intimately involved in the connective functions of the sentence. In “Easter Greeting,” the conjunction “or” works like the prepositions in “She was a mourner” both to use and diffuse relational language.

I suppose there is nothing
so good as human
immediacy

I do not speak loosely
of handshake
which is
of the mind
or lilies—stand closer—
smell (221)

The title of the poem indicates a narrative context of greeting, further particularized by Easter, which indicates the spring season and calls to mind the Christian resurrection story. In the first stanza, the speaker appears to make a relatively straightforward statement. The stanza break, along with the capital “I” of the following stanza, recommend that the first three lines be read as a self-contained utterance, which is easily interpretable: the speaker supposes that human immediacy is unsurpassed by any other thing. The next stanza introduces further context for that statement, but, as often occurs with Niedecker’s clarifications, it expands rather than limiting possible meanings. The speaker clarifies that she does not “speak loosely / of handshake,” but this contextualizes her first statement in two mutually exclusive ways. In one possible interpretation,

“handshake” is an example of or a synonym for human immediacy, and the speaker declares that she speaks carefully about the matter. However, “I do not speak loosely of handshake” could also qualify the subject at hand, delineating human immediacy as something more specific than “handshake.” After this initial complication, the conjunction “or” further increases the possible meanings, and the various readings it allows are in turn inflected by the two fundamentally different rhetorical contexts created by the ambiguity of the phrase “I do not speak loosely / of handshake.”

Because of the absence of punctuation, it is difficult to determine exactly what options the preposition “or” establishes, but other formal elements imply grammatical structure. For instance, the indentation of “which is of the mind” separates it from the rest of the stanza, creating a visual parenthesis that allows “or” to connect “lilies” with “handshake”: “I do not speak loosely of handshake (which is of the mind) or lilies.” In this version of the poem’s potential grammar, “lilies” are like “handshake”; depending on the reading of the first line of the stanza, they are either an example of or an imprecise description of human immediacy. If lilies exemplify human closeness, this suggests a dissolution of the distinctions between kinds of life, a leveling of the taxonomic topography. But if to talk of lilies is to speak loosely of human immediacy, this signifies a resistance to such leveling as imprecise. Like this most available reading of the conjunction’s role—linking handshake and lilies—other possible grammatical interpretations are also dually significant. For instance, proximity endorses the conjunction of “lilies” with “the mind” as one of two things that contain handshake, as in, “I do not speak loosely of handshake, which is of the mind or lilies.” If handshake belongs to or characterizes the mind or lilies, this implies that a physical human greeting

is non-physical or non-human. In addition, this mental or botanical handshake either exemplifies human immediacy or misses the mark, depending on how the first line of the stanza is read.

Because of the lack of standard determiners of syntactical relationship (even the separation achieved by capital letters is undermined here by the fact that “I” is always capitalized), “or lilies” remains grammatically flexible, creating possible readings even beyond the limits of the stanza. For instance, if they are combined with “human immediacy”—as in, “I suppose there is nothing so good as human immediacy (I do not speak loosely of handshake, which is of the mind) or lilies”—lilies are, along with human closeness, one of the highest goods. It is also possible that the lilies are not connected to any one of the other nouns of the poem but are, instead, posited as an alternative to the rest of the poem as a whole. When the flowers are introduced, the tone changes, moving from an internal, contemplative supposition about abstract concepts—even “a handshake” is rendered abstract by the deletion of the article—to a concrete immediacy evidenced by the shift to the more physical lilies and the direct injunction to use one’s senses: “or lilies—stand closer— / smell.” It may be that this change indicates an abrupt, mid-sentence swing from one subject to another, in which a sensual experience pulls the speaker out of her abstract thought. It may also be that the change is caused by the speaker greeting another person, the addressee of the imperative “stand closer—smell.” In either case, the “Easter Greeting” of the poem’s title is an encounter based in immediate physical interaction. The “or,” in addition to its other possible functions, marks a turn from supposing to smelling. Where “or” is generally one of the restrictive examples of connective language, delineating a choice among alternatives, in Niedecker’s

hands it becomes more permissive. Like her use of prepositions in “She was a mourner,” this variability limits language’s ability to dictate the nature of relationships between objects by diffusing it, but it also expands language’s capabilities by allowing a single word to form numerous poetically generative relationships.

Niedecker continues both to limit and extend language as her form undergoes significant changes throughout her life. As we have seen, she wrote to correspondents that she was seeking out a new form in the late 1960s. Perhaps buoyed by support from other publishers and writers or freed by less frequent and less emotionally intense correspondence with Zukofsky, Niedecker was actively developing a form that allowed her to express a “sumpn” that she connected to a youthful prolixity and opposed to her Objectivist condensation. One of the most immediately evident effects of this change is her exploration of considerably longer forms.⁶⁵ While much of Niedecker’s early work is known for being quite short, she wrote several important long poems toward the end of her life.⁶⁶ Despite this development, however, Niedecker continues to use ambivalent prepositions and unstable connections simultaneously to promote linguistic freedom and silences in her work. In an important later poem, “My Life by Water,” equivocal prepositions both create and resist the connections language effects. The title of the poem is emblematic of Niedecker’s use of prepositions throughout much of her work. The preposition “by” could mean that the speaker’s life is conducted near water, but it may also mean that the speaker’s life is created or authored by water. If the speaker’s life is “by” water in the sense of near it, that relationship signals a parallel existence that permits influence without jeopardizing individuality. Relationship as proximity of one thing to another evokes Objectivist silences and a resistance to language’s connective

powers. However, if the title of the poem is “‘My Life’ by Water,” this could mean either that it is water’s autobiography or that it is the poet’s biography written by water.⁶⁷ This either deemphasizes the poet-speaker as the subject or makes the biographical subject itself a creation of the object. Thus, the preposition “by” simultaneously invokes a limited relationship that inherently suggests discrete identities and an entanglement that challenges the very distinction between creator and creation by implying that water writes the poet’s life—even as Niedecker authors the poem in which water is her biographer.

Throughout the poem, prepositions and other connectives perform a similar duality, both realizing and resisting relationship:

My Life by Water

My life

by water—

Hear

spring’s

first frog

or board

out on the cold

ground

giving

Muskrats

gnawing

doors

to wild green

arts and letters

Rabbits

raided

my lettuce

One boat

two—

pointed toward

my shore

thru birdstart

wingdrip

weed-drift

of the soft

and serious—

Water (237)

In one sense, the poem is a relatively straightforward naturalistic sketch. The speaker describes what she observes in spring near a flood-prone body of water. Niedecker captures this intimately familiar experience with her usual sensitivity to the neat detail. She focuses particularly on the sounds of spring in the Wisconsin riverine climate, the onset of the frogs' croaking for mates or the defrosting of a frozen yard that results in a creaking board. The poem savors the populous multivocality of returning life: the muskrat's destructive gnawing is converted into a species of creativity—"wild green / arts and letters"—and the speaker's solitude is punctured both by hungry rabbits and visitors in boats. But, despite the interest of the poem in a vibrant aquatic fertility and sociality, because she was writing in the midst of a search for a new form, her treatment of this subject is especially fraught, and something of the mess she fears and hopes for seeps in. If prepositions and connectives "lie in wait" like an "early spring flood," to take on the subject of an actual early spring flood is to risk being washed away by them. Though there are, perhaps surprisingly, fewer prepositions in this poem than in many others, those that are included create a sense of chaotic interrelationship among the objects of the poem. The greatest density of prepositional relationships occurs toward the end of the poem: "One boat // two— / pointed toward / my shore // thru birdstart / wingdrip / weed-drift // of the soft / and serious— / Water." The first relationship is clear: the boats are pointed toward the speaker's shore. However, both "thru" and "of" are less certain. It may be that each prepositional phrase modifies the one that came before it: the boats are pointed *toward* the shore *through* the sights and sounds *of* the water. In this case, the prepositions and connectives take the poem farther and farther from the individual "one boat," increased to "two," directed toward something, through something

else, which is of another thing. And this propagation of relationships is intensified as the poem uses one preposition to interrupt the connections posited by another, making more interactions possible. The stanza beginning “thru birdstart” can also function as a parenthetical separating “my shore” from “of,” leaving two different subjects—“my shore” and “birdstart / wingdrip / weed-drift,” themselves objects of other prepositions—vying for the object of the preposition “of.” The grammar is further complicated by the placement of the final dash, which makes it possible that either “the soft / and serious” or “Water” are the object of the preposition. Thus, the boats could be “pointed toward my shore of the soft and serious” or “pointed toward my shore of the (soft and serious) water” or simply “pointed toward my shore” through the sights and sounds of the water. As we saw in Niedecker’s earlier work, these radically uncertain prepositions have simultaneous and contradictory effects. On one hand, like the frogs, doors, muskrats, and boards of the poem’s earlier images, the objects of these final stanzas collide into surprising and unstable relationships in the flood of language. On the other, the very uncertainty of relationships undermines the predatory aspect of language that would rob objects of their individual natures by reifying their relationships to one another.

Again, in addition to prepositions, other types of connectives perform dual functions; verbs also work both to extend and limit language in this poem. In particular, Niedecker uses verbs that are both transitive and intransitive, connective and self-contained. The first three stanzas of the poem are structured by the primary verb “Hear” and the secondary verb (a gerund serving as an object) “giving.” The verb “Hear” is in the form of a command—perhaps to the reader, perhaps to the speaker herself—to hear a frog or a board giving. This hearing is the primary relationship when the poem begins,

and it establishes connection between the speaker and the reader, as well as between the speaker/reader/hearer and the frog or board to which they attend. Further, it could be that the hearer must choose between hearing two sounds—the sound of the frog croaking or the sound of the board creaking; but it may also be that there is one sound of unknown source—it could be either a frog or a board. The verb “hear” establishes several relationships, opening the poem with language that subjects its objects to verbal determination and extends the reach of language by establishing multivalent relationships. But the poem undermines the verb’s claim to its objects in two ways. First, its placement after a dash and at the end of the stanza separates the verb “Hear” from its objects. “Hear” may be an apostrophe to the reader or simply an evocation of the act of listening that is removed from the grammar of the surrounding phrases. This reading would leave the following noun phrases isolated as well, objective descriptions of objects in themselves rather than objects of the speaker’s or reader’s hearing. Second, the placement of the verb in the same stanza as the introductory phrase indicating position, “My life / by water— ,” also calls to mind the homophone “here.” The deictic word “here” implies that speaker and reader share the space to which the poem points. However, it also distances the reader from the objects of the poem, both by diluting with a second meaning the readers’s involvement through the apostrophizing command “hear” and by underlining the reader’s lack of access to the actual “here” to which the word points. Like her prepositions, Niedecker’s use of the verb “hear” both establishes various connections and destabilizes those connections. In this case, Niedecker restricts the connective property of language through punctuation and the echo of a homophone in addition to the verb’s flexibility. The secondary verb, “giving,” also serves

simultaneously to restrain and further language's relational function. "To give" is fundamentally a transitive verb, in its most common usage taking both a direct object and an indirect object, "to give something to something." Thus, the verb "give," suspended at the end of the stanza, invokes a silence or omission, a suppression of the connective role the verb generally plays. The usual relationships established by a transitive verb like "give" are further stymied here since the verb is used in its much less common intransitive sense, "to collapse or break." Such a move shuts down the relationships of language, retaining a focus on the singular thing, the board, in itself, giving way. But "giving" also connects objects, in this case "board" and "ground." To hear something "giving" is an idiosyncratic but interpretable use of the verb. However, in its intransitive sense, the verb "give," especially in informal speech, often carries the preposition "out." And, in fact, the stanza begins with the word "out," looping the stanza back on itself in a syntactic inversion where the board is "out on the cold / ground / giving" but also "giving out on the cold / ground." Thus, the verb both performs and refuses its usual function of connection. Like variable prepositions, verbs that both connect subject with object and refuse to do so help create a poetic attitude that takes advantage of language's dynamic relationships without permitting the subject to inhabit the object's sovereignty.⁶⁸

While ambiguous prepositions and connectives, such as transitive verbs, appear throughout much of Niedecker's work as a means of both extending and limiting language, her own sense of her work during the period in which she wrote "My Life by Water" was that she was reaching for a new kind of form. Such a change is most evident in the interaction between sentences and stanza divisions. The enjambed three-line stanza form Niedecker develops in "My Life by Water" is not unique to this poem.⁶⁹ However,

the frequency of enjambment is noticeable compared to other instances of similar stanzaic forms. The poem enjambes syntactic units across lines, which is more common to Niedecker's short poems than her longer ones. In fact, Niedecker's short lines—which isolate objects, as we saw in “I hear the weather”—are often used to exemplify the importance of silence in her work. However, they also make it difficult not to use enjambment, which prevents the lines themselves from existing as isolated objects, despite separating the things they name. For example, a single-word line like “Muskrats” in one sense leaves the object uninterpreted. Similarly, “gnawing” and “doors” receive their own lines. But the enjambment of the lines connects each of these detached words into a phrase, “muskrats gnawing doors,” that establishes a clear relationship between objects. The structure of the stanzas mirrors the structure of the lines. “Muskrats gnawing doors” is set apart in its own short stanza. But the next stanza establishes a new relationship “to wild green / arts and letters,” disrupting the closed system of the previous stanzas with a strange image that connects the muskrats gnawing doors to a distant world of “arts and letters.” Also, the seeming incompleteness of the verb “giving” relates the muskrats to the previous stanza. Thus, while the short lines and stanzas suppress the connective power of language, that condensation gives rise to enjambment, making the boundaries of lines and stanzas permeable to grammatical relationships reaching across them. The structure of sentences in the poem similarly both separates and connects. The elision of periods and other punctuation allows for a freer play of connection between what would normally be distinct utterances, indicating an openness and linguistic freedom.⁷⁰ For instance, the verb “giving” may be the end of a sentence. But it may also continue that sentence—in a strange instance of the usual grammar of the verb to give—

with the board giving muskrats to arts and letters or giving the muskrats to rabbits that may be raiding not only the lettuce of their own sentence—sounding a possible pun on “letters”—but the boats of the next. Nonetheless, despite this invitation to linguistic freedom, Niedecker cannot completely throw over her “short poem” style and her desire to restrain the connective quality of language. Thus, while the lack of periods and the enjambment of sentences across stanzas create multiple relationships, the poem maintains the capitals that imply partitions without entirely committing to them.

In “My Life by Water,” Niedecker works out a form that utilizes the relational quality of language—allowing the flowing interrelationships that she believed gave access to interiority—while simultaneously limiting the aspects of language she distrusts—particularly the way language’s connective properties exercise the poetic subject’s will over the object. She uses a similar three-line, highly enjambed form for her longest poem “Wintergreen Ridge,” perhaps because that form allowed the kind of linguistic freedom necessary to sustain a longer poem. However, as we have seen, Niedecker’s ambivalence toward language is acutely felt, and in her work after *North Central* she pulls back from the freedom and prolixity she achieves in poems like “Wintergreen Ridge” and “Paeon to Place.” Writing Corman about her “strange winter,” she expresses discomfort with this kind of loosening: “I’ve made a turnabout again toward the short poem, don’t feel I shd. leave what’s been a part of me all these years” (*Between* 156). The fact that Niedecker’s last poems are among her longest may appear to belie her “turnabout toward the short poem,” but, in contrast to the enjambment of lines and stanzas in previous longer works, these poems are characterized by distinct, independent elements. These short, highly condensed parts signify a return to a more

restrained mode, but their aggregation under larger themes or subjects indicates that Niedecker's relationship to condensation has been changed by her experiment with more freely flowing language in poems like "My Life by Water." The major works of Niedecker's last years are biographical poems about "great men" like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, William Morris, and Charles Darwin. But after allowing her own life to be the subject of her poems in unprecedented ways in "My Life by Water" and "Paean to Place," Niedecker appears wary of the notion that a poet can create a unified picture of a life. Perhaps because the danger of intrusion on the part of the poet is so strong in biography, Niedecker pulls back from the relational language that she allowed when she herself was the subject. In these late poems, she moves from permeable boundaries between lines, sentences, and stanzas to a more strictly delineated form.⁷¹

"Darwin," Niedecker's final published poem, exemplifies this mode. Where before she sometimes used spaces or unobtrusive typographical symbols to separate the parts of a poem, in "Darwin," as in several of her other biographical poems, Roman numerals decisively divide and ordinate the parts of the poem. Each narrates a separate event or phase in Darwin's life without the grammatical bleeding across boundaries that characterizes earlier poems divided into sections. Occasionally, stanzas within the sections are enjambed, but this indicates a longer independent thought and does not create the grammatical ambiguities of "My Life by Water." In general, both single lines and stanzas are more self-contained. The final stanzas of the second section are tersely individual even though they create a narrative:

Fossil bones near Santa Fé

Spider-bite-scauld

Fever

Tended by an old woman

“Dear Susan . . .

I am ravenous

for the sound

of the pianoforte” (296)

The first of these stanzas consists of four lines that stand alone. The second stanza is set apart from the previous not only by syntax and stanza breaks but also by quotation marks that emphasize its distinction. These line- and stanza-level rejections of the connective power of language echo the rigidity of separation created by the Roman numerals. Like condensation and omission, these reinforcements of boundaries prevent the free flow of language, focusing instead on the individual, isolated objects, “wonderful in themselves.”

Yet, while “Darwin” returns to an aesthetic of silence, its very length indicates that Niedecker’s “turnabout” to her “short poem mode” was also marked by her investigation of the possibilities of flowing language. For example, despite the emphatic distinction between parts of the poem, “Darwin” continues to omit periods and use only capital letters to divide the poem at the sentence level. As illustrated by the stanzas quoted above, the poem relies on capital letters and on line and stanza breaks to establish phrasing. Though it does not generally test those separations with enjambment, the lack of periods still makes it possible to create grammatical connections that overflow the expected boundaries. For instance, the capital beginning the phrase “Tended by an old woman” and the fact that it comes at the end of a list of self-contained utterances suggest

that the verb “tended” refers to an implied subject, Darwin himself. However, the lack of periods also makes it possible to read the verb as referring back to any of the previous nouns or noun phrases. Though less pronounced than in her earlier poems, the lack of periods permits a countercurrent of linguistic movement that works against the poem’s silences. Ambiguous prepositions also continue to form a part of this countercurrent. For instance, an apparently straightforward stanza in the first section depicts a wearied Darwin: “He was often becalmed / in this Port Desire by illness / or rested from species / at billiard table.” While the primary meaning of the preposition “at” locates Darwin at the game table, it is also possible that Darwin rested from the species that was at the billiard table, that is, rested from the human race rather than from the animals he studies. Though this complication is minor, it indicates the variability of relationships established even by apparently ordinary language use, and it establishes an interchangeability of human and animal species that informs the themes of the poem. Though Niedecker does return in many important ways to the aesthetic of silence identified with her short poem style, she continues simultaneously to employ linguistic connection as flow, if not overflow.

This narrative of Niedecker’s formal experimentation—beginning in Surrealist freedom of linguistic connectivity, moving through Objectivist omissions to a simultaneity of language and silence, to, finally, an aesthetic of silence only minimally undermined by currents of disruptive linguistic connectivity—reveals an important dynamic in Niedecker’s formal negotiations of her conflicting attractions for silence and language. Silences are useful to Niedecker as a “follow up feeling” to overpowering language. The relational or connective property of language must be allowed to enter the poem, but it is equally important to clean up after it. In this sense, silence, despite its

alignment with Objectivist masculinity and hardness, is a domestic action. Language makes a mess of things, destabilizing relationships and making boundaries permeable in a way that is, for Niedecker, necessary but unsustainable. When she writes Zukofsky about her post-flood housekeeping, Niedecker takes evident pleasure in tidiness after disruption: “All my surfaces shine, a hard varnish shine but looks good to me, renewed table feet, doors etc after a flood. All my surfaces are hard, all my interiors, quiet and relaxing” (*Correspondence* 253). She delights in her ability to recover a livable space after the encroachment of the floodwaters, but, tellingly, she does not relocate to higher ground. The process of flooding and rebuilding is central to her life and an important analogue for her experience of the sentence as flood. Indeed, that Niedecker’s silences come after linguistic flow and overflow invests them with a vitality that distinguishes her poems from the sterility of writing in which silence is not so hard-won. Though she often felt her allegiances to circumscribing and celebrating language as mutually exclusive, her grammatical figuration develops as a response to the need to permit language to thrive without allowing it to overwhelm the poem’s objects, including the poet herself.

Notes

¹ Except where otherwise noted, Niedecker’s poems are quoted from *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*.

² Untitled poems will be referred to by their first lines.

³ In 1996, the National Poetry Foundation published *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*, a collection of reviews, letters, and critical essays. Penberthy, the editor of that volume, also edited a volume of Niedecker’s letters, primarily to Zukofsky, published in 1993. In 2008, another collection of essays, *Radical Vernacular*, was devoted entirely to Niedecker criticism (Willis). The first full biography of Niedecker appeared in 2011, collecting biographical information that had previously only been available in archives and scattered sources (Peters). Perhaps most importantly, Penberthy’s meticulously edited volume, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, was published in 2002.

⁴ Cox's attitude is representative of early evaluations of Niedecker's work. While he praises her writing as "as careful and complex," he suggests that readers may miss these virtues "hidden under feminine ease" that camouflages her craft as mere "sketch notes or diary jottings" (29). Even an otherwise perceptive essay by Heller at times makes Niedecker a composer of "artless" poems "without intellectual means" that "resonat[e] with pure being" ("Seen" 26-27). Much recent criticism questions the underlying values of such reading, reevaluating the role of the small or seemingly minor in feminist resistance, anti-consumerism, and modernist practice. See especially DuPlessis and Willis.

⁵ See White for a discussion of Niedecker's relationship to contemporary American poetry and Jenkins and Skinner for explorations of the ethics of her poetics. See also Altieri for the ethical dimensions of Objectivism.

⁶ Wilk edited a special memorial issue of *Truck* in 1975 and Corman an issue of *Origin* in 1981. More recently, in 2005, *Court Green* published a dossier on Niedecker including book reviews, criticism, and poems honoring Niedecker by contemporary poets ("Dossier"). Jonathan Williams edited *Epitaphs for Lorine*.

⁷ This is not to say that such prejudice did not contribute to Niedecker's absence from the canon. As Perloff and others have observed, Niedecker's position as a woman and an experimentalist has made her ineligible not only for inclusion among the only recently revalued Objectivists but for feminist critical reevaluation. Further, oversimplified early critical response to Niedecker as a regionalist or a naïve nature poet, along with her highly condensed style, reinforced the idea that she was a minor talent. Finally, the notion that she was merely an acolyte of Zukofsky, an evaluation that Niedecker herself did much to further, has also contributed to her critical neglect.

⁸ Despite allegations of professional naivete, Niedecker was very conscious of the financial burdens of artists, both herself and others. She often mentions household costs or rents in her letters, and she sent small sums to the Zukofskys and other writers whom she felt could benefit from financial assistance. She occasionally mentioned payment in letters to publishers, though most often on behalf of others. And, though paying publishers may seem like a mark of desperation to some modern readers, at the time Niedecker was publishing, it was not uncommon for writers to cover part or all of printing and advertising costs. Niedecker was willing to pay to have her books printed, but she was also an agent in that process. She was concerned that the editions be well made and designed to her taste; thus, she was much more willing to send money to publishers she trusted, like Corman, than to presses she felt might not put out books matching her vision. Though Niedecker is often characterized as unwilling to engage in the business of poetry, most likely because of her vehement rejection of participating in the promotional aspects of publishing, her letters reveal that she was by no means unacquainted with the costs of publishing. She also made detailed legal inquiries that show her anxious to preserve her rights.

⁹ She wrote only a few pieces promoting the work of friends and correspondents Zukofsky and Corman.

¹⁰ The regular conversation of her coworkers at the hospital or her neighbors in Black Hawk Island was a source of poetic material, and she viewed local notoriety as endangering poetic production.

¹¹ Niedecker herself resisted such biographical attention. Regarding what she called a “flattering” review of her poems by Jonathan Williams, she protested to Zukofsky, “And LN *personally*—when what we’re talking about is *poetry!*” (*Correspondence* 321).

¹² DuPlessis mentions Niedecker’s “demeanor of intentional modesty” (“Anonymous” *Kenyon*, 97), while Jowett discusses a personal “tendency to self-effacement” (“silence” 32). Further, despite Breslin’s work showing the mutuality of the Niedecker/Zukofsky relationship, contemporary critics often continue to paint Niedecker as a disciple, buried under Zukofsky’s pronouncements about her work.

¹³ Heller’s essay “Lorine Niedecker: Light and Silence” exemplifies the kind of condescension that, masquerading as praise, dismissed Niedecker’s poems as mere outgrowths of her life rather than meticulously crafted responses to it: “Niedecker’s poems are for the most part notations of isolation, of the poet’s own and her world’s sheer recalcitrance, a record of an inert and almost blind physicality which she confronts in both her native landscape, the rural Midwest, and in its people, ‘the folk from whom all poetry flows / and dreadfully much else.’ The poems strike the reader as natural and seemingly artless constructions, as artless as the region they mirror, a part of the United States, plowed and grazed but as yet unhumiliated by technology” (51).

¹⁴ Jenkins, for example, argues that the omission of the body in Niedecker’s poetry, especially the female body, rejects dialectical notions of gender and empowerment and provides an “opportunity for freedom” (313). In a different vein, Pritchett reads an emphasis on nothingness or emptiness in Niedecker’s poems as a means of “placing the poem outside the stream of commodity exchange” (96). Clausen’s 1987 “Rediscovery” review of Niedecker’s collected works hails her silences as a strategically chosen and empowering corrective to the over-simplified feminist “catch phrase,” “Break the silences!,” effectively making Niedecker’s silences a feminist resistance to mainstream feminist values (11).

¹⁵ Jowett’s unpublished doctoral thesis, “‘and silence’: Lorine Niedecker and the Life of Poetry,” takes silence as its organizing theme. Though it devotes a section to silence in Niedecker’s forms, focusing in particular on condensation, biographical omissions, and the use of white space and line breaks in her stanza forms, the bulk of the thesis focuses on silences in Niedecker’s life, context, and critical reception.

¹⁶ I take up the question of Niedecker's relationship to Objectivism and Surrealism later in this chapter. Contrary to Middleton, I argue that Objectivist practice was an essential tool for Niedecker's resistance to the appropriative violence of subjective language. Nevertheless, I concur with Middleton's point that, in addition to aesthetic preferences, Niedecker's use of silence is driven by ethical concerns about appropriation and representation.

¹⁷ Quartermain implicitly makes a similar argument about silence in "Reading Niedecker"; he suggests that Niedecker's poems are a kind of "gossip," which uses silences in that it takes for granted the familiarity of the reader with shared local history or personal experiences rather than explaining them.

¹⁸ See Westover for an economic analysis of Niedecker's refusal of appropriation and commodification. See also Upton for a discussion of Niedecker's formal choices as "defense against encroachment" (46). Though they do not address silence directly, both of these more recent discussions make implicit arguments about formal silences as resistance to appropriative forces.

¹⁹ Niedecker admired Corman because, she said, he was "the only one who [could] carry over the silence [of painting] into poems" (*Between* 49).

²⁰ See Penberthy's "Writing Lake Superior" for an analysis of Niedecker's process of condensing her travel notes into a poem.

²¹ Niedecker only read her poems before an audience once. The event disappointed her, and she refused all other requests to read her work. As she wrote to Cox in 1970: "I really do not approve of reading aloud or listening to someone read" ("Extracts" 42).

²² Niedecker wrote Cox about the particular difficulties of translating a poem from print to speech: "I got to thinking as I read how one can write for print and it means one thing and let it out of the mouth and into a listener to become something else e.g.: my Darwin commences:

His holy
 slowly
 mulled over
 matter

from the mouth is it holy or wholly or holey?????" ("Extracts" 42).

²³ She wrote similarly to Cox: "For me poetry is a matter of planting it in deep, a filled silence, each person reading it a silence to be filled—he'll have to come to the poems—both writer and reader—with an ear for all the poems can give and he'll hear that as Beethoven heard the deaf" ("Extracts" 42). This version of her reaction to reading aloud further emphasizes silence as crucial to both the creation and reception of poetry.

²⁴ Her reference to Beethoven being able to “hear” music “tho deaf” supports the possibility, explored by several critics, that the deafness of Niedecker’s mother may have influenced the poet’s relationship to sound and silence. See especially Robertson.

²⁵ In 1958 she wrote Zukofsky, “The business of loneliness—the mind has to be sharp to keep one from getting uselessly involved just for the sake of a moment of less loneliness” (*Correspondence* 244).

²⁶ She writes Corman regarding her “immanent marriage” and calls it “unnatural” though Millen is her “connection to life.” Life, it seems, interferes with poetry: “Till life settles down, this frog is singing silently” (*Between* 40). Niedecker mitigated this problem by circumscribing the noise of life. Perhaps the most striking reminder of this is the image of Niedecker wearing earplugs so that she could write while Millen watched the television.

²⁷ This lineation is not intended to make Niedecker’s prose lines into a poem—to be sure, her poems are generally subtler—but to make their poetic elements more immediately evident.

²⁸ Even when Niedecker indulges this voluble strain, she is careful to maintain a distance from what she quotes, often crafting whole poems from the words of others without direct comment or contextualization. Discussing her tendency to use quotation in her work she calls herself “a weak sister” of Marianne Moore, arguing “I appreciate but don’t criticize” (*Between* 75). Once again, Niedecker’s strongly felt respect for the individual, in this case, the words of others, is inflected as a weakness of nerve or of intellect.

²⁹ In one sense, this statement reinforces the value of silence because it argues that the quiet experiences of listening to the natural world supersede human voices and language. But, while the sora rail’s call may undermine the power of language in that it is more memorable than the information gleaned from her reading, that call is not silent.

³⁰ Another instance of Niedecker’s enjoyment of natural sounds coinciding with her delight in language emphasizes that sounds do not necessarily have to be melodious in order to please: “Not all harsh sounds displease— / Yellowhead blackbirds cough / through reeds and fronds / as through pronged bronze” (271).

³¹ Like many modernists, Niedecker was fascinated by the power of names, in particular taxonomic nouns. She believed that individual words and names could be transformative. She wrote to Zukofsky that she had recently discovered a name for a local plant. She then listed names for that plant in a kind of litany: “Creeping Jenny, Creeping Charlie, Creeping loosestrife, moneywort, yellow myrtle—all the same. Somebody is going to come along some day and tell me my name is Rosa Bonheur and that I’ll get poisoned if I paint a horse eating equisetum” (*Correspondence* 154). Her list of the

names for the plant delights in the variability of sounds, but her brief fantasy about being transformed into nineteenth-century painter Bonheur also implies that names can influence as well as describe identity.

³² Throughout “For Paul,” a collection of poems ostensibly written for the son of Niedecker’s former lover, Zukofsky, Niedecker uses nursery rhyme rhythms and playful language, often in strong contrast to difficult adult themes like war and death. Though one can detect a certain playfulness in all of Niedecker’s poetry, it is often terse and curtailed. Perhaps the figure of the childish listener allowed Niedecker to indulge linguistic playfulness in a way she considered more suspect in poems intended for what she elsewhere called “solid citizens.”

³³ The ostentatiousness of the rhyme’s reliance on linguistic manipulation may also align the poet herself, as an artist who flouts convention, with the nebula-haired fiddler figure.

³⁴ Though the title of Heller’s essay is “Lorine Niedecker: Light and Silence,” he focuses largely on Niedecker’s relationship to language as a physical experience. He takes her silences to constitute an intellectual and moral ambiguousness and refusal to comment, casting her work as personal rather than public or political. Aesthetically, he argues that her rhetoric is achieved through sound-patterns rather than statement (51). This immersion in the sounds of language, rather than its logical or meaning-making properties, is credited to Niedecker’s local sensibility and a sensuous (rather than sensible) “inert and almost blind physicality” (51). While I concur that sound-patterns and other non-rational forms of meaning are central to Niedecker’s poetics, I do not follow Heller in his evaluation—which seems to me inflected by gender- and class-based assumptions—of such strategies as unintellectual. Certainly the largely male, white, and middle- to upper-class Language poets frequently use similar strategies but are rarely described as sensuous, physical, or unintellectual, nor does Heller describe Zukofsky as such despite the obvious similarities between his reliance on sound-suggestion and Niedecker’s own.

³⁵ It is also useful because it demonstrates a continuity between Niedecker’s work and the modernist tradition to which she is so often seen as ancillary.

³⁶ Penberthy points out that “[v]oice is one of the most memorable features of [Niedecker’s] work. She had an exquisite awareness of voice, of speaking out of silence, of speaking at all, of speaking in the rhythms and locutions around her, or of speaking in a literary voice” (“Part One” 73). See also Robertson and Dorn.

³⁷ See Waldman, Walsh, and Clausen for other treatments of the tension between speech and silence in Niedecker’s work. Each of these writers is working under very different assumptions—Waldman is a poet-critic, Walsh an appreciator, and Clausen a reviewer—but they all point to sound and silence as opposing forces in Niedecker’s work.

³⁸ For Skinner, Niedecker's attraction for language, especially play with syntax and assonance, allows her to collapse the hierarchical distinctions between human and nonhuman, achieving a Darwinian leveling that allows for "particular attention" to the nonhuman world. He argues that silences are important for Niedecker but primarily as an act of listening: human subjectivity is silenced to allow the "nonhuman other" to be heard (56). Robertson also uses the concept of listening to explain Niedecker's simultaneous desire for sound and silence. According to Robertson, "Niedecker is 'ravenous for sound,' as she has Darwin say it," but such a hunger requires her to be silent and listen. She further contends that the silence of listening is active and involves "techniques of reception" (87).

³⁹ Following Niedecker's own sense of opposed aesthetic allegiances, several critics have offered explanations of her poetics based on her participation in, or rejection of, aesthetic programs like Objectivism and Surrealism, often including the folk impulse. For critics like Tarlo, Niedecker's poetics represents a "held tension" between a proliferating language of multiplicity and difference, connected to Surrealism, and a devotion to the particularity of the real, aligned with Objectivism. Tarlo uses the term "vertical" rather than "Surrealist" because, she argues, to use "Surrealism" to describe the "semiotic multiplicity" that pulls against Niedecker's "Objectivist specificity" overstates the closeness of her relation to the Surrealist program. However, she does call this multiplicity "surrealistic," and the term "vertical" also describes Surrealist notions about states of consciousness. Middleton, on the other hand, reads Niedecker's folk impulse (which is also connected to Surrealism) as a resistance to the universalizing elements of Objectivism and the avant-garde more generally. DuPlessis counters models of tension and resistance to expand the conversation about the contending literary philosophies in Niedecker's work. She argues that Niedecker was looking for "something more" than Objectivism, and she understands Niedecker's forms as effecting a fusion not only between Objectivism and Surrealism but also with the related aesthetics of Projectivism and folk forms. I agree with DuPlessis that Surrealism, Objectivism, haiku, and folk forms served as correctives to each other ("Fusion" 396).

Though they suggest significantly different types of relationships between conflicting philosophies, all of these critical models take for granted that aesthetic philosophies like Objectivism and Surrealism can tell us something useful about Lorine Niedecker's work. In the following discussion, I take that to be true as well. However, I do not treat Objectivism and Surrealism as such; rather, I explore Niedecker's own sense of what was important in those movements for her work.

⁴⁰ The essays were requested by magazine editor Harriet Monroe and written, according to Zukofsky, under some protest. Zukofsky was uncomfortable with the notion of a movement; in fact, he insisted on placing the word Objectivist in quotation marks to indicate its provisionality.

⁴¹ Niedecker published a poem called "Wasted Energy" in her high school yearbook that features a curmudgeonly speaker lamenting the lack of specificity in

modern language that erases fine distinctions: “When describing a quail or a sunset or whale— / They’re ‘wonderful!’—each of the three” (*Condensery* 3). Even as a young person, Niedecker had no patience for lazy language and admired the search for the right word.

⁴² DuPlessis argues that folk forms like ballads and “Mother Goose” rhymes often leap from event to event and from location to location, focusing on happenings rather than motivations. She considers Niedecker’s attraction to these forms a resistance to the glut of explanation and part of a poetics of anonymity (“Anonymous”).

⁴³ In one sense, Niedecker’s first version of the poem is truer to the notion that the identity of the poetic object is fundamentally unavailable to the poet because it acknowledges the distance between “I” and object and the uncertainty of the speaker’s observations.

⁴⁴ Niedecker’s first encounter with the French Surrealists was initiated by Zukofsky, who advised her to read them. Niedecker’s impression of the Surrealists was always colored by Zukofsky’s complex feelings about Surrealism. See especially Golston for a discussion of Zukofsky’s relationship to Surrealism.

⁴⁵ The Surrealist “Proclamation,” reproduced by Penberthy, was originally published in *transition*.

⁴⁶ One of the poems sent with this letter, “Promise of a Brilliant Funeral,” was published by Monroe. The other, “Progressions,” was recently located and published in Penberthy’s edition of the *Collected Works*. Both of these poems are at odds with the canonical picture of Niedecker in her condensery.

⁴⁷ It should be noted, however, that there is also an important similarity between what moves Niedecker about both Objectivism and Surrealism: the unrecognizability of objects in Niedecker’s version of Surrealism echoes their unavailability to the subjective in Objectivism. Similarly, Niedecker quotes Davie on mystery: “if mystery is there you can’t express it, it is there through being unable to be expressed” (*Between* 192). Both Surrealism and Objectivism are interesting for what they do not say, but their subject matter and their methods of not saying are different.

⁴⁸ In Niedecker’s later years, Dahlberg suggested that she try mind-altering substances to assist her experimentation with representing the illogicality of the mind, but Niedecker scoffed at the recommendation and the idea that she would need such an aid to access the stream of consciousness (*Between* 156). Instead, words were her means of reaching an inner landscape that she felt to be the special province of her poetry.

⁴⁹ The poem is also included in a letter to Corman. Niedecker did not include it in any of her collections, but it was published by Corman in *Origin* in 1968.

⁵⁰ My own experience of folk language echoes this image with a song I heard often as a young person: “I gotta gal who’s six feet tall / sleeps in the kitchen with her feet in the hall.”

⁵¹ Niedecker’s grammatical figuration of the dynamics of marriage recalls Dickinson’s syntactic staging of the hazardous allure of conjugal union.

⁵² See Clark’s *Sentimental Modernism* for a discussion of the role of feminized sentimentalism in modernism. See also Golston, who reads this gendered dynamic into Zukosfky’s rejection of Surrealism, the very aesthetic that embodied for Niedecker the effusive, interiorized, “streaming, sometime screaming” impulses not welcome in Objectivism.

⁵³ As always, Niedecker is ambivalent on this subject. Despite her categorical statement “no better poetry than the quiet,” she concludes her letter to Corman: “Funny, I can’t get the roaring, ranting, filthy, spiritual *Kaddish* out of my mind” (*Between* 103).

⁵⁴ Several critics fruitfully read Niedecker’s themes and forms in a feminist context. See Jenkins, Tarlo, Clausen, Jowett, Perloff, Upton, Augustine, Peterson, Savage, and DuPlessis for a wide range of these readings.

⁵⁵ Writing to Zukofsky about a new distance in her correspondence with Corman, she mentions that a comment she made about his work may have offended him. She sees discussions of the why of poetry, rather than the how, as a nuisance and an unnecessary point of contention between friends: “I must write to Cid just to keep in touch—a kind of sensitive distance. Awhile back I said to him he used (did I say conversational metaphysics no) the metaphysical conversational in his poems and he took slight offense. Of course I meant merely metaphysical as all human beings are or can be, nuttn I’d want to go into. I wonder if Henry James went into critical discussions. If he did and it offended he’d probably bow a little and say softly ‘I shouldn’t have mentioned it, my friend’” (*Correspondence* 349).

⁵⁶ Her position as a female Objectivist makes it particularly important for Niedecker to resist the feminizing and thus deauthorizing effusiveness of the sentence. But it also makes it important for her to rethink the masculinist elements of Objectivist condensation that seeks to purify the body of the text.

⁵⁷ The title of Corman’s *Sun Rock Man*, a book Niedecker admired, is emblematic of this treatment of connectives. The book places objects together but, as with the nouns in its title, refuses to delineate how they are together.

⁵⁸ See Pinard for a brief investigation of both the biographical and formal implications of flood imagery for Niedecker. Pinard raises “an intriguing set of tensions: between mystery and clarity, between isolation and connection, between silence and

sound” (167). These same tensions inform my exploration of Niedecker’s use of prepositions and connectives to both limit and extend language.

⁵⁹ Other notable examples include “Some float off on chocolate bars,” which aligns flood waters with an alcoholic floating and a terror of something “wild” barely held at bay, and “My life is hung up,” which proposes that flood water can erase one’s identity or “face” (208, 193).

⁶⁰ Surprising juxtapositions were an important tool for Surrealist writers seeking access to the unconscious. Niedecker’s attraction for Surrealist models may have something to do with the importance of the flood in her understanding of mind and language.

⁶¹ See Augustine for an exploration of gender roles in Niedecker’s work. Of particular interest is her analysis of Niedecker’s short story “The Evening’s Automobiles,” in which the narrator returns to his home on the river and experiences the flood as a maternal source and an agent of rebirth.

⁶² She compares her new interest in poetry to a bird about to migrate, feeling “something akin to pain (and fear)” (*Between* 149).

⁶³ Though I have noted that the flood is both destructive and revitalizing, from this point I will emphasize the enlivening power of the flood. The strategies Niedecker uses to shore her poems against the threat of linguistic flooding—omission, silence, condensation—are the same strategies she uses to throw off the shackle of the sentence. Thus, though the emotional and intellectual valences of throwing off a shackle and fending off a flood are distinct, these two elements of Niedecker’s work are somewhat conflated in the following formal analysis.

⁶⁴ Though the noun “she” is farther from the verb than the other possible subjects, the notion that the “she” can still speak is reinforced by the appearance of direct speech in the final three lines, indicated by the pronoun “my.”

⁶⁵ While her exploration of longer forms later in her life was in a sense a departure, it was also a return. Niedecker’s earliest poems, which she identified with Surrealist influence, were also longer than poems in what is generally considered her representative condensed style.

⁶⁶ It was during this period that Niedecker wrote both “Lake Superior” and “Wintergreen Ridge,” which were much larger in scope and which she saw as a departure and a challenge. The significance of the turn or return to longer forms has been explored by critics like Davie and Penberthy (“Writing”). The formal elements I discuss in “My Life by Water” can be extended to both “Lake Superior” and “Wintergreen Ridge,” but I chose to discuss this shorter poem because the scope of my work does not allow for a full exploration of the longer ones, and I did not wish to give short shrift to their complexity.

⁶⁷ The possibility that the final line, “Water,” is the author’s signature supports this reading.

⁶⁸ Many of Niedecker’s poems use verbs to make unresolvable multiple connections that inflect the overall reading of the poem. In poems like “Smile” and “I hear the weather through the house,” the key verbs, “lay” and “breathing” respectively, can be read both transitively and intransitively (242, 181). Other interesting examples include ambiguities created by puns on verbs, such as kin/can in “Grampa’s got his old age pension” and the overlapping verb and noun “spoke” in “I walked” (100, 245).

⁶⁹ In addition to appearing in earlier poems like “Paul,” “Poet’s Work,” “Spring,” and “Wild Pigeon” (156, 194, 211, 235), this stanza is used in a few important poems after “My Life by Water,” most notably “Wintergreen Ridge” (247-57).

⁷⁰ Niedecker’s poetry tends toward using fewer and fewer periods in her later work. She frequently avoids final punctuation in the short poems of her middle years, but, since they are so short, many of them composed of a single sentence, this lack of punctuation as a separating force is less noticeable.

⁷¹ It is outside the scope of this work to perform a sustained close reading of any of Niedecker’s biographical poems. Though I discuss how they illustrate Niedecker’s use of ambivalent connectives in general terms, her biographical poems are distinct from one another in significant ways.

CHAPTER IV

“SOMEWHAT OF SOMETHING OTHER”:

ARTIFICE IN THE POETRY OF GWENDOLYN BROOKS

Criticism of black writing in America has shared with feminist criticism a recuperative stance: their charge has been to unearth those voices that were silenced in the past and to read the texts of black and women writers as evidence of a resistance to that silence or a courageous foray into territory previously denied them as speakers and subjects. As a black writer and a woman, Gwendolyn Brooks is often read as just such a speaker, breaking racist and sexist silences, and much of the criticism on Brooks's work seems to take as its premise Barbara Christian's claim that "if there is any persistent motif in [African American women's] literature, it is the illuminating of that which is perceived by others as not existing at all" ("Celie" 20). Walter Kaladjian's reading of Gwendolyn Brooks is typical of this tradition in that it understands her poetic voice as a response to the dual challenges of representing black and female experience. Kaladjian introduces Brooks by describing the place of black women's poetry in the American literary canon more generally:

The great white canon has not only functioned to exclude and expunge the literary history of people of color, but has served to reproduce denigrating stereotypes of black experience. Thus, the challenge for Afro-American writers concurs with the task of feminism, of retrieving women's past behind the back of patriarchy's demeaning representations of gender. (174)

Brooks's "task" as a black writer and a woman writer is, in this model, a double retrieval. She must rescue black experience and women's experience from imposed silences and the "demeaning representations" of white patriarchal culture.

However, while much of the criticism of Brooks takes authentic representation of black feminine experience as Brooks's goal, the representational undertakings of feminist and African American writers do not always appear to concur. In fact, Kaladjian directly follows his statement of concurrent tasks with a recognition of the conflict between Brooks's black and feminist challenges: "Making matters worse for Brooks, postwar sexism within the Afro-American community consigned black women to even more marginal roles" (174). Racism and sexism, especially as they are entrenched in Western feminism and black nationalist aesthetics, have often divided critics of black women writers along opposing racial and gender lines, and Gwendolyn Brooks's critics are no exception. Brooks's much talked-about 1967 black revolutionary awakening at a Fisk University writers conference and her subsequent move from Harper's to small black-owned presses provide a dramatic skirmish line for those seeking to situate Brooks either as a black writer or a woman writer. Black male critics, especially those directly involved in nationalist aesthetics like Haki Madhubuti, often argue that Brooks's most important and authentic work primarily illuminates black experience. Such critics tend to favor Brooks's later, post-Fisk, more directly black nationalist work and repudiate her earlier work as too personal or pitched for white audiences. On the other hand, white feminist critics often argue that Brooks's most important poems reveal previously unexplored or taboo areas of female experience. They tend to hold up Brooks's earlier volumes as feminist, or at least woman-centered, and claim that her feminist consciousness was later

subordinated to the masculinist elements of black nationalism. Suzanne Juhasz laments what she sees as struggle between identities in which femaleness loses to blackness:

Over the years Brooks has developed a black consciousness; in her fifties, she opened herself to revolution. But she has not developed at the same time a feminist consciousness. Blackness came and comes first in her life: because race oppression has been the most overt, the most threatening, race identity has also been foremost. (150)

Betsy Erkkila also argues that Brooks's concerns as a black writer stifle her as a woman: "In silencing or glossing over her historical needs, desires, voice, and experience as a black woman, Brooks's later work suggests the problematic place of black women in relation to the Black Power movement" (226). Whether these critics value racial or gender identity more highly or argue for complex and nuanced ways that these identities may cooperate, compete with, or mutually construct each other, they begin from the basic assumption that Brooks's poems are triumphs of speech over silence, and competing perspectives on her work almost always agree that Brooks's poems are part of a larger communal search—whether black, female, or both—for a more fully realized voice.¹

Thus, Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry has been read largely in terms of how it succeeds or fails at breaking the silences that have oppressed her as a black woman.² Brooks herself contributes to this evaluation of her work when she says, in interview after interview, that she wishes her poems to develop toward a greater capacity to speak to a wider audience of black people. She tells Eugenia Collier in a 1973 interview:

I am in transition. I want to reach all manner of black people. That's my urgent compulsion [. . .]. It will be a simple-looking poem but there will be subtleties

easily reached, I hope, by those who are interested in reaching them—
immediately enjoyable by black people who spend a great deal of their time in
taverns or the streets, black people who, perhaps, have dropped out of high
school. I still want to reach and appeal to such blacks. (69)

Brooks is conscious of her responsibilities to her audience, and she is interested in crafting a voice that communicates to readers. The poems themselves attest to this. Their constantly shifting speech registers, references to popular music, art, history, local landmarks, and neighborhood types, their exhortation and advice, all imply a speaker who wants to tell her listener something and expects her listener to understand. This kind of accessibility was important to Brooks throughout her life as a poet, a teacher, a member of her community, and an advocate for black people—especially the young—in Chicago and abroad.³

However, the focus on collective voice in Brooks's poetry, whether black voices or women's voices, can obscure how important certain kinds of silences are to Brooks's poetics. Criticism of her poetry must take into account the ways that her work speaks out and breaks silences, but it must not neglect how and when she chooses not to speak. Brooks sought a poetry that could speak to people in taverns, but she also wrote: "He can abash his barmecides; / The fantoccini of his range / Pass over" (123) and "Howas I handled my discordances / And prides and apoplectic ice, howas / I reined my charger, channeled the fit fume / of his most splendid honorable jazz" (389).⁴ Her strangeness, her difficulty, and her obscurity—the gaps and silences that recur in her poems—may be too often ignored because they do not seem to advance the vital role she has played as a public voice or her maternal position in twentieth-century black poetry, nurturing young

writers.⁵ But to hear the voice of Brooks's poems is also to hear their silences, to attend to the ways they both resist language's power and claim it. Her self-conscious role as a representative for black people and black women means that she must speak out, but her silences are also a part of the black female heritage she takes up. Voice and its refusal are both necessary strategies for empowerment, and Brooks's poetry avails itself of revelatory speech and protective silences. Brooks's relationship to a contradictory tradition that values both speech and silence as strategies for the empowerment of the community is complicated by her loyalty to the strange and idiosyncratic, the individual expression that is often at odds with the common. These complex overlapping allegiances—to speech and silence, to the shared and the singular—drive Brooks's experimentation with form, particularly through artifice, from the level of the word to the level of book organization.

Brooks's poems participate in a tradition of black women's writing that is concerned with the politics of representation, especially representations of speech or voice. As *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* announced in 1982, the numerous forces silencing black women's voices, among other things, indelibly shape black women's literature (Hull). By the very act of writing, these writers respond to a history that denied black life as the proper subject of literature and denied black people the human capacity to represent that life artfully; they also respond to a history that valued women as variously decorative or useful objects, as the subject matter of literature, perhaps, but not its speaking subject. Therefore, black women's poetry bears the responsibility of finding a poetic voice in which to speak for the silenced, and criticism of that poetry must make that voice heard. Audre Lorde puts the

situation thus: “An academic at Tuskegee discovers twenty-five to thirty Black writers from the American South who have never been mentioned in any bibliography. Most of these unheard artists are women. Black. Invisible words” (xi). Black women writers and critics of their work are undeniably invested in making the unheard heard and the invisible visible, in part because literary language is emphasized in African American history. Henry Louis Gates Jr. signals the importance of literary speech to the formation of black identity:

Slaves and ex-slaves met the challenge of the Enlightenment to their humanity by literally writing themselves into being through careful representations in language of the black self. Literacy, the very literacy of the printed book, stood as the ultimate parameter by which to measure the humanity of authors struggling to define an African self in Western letters. (*Signifying* 131)

Black writers have been burdened with the responsibility not only of expressing their humanity but demonstrating their humanity to a culture that denies it. Finding a voice that can break oppressive silences is, in black poetry, a matter of cultural survival. Gates also recognizes that a dehumanizing silence falls double on black women writers. He quotes Anna Julia Cooper’s 1892 assessment of this doubled silence: “One muffled strain in the Silent South, a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black Woman” (“Intro” 1). According to Gates, part of the success of black women writers is due to the “sheer energy that accompanies the utterance of new subject matter, a formalized breaking of the silence of black women as authors” (2).

Formerly the “voiceless note” of a “muffled chord,” black women’s writing is understandably intent on being heard.

Brooks’s poems share in the “sheer energy” of “new subject matter” and a “breaking of the silence.” From her first book forward, Brooks’s poems take black lives, and black women’s lives, unerringly as their subject. Despite discouragement from reviewers who felt that poems about black people’s lives were too specialized and not universal enough, or the more subtle racism of those who praised Brooks for writing on universal human themes “despite” being black and a woman, Brooks voices black and female experiences: she writes about white racism, hair straightening, and the vicissitudes of color prejudice within black communities, while she also insists that supposedly universal human experience—childbirth and war, love, jealousy, murder, and the dreadful emptiness of prayer—is central to her portrayal of black men and women’s lives. The importance of claiming a communal black voice is evident in Brooks’s choice of subject matter and in her devotion to speaking about and to her own people in Chicago. “The Wall,” a poem on the dedication of a Chicago mural of heroic black figures, depicts a poet who “mount[s] the rattling wood” to address the gathered celebrants: “An emphasis is paroled. / The old decapitations are revised, / the dispossessions beakless. // And we sing” (445).⁶ The multiplicity of black expression—out-spoken “boy-men on roofs,” “Val, / a little black stampede” who “fists out ‘Black Power!,’” and the “Heroes of [the] Wall”—is summarized by an attainment of voice that has the power to “revise” and make “beakless” “dispossessions.” In the end, these voices are gathered into a triumphant shared conclusion: “And we sing.” The job of the poet, it appears, is to weave the individual voices of the community into a song that is capable of revising a narrative in

which they are supposed to remain silent. Such singing takes away the oppressive culture's power to dispossess, making it beakless, ineffectual. This strain runs throughout Brooks's poetry, and silences are frequently figured as something to be resisted through empowered voice. In a later poem specifically directed "To Black Women," Brooks enjoins her "Sisters, where there is cold silence— / no hallelujahs, no hurrahs at all, no handshakes, no neon red or blue, no smiling faces— / prevail" (502). Brooks's poetry seeks a language that can "prevail" by bringing hallelujahs, hurrahs, and handshakes to the "cold silence" that has marked the dominant culture's reception of black women's voices.

Perhaps more surprising than the importance of speaking out in Brooks's work and in black women's literature more generally, however, is the way such speaking out takes shape against a backdrop of American national narratives. Twentieth-century black aesthetics is closely tied to a black nationalism that rejects American cultural values as the tools of oppression and promotes instead a lost or repressed African heritage as a form of resistance to the destruction or appropriation of black culture by white. As Addison Gayle Jr. explains in his introduction to *The Black Aesthetic*, "the problem of the de-Americanization of black people lies at the heart of the Black Aesthetic" (xxii). Gayle traces this de-Americanization back to W. E. B. Du Bois, calling his expatriation to France a symbolic "denunciation of America":

His act proclaimed to black men the world over that the price for becoming an American was too high. It meant, at least, to desert one's heritage and culture; at the most, to become part of all "that has been instrumental in wanton destruction of life, degradation of dignity, and contempt for the human spirit." (xxii)

For the descendants of Africans brought as slaves to build the new world, considered fractionally human by the nascent American democracy and systematically denied a share in the much-touted American dream, American culture is necessarily symbolic of oppression and repression.⁷ Thus, black writers often refuse to claim an American heritage, opting instead for a definition of black identity that is inherently not American. John O'Neal's "Black Arts: Notebook" announces black opposition to Americanness in no uncertain terms:

We are simply not an American People. America exists as a contradiction to our People-hood. America is the historic mentor of the oppression of our People. America serves as the bulwark of colonial, neocolonial, and imperialistic forces that support and maintain the oppression of our People and other non-European Peoples in the world today. (48)

Black aesthetics, especially as it is influenced by black nationalism, considers black and American identities fundamentally opposed. This kind of oppositional structure is also evident in literary criticism that posits a clash between African American literature and American literature more broadly. Critics of African American literature often argue that African formal and thematic elements resist white or American forms and themes in a literary struggle for authenticity and a truer, more African, black identity.⁸ The process of finding a voice and speaking in an authentically black way, then, is often a process of claiming a decolonized language. The disjunction between the American dream and black realities is evident in a poem like Brooks's "Strong Men, Riding Horses," in which a man, Lester, compares his own life to what he sees in a movie Western: "Strong Men, riding horses. In the West / On a range five hundred miles [. . .] I am not like that. I pay

rent, am addled / By illegible landlords, run, if robbers call [. . .] I am not brave at all.” Unlike the “Strong Men” of American Western mythology, Lester does not stride boldly across wide-open spaces but rather uses his “mannerisms” as “camouflage” and his speech to “word-wall off that broadness of the dark.” The space of the American West is dangerous and something to be warded against. The “rentless” men of American admiration are just “not like” Lester, and the difference weighs on him (329).⁹ American mythology fails to represent Lester’s life, and it also causes him harm. As Brooks puts it in another poem: “The National Anthem vampires at the blood” (383).

However, despite the importance of de-Americanization to the emergence of black nationalism and aesthetics, Brooks’s poems, like much other black writing, often speak in a startlingly American vocabulary: in fact, in the very language of pioneering exploration that is inapplicable to Lester’s life in “Strong Men, Riding Horses.” Joanne Gabbin’s introduction to an anthology of African American poetry praises the collected poets in terms that evoke the religious mission of early Puritan settlers: “These poets have given voice to the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s and continue to cry in the wilderness of America today” (xx). Gabbin’s formulation aligns black voices with the original American civilizing mission. She may revise the terms of Puritan missionary rhetoric—making mainstream white culture into the wilderness that awaits the saving message of a lone black voice—but she preserves the foundational American narrative of culture won from the wilderness by courageous exploration. Houston Baker Jr. also affiliates the development of black literature with a pioneer project when he argues for Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* as the work of a “pioneering civilization” made up of “Afro-American settlers bringing into existence [. . .] a new American ‘folk hero’” (84).¹⁰

This kind of language suggests the ongoing appeal of a black American literary identity that, rather than relying on opposition or decolonization, inhabits the familiar role of explorer.

American pioneer values are frequently invoked in discussions of black writing, and even work that is less directly concerned with Americanness shows an exploratory bent.¹¹ Audre Lorde celebrates the continuity of black women's literature in the language of territory and cartography: "Black women's words are testaments that we were there, bridges through one another's realities [. . .] and no matter where we find ourselves to be, we can plot each other's words like roadmaps toward a future" (xii). Here pioneering black women writers mark the landscape with their words in order to lead other women forward into the new territories they have explored. This kind of language is especially common in criticism of black women's literature. Calvin Hernton's "The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers" is an illustrative example of a frequent theme. The title of the essay responds to Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and implicitly doubles the territory that black women writers, who scale both the racial and the sexual mountain, must cover. It is clear that, for Hernton, black women's writing is a pioneering endeavor; his language combines a miner's and an archeologist's excitement, delighting in discovery and figuring black women's experiences as untapped resources awaiting an adventurer:

[Black women writers and critics] are wielding their pens like spades, unearthing forbidden treasures buried in old soil. They are bringing forth new, uncut literary jewels of their lives, in which are reflected for the first time the truer wages of our

history and our conduct. It is an exciting, adventurous literature and scholarship.

(203)

Black women's literature, despite feminist and black aesthetics impulses to resist American narratives, also employs those narratives when it takes their experience as territory to be explored and their poetry as a journey into the unknown or unsaid. However, where the mainstream American pioneer tradition is focused on the success of the individual, often exiled or otherwise removed from his community, black and feminist literary exploration is valued precisely because it broadens the expressive landscape for a group.

Though Gwendolyn Brooks is most often placed in the pioneering tradition in black women's writing, she also works within a counter tradition that, though sometimes overlooked, is crucial to formulations of a black aesthetic: a tradition that values silence and resists language as a reifying tool that fixes and appropriates both black and female experience. Subversion of dominant language structures is an important part of black literary history. The black vernacular tradition, especially in slave songs and folk stories, is marked by indirection, misdirection, and coded language. Gates quotes Frederick Douglass's description of slaves singing cryptic field songs to illustrate the importance of restricting access to meaning: "the neologisms that Douglass's friends created, 'unmeaning jargon' to standard English speakers, were 'full of meaning' to the blacks, who were literally defining themselves in language" (*Signifying* 67). The songs are meaningless to white ears, their words effectively silent, but they communicate strength and resistance to hearers who understand their code. Similarly, Barbara Johnson claims that euphemism, ellipsis, and understatement, all forms of resisting language, are

important elements in the development of African American poetry because they allow black writers to delegitimize racist discourse by refusing to acknowledge it (206-08). For Johnson, euphemistic passivity in the face of racism is a step toward a later more empowered voice, but for others, this kind of silence remains a crucial part of a black literary expression that has come into its own.

Two of the most influential theories of black literary aesthetics, Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* and Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*, both take coded language, misdirection, and language that is silent to white hearers to be significant to both the history and current reality of black literature.¹² This refusal to speak to particular audiences by using coded language is doubled when the writing avails itself of "codes and symbols which may be understood only within the Veil of Blackness and femaleness" (Braxton xxiv). Refusing to speak to or for white audiences is an important political aspect of silence in black literature and especially so to black women writers, who may also speak in a language silent to many male readers. A poem like "To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals" is explicitly directed not only to black women but to those who cultivate the "natural" beauty advocated by black nationalism. The title of the poem itself implies a sort of refusal: by naming its recipients, it also tacitly excludes anyone else. The insistence of the second-person "you," used eighteen times in twice as many lines, unremittingly limits the audience to the "sisters" it intimately addresses and praises.¹³ Too, the poem deflects readers who do not qualify as the speaker's "sisters" by its use of terms that gain special meaning in the context of black women's hair. "Sisters!" the poem begins, "I love you. / Because you love you. / Because you are erect. / Because you are also bent. / In season, stern, kind. / Crisp, soft—in season" (459). The contrasting

pair “erect” (which evokes a rigid straightness) and “bent” has layers of meaning for those who have had “to look a hot comb in the teeth,” as do “crisp,” “soft,” and “in season.” Stephen Henderson calls such words “mascons” (an abbreviation for “massive concentration,” coined during the early days of space exploration) and argues that they connote a complex of cultural meaning “too flexible for the establishment, too allusive, too cryptic, too dangerous” (43-44). Flexibility of meaning is crucial to Brooks, and in “To Those of My Sisters” this ability is figured as a function of black women’s bodies, particularly their hair. In fact—though allusions to the biblical poem “To everything there is a season” indicate that a “natural” black style is appropriate to a particular time as part of a cycle of changes—the sisters’ hair equips them to handle all seasons and is not limited to the ascendancy of a certain style: “You reach, in season. / You subside, in season. / And All / below the richrough righttime of your hair” (459). The book of Ecclesiastes posits that everything, even opposites like joy and sorrow, is right in its own time, but Brooks’s poem argues that the women’s hair is an aegis under which they supercede opposing forces, uniting them as “richrough” and transcending them in an eternal “righttime.” As Henderson describes, flexibility and allusiveness are useful tools for black aesthetics, but they are also cryptic and dangerous to others, refusing interpretation by outsiders. For a poem to resist interpretation by white and male readers—leaving those without the benefit of “naturals” unaddressed by the poem, implying that some readers fit only a single season—is a radical kind of silence: it declares allegiances that may incur the disapproval of what Henderson calls the “establishment.” Resistance to interpretation by the establishment is a risky move for a poet who already has to fight to be given a hearing, but Brooks nevertheless takes

advantage of this important political and aesthetic strategy, using silences to declare her poetry to be at the service of a black and female community.

But a limited address or a coded or private language is only silent to those on the outside, and silence in black women's literature and in Gwendolyn Brooks's poems is more than a strategically blank face turned to white or male eavesdroppers; it is also part of a tradition of African American literature that resists not only white patriarchal language but all language as symbolically oppressive:

The problem, for [black writers and critics], can perhaps be usefully stated in the irony implicit in the attempt to posit a 'black self' in the very Western languages in which blackness itself is a figure of absence, a negation. Ethnocentrism and "logocentrism" are profoundly interrelated in Western discourse as old as the *Phaedrus* of Plato, in which one finds one of the earliest figures of blackness as an absence, a figure of negation. (Gates, "Jungle" 7)

Gates begins here by explaining why Western languages in particular are not suited to speaking about black selfhood, but he extends his critique to Western "logocentrism," the primacy of the word, not merely Western words. If ethnocentrism and logocentrism are intertwined, then a refusal of meaningful speech may also be a refusal of racist epistemologies. Gates's concept of a figurative free play or indeterminacy of meaning rooted in a black folk tradition of competitive language games that is distinctive of African American culture, called "Signifyin(g)," is often a coded language used to mock master discourses, but he also argues that signifyin(g) refuses discourse altogether: "the Afro-American rhetorical strategy of Signifyin(g) is a rhetorical practice that is not engaged in the game of information-giving" (*Signifying* 52). Language that refuses to

give information is a form of silence; thoroughly ambiguous speech, often registered as nonsense, does not communicate content: it says nothing because it says too many things. A tendency toward nonrational or nonlinear uses of language constitutes a resistance to language inasmuch as language is tied to what Christian calls “rationalist [. . .] intellectual discourse”:

The usual modes of European/American intellectual production were not accessible to or particularly effective for Afro-Americans. That is, the thoroughly rationalist approach of European intellectual discourse might have seemed to them to be too one-dimensional, too narrow, more easily co-opted than narratives, poetry, nonlinear forms where the ambiguities and contradictions of their reality could be more freely expressed and that in these forms they could address themselves to various audiences—their own folk as well as those readers of the dominant culture. (“History” 16-17)

In Christian’s account of “Afro-American intellectual history,” black literature has silenced Western rationality in order to express better the ambiguities of black experience and to avoid being co-opted by a narrowing linearity of thought and representation. The use of silence to resist the appropriation of black experience into master narratives seems particularly important to black women writers, perhaps because, as racial and sexual others to dominant white male culture, they have been rhetorically situated as doubly nonlinear and nonrational.

A suspicion of Western discourse and of discourse more generally is evident in African American women’s literature despite the importance of speaking out. Even as black women’s literature speaks for generations of women who were silenced by racism

and sexism, black women writers may also be particularly aware of the limitations of language and of the difficulties of speaking for others precisely because the language of others has failed to represent or include them. Michelle Wallace responds to Alice Walker in just such terms: “the premise [. . .]—that black women writers should speak for previous generations of silenced black women—posed certain conceptual difficulties for me. First, no one can really speak *for* anybody else. Inevitably, we silence others that we may speak at all” (59). Writers like Wallace do not definitively value speech as a remedy to oppressive silencing; instead, as Wallace suggests, language may be ineluctably tied to that very silencing, and to use it may implicate the speaker. As Mae Henderson puts it, “it is not that black women, in the past, have had nothing to say, but rather that they have had no say. The absence of black female voices has allowed others to inscribe, or write, and ascribe to, or read, them” (124-25). The process of writing and reading, of language, has been a means of oppression and theft and, thus, may be mistrusted and resisted rather than claimed as liberatory. Jennifer Cognard Black finds that silence can be a strategy that “renounces the charge to bear witness” and can “resist conscription and [. . .] forge an intricate and versatile counternarrative” (42). She argues that refusal of language is important because “under the slavery of consciousness, if language indicates the power of whiteness, then names are suspect, for whites delimit the practices of naming” (48); further, “the retelling of the tale [of slavery] solidifies white despotism and, in effect, the importance of white record as something that must be acknowledged as well as disputed” (49). She invokes a paradoxical relationship to language that she considers fundamental to “African American colonialist stories”: “a paradox evolves: speak of a thing, and you conventionalize it; leave it unspoken, and you may very well erase it” (54). Where Black

discusses narrative silences in African American writing (particularly refusing to pass down a history of slavery to new generations), in poetry, the strategies of refusal that Black notes become formal ones. If naming and narrative—the foundations of language—are tools of oppression, then language itself must be subverted. Brooks's poetry is part of a tradition of refusing speech and employing silences to undo white, male, Western, oppressive uses of language by resisting ordinary, communicative language altogether. The obscurity and the strangeness that, in some estimations, exclude her writing from an authentic communal voice can be reconciled with a shared tradition of silence—a strategic multiplicity, difficulty, and undecideability—that plays a principal part in a black and female aesthetics of resistance.

Silence is important in Brooks's communal poetics not only because of what it refuses but because of what it surrounds. In this sense, it again joins with a traditionally American concern: the antithesis to the pioneering impulse, that is, the desire to preserve untouched wilderness. In black literature, the American tradition of awe before an overwhelming natural force is transformed into an awe before an irreducible, even mystic blackness that is, by definition, beyond words. Thus, despite the concurrent importance of speaking out, words must be recognized as insufficient in the face of an essential supralinguistic blackness that authorizes black experience as spiritually vital and fundamentally resistant to cooption. Du Bois's concept that black life is separated from white by a veil is often cited as an explanation of the need for black writers to pull that veil aside and claim a more fully realized voice for black people. However, the veil also confers a kind of mystic power: Du Bois argues that "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and *gifted* with second-sight in this American world" (3, emphasis

added). In this metaphor, the veil, or caul, obscures the features of the child, marking him as different while also granting him special knowledge or power. Black literature and criticism often take advantage of the gift of the veil, claiming that black experience inherently exceeds language, even as they pull that veil aside to show the ordinariness as well as the beauty and complexity of black humanity. Larry Neal evokes the primacy of the supralinguistic when he claims that “Black Arts” are “more concerned with the vibrations of the Word, than with the Word itself. Like signifying” (15). Though readers and writers of black literature attribute mystery to different sources, they consistently invoke silences, vibrations, or unspeakable truths as an essential element of black literature.¹⁴ Like her femaleness, Brooks’s blackness is considered powerful because it is unspeakable: to name it is to diminish it and subject it to a rationalization associated with violence and oppression. Like the American wilderness, it must remain uncultivated in order to retain its spiritual strength.

Critics of black literature, despite their frequent investment in the rhetoric of speaking out, are also sensitive to this strain in black aesthetics, as evidenced by their tentativeness to characterize exactly what black literature is or does. If black experience can only be hinted at in language that is insufficient to it, then a critical understanding of that language of hints and indeterminacy must also cultivate certain silences. For example, Stephen Henderson’s influential 1973 book on oral and musical influences in black literature is called *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, but the introduction immediately undermines the expository tenor of the book’s title with its own subtitle, “The Form of Things Unknown.” This contradictory attitude toward explaining black poetry—the need to shed the light of criticism on work that has been ignored or

misunderstood while simultaneously maintaining its authority as unknown and unknowable—is evident at the close of Henderson’s introduction:

Finally, I have tried to postulate a concept that would be useful in talking about what Black people feel is their distinctiveness, without being presumptuous enough to attempt a description or definition of it. This quality or condition of Black awareness I call *saturation*. I intend it as a sign, like the mathematical symbol for infinity, or the term “Soul.” It allows us to talk about the thing, even to some extent to use it, though we can’t, thank God! ultimately abstract and analyze it: it must be experienced. (68)

Henderson’s use of the capitalized term “Soul” and his insistence on the provisionality of any term that describes black “distinctiveness” is mystical in the sense that it posits a central, identifying experience that requires recognition but exceeds language. Black literature may use a pioneering language to explore the unknown lands of experience, but it is also invested in maintaining a fundamental unspeakability of black experience on which its distinctiveness depends. Black aesthetics, and by extension black experience, must remain unspoken in order to remain dynamic and authentic.¹⁵ Despite the importance of speaking out to Brooks’s place as a progenitor of contemporary African American women’s poetry, her work consistently complicates the popular picture of the trailblazing outspoken poet who breaks oppressive silences. Though she strives to speak of and to a community, silences are also profoundly useful to that community.

Gwendolyn Brooks has always actively situated her work within a tradition of black writing, and her work is marked by both the outspoken and reticent strains so important in African American literature and even further emphasized in black women’s

literature. Criticism of Brooks has most often focused on her role as trailblazer. Brooks's triumphs are cited in the language of exploration and her poems are maps leading others into new lands: "she rose from modest roots to become the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry and blazed a trail while winning many other honors and distinctions" (Mickle 3); "she was a fiercely independent writer who borrowed from both European and African American literary traditions to write poetry that would cut her own path" (Rugoff 21).¹⁶ Cheryl Clarke also reads Brooks's poetry in terms of the exploration of new spaces:

Her simultaneous rejection of perceived white cultural control and her embracing of the new black expressivity opens space for the varied voices of black women poets beginning to publish in greater numbers than during the New Negro Renaissance, nearly fifty years before. Brooks explores the possibility of new space, new speech, and new agency. (46)

These formulations cast Brooks as a pioneer poet who explores unknown or restricted territory; she says a new thing, and she pushes at cultural borders that restrict black women's expression. Significantly, her exploratory successes are not praised as personal victories of her poetic language but as survival strategies for black culture in general and extensions of the poetic territory for all black women writers.¹⁷

In addition, though they are often ignored in criticism that emphasizes her role as a spokesperson, Brooks's silences are also communally inflected. In his biography of Brooks, George Kent quotes an early poem as evidence of Brooks's growing black consciousness and connects such a consciousness to her appreciation of silences:

Growing in her also was a racial pride for those who walked sturdily, and rebuke for those who did not appreciate blacks, including blacks themselves [. . .]. In her thoughts of the twenty-one-year-old heavyweight champion boxer Joe Louis, she found praise of his silence and seeming coldness, and she expressed contempt for men who were afraid to be silent. “Unspoken words are stronger, / Ungiven smiles are sweet; / Staid ice is the best cover / For strength’s resourceful heat” (“Song for Joe Louis,” June 28, 1935). (*Life* 36)

If “unspoken words are stronger” and this unspoken strength is a resource for black art and culture, it is Brooks’s paradoxical challenge as a poet to speak out in a “shrill spelling of blackness” (Brooks, *Part One* 83) and to make a space for the “unspoken words” of black strength in the language of poetry.¹⁸ This doubleness is evident in Brooks’s proposal that Western Christmas traditions be supplemented by an African celebration that will be more authentically black: “I see, feel, and hear a potential celebration as African colors—thorough, direct. A thing of shout but of African quietness, too, because in Africa these tonals can almost coincide. A clean-throated singing” (*Part One* 78). Brooks’s vision of authentic celebration is “A thing of shout but of African quietness, too,” and it is, for Brooks, a black African heritage that can bring together these two impulses. A simultaneous speaking and silence defines a black essence in poetry. While she argues that “Every Negro poet has ‘something to say.’ Simply because he is a Negro; he cannot escape having important things to say,” this “saying” can also be remarkably nonverbal: “His mere body, for that matter, is an eloquence. His quiet walk down the street is a speech to the people. Is a rebuke, is a plea, is a school” (“Poets” 312). While speaking out seems inevitable in this formulation, a “quiet walk”

can also be “a speech to the people,” and this duality is part of what it means to Brooks to be a black poet.¹⁹ The valuation of black experience as resistant to and even unavailable to language plays a crucial role in Brooks’s poetics at the same time that she self-consciously develops a poetics of speaking out to wider audiences.²⁰

A poem like “I love those little booths at Benvenuti’s” shows Brooks poised between the “shrill spelling” and the quietness that she sees as equally important to an authentically black aesthetic. The poem narrates the experience of white tourists to Bronzeville—the predominantly black section of Chicago that figures so prominently in her work. The tourists go to Benvenuti’s, a Bronzeville restaurant, to observe “tropical truths” about the “dusky folk, so clamorous!” The observers have come to revel in the otherness of the “dusky folk” they “dissect” with their gaze. They arrive expecting “antics” and “lurching dirt,” which the poem immediately juxtaposes to the “very large cabana, / small palace” that the onlookers arrange for in Venice (126). But instead of the “knives” and the “ditty— / dirty” with which they come ready to titillate themselves (126), they find “a vendor tidily encased” and ordinary “paper napkins in a water glass” (127). In this sense, the poem speaks out on behalf of the black community. It describes black life in an aggressively ordinary way that ruptures white expectations of difference: “The colored people arrive, sit firmly down, / Eat their Express Spaghetti, their T-bone steak, / Handling their steel and crockery with no clatter” (127). This descriptive outspokenness is matched by a formal emphasis on linguistic performance. In particular, the poem uses frequent rhyme and alliteration to call attention to the literariness of the language. The first stanza sets the stage for the insistent—if unpredictable—rhymes scattered throughout the poem:

They get to Benvenuti's. There are booths
To hide in while observing tropical truths
About this—dusky folk, so clamorous!
So colorfully incorrect,
So amorous,
So flatly brave!
Boothed-in, one can detect,
Dissect.

One knows and scarcely knows what to expect. (126)

The speaker manipulates language with assurance and ease in order to reject the reduction of black people to stereotypes and jesters. The self-consciously artistic language claims a poetic mastery and authority that mocks white expectations of blackness as excessive, clowning, or radically other; this poetically authoritative voice articulates a silenced version of black life—the tidily straight, even bourgeois, quotidian—that disrupts the fetishization and consumption of a supposedly essential black duskiness, tropicality, or savagery. The subject matter of the poem constitutes an extension of language's territory in itself, but the foregrounding of artifice also asserts that poetic artistry and virtuosity—literary language, the supposed bastion of the universally human—is a useful tool for expressing black life.

And yet, despite its use of traditionally poetic language, the poem also limits language or intelligibility in order to ward off intrusion by outsiders. The white observers “stab their stares,” but ultimately “they feel refused.” And, though the tourists attempt to access and vicariously enjoy black life through their gaze, the refusal of access is notably

about sound. They come expecting music, loudness: “so clamorous,” “not bottled up,” “sexual soprano,” “and praying in the bass, partial, unpretty” (126). Though they hear music, it is not “tropical” or “incorrect” but decorously middle-class: “They play ‘They All Say I’m the Biggest Fool’ / And ‘Voo Me On the Vot Nay’” and “‘New Lester / Leaps In’ and ‘For Sentimental Reasons.’” The “subtle treason” of the fact that “The colored people will not ‘clown’” is, in the poem, a treasonous quiet that, in turn, silences the tourists and, more importantly, thwarts their expectations. This disappointment is figured as language trouble: “The absolute stutters, and the rationale / Stoops off in astonishment.” The refusal of the black people in Benvenuti’s to make noise also silences the racist rationale of difference that is available to those who would dissect them, leaving them unable to report what they’ve seen: “But how shall they tell people they have been / out Bronzeville way?” Their language is, unlike the language of the poem, incapable of reporting black life as it is, only black life as they expected it to be. Their words fail, even down to the basic vocabulary they come prepared with: the quotation marks around “folk” and “clown” emphasize the inadequacy of these terms to the reality of the situation (127). The silences of the folk in Benvenuti’s, their “quiet walk” and “staid ice,” cause a crisis of language for the white observers who are no longer certain how to represent them.

In addition, the poem produces disruptive silences in its form. Though it uses poeticity to speak out for a group, it also resists such showiness. For instance, rhyme is one of the most assertive elements of poetic language here. Though rhyme is, in one sense, a marker of literariness, the irregular placement of the rhyming pairs—which appear sometimes internally, sometimes ending three lines in a row, and sometimes

separated by as many as two stanzas and eight lines—runs counter to traditional literary expectations, which are signaled by the relatively conventional rhyme of the opening couplet. The poem is noisily musical; it is “clamorous” and “colorfully incorrect” where the diners are not, smuggling in the “hot, not bottled up” music that is refused to the tourists.²¹ There is some danger here that the form of the poem itself will provide a show of “tropical truths” for white readers analogous to the Benvenuti’s tourists. But, in the last stanza, this music is abruptly silenced:

The colored people will not “clown.”

The colored people arrive, sit firmly down,

Eat their Express Spaghetti, their T-bone steak,

Handling their steel and crockery with no clatter,

Laugh punily, rise, go firmly out of the door. (127)

The poem lands on a strong rhyme, “clown” and “down,” just before ending with its longest succession of lines that are not rhymed with any others. The couplet, separated by a stanza break, emphasizes rhyme’s absence in the final lines. The conspicuous lack of clatter and music, both thematically and formally, shuts a door in the face of the outsiders looking in: the poem refuses to make its expected music, ending with relatively unadorned language and prosaic cadences. Further, the contrast between the linguistic performance earlier in the poem and these firmly plain lines recasts the poem’s musicality. It is not the show of essential “dirty, rich, carmine, hot” black musicality the spectators and readers may have been looking for but an aesthetic tool that can be picked up or set down depending on the task at hand.

But Brooks's relationship to a tradition that makes both speaking out and keeping quiet defining features of black and female group identity is deeply complicated by her loyalty to the strange and distinctive. The particularity, even peculiarity, of many of Brooks's poems is a fundamental element of her work. Though she often prizes accessibility, her poetry is also strange and reticent. These moments of difficulty or unintelligibility amount to a remarkable idiosyncrasy in poetry so often valued for its accessibility and attainment of shared voice.²² Though most readers agree that Brooks's poems have a political, or at least a social element, many also observe that her political statements—if she can be said to make political statements in her poetry—are often oblique, understated, ambiguous, or implied, subordinated to the unique experiences of the personages who inhabit her poems and to the style in which they are expressed. Maria Mootry considers this “wide-angled, ironic, slanted vision” part of a feminist poetics that represents women's lives without fully subjecting their experience to a broader system of discourse in which “women are either misnamed or occulted or totally appropriated” (“Slant” 181). Raymond Malewitz also connects Brooks's difficulty to female identity, arguing that “she challenges her readers through a language of what could be called motivated ambiguity or, more polemically, a feminine semiotics of black empowerment” (533). Critics like Mootry and Malewitz contend that such ambiguity is a feminist refusal of appropriation into masculine forms of rhetoric, but the difficulty that they observe is also part of Brooks's resistance to allowing the individual to be dissolved into the group. When she speaks out or remains silent about black experience, blackness is the distinctive experience that she prevents from being misnamed or appropriated by white homogeneity. When she speaks out or remains silent about women's experience, she

prevents it from being swallowed up by male homogeneity. In these cases, her loyalty to the particular is also in service of a shared identity. But her resistance to homogeneity likewise extends to the singular being, and it comes in conflict with her communal values when she resists blackness or femaleness or even ordinary language itself as homogenizing forces. Her advice for “Black Woman” clearly separates personhood from shared identity:

Black Woman must remember, through all the prattle about walking or not walking three or twelve steps behind or ahead of “her” male, that her personhood precedes her femalehood; that, sweet as sex may be, she cannot endlessly brood on Black Man’s blondes, blues, and blunders. She is a person in the world—with wrongs to right, stupidities to outwit, *with* her man when possible, on her own when not. And she is only here to enjoy. She will be here, like any other, once only. Therefore she must, in the midst of tragedy and hatred and neglect, in the midst of her own efforts to purify, mightily enjoy the readily available: sunshine and pets and children and conversation and games and travel (tiny or large) and books and walks and chocolate cake. (*Part One* 204)

Though she argues most directly that “personhood precedes femalehood,” her reasoning—that a person is primarily responsible to her own “readily available” life as distinct from whatever “tragedy and hatred and neglect” she may face—suggests that personhood precedes blackness as well. Though this articulation of individual identity came late in Brooks’s life, throughout her career Brooks writes for this particular “person in the world” as much as she writes for “Black Woman.”²³ Indeed, the competing values of voice and silence that drive her experiments in search of a publically resonant poetics

are also at play in her work to carve out a space for individual experience within—and sometimes against—larger group narratives.²⁴

In addition to blazing a trail for language that can reverse the silencing of black and female experience, Brooks also works to craft a language that is better able to express discrete identities or experiences that may be silenced or ignored or may be inexpressible in ordinary language. This is important to Brooks when she pushes language to express black and female experiences that do not have a place in white, male-dominated poetic traditions, but she also experiments in order to voice the experiences of individual people who do not have a place in the common language more generally. For Brooks, the poet must attend to the specificity of experiences and perspectives, prize her own sense of language, and not surrender to pressures to speak in the voice of another. This can mean black writers avoiding the imposition of white expectations, but it is also important that the particular voice remain distinct from exterior impositions of all kinds. Brooks's view that poetry is a search for a singular voice is most clear in her advice to young writers. In *A Young Poet's Primer*, she exhorts would-be poets to read the work of other writers but, above all, to credit their own lives and minds as a source of poetry—what she calls “Your Poem.” Though *A Young Poets' Primer* is at times aimed explicitly at a black audience, it is most concerned with affirming the value of personal experience for young poets. Item 20 in the list of advisements makes this clear. In it, Brooks gives her students permission to write about anything, but, ultimately, what qualifies a subject for inclusion in a poem—be it “Malcolm X, Mao, mice, mountains, [or] mercy”—is that it is “what you REALLY think and feel. What YOU think. What YOU feel” (12). The authenticity emphasized by the capitalized “REALLY” is compromised by thoughts and feelings that

do not come from the “YOU” that writes the poem.²⁵ In order to devise a language capable of expressing the singular experience, Brooks advocates originality and experimentation. The new territory that Brooks pushes language into is, in addition to denied or ignored black and female experience, particular personal experience.

But, like her commitment to attaining communal voice, Brooks’s individualist voice coexists with strategic silences. Just as Brooks uses silences to resist the flattening out of black experience by racial stereotypes, she also uses silences to refuse the disappearance of the strange and idiosyncratic into the common—even when that commonality is a valued shared black identity or sisterhood. Her silences are as much about shielding the singular as they are about guarding blackness or femaleness, and when identity-based poetics require a sacrifice of idiosyncratic expression or a revelation of a private self, Brooks resists such shared expression.²⁶ In fact, Kent argues that, despite her “gift to the reader of a lyric essence,” she also acknowledges “the irreducible measure of aloneness borne by man and woman alike.” This essential aloneness resists language and requires silences. For instance, Kent argues that a regard for such isolation leads Brooks, in her autobiography, to omit many of the details of her life, which reflects a belief that is central to Brooks’s poetry: there are some parts of one’s essence that cannot be “render[ed] as a message from soul to soul” (“Preface” 34).²⁷ Just as blackness or femininity is ultimately unavailable to language, so is the individual.²⁸ This is not only because language is not able to express the “irreducible measure of aloneness” but because the poet guards that solitude by deliberately refusing language.

Thus, in addition to balancing between communal speaking out and strategic silences, Brooks’s poems also balance between pushing language to express the

idiosyncractic while also using silences to deflect intrusions on the singular. This is perhaps most evident in her portrait poems. Many of these—that is, poems frequently named after the single character they describe—praise people for being idiosyncratic. Poems like “Memorial to Ed Bland,” “the rites for Cousin Vit,” and “Bronzeville Man with a Belt in the Back” memorialize those who do not fit in and who are in some way incomprehensible or excessive (79-80, 125, 362): like the bird in “A light and diplomatic bird,” they are “admirably strange” (123). But in addition to celebrating their strangeness by expressing it, the poems also resist the recuperation of that strangeness into the common language of the group. For example, “Naomi” shows Brooks simultaneously representing particularity and using silences to sustain such difference against the homogenizing of shared language:

Too foraging to blue-print or deploy!—
To lift her brother;
Or tell dull mother
That is not it among the dishes and brooms,
It is damper
Than what you will wipe out of sills and down from the
mouldings of rooms
And dump from the dirty-clothes hamper;

Or say “Do not bother
To hug your cheese and furniture”
To her small father;

Or to register at all the hope of her hunt or say what

It was not.

(It was, by diligent caring,

To find out what life was for.

For certainly what it was not for was forbearing.) (374)

Naomi's exploratory urge is irreconcilable with her family's values. She is foraging for something that can't be found among her mother's "dishes and brooms" or her father's "cheese and furniture." Naomi's individualist urge "by diligent caring, / to find out what life was for" is inexplicable to her family, and the valuation of voice that is normally considered part of Brooks's communal role is here almost anti-communal. The poem voices Naomi's rejection of shared values and her search for what she "REALLY think[s] and feel[s]" (Brooks, *Young* 12). But it also uses silence to prevent Naomi's "foraging" for a different way of life from being appropriated into common language. The poem begins by describing her search as "Too foraging to blue-print or deploy!—": because she is seeking something new, she cannot explain it to others or send them down a similar path.²⁹ The rest of the poem acts out this inability: it describes what "it" is not, but it cannot, until the end of the poem, say what it is. Like mystical revelation, what Naomi forages for can only be described by negation. Further, despite the poem's efforts at explanation, Naomi herself is "too foraging" to "register at all the hope of her hunt or say what it was not," emphasizing that experiences exceeding the group's expectations are,

by nature, incommunicable to that community. The final parenthetical statement appears to undermine the silence the poem has built around Naomi's search by baldly stating her goal. However, the parentheses imply that the utterance is between the narrator of the poem and the reader, not between Naomi and her family. And even that aside works by negation more than affirmation. She seeks to find out "what life was for," but the poem ends by describing the answer—the familiar answer—that Naomi does *not* seek: "For certainly what it was not for was forbearing." The ending turns around a silence, the unspoken and perhaps unspeakable answer to Naomi's question about "what life was for," as if, though it uses language to make a space for the peculiar, the poem itself is "Too foraging to blue-print or deploy!" Poems like "I love those little booths" and "Naomi" demonstrate that the tension between speaking out and silence is necessary for Brooks in both communal and individual contexts.

The tensions between voice and reticence, as well as between the individual and the group, shape Brooks's formal choices throughout her career as she works out a poetics that can achieve both shared and singular voices while also remaining strategically silent.³⁰ Mootry's introduction to *A Life Distilled*, a critical volume on Brooks, emphasizes her experimentalism:

Through the years, Gwendolyn Brooks has experimented with a variety of prosodic, syntactic, and narrative strategies. Her writing career has been remarkably rich in forms and ideas. Her creative practice has involved the ongoing articulation and formation of a variety of texts that express a shifting, exploratory, and ultimately performative consciousness. (1)

This “shifting and exploratory” attitude and the experimentation that Mootry describes are driven by the complex and contradictory nature of Brooks’s goals. Brooks’s particular poetic flexibility and her constant revisions of her relationship to form reshape her poetics to meet the changing and sometimes conflicting demands of poetry as she sees them. In particular, her form changes as her emphasis shifts between individual and communal experience and between speaking out and remaining silent. The simultaneous necessity of claiming voice and remaining strategically silent is most evident in Brooks’s management of the idea that poetic language is capable of expressing and revealing identity or essence. A poetics that purports to express the inner life of a speaker or reveal the essence of a subject or experience is useful for speaking out for silenced experiences that are important to Brooks: black experience, women’s lives, and the particular person. But—because Brooks prizes personal reticence as well as black and female traditions that value the strategic silences of undecidability, occlusion, misdirection, and outright refusal to speak—revelation must also be resisted. Brooks experiments with artifice in order both to use and refuse access to essence or identity. She innovates most radically in “In the Mecca” because that poem marks the moment in her career when the tension between her various loyalties is most extreme. But Brooks’s consciousness-raising experience at Fisk University doesn’t change her basic poetic concerns; it raises the stakes on them. Throughout her career, the changing role of self-consciously artificial language in Brooks’s poetry is shaped by her conflicting goals as a black woman poet to pioneer a new poetry, capable of voicing what has been silenced, and to preserve the recalcitrant silences that she also considers crucial to black identity. Likewise, her developing

relationship to form works to strike a balance between a desire to write of and to a community and her own personal devotion to the idiosyncratic.

The discussion of artifice in Brooks's work is frequently limited to her use and apparent rejection of traditional forms—most notably the sonnet and the ballad.³¹ But it is also useful to view Brooks's traditional forms as part of her experimentation with self-consciously stylized language more broadly. This includes the most obviously innovative element of her poetics: her use of what I will call thick language, that is, literary, artificial, difficult, obscure, or idiosyncratic diction, syntax, and imagery—language that cannot be ignored as the mere vehicle of expression—language that has a presence of its own. The role of this kind of language in most of Brooks's earlier work is not noticeably experimental. Though there are moments of strangeness and difficulty, taken individually, few of her early poems appear particularly interested in flouting poetic convention.³² Certainly, Brooks's early volumes make use of traditional forms like sonnets and ballads in formally conventional ways.³³ And, while her free verse mixes the conversational with the carefully wrought, sometimes even the ornate, and is scattered with moments of regular meter and frequent rhyme, none of these formal or stylistic choices is especially innovative considered among the range of poetic forms available to Brooks and her contemporaries. Her earlier work nonetheless reveals her foregrounding style as a means of simultaneously speaking out and retaining guarded silences.

In the first part of Brooks's career, this use of poeticity is most pronounced in her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Annie Allen*.³⁴ *Annie Allen* is, in several important ways, invested in the revelation of essence.³⁵ As the detailed picture of the life of Annie Allen, a black woman, it is concerned with revealing blackness, femaleness, and Annie-ness. Its

revelatory moments are many as the book traces Annie's development in three major sections: "Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood," "The Anniad," and "The Womanhood." The first and last sections, however, are less directly focused on Annie than the second, introducing other characters and ideas that are often not self-evidently related to Annie's life. These more varied sections frame the centerpiece of the book, the "Anniad," which treats Annie's love and disappointment with the "man of tan" who, after returning from war, leaves her. The poem narrates her devotion to and even deification of her lover, along with sex, love, the effects of war on them both, the pain of betrayal and jealousy, and the despair of abandonment. The story reveals Annie's most intimate experiences, but it is by no means plain or direct. "The Anniad," in part because it represents Brooks at her most revelatory, is also highly artificial. The title of the poem harks back to an epic tradition with its reference to the *Aeneid*, and its *aabbccc* rhyme scheme echoes both the rhyming couplets of epic verse and the traditional English seven-line rhyme royal stanza, adapting them to create a new form for her black woman's epic. Further, the register is elevated, the syntax often inverted, and its vocabulary complex and strange. In short, the language draws attention to itself as poetic. For example, the stanza that describes Annie's lover being called off to war is representatively complex and self-consciously linguistic:

Doomer, though, crescendo-comes

Prophesying hecatombs.

Surrealist and cynical.

Garrulous and guttural.

Spits upon the silver leaves.

Denigrates the dainty eves.

Dear dexterity achieves. (101-02)

The status of the words as carefully crafted language is emphasized by consonance and assonance, rhythm, rhyme, and register. The words appear to be chosen at least as much for how they sound as for what they say, and their references are often uncertain. We can't be sure what a "doomer" is, but it echoes the vowel of "hecatombs," itself an uncommon word meaning a ritual sacrifice. It is not clear whether the "doomer" or the "hecatombs" are characterized as "garrulous and guttural," but the sounds of those words create a sense of babble or chaos in addition to suggesting the sounds of artillery. What it means for a doomer or hecatombs to carry out any of the actions of the last lines is unclear, but the strong triple rhyme of "leaves," "eves," and "achieves" conveys a sense that these actions are coming in quick succession, piling unstopably one atop the other. In these lines and throughout the collection, the decorative or artificial aspects of the language are not only added to the communicative function but sometimes obscure that function. This emphasis on language as medium serves two contradictory purposes. The poem accentuates its linguistic virtuosity in order simultaneously to speak out for black women's experience and to deemphasize the communicative aspects of language, creating an ironic distance that undermines the notion that language can render experience.

This emphasis on the ornate serves the revelatory ends of the poem in that it produces strangeness and idiosyncrasy, innovating a language that is capable of expressing the peculiar personality of Annie.³⁶ The "Childhood and the Girlhood" section paints young Annie as naïve and romantic, bookish and unsatisfied, desiring an unknown

“somewhat of something other” that “she did not know; but tried to tell.”³⁷ The “ballad of late Annie” elaborates Annie’s life and thoughts, establishing her fascination for the florid and embellished (90).³⁸ The poem signals the lure of a certain poeticalness with its archaic first line, “Late Annie in her bower lay.” But, in sharp contrast to Annie in her bower, admiring her own “blush-brown shoulder” and “blush-brown lip,” comes the “shriek” of her mother’s demand that she get up and do her chores. Annie’s wants are defined in contrast to those of her family, as is her ornate style. Her mother’s words are relatively unadorned and practical: “Be I to fetch and carry? / Get a broom to whisk the doors / Or get a man to marry.” But Annie’s thoughts are articulated in language that is more elaborate, revealing her hopes for richness and her delight in the highly wrought. She describes the man who would be “chief enough to marry [her]”: “Whom I raise my shades before / Must be gist and lacquer / With melted opals for my milk, / Pearl-leaf for my cracker.” The literary tone of these lines, with their inverted syntax, rhythmic regularity, and heavy rhyme, foregrounds poeticity in order to develop a language appropriate to revealing the thoughts of a young girl who craves “melted opals” and “pearl-leaf” and a man who “must be [. . .] lacquer.” In “The Anniad,” this style is heightened and sustained for 43 stanzas. The elaborateness of the language serves the portrait of Annie’s individuality and difference. In this sense, it is a means of speaking out: it reveals the particularity of Annie in a way that plain-spoken lines would not. The poem begins by speaking directly to the reader, “Think of sweet and chocolate,” and it is framed by repeated injunctions to “think of” various things that will help one to imagine Annie and her life: “Think of ripe and rompabout, / All her harvest buttoned in, / All her ornaments untried” (99). This casts the speaker of the poem as Annie’s explainer and the

reader as someone who is trying, or who ought to be trying, to understand Annie. The artifice of the poem promotes that revelatory stance by enacting Annie's longing to try her ornaments or to "print [. . .] roses" on "the unembroidered brown" that she sees in her mirror. The thick language of "The Anniad" speaks out for Annie's silenced yearning for embellishment and beauty and reveals her difference from the plain and plain-speaking lives of her parents and those around her.³⁹

However, even as poeticity expresses Annie's particularity, it also creates an ironic distance that preserves the dignified silence of the "precious" self: it often refuses language and leaves the "something somewhat other" of Annie's essence strategically undefined. The poem ends with Annie abandoned and alone in her kitchen. It tells us what she feels and thinks of when her "tan man" leaves her for good. But the poem undermines the idea that poetic language can capture Annie's inner reality by pointing up the artificiality of language:

In the indignant dark there ride
Roughnesses and spiny things
On infallible hundred heels.
And a bodiless bee stings.
Cyclone concentration reels.
Harried sods dilate, divide,
Suck her sorrowfully inside.

Think of tweaked and twenty-four.
Fuschias gone or gripped or gray,

All hay-colored that was green.
Soft aesthetic looted, lean.
Crouching low, behind a screen,
Pock-marked eye-light, and the sore
Eaglets of old pride and prey. (109)

Some of the imagery of this passage is concerned with the hidden or unknown: the bee that stings is bodiless, Annie is buried under “harried sods,” and the “pock-marked eye-light” and “sore / Eaglets” that harass her are hidden “behind a screen.” But it is the style of the passage that creates the most significant silence. The difficulty of the language, its uncertainty of reference, and its self-conscious literariness are all reminders that any access to experience language may provide is always mediated by that language. Despite its close look at Annie’s life, the poem is also reticent, demonstrating at every turn the distance between experience and revelation. Brooks’s style here mutes signification in favor of the sumptuous sign. Language, it reminds us, is not experience, and the poet, like Annie, may have her own appreciation for pearls and lacquer, for words that are satisfying in themselves, independent of their communicative functions.⁴⁰ In “The Anniad,” and in much of Brooks’s other work, thick language is a means of articulating singular perspectives or experiences—a kind of “lyric essence”—while, paradoxically, revealing the divide between language and life. The voice and the silence that artifice simultaneously accomplishes in *Annie Allen* are largely individualistic or idiosyncratic, but Brooks’s work, on the whole, is concerned as well with that individuality as part of a black community.

“The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,” the longest poem in Brooks’s first volume, *A Street in Bronzeville*, foregrounds artifice to balance between speech and silence that serve both shared and singular purposes and, more, to manage conflict between those purposes (42-47).⁴¹ “Satin-Legs” is, in large part, concerned with speaking out. It describes a poor black man who, on his day of rest, decks himself with strong scents and elaborate clothing. The poem reveals Satin-Legs in front of his mirror, inspects the “innards” of his closet, narrates his walk down the street, dinner and a movie, and, in the final lines, recounts sex with his anonymous and interchangeable date, as extravagantly dressed as he. The narrator makes much of showing the reader something he or she has not seen before. In fact, she directly addresses an observing “you” who is an outsider to Satin-Legs’s life and likely to misunderstand him, speaking back to that observer and seeking to explain Satin-Legs and his extravagance, which may seem to an outsider mere bad taste:

Now, at his bath, would you deny him lavender
Or take away the power of his pine?
[. . .] might his happiest
Alternative (you muse) be, after all,
A bit of gentle garden in the best
Of taste and straight tradition? Maybe so.
But you forget, or did you ever know,
His heritage of cabbage and pigtails,
Old intimacy with alleys, garbage pails (42-43)

The poem presents Satin-Legs at his bath to an unsympathetic observer in order to speak out about his life, about the realities of poverty that may be invisible to those accustomed to “the best / of taste and straight tradition.” It seeks to rectify an ignorance about Satin-Legs, articulate the previously unknown “heritage of cabbage and pigtailed” to the observer, and thus expose good taste as a racist and classist construction, a privilege born out of inequality rather than an achievement. In this sense, the poem speaks out on the part of a community that is systematically denied such privileges. But it also speaks on behalf of the individual, describing a person who cannot wholly be understood as an emblem of his race. He is defiantly and strangely his own, and this too is disclosed. Satin-Legs appears in the deeply private act of regarding himself in the mirror, and what he admires is his own particularity, not his place among a people: “He looks into his mirror, loves himself— / The neat curve here; the angularity / That is appropriate at just its place / The technique of a variegated grace” (44). Brooks exposes the effects of poverty on a group of people, but she also unveils the private life and “variegated grace” of a particular person, Satin-Legs Smith. His angularity is “appropriate at just its place” and no other. Like many of Brooks’s portrait poems, “Satin-Legs” voices both a version of blackness and the particular person as part of a poetics that illuminates the ignored or oppressed.

The foregrounding of artifice in the poem helps Brooks to achieve this revelation because the thickness of the poem’s language expresses the idiosyncratic individual in addition to modeling an outspoken black aesthetics. The first lines of the poem demonstrate Brooks’s attraction for dense, copious, self-conscious, even baroque language: “Inamoratas, with an approbation, / Bestowed his title. Blessed his inclination”

(42). And this kind of carefully wrought language—high-register vocabulary like “approbation,” antiquated imported words like “inamoratas,” insistent rhythms, and strident rhyming—is intimately tied to Satin-Legs both as a member of his community and as a distinctive person. As Satin-Legs, waking, “unwinds, elaborately,” so do these first lines and much of the poem (42). Like the poet, Satin-Legs undertakes the task of decoration with deliberate care: “He waits a moment, he designs his reign, / That no performance may be plain or vain” (42). The extravagant language used to describe Satin-Legs distinguishes him from the “men estranged / From music and from wonder and from joy” who make up the background of his life as much as his zoot-suits distance him from the disapproving onlookers to whom the poem ostensibly speaks (45). As in the “Anniad,” linguistic ostentation is a means of pushing language to be more capable of expressing particular identity. But, like Satin-Legs’s careful show of beautiful extravagance, Brooks’s use of embellishment also speaks for a group denied beauty, innovating a language that reaches toward “the gold impulse not possible to show” (44). In addition, when the opulence of the poem appears to exceed the bounds of the “best of taste and straight tradition,” it aligns the poet with the mocked excessiveness of Satin-Legs and others like him. In this sense, artifice in the poem serves a communal voice that talks back to the observing and disapproving “you” in defense of black performativity dismissed as bad taste. Indeed, when the speaker invites the censorious onlooker to investigate Satin-Legs’s wardrobe, “Let us proceed. Let us inspect, together [. . .] The innards of the closet,” the lines that follow not only describe the flashiness of the zoot-suits that he wears but call attention to the artful embellishment available to Brooks as well:

[. . .] wonder-suits in yellow and in wine,
Sarcastic green and zebra-striped cobalt.
All drapes. With shoulder padding that is wide
And cocky and determined as his pride;
Ballooning pants that taper off to ends
Scheduled to choke precisely.

Here are hats

Like bright umbrellas; and hysterical ties
Like narrow banners for some gathering war. (42-43)

These lines emphasize style with neologism (“wonder-suits”), odd synaesthetic locution (“sarcastic green”), and obvious and insistent literariness (rhymes like “wide/pride”). We also see the “architectural design” that the poem attributes to Satin-Legs in the way the line break after “scheduled to choke precisely” creates syntactic division while maintaining the regular rhythm of the iambic pentameter. Though the speaker of the poem casts herself as a guide to outsiders, the performativity of the poem positions the speaker in opposition to those onlookers, affirming the value of extravagance.

Though the speaker of the poem appears to revel in both Satin-Legs’s art and her own, there are moments of irony that trouble that stance. The poem’s style creates an ironic distance that directly opposes the speaker’s stated intention to act as a tour guide: it shields the subject of the poem from the outsiders looking in, both the arbiters of taste and the writer herself. Just when the view is most intimate—as observer and poet “inspect, together” “the innards of his closet”—the poem is decorative, the language artificial. The thickness of the language reminds us that this view of Satin-Legs, though it

purports to reveal his “innards,” is mediated. As it does in a poem like “The Anniad,” artifice emphasizes the distance between language and experience in order to prevent the poem’s revelatory push from impinging on the individual. But, in “Satin-Legs,” it also screens a particular aspect of black identity from white audiences. While the poem opens a black man’s closet to white viewers and invites them to look in, knowing that they will sneer at what they find, it also reminds those readers that what they are seeing is a piece of art, a made thing with its own motives, not naked essence. The very act of addressing the audience with phrases like “Let us proceed. Let us inspect, together” heightens the theatricality of the revelation, emphasizing the act of reading and writing, rather than creating an illusion of direct access. Just as Satin-Legs’s ablutions are the result of a heritage that his white observers do not understand, this use of poeticity echoes a tradition of rhetorical richness and multiplicity rooted in a strategic refusal, a blank face or a silent mask—often achieved by a show of volubility—turned to white interlocutors. Thick language creates a kind of silence, a reminder that experience is separate from and inaccessible to language, hiding Satin-Legs from the judgment of the unsympathetic white reader and arguing for an irreducible selfhood that eludes shared expression.

Artifice thus serves the simultaneous urge to speak out and resist language for both the community and the individual. This is complicated, however, by negotiations between the conflicting needs of the group and the private person. Satin Legs is both of and not of his people, and his art is simultaneously the source of his connection to and separation from them. Even though he emblemizes some of the strategies available to artists working within an African American tradition, he is also stubbornly unique, defined apart from his own community by his idiosyncratic and self-focused art. While

dressing, “he looks into his mirror, loves *himself*—,” and he “judges that he walks most powerfully alone” (44, emphasis added; 46). Satin-Legs’s style—rooted in self-regard, an admiration for his own curves and particular articulations and techniques—entails a smearing of the people around him into a “unit” that he “hears and does not hear” and a blur that “he sees and does not see” (45). Further, his embellishment involves a lack of political awareness or agency: Satin-Legs’s contentment with self-decoration, his “lotion, lavender, and oil,” indicates his failure to attain political and racial awareness. Thus, addressing the white onlookers, the speaker makes their anticipated criticism and Satin-Legs’s extravagance sopps that take the place of real change: “You might as well— / Unless you care to set the world a-boil / And do a lot of equalizing things / [. . .] Leave him his lotion, lavender and oil” (43). His self-fashioning obscures his participation in a group and the place of that community in the world. Therefore, it may appear that artifice is primarily a tool of individual, even anti-communal, resistance to dissolution into shared modes of expression. However, it cannot ultimately prevent Satin-Legs from being subsumed into a common voice, and his particularity is blurred by a crowd of ancestors who are just as “dexterous” as he is:

The pasts of his ancestors lean against
Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity.
Hundreds of hungers mingle with his own,
Hundreds of voices advise so dexterously
He quite considers his reactions his,
Judges he walks most powerfully alone,
That everything is—simply what it is. (46)

These lines argue that ancestral voices both silence individuality and create individual identity; it is naïve for Satin-Legs to believe that he is “powerfully alone” and that “everything is—simply what it is.” Instead, everything, including his own reactions, belongs to a shared past he does not see at work. Like the people and events in his neighborhood blurred by his inability to distinguish them, Satin-Legs’s own particularity is smeared by history. Ornamentation does not create a personal voice, nor does it effectively resist being fogged by the collective, since it is one of the “reactions” that is at bottom the dexterous advice of “hundreds of voices.” This struggle between the individual and the group muddles Brooks’s foregrounding of poeticity to extend and limit the reach of language. Artifice represents both apolitical self-indulgence and “banners for a gathering war”; it is suspect because it separates Satin-Legs from his community and because it fails to do so.

In many of Brooks’s poems, self-conscious language expresses and occludes individual and group identity in mutually supportive ways, but her style changes when the individual and the group come into conflict. Elaborate language plays contradictory and contentious roles in negotiating individual and shared identity, which makes Brooks’s use of it to balance between speech and silence problematic. She does not, however, merely abandon artifice as self-centered or anti-communal. It is too important to her own sense of what poetry is and does. Instead, the tension between singular and collective needs motivates her innovation of composite forms that can continue to employ self-consciously stylistic language usefully: her multiplication of forms allows her poems to speak out and refuse speech while also questioning the appropriateness of artistic excesses.

This kind of innovation is most evident in “In the Mecca,” but friction between the group and the people who constitute it drives similar experimentation even in an early poem like “Satin-Legs.” The various forms of the poem’s ending prefigure the formal multivalence of “In the Mecca,” and it’s no coincidence that the poems share a concern with singular and collective voices in conflict and the oppressive and defiant silences such conflict generates. When Satin-Legs and his date return home, the poem appears to abandon a particular sort of artifice along with the showy clothing of the pair. The word “mignonette” stands in as the only reminder of the type of language that has been shed in favor of simple, plain-spoken, lyrical language like “Her body is a honey bowl / Whose waiting honey is deep and hot” (47).⁴² These last lines—contrasted to the rest of the poem by indentation and italics, in addition to their easily musical rhythms and understated vocabulary—are juxtaposed to the thick language of the rest of the poem without transition. Though they use the kind of language that might be considered natural to poetry, quiet lyrical revelation in the “best of taste and straight tradition,” that style is also denaturalized by its presence in a poem that otherwise argues for a more garish and performative poetics.⁴³ The coexistence of two entirely different styles emphasizes that both are aesthetic choices, not natural or authentic. The poem need not choose between language like “An indignant robin’s resolute donation / Pinching a track through apathy and din” and “her body is like summer earth” but can easily wield both and move effortlessly and unapologetically between them (45, 47). It also creates resistant silences around both shared and singular experiences by implying that full revelation is impossible; even language that intimates revelation and purports to dispense with mediation and lay the subject bare is a device. In addition, casting the poem’s revelatory

moment in the language of good taste and literary tradition is a strategic use of silence on the part of the community, much like the decorousness of the diners in “I Love those Little Booths at Benvenuti’s.” The poem offers taste to readers who disapprove of extravagance, but it also questions the authenticity or naturalness of such language by revealing it as only one option among many. That the adoption of this style is, in one sense, a mask is reinforced by the line preceding the final section: “the end is, isn’t it, all that really matters” (47). This hints that the poem’s aloof interlocutors are fooled by an ending more to their liking into ignoring the way the rest of the poem resists their desires. Thus, the emphasis on artificiality achieved by juxtaposing disparate forms operates similarly to other uses of artifice, balancing between speech and silence for both communal and individual purposes.

Most importantly, however, the mixture of registers at the conclusion of the poem explores divergent and even contradictory responses to the conflicts between discrete and shared identity. Because the majority of the poem is connected to the artists’ (Satin-Legs’s, his date’s, and the poet’s) focus on self-indulgent decoration, the abandonment of that style at the close of the poem constitutes a rejection of idiosyncratic ornamentation in favor of a more direct or authentic public language. But the artistic range of the poem also creates a counterpoint. These lines depict a shedding of artifice, particularly as represented by shedding clothing, but that apparent revelation of what is beneath the poem’s art is, itself, shown to be an artistic choice. The poem, like its characters, discards its clothes only to reveal more embellishment and decoration beneath them. Even though the poem stages a stripping bare, it maintains a shield between reader and subject as long as it uses language. The persistence of performativity in this sense advocates for the

sovereignty of the singular being, but it also intimates that this persistence is a fatal flaw. The concluding image is richly romantic but tinged with death: the revealed body of Satin-Legs's lover becomes a tomb of "summer earth / receptive, soft, and absolute" (47). Satin-Legs is buried in the closing lines of the poem, but the composite form makes contradictory readings of that burial possible. It may be that the poem has shed its thick language, thus allowing Satin-Legs to disappear into the communal. But it may also be that Satin-Legs is lost because the poem fails to transcend artificiality, continuing to isolate the individual from the community by focusing on his or her artistic agency. What we can say is that the role of stylized language becomes more complex when the person and the group are in conflict, leading Brooks to invent a composite form that simultaneously uses and refuses artificiality, articulating her conflicted position regarding the place of the idiosyncratic among the people. This strategy, which only appears at the end of a largely formally consistent poem, becomes even more useful to Brooks in "In the Mecca," where the nascent conflicts of "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" are a primary concern.

Though "In the Mecca," the title poem of Brooks's first post-Fisk volume, is a formal departure for Brooks, it uses similar strategies to her earlier work, emphasizing style in order simultaneously to claim voice and remain silent. "In the Mecca" can be considered part of a tradition of speaking out most simply because it articulates ignored or erased black female experiences. The poem hinges on the disappearance and murder of Pepita, the youngest of the nine children of Mrs. Sallie Smith, an inhabitant of the Mecca building, first an architectural showpiece of Chicago, then a slum.⁴⁴ The setting of the poem is distinctly black, its characters are black, and its unifying action is the domestic

and local response (or lack of response) to violence against a young black girl. But the poem goes further than this thematic breaking of silence: the experimentalism of “In the Mecca” betrays an urgency not just to claim that black women’s lives are the suitable subject of poetry but to push poetry to become more suitable to black women’s lives.⁴⁵

However, “In the Mecca” does not unreservedly lend itself to giving voice. In fact, an early review of the poem was disturbed by its refusal of direct language and considers Brook’s poeticity a shirking of her responsibility to reveal her people’s wounds:

This tale of the murder of a little black girl in the Chicago ghetto ought to have the unrelenting directness of Crabbe’s “Peter Grimes” but is overwrought with effects—alliterations, internal rhymes, whimsical and arch observations—that distract from its horror almost as if to conceal the wound at its center [. . .].

Except in isolated passages, we are held off from the pain at the center almost as if the author were an old-fashioned local colorist commenting from a distance.

(Rosenthal 27-28)

The reviewer’s “ought to” puts him on the side of revelation and against concealment and distance, against the ornamentation that Brooks employs in “In the Mecca.” But these silences are not a failure of nerve on Brooks’s part or a lack of dedication to writing about and to black people; they are an integral part of a poetics that strives to realize her newly articulated vision of herself as, first and foremost, a member of a black community, shaped by a shared heritage and struggles. Brooks’s autobiography records a plan for the poem marked from the beginning by the double pull of reserve and articulation: “WORK PROPOSED FOR ‘IN THE MECCA’ A book-length poem, two

thousand lines or more, based on life in Chicago's old Mecca Building. This poem will not be a statistical report. I'm interested in a certain detachment, but only as a means of reaching substance with some incisiveness" (*Part One* 189). The poet here wants an incisive and reaching language, capable of taking on the huge and intimidatingly varied task of representing life in the Mecca building, but such a language must involve distance. As in her earlier work, artifice is a primary means for Brooks of both exactness and detachment, of elaborating a subject and gesturing toward the gulf between subject and language.

The opening of "In the Mecca" continues to emphasize style to claim poetic voice for silenced experiences and simultaneously create ironic distance. The self-consciously poetic, even mannered tone in which Mrs. Sallie Smith is described breaks the silence that characterizes her life as a domestic worker by claiming poetic language as appropriate to that life. In the opening description, she is a "low-brown butterball" behind which "suns that have not spoken die." She has spent her day in silence and returns home silently trudging under a silent sun. But the description itself undoes this imposed quiet with Brooks's characteristic thick language: here, archaic and heightened diction, "hies home to Mecca, hies to marvelous rest"; alliteration, "this / low-brown butterball. Our prudent partridge"; and hermetic phrasing, "fugitive attar and district hymn" (407). The language refuses to be restricted to infirmity or prudence. However, silence here is more than something imposed from the outside to be broken. Though to call Sallie a "coma" supports the foregoing description of her as passive, mute, and unable to act on her life, "*armed* coma" casts doubt on that characterization. Sallie's reticence and non-participation in her life are converted, in this strange turn of phrase, to something militant

and self-defending. The style of these lines also reflects this attitude toward silence: it is an armed coma, protecting Sallie and her experiences from the speaker and the reader who would possess her, would make her “*Our* prudent partridge.” As in “Satin-Legs” and “The Anniad,” the speaker of the poem addresses an outsider to whom she is explaining or revealing the subject, but she also uses language that reinforces the distance between observer and observed rather than remedying it. While a phrase like “armed coma” describes the importance of a resistant muteness, a phrase like “fugitive attar” exemplifies that importance by refusing easy intelligibility. As in this first section, Brooks’s strategies throughout “In the Mecca” are reminiscent of earlier poems, but the poem as a whole becomes more dramatically experimental because it must also negotiate an increasingly charged relationship between a black communal identity and particular personality.

The role of artifice is fraught for Brooks in “In the Mecca” because it can no longer serve both shared and individual goals in the relatively unconflicted way it did in her earlier work. Brooks’s relationship to poeiticity changes in “In the Mecca” in part because of a sense of purpose instilled by her experience at Fisk.⁴⁶ George Kent discusses the effect that her shift in political perspective had on her poetic strategies in *In the Mecca*:

The title poem in the company of the others marks Brooks’ turn from Christianity and the hope of integration to that of nationalism. Obviously the situation means that motives different from those of the preceding works will place at the forefront the necessity for new stylistic developments. The language must emphasize Blacks developing common bonds with each other instead of the

traditional “people are people” bonding. For a poet who has so intensively devoted herself to language, the situation means a turn to ways of touching deeply an audience not greatly initiated into the complexity of modern poetry and yet retaining a disciplined use of language. The challenge would seem all the greater since to acquire such brilliant command over so wide a range of poetic devices as Brooks had done over the years was also to build a set of reflexes in consciousness which, one would think, would weight the balance toward complex rendering [. . .]. *In the Mecca* thus represents, on the one hand, the poet at the very height of her command and utilization of complex renderings. On the other it represents change of concern and expansion of the use of free verse. (“Realism” 98)

Kent describes a tension between Brooks’s earlier formal strategies as “complex” and “disciplined” and a new aspiration to “emphasize Blacks developing common bonds with each other.” His formulation of these things as conflicting implies that, in order for Brooks to emphasize black community, she must abandon or revise her “complex renderings” and instead favor free verse, which is assumed to be simple. This perceived distinction of poeticity from black voice was central to Brooks’s reevaluation of her role and methods.⁴⁷ From the mid-40s to the mid-60s, Brooks built her reputation on complexity, pioneering a new language for black and female experience while simultaneously resisting the reduction of inexpressible identity to insufficient or oppressive language. But her experience at Fisk suggested that foregrounding style was harmful to achieving an authentically black poetry.

The new aesthetic to which Brooks was drawn placed her use of traditional forms and decorative or self-consciously poetic language on the side of a regressive, white-identified individualism. In his introduction to Brooks's first autobiography, Madhubuti (then Don L. Lee) describes "In the Mecca" as a transition piece between Brooks's earlier work, conditioned by white formal expectations, to a more authentically black poetics that is pared down, direct, free of "fat." He concedes that "there were still a few excesses with language in *In the Mecca*" (22), but he argues that such excesses signal a transitional moment in Brooks's progress toward an art that values the collective over the individual and abandons "art for art's sake" for an art that is "used in the liberation of his [*sic*] people" (26). The narrative with which Madhubuti introduces Brooks's autobiography argues that artifice, especially when it reflects the "conditioning" of black poets to use traditional forms associated with white culture, must be repudiated in the attainment of a more authentic black voice. And, in some ways, Brooks shares this sense of the progression of her work. She must certainly have consented to Madhubuti's account as an introduction to the story of her life, and her constant reiteration in interviews of her intention to develop a poetry that can speak directly to black people in taverns supports the notion that she wishes to reject language that is not accessible. Indeed, her poetry after *In the Mecca* is often, in Madhubuti's words, "streamlined and to the point" (22). But the "few excesses with language" that he notes in *In the Mecca* are not simply regrettable remainders of a white tradition that will later be fully excised. Formal complexity does indeed serve an individualistic purpose in "In the Mecca"; it is a form of resistance to a shared black voice that is newly threatening to Brooks's notion of particular selfhood. Embellishment articulates particular, especially female, experience

that is silenced by the masculinist elements of black nationalist aesthetics while simultaneously preventing the appropriation of singular experience into a collective voice. But Brooks also continues to employ artifice, and its simultaneous advancement and refusal of language, for communal goals. In “In the Mecca,” Brooks creates a composite form by which she continues to advance artificiality as a means of both extending and limiting language while she negotiates a newly conflicted relationship between the person and the group. This innovation disassociates poeticity from whiteness and regressive individualism in order to use it as a tool for both collective black expression and silences, while it simultaneously allows her to continue to voice particular experiences and, especially, to celebrate a feminine artistic agency that will not be dissolved into a common voice, which, in some respects, endangers it.

The tension between personal and mutual needs is a recurring theme in “In the Mecca.” Perhaps most importantly, that strain underlies the narrative of Pepita’s disappearance at the center of the poem: the private obsessions and self-indulgences of the inhabitants of the Mecca building distract them from protecting one of their own. Meanwhile, the family’s search for their missing member necessitates that they leave behind their own preoccupations: “Yvonne upends her iron,” and “Melodie Mary / and Thomas Earl and Tennessee and Briggs / yield cat contentment gangs rats Appleseed,” and “Emmett and Cap and Casey / yield visions of vice and veal” and everything else they wish for, and “they are contrained. All are constrained” (416). Each must yield up her or his personal delights, contentments, and resentments in order to help search for Pepita. The other inhabitants of the Mecca, because they are not “constrained” by family ties to leave their own memories or sadnesses or little joys, cannot serve the needs of the

community. When asked about Pepita, they can only answer about themselves. In this sense, the overarching narrative of “In the Mecca” supports the view that a focus on the individual can be a hindrance to the achievement of broader goals. However, the “constraint” that pulls the Smith family out of their private thoughts and into the halls of the Mecca in search of their sister is also depicted as a thing to be resisted. The poem has an anxious affection for the small, the overlooked, and the personal that is a constant counterpoint to the injunction to step out of the “privacy of pain” that undermines the group. In effect, the very event that calls for joint action is the “constraint” of a vulnerable person, “Pepita the puny—the halted, glad-sad child” (419). Like Melodie Mary, who “likes roaches / and pities the gray rat” and to whom the headlines about the suffering of Chinese children are secondary, the poem argues, at times in spite of itself, that the struggles of the individual are also “importances” (412). Though the poem indicates that too exclusive a focus on one’s own sufferings makes one civically ineffectual, it also recognizes those like Marian, who wishes to “pop / the slights and sleep of her community / her Mecca” (431). Marian “Craves crime: her murder, her deep wounding [. . .]. A Thing. To make the people heel and stop / and See her”; she craves something that will get the attention of her people and the family who “never said / her single certain Self aloud” (431-32).

The treatment of the character Alfred, “who might have been a poet-king,” demonstrates that this conflict between the individual and the communal is realized in language, particularly in poetic style (422). Alfred is perhaps the most dynamic character in “In the Mecca”: he moves from an obsession with “Horace” and “Hemingway” and a language that fixes experience by finding the right “coats in which to wrap things” (409),

through the “line of Leopold” and an African aesthetic (422), to recognizing the “substanceless” call of the Mecca (433). The beginning of the poem identifies Alfred with a traditional idea of poetic creation, a belief in the power of language to fix and understand experience. And, as D. H. Melhem observes, in the person of Alfred poetic creation is rendered ineffectual:

The Mecca will not be improved by Darkara’s imported *Vogue*, by Alfred’s amiable dabbling in the arts, his reduction of literature to an obsession with language and his knowledge of Senghor. Reiteration that Alfred has not seen Pepita, though he can describe the Mecca and praise the poet-president, emphasizes his well-meaning yet ineffectual nature, his inability to relate actively to his own environment. (172)

It is not only Alfred who is ineffectual but the kind of language he employs, which can “describe” and “praise” but cannot find or save Pepita. From this language, Alfred seeks “the joy of deciding—successfully— / how stuffs can be compounded or sifted out / and emphasized; what the importances are; / what coats in which to wrap things” (409). The description of his words as “coats in which to wrap things” emphasizes the artificiality of his language: it is a constraining, almost violent, poetics that interacts with the world as “stuffs” to be “compounded,” “sifted,” or “wrapped.” But artifice fails for Alfred, reduced to a drunken mirage, because his experience is beyond that power; it refuses to be wrapped up in its coat of words.⁴⁸ As Alfred’s poetic vision develops away from reminiscing about Horace and Hemingway and toward a more militant black nationalism, he also moves away from the idea that language can unify and express a singular experience. In the following lines, poeticity is insufficient for Alfred’s task:

Says Alfred:

To be a red bush!

In the West Virginia autumn.

To flame out red.

“Crimson” is not word enough,

although close to what I mean. (424)

Silencing the Western tradition of poetic style, signaled by the inadequacy of the antiquated and poetical “crimson,” is part of Alfred’s development toward a language responsive to the Mecca. The particularities of black experience in the Mecca elude the art of the white-identified language in which Alfred previously wished to express them, and even a black aesthetics can be implicated in a stylization that separates it from the truth of black experience. Though Alfred can speak of “the line of Leopold” who “sings in art-lines / of Black Woman,” he “has not seen Pepita Smith” (422). This development argues for a repudiation of white assimilation but also of the artifice inherent in all poetry, even the African-identified aesthetics of Leopold Senghor, poet and first president of Senegal.⁴⁹ Only when Alfred abandons his obsession with the right word or the perfect phrase, whether Hemingway’s or Senghor’s, can he become aware of the “substanceless” “something, something in the Mecca” that “continues to call” and which carries the poem to its evocation of “an essential sanity, black and electric” (433). Alfred’s movement away from literariness and toward a greater understanding of the Mecca indicates that for a black poet to develop a poetry responsive to the needs of her community is to abandon the highly wrought and, indeed, to eschew language itself as insufficient to the expression

of the realities of black life. In light of this claim, the poem's experimentalism and performativity are striking.

Brooks's continued use of artifice is due in part to its association with individual, especially female, identity. In her earlier portrait poems, as we saw in "Satin-Legs," style often stands as an act of rebellion against oppressive systems that deny people small beauties or pleasures. Over and over, we see people, particularly women, indulging in aesthetic acts that represent their recalcitrant peculiarity.⁵⁰ Thus, Brooks's acceptance of a black aesthetics that rejects stylistic excesses is complicated by her admiration of extravagance. For example, when Mrs. Sallie arrives home, she confronts her kitchen and finds it "bad." Contemplating its badness, Mrs. S. rules out decoration by making a programmatic statement that would seem, at first, to echo the attitude underlying Alfred's development: "First comes correctness, *then* embellishment." But the context of the statement conveys a certain irony:

Now Mrs. Sallie
confers her bird-hat to her kitchen table,
and sees her kitchen. It is bad, is bad,
her eyes say, and My soft antagonist,
her eyes say, and My headlong tax and mote,
her eyes say, and My maniac default
my least light.

"But all my lights are little!"

Her denunciation

slaps savagely not only this sick kitchen but

her Lord's annulment of the main event.

"I want to decorate!" But what is that? A

pomade atop a sewage. An offense.

First comes correctness, *then* embellishment!

And music, mode, and mixed philosophy

may follow fitly on propriety

to tame the whiskey of our discontent!

"What can I do?" (410)

Though Sallie may be experiencing a genuine internal quarrel about the appropriateness of her love of embellishment, the voice of reproach is connected to patriarchal denial.

The programmatic statement, "First comes correctness, *then* embellishment," appears to come from a "Lord," presumably her husband and undoubtedly a figure of authority. The idea, whether internal or external to Sallie, that correctness must precede embellishment clearly has power over her, but she also resists it. Mrs. Sallie denounces her kitchen, the evidence of her poverty, but she also denounces the attitude that would deny her the joy of decoration: "Her denunciation slaps savagely [. . .] her Lord's annulment of the main event." This resistance is rooted in embellishment despite the impossibility of

correctness. Though she does not decorate the kitchen itself, the words that describe it embody the "music, mode, and mixed philosophy" that Sallie is enjoined to put aside.

"Her eyes *say*" the lines repeat, emphasizing her thoughts as words, and those words are embellished rather than plain-spoken and "correct." The lines use repetition, line breaks that work against "natural" speech patterns, alliteration, and idiosyncratic phrasing, calling attention to themselves as language. These lines purportedly reveal Sallie's

innermost thoughts, but the glimpse of her essence is clearly decorated. The statement that correctness comes before embellishment may be intended sincerely, but it is undermined by the music and elaboration of what her eyes say and even by the “bird-hat” she “confers [. . .] upon her kitchen table.” A bird-hat is an unnecessary extravagance, an indulgent piece of beauty, and she doesn’t merely set it upon her kitchen table but “confers” it. The verb “confer” transfers ownership of the hat to the table, possibly as an award or honor, decorating the imminently practical furniture despite her lord’s annulment.

Sallie defiantly embellishes as does the poem itself. In this sense, ornamentation is a form of feminine resistance—reinforced by the feminine locale of the kitchen and the classically domestic urge to decorate the house—to masculine restrictions. Further, artifice prevents Sallie as an individual from being entirely consumed by the demands of public roles she plays, such as domestic worker, mother, and woman. Thus, though Brooks at times argues that artists must move past poeiticity that is part of an oppressive or insufficient system of representation, ornamentation is also an important strategy for preserving the idiosyncratic. In fact, Brooks herself embellishes—wears her own bird-hat, if you will—in the face of various annulments: she continues to value her “G. B. voice” despite pressure, some of it self-directed, to adopt a more correct style and to play a particular role (*Part One* 183). The distinction between a person and her community, compounding the contradictory desires both to speak out and remain silent, drives Brooks’s experimentation in “In the Mecca,” particularly her use of a flexible poetics that combines widely disparate poetics and speech registers.

Brooks's composite form recuperates artifice from a reductive association with assimilation to white culture and anti-communal self-indulgence so that it can continue to be useful for writing that expresses and deflects constructions of black identity. "In the Mecca" foregrounds style even more dramatically than Brooks's use of traditional forms and dense language in her earlier work: it emphasizes the artificiality of all language, not only particularly poetical or self-conscious language. "In the Mecca" is by turns baroque and plain-spoken, and it employs a variety of formal strategies from traditional ballad measure to conversational free verse. While the styles Brooks employs may be perceived as existing on a spectrum of artificiality—with the noticeably formal and self-consciously literary on the artificial end and free verse and plain diction on the authentic end—the multifariousness of the poem posits all form as choice, denaturalizing and rendering artificial each of those choices by emphasizing the possibility of others. The authentic or direct feel is an affect—a result of artistic manipulation—just as a poetic or literary feel is an affect.⁵¹

This composite form simultaneously works toward communal expression and resistant silences. "In the Mecca" employs a virtuosic, disorienting, and sometimes violent combination of traditional poetic meters, folk forms, musical rhythms, and wide-ranging speech registers, from Chicago south-side black dialect to Emersonian philosophical grandiosity. Brooks's concatenation of voices and forms ignores generic divisions and abjures transitions or gestures toward stylistic harmony, trusting instead to place, the Mecca, as the primary force for coherence. Despite the black arts rejection of the "excesses" of literary language and, especially, traditional Western forms, artifice in "In the Mecca" expands the expressive possibilities of a collective black voice.⁵² The

diversity of styles used in “In the Mecca” argues for a multiple black identity that is capable of making room for difference without sacrificing unity. There are no separating devices to make distinctions: they all exist together under the sign of the Mecca. The fact that the artificiality of these means of expression is emphasized does not weaken their power as black expression. Instead, it argues for expressive agency on the part of black speakers of all kinds. The Western formal tradition is available to black speakers in a section like Edie Barrow’s ballad to express the anguish of racism compounded with sexual expression and oppression (425); poetic diction and rhyme articulate the tragic appeal of gangs to boys like Briggs Smith or the careful contentment of his brother Tennessee (412-13); and plain diction and free verse capture the sensual, irreverent religion of a woman like St. Julia (407-08). The juxtaposition of various registers and forms refashions tools that have been considered the province of white writers because it makes each style it uses—even supposedly unconsciously authentic plain-spokenness—an available choice for black speakers.

This variety also creates a protective silence because it suggests that no language allows direct access to the experience of life in the Mecca: the poem has recourse to almost limitless means of expression, but this also serves to emphasize the “something somewhat other” that wriggles out from under language. The poem dexterously explores the possibilities of language, but black experience exceeds them all, as when Alfred tries on new forms and new attitudes and finds that all of them—“chaste displeasure,” “the brilliant British of the new command,” “the counsels of division”—are “not enough” (414). Though the poem avails itself of rhyme and meter, free verse, complex diction, philosophical abstraction, fine detail, and familiar music, even in the exhaustiveness of its

linguistic capabilities it points toward a silence: “What else is there to say but everything?” (415). This silence reflects both an incapacity of language and a purposeful use of language that refuses to reveal essence to non-residents of the Mecca and casts the very idea of essence into doubt. Rather than assimilating to white culture or indulging in a regressive individualism, the formal diversity of “In the Mecca” highlights artifice simultaneously to express and occlude black experience.

But, as we have seen, communal goals are sometimes at odds with the individualism that is so important to Brooks both personally and aesthetically. Thus, the multiform style of “In the Mecca” also expresses the peculiar, at times resisting collective voice by crafting integral and idiosyncratic portraits of particular denizens of the Mecca building. These disparate poetic identities refuse to be dissolved into a “joining thing” that erases their difference (410). The lack of transitions or smoothing structures between the various modes that “In the Mecca” explores reflects the coherence of the idiosyncratic selves it depicts; it argues for possibility, power, and choice on the part of the specific person, regardless of group membership and sometimes counter to the needs or wants of the group. One of the most jarring juxtapositions in “In the Mecca” demonstrates how Brooks’s combinational form asserts the individual voice, even when it does not fit in with kinds of speech considered authentically black. The section of the poem that is most in line with the politically motivated aesthetic advocated by people like Madhubuti is Amos’s prayer for America:

Bathe her in her beautiful blood.

A long blood bath will wash her pure.

Her skin needs special care.

[. . .]

Great-nailed boots

must kick her prostrate, heel-grind that soft breast,

outrage her saucy pride,

remove her fair fine mask.

Let her lie there, panting and wild, her pain

red, running roughly through the illustrious ruin— (424-25)

The poem opposes Amos's prayer to Alfred's ineffectual search for the right word or to tame "that recalcitrant little beast, the phrase": "And Amos / (not Alfred) prays, for America prays" (424). In contrast to Alfred's poeticisms, Amos's words are relatively plain, and he uses few obviously literary devices. In fact, Madhubuti's introduction to *Report from Part One* singles out this section as representative of the good, clean, pared-down work that Brooks was doing and contrasts it to her lamentable excesses elsewhere in *In the Mecca*. By contrasting Amos's powerful speech to Alfred's ineffectualness, the poem appears in this section to advocate for the direct style in which Amos's prayer is delivered and for the militant, even violent, solution to racism that he proposes.

Significantly, though Amos's prayers for America are anti-racist, they are also anti-female, personifying America as the Great White Bitch. The violence that Amos prays for conflates black power with male power and figures white oppression as an insidious female force; thus, the powerful black voice here depends on images of female degradation. The clean, blunt plain-spokenness Brooks and others align with political effectiveness in poetry is also aligned with a rejection of a female and feminizing America. This is a difficult position for a woman writer drawn to highly wrought

language and elusive artificiality, but Brooks's use of composite form allows statements like Amos's to coexist with entirely different ways of using language. Indeed, the following section immediately contrasts both the form and the content of Amos's speech with a traditional ballad focused on intimate feminine experience: "The ballad of Edie Barrow" uses ballad measure—alternating four- and three-stress lines, rhymed *abcb*—to tell the story of a black woman whose white lover left her to marry a white woman. She laments: "He will wed her come fall, come falling of fall / And she will be queen of his rest. / I shall be queen of his summerhouse storm. / A hungry tooth in my breast" (425). Coming directly after the strident free verse of Amos's prayer, the traditional literariness of the ballad of Edie Barrow is emphasized. Though Amos advocates for stomping the breast of America, Brooks continues to write in a form that has a long American tradition.⁵³ The ballad of Edie Barrow has no place in a black aesthetics that depends on distance from that tradition, and the type of writing that Don L. Lee advocates for earlier in the poem—"a new music screaming in the sun"—would silence Edie Barrow's ballad (424). The abrupt shift to ballad form (and between disparate techniques and forms throughout the poem) implies that Edie Barrow and her experience cannot be integrated into Amos's vision but that her experience nevertheless must be voiced to report life in the Mecca. Edie Barrow's lament mourns the loss of the love of a white man, exactly the kind of women's experience that may be rejected as anti-communal by masculinist black aesthetics of the kind represented by Amos's diatribe. The aggregation of styles allows Brooks to express a call for a collective voice while also speaking out for those who may, paradoxically, be silenced by it.

In addition to making language more capable of expressing the singular, Brooks's compound poetics defends the particular both from being subsumed into white culture and appropriated or misrepresented by certain models of blackness. While the fact that the various sections of the poem dealing with discrete characters and themes are all joined under one title makes them all part of the same utterance, the spaces between sections and the poem's refusal to smooth transitions divides them into separate parts. The poem avoids transitional language and is silent about the relationships not only between characters but among linguistic modes. Though these characters and styles may inherently conflict, the silences created through juxtaposition permit them to coexist without requiring them to articulate or resolve their differences. This allows unique experiences and incompatible aesthetic choices to exist in and of themselves rather than requiring them to reconcile themselves into one poetics, agree on a position, or even share the same basic concerns. Such use of silence is apparent in the abrupt transitions framing the ballad of Edie Barrow section. Again, there are significant stylistic differences between the foregoing Amos section and Edie's. Their proximity places them in conversation with one another, but the ballad clearly signals its separation. For instance, it is the only section of the poem to use a title; where others begin without introduction, it begins, "The ballad of Edie Barrow: / I fell in love with a Gentile boy" (425). The introduction does not serve as a transition, however, just the opposite: rather than framing Edie Barrow's story as a response to the Smith family's or the Law's search for Pepita, thus signaling its integration into the larger theme of the work, the lack of transition refuses to articulate exactly how Edie Barrow's experience fits into the Mecca. Quotation marks intensify the ballad's isolation from the surrounding sections. Though

quotation is a common feature of ballads, including this one, here quotation marks, in addition to the white space that follows and proceeds them, separate the speech of the ballad from the other kinds of speech around it.⁵⁴ Even as “In the Mecca” pushes language to represent the variety of individual black experiences it also guards that individuality with silences.

The heightened degree of conflict between individual and collective voices and silences leads to intensified experimentation with form throughout the poem. And, as in “Satin-Legs,” this kind of innovation underpins the poem’s inconclusive conclusion. “In the Mecca”’s ending is often the source of critical concern, and interpretations vary widely, in large part because each ending portrays its central conflict, the disappearance of Pepita, in contradictory ways.⁵⁵ The last three sections appear to offer different interpretations of both the fate of Pepita and the significance of life in the Mecca building, and each deploys a different style for this; the penultimate section alone explores three distinct responses to the community’s relationship to the missing girl. Throughout the poem, the coexistence of poetic stances often considered to be working at cross-purposes articulates a version of communal aesthetics that refuses easy solutions: it will not ignore the richness of individual experiences—even when some experiences do not fit easily within a black nationalist program—but neither will it allow personal idiosyncracies to stand in for or stand in the way of a shared, politically aware, activist black identity. But in a poem based largely on refusing to choose among options, the sense of decision inherent in ending makes concluding problematic. Because the conclusion is the first time that the missing Pepita is given a voice, it is particularly

important that the poem not abandon its primary resource for managing tension between the individual and community: multiplicity of form.

The first of the poem's three endings is consistent with the role of "In the Mecca" as Brooks's first post-Fisk publication. Most of the section is attributed to Alfred, the poet who has undergone a race-identified awakening that has led him away from the showiness of the Western tradition's "dismay-with-flags-on" (429). Alfred's murmuring is, compared to his style in much of the poem, relatively direct. And, consistent with black nationalist aesthetics, the section's idiosyncracies are not personal quirks but hortatory declamations signaling a shared, if mysterious, experience:

I hate it.

Yet, murmurs Alfred—

who is lean at the balcony, leaning—

something, something in Mecca

continues to call! Substanceless; yet like mountains,

like rivers and oceans too; and like trees

with wind whistling through them. And steadily

an essential sanity, black and electric,

builds to a reportage and redemption.

A hot estrangement.

A material collapse

that is Construction. (432-33)

Alfred's new race-consciousness turns his poetic eye toward the Mecca, rather than England or Africa, and thus his language is newly useful to his community: Brooks uses

this style both to voice a certain kind of black identity and to remain strategically silent about it. The tone hints that Alfred discovers something essentially true and redemptive about the Mecca and the people it houses. His new-found language, with koan-like paradoxical flexibility, can recognize the “material collapse” that characterizes many of the lives narrated in the poem and yet redeem it as “Construction.” Thus, Alfred’s style pushes language to represent a previously unreported vision of Meccan life. But it also, in its very reliance on paradox, suggestion, and indirection, refuses the “reportage” it claims to build toward. The repetition of “something, something” and the insistence on that something’s insubstantiality recall Neal’s “vibrations of the Word” and Henderson’s “The Form of Things Unknown.” Alfred’s revelation simultaneously occludes what it purports to reveal, safeguarding the “something” from the limitations of linguistic articulation and appropriation—by the unsympathetic Law, perhaps, or by readers who are outsiders to the Mecca. Thus, Brooks arrives at a poetics inflected by a black nationalist aesthetics of communal voicing, but she also highlights an often-overlooked aspect of that poetics that depends on a defensive silence, an “armed coma,” which refuses accessibility. This section rings with finality and, if it were the end of the poem, it would offer a compelling argument for Brooks’s whole-sale conversion to black nationalist aesthetics, as well as a demonstration of her techniques for investing that poetics with her own regard for defensive silences. However, though the section proposes a black aesthetics that, despite its “hate” for some aspects of black experience, is ultimately capable of a constructive vision, it also circumscribes that solution as belonging to one man.⁵⁶ The entire section can be read as attributed specifically to Alfred’s murmuring, and, significantly, it does not include Pepita. Perhaps if Alfred’s

evocation of collapse and construction came last, it would indicate that Pepita is included in the redemption he offers. Instead, the poem keeps going, almost compulsively, to reveal the missing Pepita, suggesting that Alfred's vision, however useful, is insufficient to some of the Mecca's "importances."

Turning from Alfred's mystical oratory, the penultimate section begins in a conversational, almost folksy tone with its aphoristic opening lines and its allusion to the gospels:

Hateful things sometimes befall the hateful
but the hateful are not rendered lovable thereby.
The murderer of Pepita
looks at the Law unlovably. Jamaican
Edward denies and thrice denies a dealing
of any dimension with Mrs. Sallie's daughter. (433)

Though the style of this passage is distinctly different from Alfred's pronouncements, it also uses a communally inflected form. Both aphorism and biblical allusion are types of shared expression that Alfred ignores, if not repudiates, in his search for an aesthetics appropriate to the Mecca. But folk wisdom about "hateful people," as well as the story of Peter's denial of Christ, are useful in ways that Alfred's language is not: they can recognize and condemn Jamaican Edwards's violence against Pepita as "unlovable," despite whatever "hateful things" may have befallen him. Perhaps Alfred's vision of construction, coming as it does after the sections portraying black political consciousness as involving violence against and disregard for women, does not allow for the communal disapprobation of the actions of a black man against a black girl. Thus, Brooks puts

forward an alternative kind of shared black expression that can hold black people accountable for “hateful things,” particularly those committed against women in their own community. But the poem immediately narrows its focus from communal response to Jamaican Edward to a more private treatment of Pepita herself. In an almost cinematic move, this section turns to intimate revelation, disclosing Pepita’s fate. Here, the poem’s language is at its plainest and most direct:

Beneath his cot
a little woman lies in dust with roaches.
She never learned that black is not beloved.
Was royalty when poised,
sly, at the A and P’s fly-open door.
Will be royalty no more. (433)

Where oracular, hortatory language seems inadequate for censuring Jamaican Edward, folk wisdom and aphorism appear unable to articulate what happened to Pepita. Though this language appears in the same stanza as the judgment of the murderer, the indented line “Beneath his cot” emphasizes the shift to a new style: the sentence structure is direct, the meaning of the statements unmistakable. The poem appears to have little recourse to artifice and, though the reference to “royalty” recalls late Annie in her bower, the language here has none of Annie’s opulence. Even the strong rhyme “door” and “no more” does not seem to indicate a richness of language but a lack: it is not aurally delightful or challenging but, instead, slams the line shut, closing off Pepita’s potential for royalty with a decided absence of verbal fanfare. Though Brooks often foregrounds

artifice as a means of individualist expression, here it is direct, unflinching language that speaks out for individual experience drowned out in communal voicing.

However, the poem once again undoes its own apparent conclusiveness. Contained within this section, framed by plain language and quotation marks and interrupted by a narrator, is a short couplet attributed to the dead girl:

“I touch”—she said once—“petals of a rose.

A silky feeling through me goes!” (433)

In stark contrast to the pared down language describing Pepita among the roaches, Pepita’s own voice does retain something of the royalty the poem has just told us will “no more” be present.⁵⁷ Once again, Brooks links artificial language—here a lyrical, sensual couplet, complete with inverted syntax to create rhyme (“through me goes” rather than “goes through me”)—with the idiosyncratic individual. Though the poem reports Pepita’s murder and, in a sense, argues that, to attain an “essential sanity,” the kind of Western-identified poeticity she uses must be excised, it also refuses to let her voice, despite its failure to fit with a vision like Alfred’s, be entirely silenced. As we have seen, however, Brooks uses artifice not only to voice individual experiences but to destabilize their appropriation in language. There are several poetic effects here that prevent a too-easy equation of this couplet with the voicing of a feminine lyrical essence excluded by masculinist black nationalism. We are forcibly reminded that the poem is not revealing the real Pepita. Though Pepita’s voice does appear in the poem, it is set off clearly by quotation marks, which are rarely used in the poem. Further, the narrator’s interruption “she said once” mediates Pepita’s speech by report; Pepita is already dead when we hear her voice.⁵⁸ In fact, it is the narrator’s interruption that makes Pepita’s utterance poetic.

Without it, the lines would read “I touch petals of a rose / A silky feeling through me goes.” The first line loses its iambic rhythm and its pentameter is truncated. It is not Pepita’s voice alone that constitutes the poeticity valued in this version of the poem’s ending. The artifice of these lines reveals Pepita at her most individual, refusing to let her singular style be erased entirely in the poem’s communal voice, but it also signals the unavailability of essence, making the moment of voicing itself into a composite form combining past and present, individual and communal, poeticity and reportage. This embedded ending within an ending is further destabilized by the conclusion to the section: “Her mother will try for roses.” These lines return to the plain-spoken style of “She never learned that black was not beloved” to counter the potentially naïve conclusion that moments of beauty can redeem the violence done to Pepita; they highlight the difference between the poetic images Pepita uses and her own reality, in which roses are expensive and difficult to obtain. In one sense, poetic artifice allows her access to a beauty denied her, but the return to the present, in which Pepita is dead and can no longer speak of roses, also points to the inadequacy of that artifice to save her.⁵⁹

But again the note of finality is subverted by another ending. And this, the poem’s actual ending, is even less decisive. While the previous conclusions offer competing—and mutually exclusive—visions of how to understand and speak about the Mecca, each seems to come to a kind of rest, at least until it is disturbed by the next ending. But the poem must, at some point, end. If Brooks is to avoid a sense of stylistic culmination, the last section of the poem has to undermine its own definitiveness. Again, the poem returns to Pepita:

She whose little stomach fought the world had

wriggled, like a robin!

Odd were the little wrigglings

and the chopped chirpings oddly rising. (433)

This time, Pepita's voice is not given to us in a lyrical moment of strong feeling but as "chopped chirpings." The style shifts to a characteristically Brooksian syncopation and repetitiveness, an oddness connected to Brooks as a poet more strongly than Pepita's lines on roses. Some readers have taken this to mean that Brooks concludes by arguing for a triumphant individuality or a resurrected, "rising," female power that survives and transcends the violence done to it in order to sustain a renewed black community.⁶⁰ In a sense, by ending with "oddness," the poem does argue for a revision of models of black aesthetics or political action that cannot express or address the needs of "importances" like Pepita. But the effect of the style of the closing section is also to undermine this conclusion. In particular, its repetitiveness signals the inadequacy of its poetics.⁶¹ The comparison to a robin creates an immediate animal fragility, and the idiosyncratic descriptions may indicate that the poem has some insight into Pepita's individual experience; but the reuse, in only a few short lines, of words like "wriggle" and "odd" and the stuttering alliteration of "chopped" "chirpings" also indicate that the richness of language has been exhausted. There are no synonyms available to the speaker as she reports on Pepita's last moments: she returns obsessively to the same image, the same sounds, the same words. Like a rising inflection at the end of a sentence, the odd rising of Pepita's chirps does not convey finality but uncertainty.⁶²

The refusal of a definitive ending reflects a deep ambivalence about the place of the individual, particularly the female individual, in a communal voice, but it is not solely

the product of doubt or hesitation. The poem's contradictory endings help to preserve the core aesthetic project of the work, the development of a composite form that allows conflicting purposes to coexist: Brooks combines the particular lyric focus and intensity of the ballads, sonnets, and family portraits of her earlier work into the multipart expression of a larger black identity without allowing them to be reduced to a single voice, a single way of speaking, or a totalizing epic of national meaning. This simultaneously individualist and multiple form serves a black nationalist desire for communal black expression while also preserving Brooks's talent for creating idiosyncratic black voices. To allow any particular style to resolve the tensions of the Mecca would undo that work.

The coexisting, disparate styles of "In the Mecca" achieve on a grander scale the kind of balancing of speech and silence that marks Brooks's relationship to poetic artifice throughout her career. Artifice pushes poetic language to express the strange and elusive parts of experience, but it also signals an inadequacy of language, a distance between words and experience that refuses to be "captured." Some experiences demand linguistic contortions; they call forth attempt after attempt and exhaust the capabilities of even the most deft wielder of language. Ultimately, as in the death of Pepita, there is no style, no use of language—whether poeticisms, straight talk, idiosyncratic "chirpings," or communally powerful oratory—that is capable of accessing and conveying experience. The proliferation of language forms simultaneously makes various kinds of expression possible and points to what is inexpressible. Throughout Brooks's work this inexpressibility leads to repetition, turning around a "something" that remains unworded. We can see that reiterative return in the several endings of "In the Mecca" and in Alfred's

“Something, something in the Mecca continue to call” (433). That same slipperiness appears in “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” when “He hears and does not hear / The alarm clock [. . .] He sees and does not see the broken windows” (45). The white tourists at Benvenuti’s are similarly thrown back on repetition when they attempt to reduce black expression to their expectation of clowning: “One knows and scarcely knows what to expect” (126). The speaker in “Maxie Allen,” Annie’s explainer, also finds, despite her obvious depth of linguistic resources, a paucity of words: “Sweet Annie tried to teach her mother / There was somewhat of something other” (84). And, while many narratives of Brooks’s development as a poet, including her own, would have us read her poems after “In the Mecca” as unconflicted in their dedication to communal expression, jettisoning both individualist quirks and strategic silences, many of her later poems foreground the medium and its inadequacy using a similar repetitiveness. For example, in “Whitney Young,” a late poem describing a civil rights leader who “confounded and offended them out there,” Brooks expresses a version of essence while simultaneously confounding those who seek it: “”They saw you, / arch and precise. / They saw that you were wise, arch, and precise / They did not like it, Whitney” (505). The repetition suggests both that the speaker and those who “saw” Young possess precisely the right words to describe him and that something about Young exceeds language. Though a phrase like “They saw that you were wise” is a far cry from the *Anniad*’s “Think of ripe and rompabout / All her harvest buttoned it” (99), Brooks’s poetry continues to emphasize artificiality as a means both of experimentally stretching the capacity of poetic language and signaling its limits.

Notes

¹ Chapman's "Sweet Bombs" is an interesting exception. She calls Brooks's poems "conversational" and "staunchly impersonal" and laments the loss of this style in her more revolutionary poetry (93). Thus, she agrees that Brooks's style is divided into pre- and post-Fisk eras, but she does not prefer the earlier style based on its attainment of a more authentic voice rather a more impersonal one.

² Even when a critic like Washington notices silences in Brooks's work, as she does in her article on *Maud Martha*, she reads them as waystations in the development toward writing that is better able to reveal or expose black women's anger and rage at being silenced.

³ Though Brooks's sense of communal voicing is largely focused on blackness, she also spoke for female experience in a ways that could be considered communal speaking out, particularly in poems like "The Mother" (21) or "Mrs. Small" (341), which are often held up as examples of Brooks speaking out for silenced femininity.

⁴ Page numbers for poems refer to *Blacks*, which selects from Brooks's major volumes.

⁵ Brooks published books of poems for children, including *Aloneness* and two books of writing instruction for young readers, *Young Poets Primer* and *Very Young Poets*. Many black writers have publically lauded Brooks as a mentor and inspiration. Poems are frequently dedicated to her and, even as early as 1971, Brown, Madhubuti, and Ward edited a volume called *To Gwen With Love: An Anthology Dedicated to Gwendolyn Brooks*. She has endowed poetry prizes with her own money, and several Illinois schools and a library have been named in her honor. She was also depicted in the "Wall of Respect," a Chicago mural celebrating black culture heroes, the dedication of which she describes in her poem "The Wall," discussed later in this chapter (444-45).

⁶ The heroes depicted included Brooks, and Brooks read some of her poems at the dedication, making it likely that the poet figure represents Brooks herself.

⁷ This is not to say that oppression and repression are the only things that American symbols represent for black writers.

⁸ The argument over whether writing in traditional forms constituted assimilation to white culture was especially important during the Harlem Renaissance. Later, the Black Arts Movement also considered certain forms racially significant. Fuller, for example, argues that a black aesthetic "cannot, by definition, lead through the literary mainstream" (3). He argues that the rejection of traditional forms is analogous to the popular "black is beautiful" rejection of white beauty standards: "After centuries of being told, in a million different ways, that they were not beautiful, and that whiteness of skin, straightness of hair, and aquilineness of features constitute the only measures of beauty, black people have revolted" (8). DuPlessis has more recently argued that modernist

experimentation formally excludes blackness: “there is for white writers an aborted dialogue with African-American culture in which, after some acknowledging of the presence, and sometimes the speech, of one’s fellows, Euro-American writers construct their whiteness by refusing to imagine dialogue and thus invent a black semisilence in which they could ‘darken their speech’” (43-44). Similarly, Nielsen uses an evocative image from Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man*—the grandfather’s advice to “let ’em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open”—to illustrate the relationship of white literature to black literature. He argues that the appearance of black dialect or jazz forms in literature might be the result of the swallowing of black culture by white, that it might be the “preliminary signs of an imminent busting open, a series of hiccups, a pattern of convulsive explosions, a poetic of indigestion” (15-16). These formulations imply that there are identifiably white and black literary forms and that such forms are often opposed, mirroring cultural conflict.

⁹ Kent observes a similar dynamic, though he does not discuss the particularly American resonances of the “fictitious model” with which Lester fails to identify: “The images of the movie run an allegory before him: Strong men in vast spaces, always ready to confront Rough Man, as the Challenger, an image giving full scope to physical manliness and the natural entitlement to space. Lester cannot make the Walter Mitty escapist identification with a fictitious model and cringes in self-recognition” (*Life* 139).

¹⁰ Baker quotes Paul Kellogg’s essay “Negro Pioneers” and Charles Johnson’s “The New Frontage on American Life,” which themselves illustrate the appeal of American frontier terminology.

¹¹ Other representative examples include Gayle Jr.’s “Cultural Strangulation,” which argues that the black critic is an especially well-equipped explorer and mapper of the “untoured regions of the Black experience” that black literature opens up (46) and Fuller’s “Towards a Black Aesthetic,” which calls black writers “revolutionaries” who “[strike] out in new, if uncharted, directions” (3).

¹² Though Brooks is not directly discussing difficult language here, she argues that the new blackness is difficult to understand, especially for whites: “There is indeed a new Black today. He is different from any the world has known. He’s a tall-walker. Almost firm. By many of his own *brothers* he is not understood. And he is understood by *no* white. Not the wise white; not the Schooled white; not the Kind white. Your *least* prerequisite toward an understanding of the new Black is an exceptional Doctorate which can be conferred only upon those with the proper properties of bitter birth and intrinsic sorrow. I know this is infuriating, especially to those professional Negro-understanders, some of them so *very* kind, with special portfolio, special savvy. But I cannot say anything other, because nothing other is the truth” (“Field” 77).

¹³ This is not to say that the poem cannot be read or enjoyed by those not included in the term “sisters” but that the poem positions such readers as eavesdroppers rather than addressees.

¹⁴ The mystical or extralinguistic element of the folk tradition of signifying is further developed in Gates's work. For Gates, the secular tradition of indeterminacy or ambiguous troping in African American literature is related to African spiritual traditions that value the unknown as a part of sacred communication, where Esu, the god who speaks to human beings, is the god of "ariyemuye (that which no sooner is held than it slips through one's fingers)" ("Blackness" 238) or "the Yoruba figure of indeterminacy itself, *ayese ayewi*, or *ailemo*, literally 'that which we cannot know'" (*Signifying* 11). For Gates, the refusal of rational meaning is rooted in African spirituality and is part of the distinctiveness of black literature in the United States.

¹⁵ In black aesthetics, the logic of mystical unspeakability, that is, the notion that supralinguistic experience or knowledge is reduced, constrained, or sullied by the insufficiencies of language, is often politically deployed. Mayfield considers resistance to definitive critical language part of a larger resistance to cultural appropriation:

I cannot—will not—define my Black Aesthetic, nor will I allow it to be defined for me [. . .]. My point is that superficial appurtenances such as music, language, dress, and slogans, and other "Black Is Beautiful" fads can so easily be chewed up, digested, and spat out by this vigorous, if sick, society, that no aesthetic is safe within its grinding teeth. (30)

¹⁶ In a similar vein, Spillers observes Brooks's notable ability to "allow language to penetrate to the core of neutral events" (234), making her poems an extension of the domain of language.

¹⁷ The *Primer for Young Poets* reveals that Brooks herself also values language as pioneering. Her first piece of advice for young writers is "Use fresh language." She explains that students of writing should not be afraid to push their language into the unknown and that this process is integral to poetry: "Art urges voyages" (13). Further, she argues that diction should not be decorative but functional; it should "drive you inexorably toward your resolution" (6). This suggests that one's choice of words, especially new or "fresh" words, is a way of gaining ground.

¹⁸ In her first autobiography, *Report from Part One*, Brooks prizes what she sees as a natively African silence or quietude:

I shake hands with Mr. W. [Frederick Waweru, associate registrar at the University of Nairobi], and look into his eyes for the last time. It has been interesting, observing those eyes; one is impressed by the level silence of the eyes. You *have* to think of the eyes of lions, looking with calm neither warm nor cool at the intruder, who may or may not be welcome. (95)

Her admiration of Waweru's silence is also an admiration of ambiguity and reticence: she does not know what he thinks of her, the intruder, and his eyes refuse to say. Brooks's observing eye seems to her intrusive, and she respects an African refusal to be registered by her gaze. If her job as a poet is to see and report what she observes, Africa will not be reported, as the following anecdote further illustrates:

I train the camera's registering glass on a tall black beauty with color aswirl around her and a huge long basket on her head, but, before I can "focus," my study is lost forever. Sadly I put the camera back; picture-taking is a problem here [Dar es Salaam], as in Nairobi; most Africans look surprised and somewhat disapproving when they find they are to be "material." (123)

Her account of her trip to Africa is marked, more than anything else, by quiet. Though Brooks comments that she "sadly put the camera back," she seems also to identify with and respect the woman's disapproval of becoming "material" for someone else.

Despite her apparent reluctance to make Africa and Africans into "material," Brooks does in fact write about her experience there: "Africa. A writer is tempted not to worry about 'writing it up'; is tempted just to 'let' it beautifully be!" (*Part One* 89). The temptation to "'let' it beautifully be!" is countered by the writer's responsibility to put things into words.

¹⁹ Reticence is also a practical issue for poets as her advice to the young poet in her contribution to *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing* makes clear: "Try telling the reader a little less. He'll, she'll love you more, and will love your poem more, if you allow him to do a little digging. Not *too* much, but *some*" (10).

²⁰ Gertrude Hughes also remarks on the importance of the notion that some kinds of experience are beyond language, but, in her estimation, it has the opposite effect, encouraging experimental investigation rather than protective silences: "the assumption that there must be limits to knowledge begins to sound expedient, potentially oppressive, and, therefore, as much an ethical and political matter as an epistemological one. That is, someone who gets thought of as an enigma (What do women want?) or who has been assigned membership among the inscrutable exotics may prefer not to dismiss difficult mysteries as muddles or marvels. Such a person may be more inclined to try to develop new capacities for knowing than to accept principled limits to what can be known" (396-97). I argue that this kind of resistance to patriarchy coexists, in Brooks's work, with strategic silences.

²¹ Perhaps this unruly music is a counterpoint to the way that refusing to perform for a white audience also harms the diners, making them "laugh punily."

²² Wheeler explores the sometimes uneasy relationship between Brooks's public voice and her "strategies of reticence." She observes that "even in her later, more overtly political writing Brooks demonstrates careful reserve about some aspects of her personal life" (92). Taylor calls Brooks's detachment a "sophistication" that "sometimes becomes a shield, from behind which almost invisible darts fly often and accurately. Throughout Brooks's poetry, delicate satire regularly breaks through the surface which is pretending in some way to be well-behaved" (117). Hedley argues that what many feminist critics see as a failure to develop a feminist aesthetic is an unwillingness to "write of her own experience in the confessional mode" (105).

²³ The small pleasures that she enjoins black women to notice recall the quotidian enjoyments of Maud Martha, the titular character of a novel published almost 20 years earlier.

²⁴ The conflict between the individual and the communal is a frequent theme of Brooks criticism. Most notably, Kent's preface to *Report from Part One* describes Brooks's technique as "negotiat[ing] a nice balance between the confessional mode, (the private emotions, feelings, individual psychic responses), and that of the memoir (the individual as public act, possibly political act, as person upon the stage of history)" (33).

²⁵ This dynamic has been explored as a defense of authentically black language; however, it is also a defense of a language authentically one's own.

²⁶ Even in a much-repeated statement about her intentions to dedicate her poetry to the service of her community, Brooks appears slightly anxious to remind readers, and perhaps herself, that this poetry, while it will participate in a movement toward crafting black art for black audiences, will also be decidedly her own:

My aim, in my next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully "call" (see Imamu Baraka's "SOS") all black people, black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate; I wish to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones. My newish voice will not be an imitation of the contemporary young black voice, which I so admire, but an extending adaptation of today's G. B. voice. (*Part One* 183)

²⁷ Brooks's autobiographies show a general reticence to reveal her personal life. Though her story is supposed to be offered up as inspiration, particularly to readers in the black community, both books are remarkably obscure, and they meet the criteria of autobiography only tenuously. They collect statements from Brooks's mother, interviews with poets, and even recipes but do not offer the expected narration of inner struggles, biographical events, or private motivation.

²⁸ While Kent's phrasing questions Brooks's willingness to reveal essence, her relationship to style, particularly the foregrounding of artifice, may go further than simply occluding essence and instead cast doubt on its existence.

²⁹ That Naomi's desires exceed blue-printing also implies that they exceed prescriptions for black writing such as those expressed in Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Literature." This indicates a conflict between the individual and the community in that one of the purposes of Wright's essay is to direct black literature toward "the lives and consciousness of the Negro masses" and toward "moulding those lives and consciousness toward new goals" (99).

³⁰ In "I love those little booths" and "Naomi," we saw the influence of these tensions on rhyme, syntax, and small-scale formal devices like the use of parenthesis.

³¹ See Baker, Fuller, Cullen, Leonard, and Ford for discussions of Brooks's relationship to traditional forms.

³² While *Annie Allen* is obviously experimental, I refer here to *A Street in Bronzeville* and *The Beaneaters*.

³³ Brooks's more traditionally formal poems might be considered experimental in that they broaden the range of those forms by extending them to the expression of the ignored, silenced details of the lives of black men and women, considered by many to be too particularly black to qualify as the "universal" concerns of poetry. While Baker's suggestion that these poems are "white forms" filled with "black content" would not qualify these poems as experimental, Leonard points out that the insertion of "black content" does not leave these forms unchanged. Though I agree with Leonard that the encounter between form and subject matter in Brooks's traditionally formal work is more complex than a white container filled with black content, neither writer nor reader is likely to experience such technically proficient and correctly formal poetry as experimental in and of itself.

³⁴ As the book that won Brooks the Pulitzer, *Annie Allen* stands for an important moment in her career. For some readers the difficult and self-consciousness artifice of her style makes it her most "white" work, and for others the subject matter makes it her most woman-centered or feminist work.

³⁵ Though *Annie Allen* often departs from direct treatment of its title character, it can still be considered a sustained treatment of a single character in that all of the poems in the book are organized under headings that relate them to periods in Annie's life.

³⁶ Brooks, at least in hindsight, considers the style of *Annie Allen* highly individualistic, even self-indulgent. But her response to negative preliminary reviews from *Harper's* reader Genevieve Taggard—as revealed in a 1948 letter to her editor Elizabeth Lawrence—also shows that her experiments with language are driven by the need to push language to be more capable of expressing the realities of black women's lives: "the quality of the 'things' is as important to me as ever . . . I tried very hard, especially in 'Hesteriad' [the original title of the 'Anniad'] and 'the children of the poor,' to say exactly what I meant, instead of approximately. I'm surprised that this reaching toward a more careful language should strike anyone as 'a trick and a shock device'" (qtd. in Kent, *Life* 77).

³⁷ These lines are from "Maxie Allen," a poem describing the relationship between Annie and her much less romantic mother (84).

³⁸ Though many of the poems in the first section of the book narrate Annie's life, "the ballad of late Annie" is one of only two poems to voice Annie's thoughts directly. The first poem of the "Childhood and the Girlhood" section, "the birth in a narrow

room,” also quotes Annie: “How pinchy is my room! how can I breathe! / I am not anything and I have got / Not anything, or anything to do!” (83). The dissatisfaction of these lines appears to be the cause of Annie’s attraction for the romantic and the decadent. The style is plainer in this first introduction to Annie, but the idiosyncratic “pinchy” and the noticeable repetition of “anything” presage the more representative “Annie” voice of “the ballad of late Annie” and of “The Anniad.”

³⁹ Like women’s writing more generally, black women’s writing is often discussed as primarily, even inherently, more communal than white male writing. McLaughlin, for instance, argues that the communal is an essential value of otherwise disparate black female poetics: “Evolving within the matrix of a universal quest for self-determination and autonomy, Black feminine consciousness extols ‘community’— independent of any single ideology” (xlvi). But Brooks’s dedication to the idiosyncrasy of her subjects, even when that individuality is expressed in opposition to the community’s values, complicates if not entirely disproves this notion. See Erkkila for a discussion of women’s writing that does not fit a cooperative model of women’s literary relationships.

⁴⁰ Where Dickinson and Niedecker’s delight in what they respectively call “sapphire words” and “cormorant words” contradicts their regard for silences, for Brooks the sensuous physical quality of language disrupts its communicative aspects, thus contributing to certain silences.

⁴¹ “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” is not representative of Brooks’s early poems in that it is the longest of them. It was written at the request of her publishers (specifically at the suggestion of manuscript reviewer Richard Wright) to include a longer work among the collection of portraits in *A Street in Bronzeville*.

⁴² Though these lines do employ metaphor, their tone and register, in addition to their imagery, hint that embellishments, along with the zoot-suit and Woolworth dress, have been put aside.

⁴³ I read the ending of this poem with Ford and against the majority of critical responses that take this shift in style as a repudiation of artifice or an emancipatory casting-off of white influence to reveal the natural, unadorned, black self. Like Ford, I argue that the poem’s “contradictory endings” betray an uncertainty about style and trouble the role of artifice in the poem, without, as is commonly held, rejecting artifice altogether (“Sonnets” 348). I build on Ford’s claim that the poem’s multiple endings result in “fundamental contradictions about style” to argue that the coexistence of disparate styles in individual poems balances aesthetic idiosyncracies with group affiliation and that this type of innovation is most pronounced when individual and collective concerns conflict.

⁴⁴ The Mecca Building was destroyed in 1951 to make way for the expansion of the Illinois Institute of Technology by the time Brooks’s poem was published 1968.

⁴⁵ As Hedley explains, Brooks casts herself as a “Super-Reporter” who observes life in the Mecca, but her observations go far beyond the purview of the reporter (105). Instead she uses “a great variety of speech patterns that coexist without blending, inflected by differing levels of education, different regional and class backgrounds, difference in age and station in life” to create a diverse voice capable of a more accurate reporting than a single voice could be (125).

⁴⁶ Taylor observes that “except in scope and achievement, it is not a radical departure from the work which preceded it. However, it was completed during a time of upheaval in Brooks’s sense of herself as a poet, and the shorter poems collected with it are evidence of a major division in Brooks’s career” (130).

⁴⁷ Because “In the Mecca” is the central poem in Brooks’s first book written under the auspices of her black nationalist aesthetic, it is often taken as transitional in narratives that posit a significant change in Brooks’s style: for some readers, it has one foot in a white aesthetic that silenced black experience and the other in a more authentic African American voice, and, for other readers, it has one foot in an earlier, more authentic woman-centered aesthetic and the other in a patriarchal and sexist black nationalism that silenced feminine experience. Though these critical evaluations are based on conflicting values, they both take Brooks’s style to be in crisis and “In the Mecca” as poised between incompatible alternatives that can also be understood as representing Brooks’s simultaneous dedication to the individual and the communal. What black aesthetics codifies as white conditioning is, in Brooks’s earlier work, also an artifice used to voice and occlude singular experience: to retain elements of this supposedly white aesthetic is also to retain individual expression. What feminist critics read as woman-centeredness is, in Brooks’s earlier work, also a focus on the particular and personal: to develop away from a woman-centered voice is also to develop toward a collective black voice. Thus, both major stances on the poem contribute to a consideration of the poem as negotiating between the concerns of the community and the needs of the individual.

⁴⁸ Alfred “thinks, or drinks until the Everything / is vaguely part of One thing.” However, the power of language to wrap a multitudinous “Everything” up into “One thing” is vague and tenuous and, in the end, illusory. When Alfred’s thoughts turn toward Africa, “When there were all those gods / administering to panthers,” that mystic “One thing” begins to dissolve. He asks: “what was their one Belief? / what was their joining thing?” At which point his reverie is broken by the “stuffs” of life in the Mecca when “A boy breaks glass” (409-10).

⁴⁹ Though the focus on Senghor’s art (and Alfred’s valuation of it) as insufficient to the needs of the black community complicates the black arts rejection of artifice as assimilation to white aesthetics, at bottom it extends rather than rejects the basic notion that artifice is politically and poetically suspect and that it separates the black artist from his or her people.

⁵⁰ In addition to the prime instances of Annie Allen and Maud Martha, other examples of feminine recalcitrance through aesthetic exuberance abound, such as Hattie Scott, Mrs. Small, Cousin Vit, and the gal of “My Little ’Bout-Town Gal” (51, 341, 125, 328).

⁵¹ A consistently direct poem may participate in a fiction of access: the language of the poem is plain in order to offer the reader an unmediated and unmanipulated version of experience. More self-evidently artificial poetry rejects such a fiction indirectly by accentuating the medium through which experience is filtered or by which it is created, but consistently artificial forms leave open the possibility that the poet or speaker simply prefers mediated experience to unmediated, rather than denying the very possibility of unmediated experience or purely authentic linguistic representation. But, by combining these registers, Brooks makes it clear that plain language and free verse are not an alternative to embellishment but part of an array of available artistic choices.

⁵² See Lowney for an exploration of the ways that Brooks’s “polyvocal reconstruction of the Mecca counters reductively racist sociological narratives of urban decline” (190). He argues that Brooks responds to pop-cultural coding of the Mecca as unintelligible by suggesting that the voices of the Mecca are unintelligible by a failure of the listener, not the speakers.

⁵³ See Ford on Brooks’s use of the ballad tradition.

⁵⁴ Even here, where the division between the people of the Mecca is strongly emphasized, Brooks is concerned with community and connection. The final line of the Amos section, “never to forget,” creates a grammatical bridge to the next section if we read “The ballad of Edie Barrow” as a possible object of the verb “forget.” Though Amos’s politics appear to reject what Edie’s ballad represents, the grammar subverts this distinction, smuggling her experience into his vision.

⁵⁵ See Wheeler, Erkkila, Walters, Kaladjian, Melhem, Jones, Clarke, Doreski, and Hedley for conflicting accounts of Pepita’s role in “In the Mecca.”

⁵⁶ Alfred’s “I hate it” comes after a portrait of Dill, an old woman who challenges patriarchal restrictions on women’s sexuality with a broadly sensual widowhood.

⁵⁷ Brooks suggests that her own poetry, as part of a racial awakening, must leave behind the kind of language she attributes to Pepita here. Thus—along with Jamaican Edward—Alfred and the black aesthetics he advocates are implicated in the rejection of Pepita’s voice as a vital part of communal black expression. Brooks writes approvingly of this rejection but is ambivalent about it all the same: “Then came Baraka, rejecting all lovely little villanelles and sonnets—to Orpheus or anything else. Prettiness was out. Fight-fact was in” (*Capsule* 7). See Ford’s “The Sonnets of Satin-Legs Brooks” for a discussion of the dialogue between “prettiness” and “fight-fact” in Brooks’s poetics.

⁵⁸ Perhaps it is this insistence on distance that so troubles the reviewer who feels Brooks's artifice renders her a "local colorist commenting from a distance" (Rosenthal 28).

⁵⁹ In *Report from Part One*, Brooks meditates on the power of poetry to allow black children access to beauty that they might not otherwise touch. Her comments evoke Pepita, particularly in their focus on flowers: "Poetry is still in the world, and black children are colliding with some of it. They reach, touch lovely words and strong words with excitement and respect. They work hard to merit ownership. Looking at poetry and dealing with it, they realize that in the world there is beauty. That there is horror they know and have always known. New bombs are developed most carefully. Hatreds are here, and multiply. Modern ice and iron marry, and offer presently a frightening progeny. But black children also know that there are flowers. They are not ashamed to speak to daisies and dandelions" (207-08). To "speak to" flowers is to refuse to be limited to "horror"; however, at least in Pepita's life, horror blasts the bloom.

⁶⁰ For instance, Walters argues that "Pepita's death actually symbolizes renewed hope for the community [. . .]. Like the robin, which is synonymous with the beginning of spring, Pepita, whose name means seed, also represents new life. Through her struggle to remain alive, Pepita showed the community that even though racial and social circumstances accounted for their hellish, death-like existence, they could not give up on life [. . .]. Pepita's spirit of optimism was consistent with the attitude of hope expressed by many in the Black community during the 1960s" (96). Arguments like these fail to account, however, for the fact of Pepita's brutal death and that, whatever beauty or hope she speaks for, she speaks as a corpse "in dust with roaches."

⁶¹ An iconic example of repetitiveness that signals the inadequacy of language is Pablo Neruda's description of violence in Madrid: "through the streets the blood of the children / ran simply, like the blood of children" (my translation, 54).

⁶² Erkkila reads this indecisiveness of the ending as a failure to reconcile a split vision: "Ultimately, Pepita's 'chopped chirpings' do not really work in unison with the black male voices of renewed consciousness that punctuate and in some sense rupture the black female quest myth of 'In the Mecca.' Like the blank space that separates Alfred's constructive vision from the dead body of Pepita in the concluding passage of the poem, the gap between the voices of new black consciousness and Pepita's 'chopped chirpings' indicates Brooks's own failure to negotiate the split between the black female-centered quest myth—with which the poem begins—and the male-centered mythos of Black Power—with which the poem ends" (218). I argue, however, that unison is not Brooks's goal here, rather community without unison.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION:
SOMETHING ELSE

Emily Dickinson, Lorine Niedecker, and Gwendolyn Brooks all write at the limits of language. Each of them circles a core silence that they do not wish to sound or for which they have no words: despite masterful and inventive uses of language, they arrive at something they only call “something.” Dickinson writes of “Something in a Summer’s day” and a “Dying Eye [. . .] In search of Something.” Niedecker’s poet-speaker says to “[her] head, Write something,” and Niedecker composes her oblique “Something / in the water.” Brooks’s Annie wants “somewhat of something other” while Alfred senses a “something, something in Mecca.”¹ For all of these poets, it is important to recognize a thing apart from language, and their responses to it are shaped by the pioneer and mystic strains of American poetics, though their particular contexts differentiate them.

As we have seen, the unsaid or unsayable motivates both the extension and limitation of language, a simultaneity that requires innovation. Dickinson pushes metaphor and other kinds of figuration closer to an unspeakable “Force” or unity, but she simultaneously preserves the comparative structure that sustains difference.² Niedecker uses omission and ambiguity to promote a plurality of grammatical possibilities, while this same proliferation of linguistic connections points to the object’s transcendence of language’s relational power. Brooks foregrounds artifice to expand communal and individual expression—particularly artistic agency—and, at the same time, this emphasis on language as art insists on the slippage between experience and the “coats in which [we] wrap things.”³ Each of these poets reshapes her language to open new expressive

territory even as she describes its limits, and the similarities among their projects demonstrate the influence of coexisting pioneer and mystic motivations on American women's poetic experimentation. However, though Dickinson, Niedecker, and Brooks all respond to a "something" that inspires both speech and silence, for each of them the role that something plays is shaped by historical, cultural, and personal frameworks.

In Dickinson's poetry the unnamed and unnameable thing is most often aligned with a force, variously natural or supernatural, that exceeds the human and offers, or threatens, to envelop it. Language serves to approach this power, but it is also a marker of human difference from it, preventing the disappearance of the speaking subject into total identification with an other. This simultaneous reverence for and fear of the suprahuman aligns Dickinson with political and cultural currents of her time, especially as evidenced in attitudes toward the American wilderness or frontier. Further, it echoes religious mores that carried great weight not only with New Englanders but with the Dickinson family in particular and must have influenced Dickinson, however unorthodox her thinking. Like the wild lands that so entranced and imperiled her contemporaries, like the God who was both confidante and terrifying mystery, the thing that stays Dickinson's language lures and looms to swallow her up.

In contrast, for Niedecker it is not the unspeakable that endangers the human subject but the "I" that invades the other. The mind—particularly as it exercises language—impinges on the "facts," "wonderful in themselves," and Niedecker is anxious to prevent its predation upon what is exterior to it.⁴ In her work, it is not primarily the self whose boundaries are endangered by something outside language but the identities of extralinguistic objects that are menaced by the self.⁵ Niedecker's protective attitude

toward natural objects reflects the shifting status of wilderness in American thought from danger to endangered. Further, her identification with the regional particularities of folk life in rural Wisconsin undergirds a resistance to the blurring of distinctions intrinsic to some versions of modern (and modernist) cosmopolitanism, while her personal appetite for intellectual stimulation and lively correspondence make the possibilities for a wider network of connection a boon. Niedecker's simultaneous attraction for and suspicion of the connective power of language echo a cultural excitement and anxiety about the effect of burgeoning human capabilities on "individual intact natures."⁶

Though there is some overlap in the years Niedecker and Brooks published their work, they are informed by very different assumptions about the "somewhat of something other" that stands apart from language. In fact, Niedecker may have more in common with Dickinson than with Brooks. Where Niedecker and Dickinson both wrote in relative isolation from other people, their work marked by garden and river more than by street or apartment building, Brooks actively participated in a vibrant local community in Chicago, as well as a national and global community of writers. Perhaps as a result of this greater involvement with human beings, while Niedecker and Dickinson both locate otherness outside the self, in Brooks's work the extralinguistic becomes internalized, a function of identity. The unspoken for Brooks is a property of the self and, as such, is both shared and unsharable. Language, in this formulation, is a tool for expressing the irreducible apartness of the individual—particularly the black, female individual—and maintaining that singularity as inexpressible. Brooks's location of "something other" within the self—rather than outside, threatening or threatened by it—is in part a response to racist and sexist logics that position blackness and femaleness outside of language in

order to marginalize them: it turns that logic on its head, making ineffable particularity a source of artistic vitality and communal belonging. Clearly, something beyond words drives disparate American women poets both to extend and limit the reach of language, but the otherness to which their experimentation responds changes with the writer's context and perspective.

Thus, to understand how the tension between contradictory impulses to speak out and remain silent continues to influence U.S. women's poetry, we must understand the shifting role of the extralinguistic. All of the poets considered here write exclusively in English, but further work might also take into account the way women's writing incorporating languages other than English reconstitutes what is considered outside of language and alters the dynamics of speaking out and keeping silent. One of the most important changes in both the creative and critical atmosphere of late-twentieth-century literature has been the opening up of publishing practices, public tastes, and critical criteria to include voices that have been suppressed, ignored as marginal, or—in the case of nationalist American literary study—considered outside the purview of a criticism based on limited concepts that conflate nation and language. This has, among other things, signaled the importance of reevaluating the place of multilingual literature—especially writing that uses both English and non-English languages—in accounting for the multifariousness of literary endeavor in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century United States.

In American women's multilingual poetry the question of what stands apart from language is complex and must necessarily be answered differently depending on the cultural and linguistic ties as well as the particular aesthetic choices of individual poets.

What we can say, though, is that within mainstream English-speaking United States culture, women identified with non-English languages are themselves doubly positioned outside language—they are disqualified from rational speech and identified with a mysteriously exotic extralinguistic matrix by virtue of both their gender and the supposed foreignness of their language or culture. This formulation relies on the conflation of language with *a* language.⁷ Thus, where American women poets who write exclusively in English experiment in order to sound the silence of something outside language itself, multilingual poets frequently adopt similar techniques instead simultaneously to enrich and curtail a specific language to which they have been positioned as outsiders, namely, normative English.

Multilingual writing is often characterized as a tool of poets whose experiences are not adequately represented by monolingual expression. As such, it is associated with outspokenness and resistance to silences, an association which has much in common with a feminist rhetoric of breaking silences. And, indeed, many women do employ non-English languages to dispel the silences that monolithic notions of U.S. culture impose on them. The use of multilingualism to extend the expressive range of English is important to poets working in a wide variety of styles and levels of linguistic mixing: for some it may mean simply using non-English nouns for culturally specific items, such as food or kinship relationships, but for others it means a systematic juxtaposition or integration of two or more languages that is nearly impossible to interpret for those who do not wield the target languages with ease. At all ends of this experimental spectrum, however, writers and critics often take the interpolation of various languages to signify an enlarging of what is seen as limited or limiting monolingualism to accommodate new

kinds of experiences or ways of knowing. Doris Sommer's description of this process casts multilingual writing as situated on a frontier, pushing forward into the unknown: "These new investigations will need to stretch beyond a single language and also past everyday activities, as mass migrations and strained, often double, be-longings push identities and language games to boundaries between codes. And at those frontiers, unconventional speech and writing border on art" (1). By taking monolingualism as settled territory and multilingualism as pioneering, Sommer echoes a commonly held attitude about the benefits of multilingualism for enlarging the capabilities of a single language.⁸ Polyglot writing, like the writing of others for whom poetic legitimacy is hard-won, is an important tool for voicing what has been silenced.

Because of this emphasis, the importance of silences in late-twentieth-century multilingual poetics is frequently overlooked. However, vaunting multilingualism as a means of stretching the capacity of English does not fully account for the material realities of writers and readers of multilingual poetry. For some, multilingualism may not be experienced as a salutary corrective to a limiting monolingualism rather as submission to linguistic domination or bowing to economic pressures. Thus, to refuse, even in part, to translate one's experiences into a dominant tongue can be part of a politically and culturally important refusal to assimilate. Though the particular dynamics of relationships between languages and the cultures that use them inflect the role of silence, in many circumstances of language contact, silence—particularly untranslated non-English text—is figured as a tool for resisting the imposition of a dominant culture by refusing to assimilate to it or be intelligible within it.⁹ In fact, Caroline Bergvall argues that postmodern multilingualism is distinct from modernist multiculturalism precisely in its

resistance to interpretation or translation.¹⁰ For Bergvall, polyglossia does not lead to a renewed or expanded language but instead suggests a “positive reevaluation of untranslatability” (217). While multilingual literature is often posited as opening new linguistic territory, it is also marked by silences, particularly in its strategic unintelligibility to certain readers.

This is not to say that the discussion of multilingual experimentation should be limited to engagement with non-English languages as representing the unspeakable or unspoken. Certainly multilingual women poets are as concerned as others with a “something” outside of language entirely. Again, what plays the role of the extralinguistic—whether it echoes Dickinson’s unspeakable union, Niedecker’s bounded objects, Brooks’s idiosyncratic self, or is an entirely other “something”—depends on historical, cultural, and personal particularities. Nevertheless, in a general sense multilingual writing impels and repels the reach of language itself, not just a particular language. The polyglossic expansion of language transgresses the limits of monolingual monoculturalism, allowing linguistic revitalization.¹¹ But this transgression also defamiliarizes language entirely: “When more than one word points to a familiar thing, the excess shows that no one word can ‘own’ or ‘be’ that thing” (Sommer 2).¹² Multilingual writing renews language itself, expanding its reach into polyvocal play, but by denaturalizing the connection between word and thing, it also delineates the insufficiencies of language as a whole, revealing the slippage inherent in linguistic representation.¹³

In future research, I hope to investigate more closely how multilingual women’s poetry, an essential and under-researched strain of twentieth- and twenty-first-century

American women's innovation, takes up and revises the experimental motivations and techniques at work in the poetry of Dickinson, Niedecker, and Brooks. In 1854 Thoreau voiced one of the essential paradoxes of his age: "At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of Nature."¹⁴ And though Thoreau's "we" is a new people and his "Nature" now all but unrecognizable, American poetry still earnestly explores the very mysteriousness it requires.

Notes

¹ Dickinson poems quoted here are 104 and 648 in Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Niedecker poems are found on pages 100 and 202 in Penberthy's *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*. Quotations from Brooks are from "Maxie Allen" and "In the Mecca," pages 84 and 433 of *Blacks*. See Chapters II, III, and IV for full citation information for these volumes.

² See Chapter II, page 76, for Dickinson's treatment of a "Force" she cannot "mould" "into word."

³ See Chapter IV, pages 258-59, for a discussion of Alfred's search in "In the Mecca" for "what coats in which to wrap things."

⁴ See Chapter III, page 146, for Niedecker's letter to Zukofsky regarding "think[ing] with things as they exist."

⁵ Niedecker's work retains some of Dickinson's apprehension before the ineffable other. When language is counted among the objects outside the self, Niedecker too invests something suprahuman with an attractive and dangerous ability to trespass the boundaries of identity. This may, to some degree, indicate the persistence of the early-American view of wilderness inflecting Dickinson's poetry.

⁶ See Chapter III, page 146, for a discussion of Zukofsky's writing about the "individual intact natures" of things and its influence on Niedecker.

⁷ See Miller and Firmat for considerations of the circumstances of English becoming the de facto language of United States national identity.

⁸ Miller considers the influence of other languages as something that will “stretch U.S. English” (23). Lashgari points out a similar effect: “the increasingly wide use of English and other European languages by writers from Third World cultures has expanded the range of those languages, carrying them beyond the imperial singular to an inclusive plural—‘englishes,’ ‘frenches,’ ‘spanishes,’ capable of embodying cultural differences” (5-6). More pointedly, Ch’ien also formulates the contact between monolingualism and “weird” English—English marked and shaped by its encounter with other languages—as a frontier where the explored abuts the unexplored. Weird English writers “expand linguistic territory as a nomad might expand geographic territory” responding to a “temptation to expand language” that is “irresistible” (47).

⁹ Cutter discusses the role of translation as a trope in American literature. She suggests that a refusal to translate can signify both a desire to assimilate and a refusal to “transcode ethnicity and create an identity that is multicultural and multilinguistic”(6). As critics like Rosenwald insist, multilingualism is not self-evidently positive in all situations: “we have already assigned positive values to hybridity, multilingualism, and *mestizaje*, negative ones to parochialism and homogeneity. That assumption is a limitation; the values of these qualities need to be investigated, and respectful attention paid to works that portray the unilingual as the servant of her endangered culture, the multilingual as the rootless cosmopolitan, the polyglot as the traitor from within” (xviii).

¹⁰ Bergvall’s discussion of texts that resist universality by retaining a recalcitrant local significance recalls Middleton’s framing of Niedecker’s poems as using regionally or personally specific references to create texts that remain closed to non-local readers. See Chapter III, page 126.

¹¹ See Sommer on the salutary aspects of bilingualism on language in general. See also Nancy’s discussion of *mestizaje*—loosely translated as mixing or mixture—as a force destroying and remaking not only language but all of human culture.

¹² Sommer and Miller specifically cite Victor Shklovsky’s notion of linguistic defamiliarization in their formulations of multilingualism’s effect on target languages.

¹³ For Nancy *mestizaje* itself is the “something” outside language that exceeds signification: “Isn’t it already going too far to talk about *mestizaje*? As if *mestizaje* were ‘some thing,’ a substance, an object, an identity (an identity!) that could be grasped and ‘processed’” (122).

¹⁴ See Chapter I, pages 13-16, for my discussion of the dual pull of language and silence in Thoreau’s writing.

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