

Poetry's Work:
Labor and *Poiesis*, 1950 to the Present

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A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

University of Virginia
May, 2017

Abstract

Although Plato famously expels the poet from his Republic, *Poetry's Work: Labor and Poiesis, 1950 to the Present* argues for the poet's continued place in the contemporary city not only as a visionary or an intellectual, but—returning to the etymology of “poetry” in the Greek verb for “to make”—as a maker, subject to but uniquely able to help us think about the global transformations, contradictions, and crises that characterize work today. My research brings the work of theorists such as Sarah Brouillette, Silvia Federici, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Cedric Robinson, and Saskia Sassen, among others, together with readings of poems, assembling a set of modern and contemporary American poets whose politics, racialized or gendered identities, and aesthetic practices—as well as their various positions in and among hegemonic and often exported forms of labor—give unique vantage points at moments during a global transformation of work. Joining scholars of form and poetry such as Caroline Levine, David Palumbo-Liu, Jahan Ramazani, Anthony Reed, and Dorothy Wang, I focus on the particular capacities of poetic form to reveal the social and historical world of the poem's making. Setting poetic and non-poetic making as kindred and complementary activities, I offer a version of poetic form that reveals its own creation as bound up with both global processes and aesthetic value, and, in so doing, opens onto new understandings of labor, as well as renewed emphasis on the value of aesthetic work.

My first chapter charts changes in globalized labor of information that are linked to a shift from Fordism to what has been seen as a regime of “immaterial labor” through the work of John Ashbery and Ara Shirinyan, using the poetic figure of *ekphrasis*. These

poets provide a nuanced view of the work—material as well as “immaterial”—involved in this shift. Together, they point to the conditions of worsening global inequality that characterize the period under consideration. In a second chapter, I examine the forms of “song” and “sonnet” beside gendered reproductive or domestic labor in the poems of Alice Notley, Catherine Wagner, and Sandra Simonds; these forms provide flexible and dynamic models for a multi-valenced type of work that has been difficult to categorize. A third chapter takes up the problem of the massive expulsions and displacements from work happening today on a global scale. The work of a set of contemporary poets—Mark Nowak, Fred Moten, Caroline Bergvall, and Bhanu Kapil—gives a range of formal manifestations of life and work on what Sassen terms “the systemic edge.” A final coda tracks the figure of *paralipsis* across different contexts (creative labor, gendered domestic or reproductive labor on several geographical scales) in the poetry of Anne Boyer, demonstrating the flexibility of this rhetorical form, its ability to contain resistance to work and awareness of work’s value simultaneously, and its self-awareness of both similarities to and differences from other sorts of work.

Acknowledgements

Deepest thanks first of all to my dissertation committee: Susan Fraiman, Jahan Ramazani, and Lisa Russ Spaar. In different ways, each member of my committee has been a model of creative and committed academic work, informing and helping form this project. Additional thanks to Elizabeth Fowler, Jerome McGann, Michael Levenson, and Herbert Tucker for passionately and rigorously helping me think through all sorts of poetic work across periods. I owe a debt of gratitude to Jennifer Wicke, whose intellectual spirit was integral to the initial stages of my dissertation. A University of Virginia Society of Fellows Yalden-Thompson Summer Grant and an Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences Summer Research Grant allowed for research and writing at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Generous fellowships from the Renate Voris Foundation, the University of Virginia Society of Fellows, and the Josephine De Karman Foundation gave me the time and space necessary to complete this project.

I am constantly grateful to my teachers at Harvard College—Jorie Graham, Peter Sacks, and Helen Vendler—for the beginnings of everything. At New York University, I was glad to have had Deborah Landau's guidance. Ernest Gilman let me into his graduate class, as did Maureen McLane, who has been and continues to be a lucky mentor. Thanks to Dan Carey and Lionel Pilkington at NUI Galway for a library card and moral support. Thanks to the editors at *ASAP / Journal* and the *Poetic Labor Project*, and to Timothy Donnelly at the *Boston Review*, for making space for some of the thinking included here. And thanks beyond thanks to the Clemson University English Department: Garry Bertholf, David Coombs, Camille Cooper, Pauline De Tholozany, Erin Goss, Mike

LeMahieu, Brian McGrath, Angela Naimou, Elizabeth Rivlin, Lindsay Thomas, Michelle Ty, and others.

None of this would have been written without a host of friends. Love and thanks to Anastatia Curley, for wisdom, camaraderie, and commiseration; to Adrienne Raphel, for ballads and puns. And to many, many more: Stephanie Bernhard, Angèle Christin, Sarah D'Adamo, Amy De'Ath, Georgie Devereux, Sean O'Brien, Anthony Madrid, Jeff Nagy, Jennifer Nelson, Giulio Pertile, André Pesic, Katie Peterson, Hilary Plum, Tom Rock, Kristen Rock, Zach Savich, Connie Scozzaro, Jocelyn Spaar, Young Suh, Andrew Zawacki.

There is actually no way to thank Walt Hunter, whose love and thought helped me through this project, and everything else.

Finally, thanks to my parents, Pamela and Richard Turner, and to my sister, Lauren, for their patience and confidence. A polymer chemist, my father researches and teaches with devotion, joy, and intense curiosity—qualities of work I'd like to believe are at the heart of my own. These pages are dedicated to him.

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Introduction

What Work Is

We stand in the rain in a long line
 waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
 You know what work is—if you're
 old enough to read this you know what
 work is, although you may not do it.
 Forget you. This is about waiting,
 shifting from one foot to another.
 Feeling the light rain falling like mist
 into your hair, blurring your vision
 until you think you see your own brother
 ahead of you, maybe ten places.
 [...] You love your brother,
 now suddenly you can hardly stand
 the love flooding you for your brother,
 who's not beside you or behind or
 ahead because he's home trying to
 sleep off a miserable night shift
 at Cadillac so he can get up
 before noon to study his German.
 Works eight hours a night so he can sing
 Wagner, the opera you hate most,
 the worst music ever invented.
 How long has it been since you told him
 you loved him, held his wide shoulders,
 opened your eyes wide and said those words,
 and maybe kissed his cheek? You've never
 done something so simple, so obvious,
 not because you're too young or too dumb,
 not because you're jealous or even mean
 or incapable of crying in
 the presence of another man, no,
 just because you don't know what work is.

I watched a snake

hard at work in the dry grass
 behind the house
 catching flies. It kept on
 disappearing.
 And though I know this has
 something to do

with lust, today it seemed
 to have to do
 with work. It took it almost half
 an hour to thread
 roughly ten feet of lawn,
 [...]

All this to say
 I'm not afraid of them
 today, or anymore
 I think. We are not, were not, ever
 wrong. Desire

is the honest work of the body,
 its engine, its wind.
 It too must have its sails—wings
 in this tiny mouth, valves
 in the human heart, meanings like sailboats
 setting out

over the mind. Passion is work
 that retrieves us,
 lost stitches. It makes a pattern of us,
 it fastens us
 to sturdier stuff
 no doubt.

Jorie Graham's "I watched a snake," first published in the *Iowa Review* in 1980, and Philip Levine's "What Work Is," from his 1991 collection of the same name, seem as different as the poets who wrote them. Although both Levine (1928 – 2015) and Graham (b. 1950) hold degrees from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, are Pulitzer Prize winners, have served on the Board of Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets, and were or are influential teachers of and mentors to a younger generation of poets via prestigious institutions, similarities end there. The child of Jewish immigrants, Levine grew up in working-class Detroit, was employed in the manufacturing plants of auto giants such as

Cadillac and Chevrolet, and writes what might be summed up as a plain-spoken poetry of the American everyday. Graham, on the other hand, was born in New York City to an international journalist and a renowned sculptor, grew up in Rome, attended the Sorbonne, and developed an interest in poetry during her time as a film student at New York University. In contrast to Levine's poems, Graham's can seem heady, difficult (or "elliptical," to use critic Stephen Burt's term), philosophical, or erudite. Her references are continental and academic, her poems more likely to be set in Tuscany or Normandy than closer to home.

Given such different backgrounds, poems by each of these poets about "what work is" are likely to be vastly divergent. Where Graham's presents a domestic setting, a space of prolonged solitary meditation on "desire" and "passion" in addition to labor, Levine's returns us to a recognizable scene of the American working class: an assembly line, the domain of time pressures and tough conditions, brotherhood and masculinity. And yet in terms of their content—the vision or definition of work they offer—these poems think along remarkably similar lines. Each poem takes one version of work and transforms it into a more expansive or capacious version. Levine begins by complicating a common conception of American industrial waged labor (what "you" already know or think of). Even as "work" is opposed to artistic and cultural production (outside of the time of work is the time of art, of opera, "the worst music ever invented"), by the poem's end, work encompasses one version of its other: fraternal emotion, displays of affection. For Graham, the process occurs in the opposite direction: an animal action, a motion that mimics the inward affective motions of lust and desire, is revealed to be a social process and a productive activity, "honest," and "sturdy." What once was private is brought

together with its opposite; what once might have been fruitless and fearful is now seen as a kind of work.

This project begins from a similar desire to widen or complicate our idea of “what work is.” But while both poems share this expansive impulse, their juxtaposition also brings into focus a crucial aspect of my work, which is the inclusion of *poetic work* into the sphere of work more generally. For Levine, cultural activity remains outside the time of labor; while certainly the poem is itself a well-crafted artifact, it would be difficult to say much about how it thinks about poetic production *as* work. In its formal and rhetorical simplicity, it offers a vision of poetic labor as an almost transparent activity, one that is—whatever it is—off the clock of factory work, and not very present to it. On the other hand, although Graham doesn’t thematize poetic making *per se*, the formal mechanisms of her poem offer an insight into what kind of activity making poetry might be. Like the snake it describes, the poem moves via an in-and-out structure of indented lines, weaving syntax through its visual patterning and “stitching” (the verb appears for the snake’s motion and for a pattern of physical human birth and death, “stitching the earth”) its meaning down the page. Graham even uses the break between the title and the poem, enjambling the title into the poem, to demonstrate this activity of pulling-together. This is not a form of mimesis; the poem does not simply mimic the snake’s motion. Instead, for Graham, the activity of poetic making resembles the motion of the snake, which resembles the motion of human desire, which resembles a form of domestic labor. The poem brings these activities together, interrogating them all—poetic making included—under the rubric of “work.”

“I watched a snake” is not only about work; it also performs a sort of work. Reading formally, we see how poetry itself is a type of labor, and how the making of the poem resembles other types of making. In opposition to poems such as Levine’s, where poetic labor operates transparently to give us an account of an alternate sphere of activity, this version of poetic labor gives us a record of itself through the forms it produces. It invites us to read this labor in relationship to other types of labor: the “honest work” of the body’s desire, as well as the domestic labor of sewing. It is this type of expanded and attentive reading of poetic form I undertake in the pages that follow. Across a spectrum of late twentieth-century and contemporary American poets, I hope to show that poems—even those that appear at first to be about desire, passion, or the private interior worlds seen most commonly to be the purview of the American lyric—are tied into histories and transformations of work, both on and off the clock. These transformations, especially in the contexts of the globalization and feminization of labor, the breakdown of a traditional “working class,” the rise of complex systems of finance capital, and the catastrophic displacement of many millions of people worldwide from their homes and jobs, mean that work today is often difficult to conceptualize, or even to recognize. From close formal attention to a variety of poems come not only new ideas about poetic labor but new ways of thinking about “what work is.”

Both poetry and work are historical and social: they change over time, subject to economic and social pressures. Yet it is work that might be seen to have more dramatically changed over the period of the last 50 or so years, the scope of this project. These changes, which happen both within and outside the US and within and outside standard delineations of waged or visible labor, are tracked, parsed, and periodized in

fuller detail in the chapters that follow. But it is worth a brief, if simplified, overview here. At the end of the second world war, coextensive with the strengthening of the welfare state and the continuing growth or at least stability of US manufacturing (especially in the auto industry) and agriculture, were the developments of types of work and institutions that would lead to the later rise of global banking and finance capital.¹ Following on the laying of this foundation, the rise of US multinational corporations, and postwar decolonization in the developing world, the late 1960s or early 1970s mark the beginning of a greater shift in the global economy. This moment is most often seen to begin in the early 1970s, with the deregulation of world currencies in 1971, the first oil crisis sparked by an OPEC embargo in 1973, and the withdrawal of US troops from Southeast Asia that same year. Figured as a global “downturn” (Robert Brenner) or a “crisis” (Joshua Clover), and characterized by historians such as Giovanni Arrighi and Fernand Braudel as part of the cyclical nature of capitalist development, the causes of this shift are complex: “capital’s need [...] to move beyond the industrial sector” (Clover, 132), coupled with the difficulty of doing so, meant the “production of nonproduction” (134) in the US plus scarcity and exploitation elsewhere.

In any case, these dynamics of globalization and crisis or recession set the stage for transformations in both the nature and the distribution of work in the final decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. On the one hand, this is the era of deindustrialization in the developed world, with the uneven shift from manufacturing to service- or information-based jobs in the US and the continuing rise of global finance capital. On the other, it is a time of complex material processes that traverse the globe, including rapid and massively uneven development, crisis, intervention, unemployment,

and migration. It is also important to recognize the impact of these primarily economic shifts on work that has pre-existed or remains “outside” these developments in the late capitalist economy, primarily gendered domestic and reproductive labor; this work is nevertheless deeply intertwined with them. At the same time as forms of this work might appear to become more invisible to certain (US-based) vantage points of wealth and privilege, it is largely these extra-economic workers who bear the brunt of austerity policies, scarcity, and turmoil, who become models for the transformation (“feminization”) of different types of work, or whose “invisible” work and bodies generate profit for others across the globe.² Above all, this era is a time at which many activists, historians, and theorists of labor point to the urgent need for new models for conceptualizing and visualizing work. In the words of Amrita Chhachhi, who points out the complicated palimpsestic nature of global labor transformation (the fact that older and newer forms of work often exist simultaneously), “profound changes in the reorganization of production, consumption, and reproduction raise once again the problematic issue of identifying classes and the potentialities for emancipatory struggles in contemporary capitalism” (904).

In the wake of these changes, what does it mean that today some activities of labor seem to bear at least a superficial resemblance to *poiesis*: typing at computers, using and manipulating language and information, trafficking in words and images? (As Arjun Appadurai argues, the collapse of the financial markets in 2008 might even be seen as ultimately a failure of promissory or performative language, p. 1). Or on the other hand, as elements of skill, craft, and material engagement sometimes seem, at least for certain sectors, to drop away, is it that labor is *less* similar to *poiesis*? Or, conversely—

given the continued predominance of material and manual labor for a majority of workers around the globe, especially women and workers of color—can this material side of *poiesis* provide necessary, if slippery, common ground? Or, finally, is it its *distance* from recognizable work that makes poetic work valuable today, in an age characterized by the rise of surplus populations and the absence or unrecognizability of work for many people worldwide? It is this tricky formal connection between *poiesis* and other activities of making that I want to take seriously. My conviction is that starting here will tell us something about both the nature of poetry and the nature of other forms of work, and that the forms made by poets have the capacity to reveal changes, dynamics, contradictions, and potentialities in the nature of work that go unnoticed or unperceived in other accounts.

One particularly vexing dilemma for thinking about work and poetry today is that the qualities of the “creative individual,” used and valued by contemporary neoliberal capitalism, are also among those that seem most characteristic to poetry. This is the difficulty highlighted in other studies of contemporary American poetry and labor, including those by Jennifer Ashton and Jasper Bernes. For Ashton, the persistence of “lyric” (even in poetry that attempts to be “anti-lyric”) is problematically keyed to capitalism’s use of the human subject; she proposes a poetry grounded in “scarcity,” revealing and probing its own status as commodity produced by a subject who is in effect a worker. For Bernes, whose study parallels mine in its period and thematic concerns—although with a different theoretical grounding—the dialectical entanglement of art and work ends up, perhaps against the critical intentions of writers and artists, contributing to this aspect of capital’s development: “the critique of labor posed by experimental writers

and artists of the postwar period,” Bernes writes, “became a significant force behind the restructuring of capitalism, by providing important coordinates, ideas, and images for that restructuring” (15). While I agree with Bernes that this is *possible*, I more optimistically conclude that it is not inevitable. As Bernes points out, the relationship between poetry and work is split across temporalities: “art is an unfolding present which, in responding to the immediate past, models a potential and sometimes actual future” (27). I want to trace a version of labor transformation that is both pragmatic (attuned to actual labor conditions on the ground) and hopeful (even if it does not follow a Marxist revolutionary teleology): as well as versions of the past, it is this potential alternate—even if not actual—future that I argue exists in poetic form.

In maintaining an emphasis on poetic form across the project as the index of poetic work and the key to its relationship to other work, I join a host of scholars who emphasize the social capacities of form, including Jahan Ramazani, David Palumbo-Liu, and Caroline Levine, who examine formal migration across historical and geographical contexts³; Anthony Reed, and Dorothy Wang, who undertake a necessary re-situation of poetic form in the context of race; and a set of younger scholars and critics of poetry including Amy De’Ath and Walt Hunter, who carefully and rigorously read poetic form in and sometimes against equally rigorous groundings in contemporary Marxist, feminist, and globalization theory. “An attention to both aesthetic and social forms,” as Levine reminds us, “returns us to the very heterogeneity at the heart of form’s conceptual history.” “Literary formalists,” she continues, “have precisely the tools to grasp [today’s world’s] formal complexity and, with them, to begin to imagine workable, progressive, thoughtful relations among forms—including containing wholes, rhythms of labor,

economic, racial, and sexual hierarchies, and sprawling, connective networks of power” (xiii). Along with the company of scholars mentioned above, I would revise Levine’s “literary formalists” to “poems made by poets.” The complexities of race, gender, globalization, and work that have often eluded theoretical or philosophical categorization can be found in poetic forms; the task of the formalist critic is to tease them out.

When I propose that poetry is a form of work, finally, I absolutely do not mean that there’s no difference between poetic labor and, say, factory work, investment banking, or childcare. But poetry is related and responds to all of these activities in different ways. If making a poem and making an automobile are radically different activities (although it’s interesting to look at them side-by-side), the varied types of work that dominate the uneven global scene today—informal, informational, domestic, reproductive, feminized, almost invisible—tend to bear a more slippery resemblance to poetic production. Taking “work” as a term that encompasses poetic and non-poetic production, I examine the ways in which poetry registers the changing distance between *poiesis* and other sorts of making, focusing on the moments at which poetic form shows how poetry materializes or theorizes—and sometimes resists—complex global transformations in the nature of work. The intervention of this project lies in its refreshed vision of poetic form as inextricable from global processes of making, situated among, influenced by, and able to model important alternatives to them. Because poetry reflects these processes through a special type of work of its own, it has the capacity to question, expand, or otherwise complicate the categories we use to think about labor across its recent and ongoing transformations through uniquely poetic resources such as inherited forms, rhetorical devices, meta-poetic reflection, or insistence on the materiality of

language. Kristin Ross, in her work on the Paris commune, has called the separation between “those who carry out useful labor [and] those who ponder aesthetics” “the most time honored and inflexible of barriers” (18). Because of the element of labor that is integral to poetry, I think this is a barrier that has been mostly imposed. If this is the case, it’s the work of contemporary critics to tear it down, reading poetic form back into the social world of its making.

*

Thinking about poetic making and labor together has a long history. At the same time, it goes against a long history of thinking about both of these things. At the root of our “poetry” is “a set of Greek terms: *poiēsis*, making; *poiēma*, a thing made, a work; *poiētes*, a maker, poet; *poiētike* (technē), the making (art/technique), poetics” (*Princeton Encyclopedia*, 1065). Similarly, the Old English word for poet is “scop,” related to the verb “to form,” while the Middle English “makar” clearly displays its relation to “maker.” Today, it is almost a critical commonplace to use words that pertain to material labor, such as “wrought” or “woven,” to describe poems. The word “verse” derives from the Latin “versus,” which refers to the turning of the plow to begin a new furrow, and of course the term “text” shows its relationship to the work of weaving (“textile”) outright. Yet the friction between poetry and labor, viewed as similar activities, goes back at least as far as Plato’s *Republic*. While a part of the expulsion of the poets from the ideal city has to do with poetic capacity to arouse emotion—poetry’s ability to show, and in turn nurture or even provoke unhelpful “womanish” sentiments best kept private—another part has to do with the way poets do or do not *make*. In the first part of the discussion of the poet in Book X, taking advantage of the double meaning of *poiesis*, Socrates proves

the poet's dishonesty by contrasting the poet with the craftsman (the cobbler, the flute-maker, the carpenter). If the craftsman is a second-order imitator, imitating the ideal form of a bed to make a bed, the poet exists at one more remove, producing an image of a bed—an imitation of something already an imitation (597e, 600e). Worse, the poet has no knowledge of whether the bed she makes is good or bad, since she is not in contact with the “users” of her product (602a). She has no way to gauge its quality and deals only in appearances. Alongside the affective powers of poetry, it is in part the poet's proximity—proximity, not identity—to other forms of work that leads to the initial expulsion.

Jacques Rancière picks up the theme of poetry's early likeness to other work, going back not to Book X but to Book III of the *Republic*. In a section from *The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004) called “On Art and Work,” Rancière questions “the relationship between the ‘ordinariness’ of work and artistic ‘exceptionality.’” Rancière shows that—for Plato, as well as for the contemporary capitalist system—work is “the idea of a distribution of the sensible: an impossibility of doing ‘something else’ based on an ‘absence of time’” (42). Such apportioning of work means that each individual remains in the “private space-time of his occupation, [excluded] from participation in what is common to the community.” This paradigm is easy enough to identify now, when jobs so often come to shape or even produce subjectivities, whether or not this occurs in the presence of typical occupations (“I’m a doctor,” “a lawyer,” “a banker,”) or in the increasingly prevalent *failures* of work that mean people “have to work” two jobs, or have no jobs at all, a situation to which I turn in my third chapter. Art's radical contribution, and what makes it unacceptable to Plato, is that it both violates and exposes this principle. As mimetic imitation, art fails because the artist cannot do the thing and

imitate it at the same time (this point is not fleshed out until Book X). And through the work of imitation, it brings domains supposedly unique to individuals into the public sphere, making them visible to all and exposing the principles that kept activities from each other. Rancière concludes:

It is necessary to abandon the lazy and absurd schema that contrasts the aesthetic cult of art for art's sake with the rising power of industrial labour. Art can show signs of being an exclusive activity insofar as it is work. [...] [Art and work come] under one and the same virtue of action that opens up a form of visibility at the same time as it manufactures objects. (45)

This part of Rancière's thought lays out one crucial aspect of my argument, even if the differences between aesthetic production and other labors remain to be sorted out. By starting from the basic affinity between poetic work and work more generally, we can see how *poiesis* brings into necessary new *visibility* (or sensibility) certain forms of work, as well as common structuring principles, shaping contradictions, unspoken attitudes, and global forces.

Counter to this fraught kinship of poetry and work runs a deep vein of antipathy between the two activities. This, too, can be found in Plato, in the *Ion*. Here again, Socrates raises the question of the poet's knowledge. While that knowledge is still proven to be lacking, Socrates and Ion acknowledge a different source for poetry: divine inspiration. In this case, the poet is—as is Ion—a rhapsode, “possessed” by “divine power” (533d, 534a). “The poet,” says Socrates, “is a light thing, and winged and holy, and cannot compose before he gets inspiration and loses control of his sense and his

reason has deserted him” (534b). On this model, poetic inspiration occurs via trickle-down influence: if Homer’s inspiration comes directly from the Muse, Ion’s is sent down from Homer. The emotion that Ion’s listeners feel is a third link in this chain of inspiration. What is important about this model, as Socrates takes pains to emphasize throughout the discussion, is that skill and inspiration are not compatible; in the end, whether epic or lyric, the rhapsodic poet has no special skill. In this, poetry is fully separate from any kind of making or imitation.

These two models—poetic inspiration versus poetic skill—have run through and continue to subtend much thinking about *poiesis*, up to and including the moment of my intervention, in twentieth-century and contemporary American poetry. The version of the poet as uniquely inspired individual once dominated most thinking about Anglophone poetry, and continues, I think, to haunt it. As M. H. Abrams writes, poetic inspiration “is the oldest, most widespread, and most persistent account of poetic invention. If we compare the various forms in which the doctrine has been presented over the centuries, we find a recurrent area of agreement amid differences” (189). My first class in lyric poetry began with a discussion of Caedmon’s hymn—Caedmon being, as Ben Lerner reminds us, the “first poet in English whose name we know,” the uneducated cowherd commanded to sing in a dream by a divine presence (7).⁴ Even if, following Abrams, English poetry before around 1800 seemed to privilege imitation (*mimesis*), Romantic accounts hew closer to the Caedmon model, with the significant difference that the source of inspiration is not divine but human, the poet’s own self. On the Romantic model, the poet resembles the Aeolian harp, strummed by the breath of external force to create a new music from the self.⁵ Even as the British Romantics sought, at least in part, to return

language back to the common people, and their work and land, they still—at least, on the whole—preserved a model of inspired and exceptional production. The poet exists at a remove from labor, separated from those who work and spared from conceptions of poetry as work.⁶

It is in turn this exceptional poetic self (the lyric “I”) that we find in most contemporary accounts as the mechanism for poetry’s signature heightened sensitivity or intimacy. As Virginia Jackson has shown, “over the course of the nineteenth century the hierarchy of verse genres gave way to a large idea of poetry that came to be associated with what we now think of as the romantic lyric.” This process of “lyricization” gives rise to “the idea that poetry is or ever was one genre [...] rather than a variety of particular genres” (322). It would be possible to argue that the predominance of this lyric “I” comes not only at the expense of poetry’s formal capaciousness but also at the expense of thinking about the component of poetic production that is craft or work, not effortless inspiration. In other words, what we think of as poetry tends itself to be conditioned by the exclusion of labor: the things that often fall out of the standard Anglophone canon, such as folk songs, lullabies, work songs, and poems that explicitly serve political purposes, also tend to be more associated with work.⁷ Certainly, of course, some later movements of American poetry seem at least partially to turn back towards ideas of the poet as worker. We might think of Anglophone modernism: from Pound’s call to “make it new” and Eliot’s dedication of *The Waste Land* to Pound as “*il miglior fabbro*,” the finer craftsman, the general leanings of this school tend towards a poetics of surfaces rather than *sagesse* or sentiment, arrangement of fragments rather than inspired production. Yet even these preserve, above all, a layer of distance, if not disdain, between

themselves and the workaday world, operating in a separate and self-referential aesthetic sphere.⁸

And certainly poets have been interested in work or workers themselves—or, indeed, have accomplished significant political work through their writing about work. Salient among these are the working class poets of the American “cultural front” in the early twentieth century whose work has been re-presented by scholars such as Michael Denning and Cary Nelson; objectivist poets such as George Oppen and Lorine Niedecker, whose work was closely tied to forms of political labor and activism; and the documentary poets of that same era and following to whom I turn in my final chapter. Yet at least in the existing criticism, it is rare that the question of poetic labor is posed. Instead, we are likely to find “exceptional” versions of workers who manage to write poems *about* labor—or, on the other hand, poets who are extraordinarily attuned to the labor of others. Or we find poetry that is used mainly or even only to tell us about the progressive struggles of its time, excluding artistic struggle.⁹ Like Philip Levine, these poets and critics contribute to our understanding of work via their content: they represent rather than enact, or stand beside rather than take part in. Paradoxically, because they tend to pose poetry and labor as mutually exclusive activities only *exceptionally* brought together, these sorts of poetics are almost the opposite of the ones I suggest.

Finally, we might think of later models such as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and conceptual poetry as also seeking to de-emphasize the “lyric I” as the source and the domain of the poem, and thus in some cases to effect some rapprochement between poetry and labor. In the case of the former, largely the subject for scholars of “cultural poetics” such as Barrett Watten and Michael Davidson, poets seek to re-direct attention

from the self onto language itself, thereby emphasizing the historicity and concreteness of language and in turn, the specificity and materiality of poetic labor.¹⁰ Similarly, a host of contemporary “conceptual poets,” to whom I briefly turn in Chapter 1, also seek to displace the creative poetic self in favor of aleatory procedures, often technologically enhanced. Claims made for this sort of poetry by poets and critics such as Kenneth Goldsmith and Brian Reed often involve its ability to represent versions of informational or immaterial labor, as poetry that somehow “escapes” the materiality of work and the personality of the poet / worker exactly at the moment at which these become subsumed and erased under conditions of contemporary information-based global capitalism.

In various ways, though, the theorization of these projects fails to tell us much about the actual similarities between poetry and work, producing closed hermeneutic difficulty that is often only self-referential (in the case of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry) or versions of the poetic self that are at once re-elevated as poetic celebrity (found language, for example, becomes a poem *only* marked by the author’s signature presence). Both visions of poetry tend too easily to dismiss lived historical and social components of “identity,” including race, class, and gender. Moreover, even the premise of this latter sort of poetry sometimes risks being overly reductive, since most labor theorists continue to assert—over the contestations of a vocal few—that work remains, for most workers around the globe, stubbornly and persistently material. I focus my work around the contemporary moment because I think this stubborn materiality is important—not only for thinking about work, but also for thinking about poetry. Behind this project is my own experience as a poet: a desire, perhaps a guilty one, that we take into account the part of poetic production that is not inspiration: the drafts, the cross-outs, the time spent stuck,

the time spent revising, the headaches (sometimes) throughout the process.¹¹ My hunch, at the outset, is that this work shows itself in the seams and junctures of the poem, and that poems made by poets can reveal fundamental things, accessible only by thinking about poetic form, about many different forms of work.

*

This version of the relationship between poetry and work is inscribed within a larger framework of theories of production and of cultural production, whether or not most critics of poetry pay attention to them. My work in this project, at a first level, is to situate the making of individual poems in the theoretical and philosophical conversations that have gone on around them. While in every case I start, in poetic-materialist fashion, with close readings of poems, this necessarily entails working in and among several of these conversations (even though they have often worked at counter-purposes themselves): Marxist and neo-Marxist conversations about value production, intellectual labor, autonomy, and aesthetics; feminist thinking about domestic reproductive labor; and contemporary sociological and anthropological perspectives in labor transformation and global development. Above all I am interested, as a critic of poetry, in what Geörgy Lukács describes as “the peculiar character of artistic creation” that often gives it “distinctive laws of its own” (73-74); it is crucial to preserve the “relative autonomy,” and the variety of specifically poetic ways in which poems reflect or refract broader conditions. It is, however, still worth looking briefly at some more specific theories of way that cultural and intellectual life—as well as life itself—has been seen to be embedded in the political, historical, and economic structures in which it is produced, especially when these theories relate specifically to the production of poetry. At the same

time as such theories inform and illuminate our readings of poems, poetry's own work can also expand or helpfully complicate the pictures given by theory.

We find one paradigm for the relationship between poetry and its world in Theodor Adorno's 1957 essay "Lyric Poetry and Society." For Adorno, lyric's defining characteristic is the nature of the subjectivity from which it emerges, an "I" so individual and so oppositional that it approaches universality (lyric "hopes to attain universality through unrestrained individuation," 38). But crucially, this separation between lyric and the social world (the historical and economic situation) is also a point of connection between them. "The demand that the lyric word be virginal," Adorno writes,

is itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronomously and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws. [...] In its protest the poem expresses the dream of the world in which things would be different. (39-40)

For Adorno, lyric does indeed bear the formal impress of the conditions under which it was produced. Crucially, though, this imprint only appears in the negative. For this version of lyric, poetic work is work towards a sort of pure difference, showing the world by not being part of it. The principles of lyric composition reveal the composition of the social world, again, only as they differ from them.

Despite its historical and contextual distance from Adorno's work, Walter Benjamin's earlier essay, "The Author as Producer" (1934) is another, more useful

model—the “maker” poet to counter Adorno’s more visionary lyric “I.” Benjamin tasks “the writer with a single demand, the demand of reflecting, of thinking about his position in the process of production,” calling on writers to be the “best technicians of their trade.” Far from turning away from a social situation of alienated work, on this model an author functions as part of society by focusing on the means of his or her own production, enacting social and political change by finding new *techniques*, not by turning to social or political themes. The artist, crucially, understands him or herself as a producer among other producers, not just a commentator on them. His or her task is thus to imagine new forms and new ways of producing, and not necessarily new ideas, at different historical moments. Benjamin’s primary example in this essay is Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater, but questions of technique and formal transformation pertain also to the domain of poetic making. It is no accident that Benjamin begins his essay by invoking Plato’s initial banishment of the poet from the city. To let him or her back in, Benjamin tells us, requires re-situating the poet not “in relation *to*” but “*in*” “relationships of production.”

These relationships of production change over time, as I examine in more detail throughout this project. Among more contemporary theorists of cultural production, Nicholas Brown picks up the questions of relative autonomy—that is, the ways in which art might not be wholly determined by conditions of production, even if not separable from them—raised by Lukács, Adorno, and Benjamin under the advanced conditions of “real subsumption of aesthetic labor under capital.” Unlike for Pierre Bourdieu, who argues for the existence of two fields of production (modernist aesthetic production in a “restricted” autonomous field distanced from its contemporary conditions of capital, and therefore increasingly self-referential), for Brown we live in a world in which there *is* no

autonomous production, no art that does not fall under Adorno's criteria for the "culture industry," and no meaning produced absolutely independently of (not "the market" but) capitalism. Following Fredric Jameson's assertion that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally" (4), Brown outlines some of the ways that art's "heteronomy"—its existence fully subsumed into capital—nevertheless "produce[s] or presume[s] the autonomous" since above all both heteronomy and autonomy are dependent on each other. Without a concept of autonomy, in other words, heteronomy would be "indistinguishable" from the world as it exists. While like Benjamin, Brown does not take up poetry *per se*, it is striking that the strategies he outlines for art are nonetheless formal strategies: either a "positive historicism," in which a work of art is formally constructed to provide a theory or a history of itself, or an "aestheticization of genre," where genre means market-produced category, as in "genre fiction."

Generally speaking, most theorists follow Lukács in identifying the novel as the terrain on which questions of cultural production and artistic autonomy are negotiated. This is especially true on the global scale, in the socio-historical work of scholars such as Pasquale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and Jameson, among theorists of the world system. It is also true that work on the institutions of cultural production, such as the national arts organization, the workplace, the academy, or the creative writing workshop (Sarah Brouillette, Alan Liu, Mark McGurl) tend to ignore poetry. On the other end of the spectrum is Franco "Bifo" Berardi, who—rather than ignoring poetry—explicitly gives it a special and salutary place *out* of the circulation of money and the flows of contemporary finance, as "the language of nonexchangeability, the return of infinite

hermeneutics, and the return of the sensuous body of language” (139-140). Yet if we resist this return to what is essentially a version of the vatic poet, and keep in mind that poetry, like all literature, does indeed circulate in some capacity, we can clearly see that Benjamin’s emphasis on “technique,” Lukács’s on “laws,” and Brown’s on “aestheticization” all pertain to notions of a *poetics*. Above all, it has been and continues to be the provenance of poetic form to make manifest its own history, to bear the traces of its own making, and self-consciously to grapple with and transform the category to which it belongs.

But the conviction that underlies this project has to do with the value of seeing poetic production not just in relationship to poetic form, or to other forms of cultural production, but in relationship to changes in *all* work. While a strict Marxist understanding (and one that has produced much quibbling about its terms) would understand “work” as a productive and economically involved activity only—the activity done by “the worker” for his own survival and the benefit of someone else (“the capitalist”)—it goes almost without saying that I use work in a sense that extends beyond this picture.¹² Here, it is helpful to proceed using the thought of those who seek to expand a more narrow conception of work, operating within but challenging Marxist categories from the inside. I am thinking specifically of the conversations around gendered reproductive labor (Silvia Federici et. al), chattel slavery (Cedric Robinson, Fred Moten), and the disappearance or breakdown of the older “working class” (Denning, Saskia Sassen) to which I turn in chapters two and three, respectively. In general, in fact, it is difficult to find definitions of work that are *not* reductive, and part of this project’s intent

is to complicate these ideas about “what work is” (or is not) at every turn, and to think across rather than through these categories.¹³

Using the lens of work to focus an investigation of contemporary poetry raises a first methodological problem, one of periodization. My delineation of what I would like to call the “contemporary” is slightly different than both most poetic accounts and most economic accounts: I begin not in the 70s but in the 1950s and following, with John Ashbery’s poem “The Instruction Manual” (1956) and his subsequent collection, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962). In theme and more importantly in form, this work is tied into some of the developments—the unexpected links fostered by flows of information and their interruption, as well as the trans-continental migration of organizational and managerial techniques—that play key roles in subsequent decades. Neither Ashbery’s work nor any other poetry is capable of predicting specific economic developments, but poems, in addition to suggesting more robust definitions of “work,” also complicate the neat time frames necessarily used for other types of analysis. Because Ashbery is still writing today (his most recent collection, *A Commotion of Birds*, appeared in November of 2016), the span of the contemporary period might thus be seen as co-extensive with these labor developments, in a helpfully messier way.

Looking at American poetry in light of these global transformations also poses a second methodological problem. Literary study, especially formalist criticism of poetry, has been and continues to remain entrenched in national, hemispheric, or linguistic paradigms, despite the calls of scholars such as Ramazani and others for more capacious models. After all, as Ramazani points out, the history of poetic form has always included migration across national and continental boundaries, in ways that exceed models of

“global form” and “local content” more recently proposed for the novel by Jameson and Moretti (115). All the poets examined in this book are US poets in the sense that they are published, reviewed, discussed, and circulated by US presses, institutions, and critical apparatuses. In their backgrounds, concerns, and scopes, however, they form a company that is anything but united under any stable concept of “nation.” Their experiences and preoccupations differ widely based on race, gender, class, and location within the country, providing, as a set, a version of the United States that contains multitudes. Not all of them were born in US, grew up speaking English, or even reside in the country today. On the one hand, then, this version of “American poetry” keeps pace with labor transformations, in that it has become “global.”¹⁴

This is not to claim, however, that there’s no real difference between US-based poets and poets from around the world: neither the globe nor the literary landscape is about to become “flat” or even anytime soon. Instead, in using this expanded and flexible view of American poetry, I am following the lead of Christopher Nealon, whose “overall frame is not so much ‘American poetry’ [...] as the ‘American century,’ because that designation foregrounds the arc of hegemony that is part of the story of the recurring crises of the period.” (Where Nealon starts with this period’s modernist beginnings, I add the question of its future.) Like Nealon’s, my project situates poets in the context of a “historical and economic crisis” (30), paying both formal and thematic attention to the “matter” of capital in contemporary poetry, although my focus is labor rather than capital *per se*. I share Nealon’s conviction that “it is not only the poetries of witness and documentation, or movement poetries” that register and respond to such conditions. My project gathers a set of poets whose work gives the possibility of critical reflection on the

versions of labor in whose exportation they nevertheless participate. This particular version of American poetry not only has an eye towards a global outside but a foot in that global outside; if it is complicit in the effects of US capitalist imperialism on a global scale, it is also able to formalize, critique, and work against these effects.

Each of my three chapters examines a certain type of labor, following a roughly historical progression from 1950 through to the present moment, and complicating or reformulating key concepts for that type of labor through readings of a set of poems. Chapter 1 explores a key “hegemonic” paradigm for labor that continues to remain influential today: “immaterial” labor (Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 109). This shift towards work that requires skills with information and language, relationships with others, and creative capacities, seems to bring work closer to poetic making, and is theorized by members of the Italian Marxist school of *autonomia* (Negri, Paolo Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato). Ashbery’s early poetry formally registers—namely, in *The Tennis Court Oath*—the transformation from locally based, artisanal, or Fordist work to information-based labor occurring in the US and in France beginning in the 1950s. In an earlier poem, “The Instruction Manual,” Ashbery models poetry’s self-awareness of its own participation in this global shift via the figure of *ekphrasis*. I chart this figure through Ashbery’s work into the work of contemporary Armenian-American poet Ara Shirinyan. The distance between the two poets reveals the change of work over time: where Ashbery’s poem includes a note of hopeful possibility about the connections enabled by the labor of information, Shirinyan’s sounds a warning about the deadening and silencing effects of global information-based inequality. Together, Ashbery and

Shirinyan show the particular position of the American poet over time, exporting but also increasingly questioning new forms of information work.

My second chapter explores domestic and reproductive labor, building on the thinking of the “wages for housework” movement of the 1970s (Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James). Much like poetic labor, domestic and reproductive labor has not counted as “productive work” under some traditional Marxist paradigms. In more commonplace terms, both poetic and reproductive labor tend to be seen as only undertaken out of inspiration or passion (“a labor of love”) and thus not to be recognized as work at all. In this chapter, I emphasize the importance of seeing both poetic and reproductive work as they exist under capital. Subject to the pressures of capital and benefitting it (to varying degrees), both activities nevertheless contain within them the germ of resistance to it. This is the case for the types of activities—housework—discussed by Federici et. al., but it’s also a picture that expands towards the contemporary moment into a wider and more complex array of labor under conditions of “feminized” work across the globe. One challenge today is to find a more nuanced way to think about this work, especially as it is inflected by differences in gender, race, and geography. Poems by Alice Notley, Sandra Simonds, and Catherine Wagner show how poetic form can help provide the sorts of recognition and differentiation often missing from other accounts. In the work of these three poets, the poetic form of the sonnet and the poetic mode of song or folksong offer new, more finely-grained, more dynamic ways of conceptualizing and valorizing forms of labor often unrecognized as labor, registering both similarities and differences between sub-types of this work, probing the relationship

between work and gendered subjectivity, exposing the mechanisms that perpetuate work-based oppression and exploitation, and framing alternatives for resistance.

My third chapter returns to problems of recognition, taking up the question of labor in a contemporary moment marked by the disappearance of stable or recognizable work, and by the displacement or expulsion of large populations from their homes and jobs. The poetry of Mark Nowak, Fred Moten, Caroline Bergvall, and Bhanu Kapil provides new models for thinking about work and the worker on what Sassen calls “the systemic edges,” in an age characterized by gulfs of inequality between workers and between types of work, as well as the endangerment of the conditions of subjectivity or citizenship that have been considered necessary for aesthetic production. In US-based and global contexts, these four poets attest in different ways to the value of poetic form in its capacity to represent presences, changes, movements, and connections in and between types of work that might otherwise be unthinkable. Radically revising midcentury projects of witness and documentation, these poets demonstrate that poetry’s position “on the edge” (thinking back to Plato’s expulsion) means that poetic work is uniquely capable of shaping and making visible forms of work that persist past their heyday, at the margins of the “everyday,” and in the absence of the stabilities of race, class, and geography that have generally been seen to have been the basis for writing in the first place.

Finally, a concluding coda thinks through the case of one particular form: *paralipsis*, or writing something through the claim not to be writing it. Using the work of Anne Boyer, in her 2015 book *Garments Against Women*, I examine this form in relation to several different dilemmas posed for US-based work: the gendered problem of the simultaneous oppressiveness and necessity of reproductive labor, as well as the

epistemological difficulties of writing about work done “elsewhere” under the conditions of globalized spatial inequality that render knowledge across distance both necessary and difficult. In Boyer’s hands, *paralipsis* is unique in its ability to confront head-on the problems of neoliberal appropriation of labor—both domestic and creative—and to emphasize the value of work even as it resists work. The form of *paralipsis* thus holds open a uniquely valuable, paradoxical, space: one in which work gets done in the present and points towards a version of itself that might eventually be different.

¹ “The postwar economic boom and the financial bull market of the 1950s provided the space,” write Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, “within the framework of the New Deal and Bretton Woods regulations, for American finance to further deepen its markets at home, expand abroad, and lay the basis for the explosion of global finance that occurred in the last decades of the twentieth century” (86).

² See Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild’s introduction to their collection *Global Woman*, which discusses some of the trends and developments for work done by women worldwide, which include the “feminization of migration” (5), the dynamics of uneven interdependency between countries, women, and workers (11), and (in Saskia Sassen’s essay in that collection), the “feminization of survival,” by which households, “enterprises that function on the margins of the legal economy,” and entire governments depend (largely) on the exploitation of women to exist at all (265).

³ Palumbo-Liu, addressing the question of literary formalism in the context of global literary studies, proposes to “open up an image of Form as the variously occupied space of multiple temporalities, modern or not, and multiple locations, not arranged side by side [...] but overlaid co-habitants of the contemporary, late capitalist world. Literary form as indeed a necessary container and common ground that is precisely not reified but dynamic, a contingent meeting place for otherwise divergent histories, literary and public at once” (832 – 33).

⁴ For Lerner, following Allen Grossman, the Caedmon story is more about poetry than the poet. The version of the poem Caedmon later relates is not as good as the version he produced in the dream, Lerner writes, and the story is therefore a model for the difference between the poem that the poet would like to produce when moved by some “transcendent impulse” and the “actual poem” on the page, which always falls short (8).

⁵ For examples, we might think of Keats’s statement that “if Poetry comes not as naturally as Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (66), or the dream-like state from which Coleridge produces his “Kubla Khan,” or even the model of his “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” in which the poem’s vessel (the Ancient Mariner) literally grabs his listener by his wedding attire and forces the poem on him.

⁶ This is a reductive account of Romanticism, although still an influential one. For an important early poetic counterexample, we might cite Charlotte Smith (1749 – 1806), known not only for her sonnets and her long poem “Beachy Head” but also for the popular novels with which she supported herself and her family. For an important corrective to this view, see also Jerome McGann, who has shown how key Romantic tropes are produced and reproduced by the uncritical acceptance of Romantic self-representations by both poets and literary critics.

⁷ Jackson’s list, in a recent defense of her theory of lyricization, includes “elegies, epitaphs, ballads, hymns, epistles, medleys, drinking songs, sea chanteys, and spirituals” (323).

⁸ In his study of American modernists (William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Carl Sandburg), John Marsh concludes: “modern poets could not pretend that capitalism and modernity did not exist; their status as modern poets depended on their being in touch with the workers and the poor of modern capitalism. So they acknowledged the labor problem (poverty, strikes,

immigration, alienation) and those it affected—indeed, let it inspire some of their most compelling poems—and then pursued out-of-touch solutions to it” (220).

⁹ Nelson, for example, emphasizes that “many of the meanings poems acquire are granted them by critical prose” (3); his twin project of “reading” and “recovery” for the work of progressive poets leading up to and including the 1930s emphasizes, above all, the collective political spirit of these poems—a product less of poetic work than of a labor history told through poems. Meaning here is produced in an encounter between this political spirit and the work of criticism, not in part constituted by poetic composition.

¹⁰ In *The Constructivist Moment*, Watten explains “constructivist aesthetics” as “the imperative in radical literature and art to foreground their formal construction; cultural poetics [...] may be broadly defined as the reflexive relation of artistic form and cultural context” (xv). Michael Davidson, similarly, draws attention to the specific relation of poetic form to culture in *On the Outskirts of Form*: “a cultural poetics of poetry,” he writes, “must attend to the dynamics of institutional power in which it appears [...] but must also ground itself in its own micro-practices of linguistic transformation, whether that includes the choice of writing in a traditional form like the sonnet or of using dialect and vernacular forms” (15).

¹¹ This sentiment has been theorized in the context of modern and contemporary American poetry by Gillian White, who writes of “the shame of poetry’s reputation as a form of privileged, leisured activity that endorsed and required the artist’s seeming remove from a labor economy” as it operates in Elizabeth Bishop’s work. “The question of how poetic labor should be valued, and how poets could or should express their concerns for the ‘actual world,’” White writes, “was made ever more keen for left-leaning artists such as Bishop during [the 1930s]” (57).

¹² Although the relative lack of consumer interest in poetry (even compared to the novel) gives rise to an easy understanding of poetic labor as “not work” since it is not productive of market value, a different project would also spend more time accounting for the relationship between poetry and commodity. Re-shifting focus to the activity of *poiesis*, on the other hand (in ways that align with Virno’s critique of the activity of the “virtuoso,” or the one who makes no product, even though poets do of course produce products, their poems) lets us more easily see the possible ways that poetic activity approaches or even is identical to value-productive activity, as linguistic skill, communication, and creativity itself become more and more necessary to certain versions of capital-generating work. As Virno writes, “[o]ne could say that in the organization of labor in the post-Ford era, activity without an end product, previously a special and problematic case [...] becomes the prototype of all wage labor” (61). In other words, focusing on process rather than product not only aligns more with my view of the making of poetry and lets us avoid the discussing the mercurial dynamics of the “poetry market” such as it is, but also it paves the way for thinking about poetry’s similarity with other work, and from there, the possibility of solidarity.

¹³ See Kathi Weeks’s *The Problem with Work* for a comprehensive theoretical overview of the notion of “work” as it structures (US-based) work and politics. While Weeks intends work as something primarily to be resisted—work as it has come to be known under capital, only—her thinking about the value of thinking about work is useful: “A politics of work,” she writes, “takes aim at an activity rather than an identity, and a

central component of daily life rather than an outcome [...] the problem of work carries the potential to resonate, albeit in very different ways, across a number of income, occupational, and identity groups” (18).

¹⁴ In this project, I employ both “American” (standard to poetic criticism) and “US” (which more appropriately reflects my actual nation-based object) to describe the set of poets, transformations, and concerns considered, using “American” for discussions that center on poetics and “US” for discussions of labor and globalization wherever this is possible.

The Double Dream of the Poet-Worker:
Poetry and Globalization in John Ashbery and Ara Shirinyan

Up until around the middle of the twentieth century, one paradigmatic figure for the American worker was, if anyone, Charlie Chaplin of *Modern Times*. Stationed at the assembly line with a wrench, falling behind, brandishing his tools in his signature duck-footed dance, running away to lead (accidentally) a parade of striking workers: Chaplin's movements show the choreography by capital of the worker's body, as well as the embodied possibilities for breaking out of capital's control. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, this body seems to be less central. According to a standard narrative outlined in my introduction, the scene shifts away from the factory, and in some cases towards the office, thanks to factors such as a host of technological innovations, the rise of a new "managerial class," processes of deindustrialization, and, later, global recession.¹ On the new model for work, Chaplin's worker becomes an army of more or less identical silhouettes in suits and ties. Or he becomes the white-collar professional at a keyboard, manipulating flows of information or generating new slogans. Or the worker's body disappears entirely, replaced by a level of automation that needs no human presence, or by the complex and depersonalized operations of finance capital. These views exaggerate and generalize: the worker's body has not disappeared, nor is it likely to do so any time soon. Nevertheless, accounts of the rise of "immaterial" labor are pervasive to the extent that, at a 2014 conference on labor and performance, Doug Henwood countered McKenzie Wark's claims about the pervasiveness of the new "information society" with statements such as: "things are still very very important," "[workers'] bodies are still important to the job, their bodies are ruined by the job, very often," and (with some degree of exasperation) "the world is still very deeply material."²

In this chapter, I pair poetic and immaterial or information work first in order to complicate such reductive views of this labor shift. While understanding the rise of information-based labor is one of many difficult and necessary tasks for those who think about work today, existing views of this labor—in part because theories are most often written by men in the global north—tend to ignore other types of labor and working conditions, at home and around the globe. As Nick Dyer-Witheford points out, “The new circuits of capital [...] look a lot less ‘immaterial’ and ‘intellectual’ to the female and Southern workers who do so much of the grueling physical toil demanded by a capitalist ‘general intellect’ whose metropolitan headquarters remain preponderantly male and Northern” (71). Simultaneously, such theories also ignore the “very deeply material” aspect of work that seems to be “merely” the manipulation of information, which could mean anything from the physical stress of a high-powered banking job to the pressures of a commute to the bodily injuries caused by sitting and typing for extended periods of time.³

Placing poetic and informational labor side-by-side does more, however, than point towards the material aspect of both. Part of the problem for theorists has also been taking account of differences—describing a situation in which multiple types of work, even those thought to occupy different places on a historical continuum, exist synchronically, and workers perform different types of work at the same moment, across geographical distance. Yet difference across distance is a built-in feature of contemporary life and labor: as David Harvey reminds us, “globalization is about the socio-spatial relations between billions of individuals” (16)—relations characterized above all by the extreme inequality wrought by processes of capitalist accumulation.⁴ One challenge today

is to think the complex relationships between different types of work and individual workers across an uneven contemporary labor-scape. Because changes in work happen unevenly, they are difficult to conceptualize, narrativize, and visualize. At the same time, the spatial and economic gulfs that open up between workers make it difficult to take account of the (possibly transformative) commonalities provided by a shared conception of work in different parts of the globe.⁵

In what follows, I take up Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's notion of "immaterial" labor as a "hegemonic" form of labor, a term they use in *Multitude* (2004) to mean a version of work that points the way of future labor transformation even if it does not characterize *all* work (109). I use this term "hegemonic," which for me also designates the influence of specifically American hegemony, not as a diagnostic but as a problematic—that is, an idea to be explored and complicated. Though formally disparate, the two poets brought together in this chapter, John Ashbery and Ara Shirinyan, are linked by their common participation in global flows of information and labor in the age of US-led information-based capitalism. More importantly, they are connected by their use of poetic form to crystallize the relationship between American poetic making and globalized forms of labor into moments of meta-poetic reflection. Dwelling on Ashbery before turning to Shirinyan by way of contemporary contrast, I find in both poets' work an ekphrastic or meta-poetic figure for the tenuous relationship between two very different types of workers that includes shared activity *and* economic and spatial inequality. Via *poiesis*, a "here" of poetic work in a hegemonic state and a "there" of poetic and non-poetic work happening at a distance are brought into relation. In these poems, the phenomenon of "hegemonic" "immaterial" labor appears not as a natural

historical progression away from material work, but is shot through with difficulties and complications: a necessary counter to versions of encounters between workers in which distance or difference is elided and labor transformation happens smoothly, seamlessly, or linearly.

Individually and together, these poets also set up the view of American poetry within the expanded frame of the global that runs throughout this project. Via a detour through Ashbery's second collection, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), I show the particular stance of the American poet vis-à-vis these labor transformations. Although all of these shifts happen on a global scale, this does not mean that the American poet's experience of such transformations—the experience that underlies and shapes poems even when they do not explicitly theorize labor transformation—is indistinct from other perspectives. Nor, conversely, is it separable from those other perspectives. Poetic form provides an opportunity for self-reflection, for examining the “American” position in light of its others. Finally, it is important to emphasize that these poets resist, to some degree, the versions of labor in whose exportation they nevertheless participate. As Dyer-Witford points out, the transformative power of information work tends to be occluded by narratives in which struggles only happen against this type of work and are impossible within it. These narratives, though, ignore the “formidable accumulation of ‘immaterial’ struggles over what communication flows within the new information spaces, what the boundaries of those spaces will be, who will be included, and who excluded.” Dyer-Witford continues, “[o]nly in the context of a project linking widely diversified sectors of global labor—material, immiserated, and immaterial—can the problems and prospects of such communication activism be evaluated” (77). The poems treated here are bound up

with these “problems and prospects” of communication: this particular version of “American poetry” not only has an eye towards a global outside but a foot in that global outside. It is complicit in the effects of US capitalist imperialism on a global scale, but also able to formalize, critique, and work against these effects. Poetry does not so much represent or enact as bring uniquely into visibility: through their specifically meta-poetic figures, Ashbery and Shirinyan uncover problems of representation, work-based influence, and connection at different (but related) historical moments. The distance between the two poets also reveals the transformation of work, making it impossible to ignore a worrying progression of inequality over time.

*

John Ashbery’s work might seem to be a paradoxical place to begin an investigation of the intersection of information work and poetic labor. This is not because Ashbery absents himself from contemporary information flows, or because labor is never thematized in his work, but rather because Ashbery has generally been seen to be uninterested in the craft of poetry and, by extension, unselfconscious about his poetic work. His particularity is seen to inhere in his obliqueness, his processes of thought and perception, his signature conversational accent, or his openness to pop culture, while his “mysteries of construction,” to borrow Marjorie Perloff’s phrase, have been too often overlooked. Even Ashbery himself did not contradict a 1983 *Paris Review* interviewer who characterized his composition as involving “something like inspiration, the poems just springing out already finished, rather than a laborious process of writing and revision.”⁶ This “inattention” to craft might, in turn, be seen to bear some relationship to twentieth- and twenty-first century labor. Jasper Bernes, for example, puts the poet in the

context of an emerging class of white-collar managerial labor, suggesting that since Ashbery's "matters are verbal, prefabricated, demotic"—"they are made elsewhere and by others, and what they offer to the intended consciousness is arrangement, not making"—the poet becomes a model for the doubled and uncomfortable position of the white-collar worker, who is paradoxically both the scriptor and the subject of capital's protocols and demands, in charge of their implementation yet controlled by them (60).

Yet while it is essential to see how Ashbery's work occurs within and offers insight into this labor transformation of the 1950s and following, it is not necessarily the case that the similarity comes about because "there is no primary relationship to matter in [Ashbery's] work, no craft really" (Bernes, 60), nor that the distinction between "arrangement" and "making" obtains for the poet. Ashbery is as formally virtuosic, and as self-aware about craft, as almost any poet writing today. His poems' concern with theorizing and contextualizing the material activity of poetry spans his career, from the formal meticulousness of his early work in *Some Trees* (1956), his first collection, to the experimentalism of *The Tennis Court Oath* through to the idiosyncrasy of much of his later writing.⁷ Indeed, in more experimental work such as *The Tennis Court Oath*, this concern with craft in poetry that would seem to rely on strategies to avoid craft, such as appropriation and collage, provides a thread that might further connect Ashbery to the techniques of appropriation and collage employed by Shirinyan. In any case, formal interest serves as a source of consistency across Ashbery's career. Taken as a whole, in fact, even *Some Trees* is formally experimental: "Two Scenes" plays with monorhyme (machinery / honesty / history / authority / poverty), while the elliptical pastoral dialogue of "Eclogue" is hardly "poetry as we know it." And on the other hand, the deployment of

“traditional” forms in *Some Trees* (the sonnet, the pantoum, the sestina, and even—using a construction that puts him in the company of W. H. Auden and James Merrill, poets whose attention to craft he has not seemed to share—the canzone, albeit with lines cheekily stripped down) is not left behind in Ashbery’s subsequent work: see, among many other examples, the sixteen-line poems of *Shadow Train* (1981) (like George Meredith’s “Modern Love,” Helen Vendler points out, 244), or the modified sonnets suggested by many two- or three-stanza poems in *Planisphere* (2009). In that collection, the anaphoric repetition of a poem from *Some Trees*, “He,” reappears, but in expanded form, in “Default Mode” and “They Knew What They Wanted,” as if to add another step to the formal experiment begun over half a century earlier.

At stake in tracking Ashbery’s notion of “craft”—a notion that encompasses but extends beyond writing in fixed forms—is less what it shows about the development of a career and more what it reveals about poetry as a type of work. While it isn’t Ashbery’s only *ars poetica*, the sestina “The Painter,” from *Some Trees*, is an early example of Ashbery’s conception of poetic production. The poem is about a painter’s struggle with his own activity, with both material and subject matter; the painter’s dilemma has to do with finding a suitable combination of the two, a medium for his unmanageable subject. The painter, who has set himself “between the sea and the buildings” to “paint the sea’s portrait,” in fact never manages to get to work, because he “[expects] his subject / To rush up the sand and, seizing a brush, / Plaster its own portrait on the canvas.” The buildings’ sensible occupants advise him to switch to a more reasonable subject, “something less angry and large.” But the painter chooses a different path, changing media rather than theme, and dipping his brush into the sea itself. To the outrage of the

onlookers, the drying canvas fades to “perfectly white,” and the end is not the painter’s aesthetic victory but his demise:

They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings;
 And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush
 As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer. (21)

In this parable of artistic production, the activity of art-making is cast as a struggle. Arduous work that leaves the painter “too exhausted even to lift his brush,” construction begins *only* when material and subject matter (paint and the sea) are transformed from what they were at the poem’s beginning. What seems significant about this painter’s work is not the image that remains, but the changes of material and media that occur. Rejecting a method that would find a new subject better suited to the limitations of the process of production, the painter instead reconfigures the productive process to become the subject. Subject matter becomes the material that makes it; the material of the form becomes the subject matter. Although Ashbery’s concern with painting and the visual arts is well documented, and although the poem has most frequently been read as an ekphrastic drama, clearly this painter might also stand in for Ashbery as a poet, specifically:⁸ the violent melee at the poem’s end evokes the myth of Orpheus, whose art-making (like the painter’s) involves a wife, and whose inability or unwillingness to satisfy the demands of a crowd results in a tragic ending. Most significantly, though, Ashbery’s poetry seems frequently to enact this sort of struggle with the medium of language. To cast the poet’s relationship to language as immersion in an ambient flow is almost a critical commonplace: the sea is not an inappropriate metaphor for the substance with which Ashbery engages for poetic making, “dipping in”

for bits and pieces that are turned into the poem, and Ashbery's poetry is as frequently discussed as being "about" language, or the experience of language, as about anything at all.⁹

But the poem "The Painter" is not only about Ashbery's conception of language. It also demonstrates his conception of poetry as an action, a strenuous engagement with the material of language. This action, moreover, is undertaken in a public setting, between the buildings and the sea, and subject to the demands of a popular audience. Poetic making at this early stage in the poet's career is presented as a social process of production under transformation; the poet's work is a quest for new ways of making, even as the static structure of the sestina form is held in tension with, or as a counterpoint to, the idea of a way of making yet to be developed. In this, "The Painter" evokes Walter Benjamin's 1934 essay "The Author as Producer," discussed in my introduction: the material transformation of the artistic process itself is the subject of the poem, as well as the locus of its social impact. If the poem "Some Trees" represents an "artifact" produced by a poet who "couldn't understand how [he] had produced" it, "The Painter" suggests that the process of production is as important as the artifact. The work of making is what determines the poet's success or failure in a social milieu; it is much of what there is to understand in the first place.

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The version of *poiesis* as a process transformed beside and in relation to real, historical forms of making has important implications for understanding Ashbery in a global context, and for readings of Ashbery's next book, *The Tennis Court Oath*. This collection appeared in 1962, six years after *Some Trees*. It was written in Paris, where

Ashbery lived for ten years (1955-1965) while working as a journalist, translator, and art critic. While the book has polarized critics—for Charles Bernstein, it’s Ashbery’s “best book” (433), while for Harold Bloom, who reports having reacted to a first reading with “outrage and disbelief,” it’s a “fearful disaster” (51-52)—it also offers a formulation of poetic making consistent with that of “The Painter,” even if the actual construction of the poems in it differs significantly. Moreover, it contains some of the dramas of nationality, hegemony, communication, and globalization of labor developed elsewhere by Ashbery, and later by Shirinyan. Most accounts of *The Tennis Court Oath* take Ashbery’s time in Paris as an important period for the formation of his uniquely American style—a style forged from the outside, as an exile, with the influence of some French artistic trends.¹⁰ Yet we should also reasonably assume that the work Ashbery undertook during this decade shaped his poetics. So, too, must the massive labor changes happening in that city during those years have had some kind of impact on his work. In *The Tennis Court Oath*, Ashbery’s poetic openness takes the form not only of poems’ extraordinary permeability by, even hypersensitivity to, the materials, accents, moods, and obsessions of contemporary popular materials, their openness to and ability to register changes in the labor milieu surrounding them, changes wrought in specific national, transatlantic (US-France), and global contexts.

On a first reading, *The Tennis Court Oath* might be seen to carry on the investigations into the nature of (only) creative labor begun in *Some Trees*. After his move from New York to Paris, Ashbery claims to have written the poems in the collection during a two- or three-year period characterized by a “state of restless experimenting”: “I thought of [the poems],” he has said, “as a stage on the way to

something else, which I knew nothing of then, when I would be able to reassemble language into something that would satisfy me in a way my early poems had once done but no longer did” (*Selected*, 251-52). While the book’s inclusion of found language, its fragmented disjunctiveness, its ambiguous polyvocality, and its experiments with format and punctuation are indisputably new, Ashbery’s remarks tie these developments back into the search for a more satisfactory process of production. Although this process entails a new way of manipulating language, the metaphor of language as social surrounding or ambient ocean still holds. Ashbery’s fundamental material is the same; it only demands to be “reassembled,” put together in a different way. Indeed, one view might position *The Tennis Court Oath* as just a more radically open version of poetic process than represented by earlier work, a nascent experimentalism pushed to the extreme under the more or less bad influence of some foreign figures.

Ashbery’s own remarks on his work provide a first way into thinking about the book’s transnational context beyond a version of the impressionable American poet’s first brush with European styles. Ashbery explains his method for composing the book as follows:

Often I’d visit the American Library and leaf through popular magazines, looking for the tone of voice I felt was lacking. Or I’d buy magazines like *Esquire* and look through them, copying down random bits of phrases in a sort of collage technique—unaware that about the same time Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso were practicing doing “cut-ups” elsewhere in Paris. It’s an odd coincidence that we all happened on this way of making at that particular time and place. (*Selected*, 250)

This explanation captures many of the themes and paradoxes that emerge from the poems, including the standard ones: the politics and aesthetics of representation, anxieties about mass or popular culture and its relationship to poetic language, the construction of an American identity from abroad. Despite the poet's claims of ignorance of both French and American practitioners, the salience of "collage" technique also points toward Ashbery's encounter with "other" art forms and styles, from surrealist film to new-wave cinematic montage to action painting to Dada provocation.

But it is, I think, Ashbery's concern to locate a "tone" here, as well as his choice of the American library as a place to seek it, that are particularly important. Ashbery's remarks on Gertrude Stein, a poet in a similar expatriated state, have often provided a tidy way to think about the book's transatlantic stance: "the distance from America afforded [Stein] the proper focus and even the occasion for a monumental study of the making of Americans," Ashbery writes, and "the foreign language that surrounded her was probably also a necessary insulation for the immense effort of concentration that this book required" (*Reported*, 109). Stein, however, is more properly a contrast than an analog. Not only is Ashbery's own linguistic insulative layer a more permeable one, but his relationship to his poems' place of composition is also more complicated than that of a writer displaced to a "here" but writing about and solidly rooted in a "there." Like Ashbery's art criticism of the time, *The Tennis Court Oath* suggests a type of writing that is addressed to, or constructed in order to be sent off to, somewhere some distance away: to "dream only of America" ("They Dream Only of America") indicates a stance of "somewhere else," as does the presence of the "thought that / All was foreign" ("A White Paper") or "the experience of writing you these love letters" ("The Ticket"). The "place"

of the book is rather a relation—or, specifically, a space between the US and France. With Stein, in other words, we have the sense that she might as well still be at home, writing about it, and that geographical displacement serves only to eliminate distractions, settling her more surely back into an American perspective. For Ashbery, conversely, Paris is the “here” where the poems are made; this “here” is solidly in communication with—leaning towards, not shut off from—another place.

This transatlantic middle ground is the site of shifting conceptions and trends for labor in the years leading up to *The Tennis Court Oath*'s publication. Above all, this particular oceanic crossing during the period carries the hegemonic US forces that will re-organize French labor. Along with the war in Algeria, urbanization, and the rise of popular culture, labor was a key issue of the time of Ashbery's French residence, a time of transition, upheaval, and confrontation. As Kristen Ross shows in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, the history of France in the 1950s and into the early 1960s is largely the narrative of “the consolidation of a massive French, urban middle class [...] under the auspices of capitalist modernization” (138)—a transition from factory work and agriculture to largely managerial labor that, although rapid, was neither smooth nor complete.¹¹

Correspondingly, work is indeed a “leitmotif” in the collection, as Bernes points out. For Bernes, the ambivalences generated by collaged construction reflect “the indeterminate class position of the white-collar worker who is both commander and commanded, the speaking mouth and its object” (65): “deskilling and, later, deindustrialization,” he writes “reposition the artist as administrator of prefabricated forms” (68). In other words, the poet takes his or her place on one side of a change that has already happened: “the poet

identifies uneasily with the figure of the conductor or director, whose technical-managerial labor [...] confronts a deskilled and purely subservient labor” (63).

Taken in conjunction with the work of Ross and others, however, Ashbery’s work provides a reminder that labor transitions happen at different times in different places. Far from being entirely “deskilled” and “purely subservient,” the type of work that Ashbery’s collection gestures towards is more variable. If the sort of work explicitly addressed in the volume’s poems is occasionally immaterial or managerial, this type of work is neither celebrated nor dominant: “And of the other things death is a new office building filled with modern furniture / A wise thing, but which has no purpose for us,” Ashbery writes, definitively and dismissively, in “A Last World.” In addition to the figure of the “janitor” who recurs in several poems, the space of “the factory” is significant throughout the book. If the publication of *The Tennis Court Oath* coincides with the French “discovery” of the white-collar “*nouvelle classe ouvrière*” by sociologists Serge Mallet and Pierre Belleville a decade after its American version, it also takes place at a moment when, as historian Serge Bernstein emphasizes, “the world of labor was a kaleidoscope of categories dominated by differences.”¹²

These categorical changes and differences—their kaleidoscopic, overlapping natures—show up throughout the volume, providing a key to some of its more puzzling images and juxtapositions. “A Life Drama” begins:

Yellow curtains
 Are in fashion,
 Murk plectrum,
 Fatigue and smoke of nights

And recording of piano in factory.
 Of the hedge
 The woods
 Stained by water running over
 Factory is near
 Workers near the warmth of their nights
 And plectrum.
 Factory
 Of cigar...

Unlike some of the other poems in the book, this one appears to unfold in a more or less real place. But it would be difficult to identify the “where” of this place—America, France, elsewhere—clues toward which seem to have been deliberately stripped from the poem. This indeterminate nationality is matched by an uncertainty about its topographical and class location. The poem’s first lines suggest the bourgeois quality of this “drama”: it is easy to imagine a sort of stolid home, sporting fashionable, maybe ugly, “yellow curtains.” But the phrase “fatigue and smoke of nights” and the evocation of an internal nocturnal warmth generated as if out of necessity and for sustenance suggest more dire, proletarian conditions for life and work. Similarly, while the “hedges” and “woods” of this section (later in the poem, “walking at twilight the path that leads to the factory”) imply a pleasant, hospitable rural landscape, that phrase, “fatigue and smoke of nights,” evokes an Eliotic uneasy urban atmosphere, perhaps a sense of unwellness. Because Ashbery sometimes omits the article before “factory,” (“piano in factory,” “factory is near,” “factory of cigar”) we might finally imagine it to connote both a place (“the

factory”) and some sort of condition (what would it mean to be “in [a state of] factory”)? Thus far, Ashbery seems systematically to be destabilizing the places of the drama, undoing such orienting binaries as America / France, rural / urban, and factory / not-factory.

Along with these basic locations and conditions, Ashbery also destabilizes our experience of reading the poem, exposing the mechanisms and contradictions of its construction. The easy visual imagery of the opening line “yellow curtains” sets up a certain mode of reading: we could expect to have to imagine a scene that would be laid out before us, in the manner of a realist novel. But this mode becomes impossible when we encounter the line “murk plectrum,” which both thematizes (our vision becomes “murky”) and enacts (a “murk” plectrum, or guitar pick, is impossible to imagine) the failure of realist description. These contradictions of poetic work, by which the poet is both collagist and mimetician, both manipulator of language and creator of images, are related to the contradictions of the poem’s place, the factory which is both urban and not-urban, both bourgeois and proletarian. The jarring repetition of the word “plectrum” at unexpected moments suggests a collision of different types of production. The poem is repeatedly interrupted by the name of a material tool for artistic making; this word even hearkens back to the classical poetic lyre. The phrase “recording of piano in factory,” similarly, contains a destabilizing simultaneity of production: the work of recording, the work of producing music, and the work suggested by the place / state of “factory,” whatever that might be. Not unlike labor more generally at this particular historical juncture, poetic labor is the site of a pervasive ambiguity—a congruence that leads us to think about the relationship between these seemingly distant modes. To what extent are

factory labor and artistic production, the sounds of industry and strains of music, related? Is artistic making aligned with the materiality of factory work, or does factory work more resemble the making of art? Given the poem's hesitation between "old" (descriptive) and "new" (disjunctive) ways of making, does the poet resemble the "old" proletarian worker? Or does he more resemble the "new" manager and manipulator of information—risking, in this poem, either a disconnection from or a misplaced nostalgia for another, older, type of labor?

These are questions the poem asks and questions Ashbery does not seem to answer. They are, though, exactly the questions of Ashbery's Parisian milieu, a point a brief cinematic example drives home. Filmed the year of *The Tennis Court Oath's* publication, Chris Marker's 1963 documentary *Le Joli Mai* gives a multifaceted examination of the city at this moment and opens onto some of the questions evoked above. Like *The Tennis Court Oath*, *Le Joli Mai* is preoccupied with the politics of representation, showing a spectrum of individuals and their response to the tenuous peace that followed the end of the Algerian War, as well as their reactions (often denials) to upheavals of class, religion, urban space—and labor. If standard depictions of the 1960s US stress the predominance of the managerial middle class, the result of transitions of the 1950s, *Le Joli Mai*, like "A Life Drama," presents a different moment, one caught between old and new models of work. After a section on strikes, Marker cuts to a scene in a café with the interviewer and two engineering consultants. The engineers discuss the decline of manual labor and the fact that technological means are now effective enough to replace most workers and shorten the workweek, if not eliminate the need for work entirely. The engineers' implication is that only a "moral" compulsion to work keeps

people at their jobs—a claim about which Marker, usually a neutral presence, expresses marked skepticism with intercut shots of cats looking defensive or yowling unhappily. (This scene is one of the few in the film in which the voice of the cameraman is heard.) But if part of this skepticism is directed towards the overall claim about work’s necessity—Marker has spoken to individual after individual for whom work is more than an old-fashioned moral compulsion—part of it is due to the engineers’ central claim about the obsolescence of manual labor. Except for a few unsympathetic young traders outside the Bourse, most of the workers Marker profiles do indeed have a physical relationship to their work. By this point in the film, it is clear that the claim that most Parisians at the moment only “fiddle with data” rings false.



As an American poet in Paris, Ashbery captures a historical hinge moment between ways of thinking about work; the ambivalence of the “factory” is, on one level, a

way of articulating the anxieties of an historical moment between industrial and post-industrial labor. This view of abroad, of Europe-as-elsewhere, is closer to home for Ashbery than at first it might seem. Bringing American work back into the equation, Ashbery's work also demonstrates the partial nature of the "hegemonic" function of US-based work, pointing towards the complicated political and material mechanisms by which the transition to "immaterial" labor in fact unfolds. The "consolidation" of a new middle class to which Ross refers is not *sui generis*, nor does it occur only within the borders of the French nation. On the contrary, as Ross convincingly shows, it involves the suppression of racial, historical, and occupational or class difference in France, the denial of and relegation of France's colonial past and the ongoing violence of decolonization in Algeria to an "outside" and a "not-now," and the effective manufacture of a set of norms of cleanliness, order, and efficiency. Above all, these norms are drawn from the example of, as well as produced under the influence of, US capitalism. The logic of nationalist class consolidation, in other words, is inseparable from the logic of uniform labor transitions—both paradigms being worked out on an international scene in which US power is strongly at play.

Ashbery's occupation in France, a newspaper writer and art critic, provides one very specific example of the real and political workings of such mechanisms. As Ross also underscores, French cultural production during the time was bound up with a set of related transformations unique to that sector, including the growth of the popular magazine industry, which served as an additional vehicle for solidifying the middle class.¹³ Especially telling is an analysis of the editorial dynamics of the popular press of the time. "France's embrace of an American, flexible managerial style" (66) is strikingly

visible in the journalistic shifts of the period, Ross writes, noting the total transformation of the important mainstream magazine *l'Express* (founded in 1953) to a “seductive, newly Americanized journalistic format” (67):

The offices of *L'Express* itself had already been transformed from its family-style, artisanal workshop into a factory of uniform production.

Gone was the approximate, unpredictable, but above all disorderly format of the magazine [...] Its new format, borrowed from *Time*, featured short, unsigned news chunks in a standardized, accessible style; articles, no matter what the subject matter, were to be made the same way, following assembly-line principles and containing the same ingredients: the typical detail, the brief citation, the amusing anecdote. (70)

Ashbery’s consumption of popular material through the mechanisms of his poems, as well as his day-job production of art journalism on a weekly schedule—not to mention his close friendship with Pierre Martory, a prolific journalist for *Paris Match*—put him squarely in the middle of these transformations, as observer and participant from both sides of the ocean.

This is a central irony of Ashbery’s work: if the poet turns from New York seeking alternate ways of working and thinking about working in Paris, the changes he encounters in Paris occur under the hegemony of American models of labor—a motion we will see along a different transnational axis in “The Instruction Manual.” While the heavily and visibly collaged nature of Ashbery’s Parisian poetry might narrowly be read as the poet in negotiation with *only* culture or art, capaciously absorbing the materials of mass culture or artistic innovation, this sort of work is inextricably, even doubly,

involved with the re-organization of informational labor, both in America and in France.¹⁴ If on the one hand the poet most resembles the new information-oriented managerial worker, his work nevertheless runs counter to the smooth surfaces, coherent narratives, and uniform views of work that are integral to the nationalist consolidation described and critiqued by Marker and Ross. (As Bruce Andrews puts it, in *The Tennis Court Oath*, “construction is not a shawl, enveloping & smoothing the shifts as in later work, but is at the heart of our experiencing those shifts at all—the jagged kaleidoscope of melancholia and expiration,” 523¹⁵). Even as a manager or manipulator of information, in other words, Ashbery reminds us of the factory, as well as the material work of the “cut-up” throughout the collection. *The Tennis Court Oath* holds in tension France and the US, non-artistic and artistic labor, and informational or managerial labor in both form and content with a continued insistence on craft and materiality. It is able to capture a moment of French transition between “the factory” and what comes after it. It does so, however, not because it is so squarely located within this transition so as to comprehend and represent it. Rather, even as it gives us purchase on a moment of ambivalence, its contradictions send us back outside of any blindered and naturalizing national context to the hegemonic forces of global change.

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Ashbery’s poetry is at once caught within a changing regime of labor under capital and offers, via its own contradictory construction, an expanded vista of work. On the one hand, it contains a position we might call the “worker’s,” which in this case reminds us of the continued presence of material work, demonstrating a certain skepticism about informational and managerial labor. On the other hand, there’s the

position of the “working poet,” which is inseparable from the first perspective, modeling a similar straddling of types of work, but which is also capable of offering *itself* as self-aware revelatory action, providing a critical vantage point from which to think about and even reconceive notions of “work” in the non-poetic sense.¹⁶ “The Painter” stands as *ars poetica* for the “poet-as-worker” perspective, which is further developed and complicated in *The Tennis Court Oath*. The poem “The Instruction Manual,” from *Some Trees*, toggles between these perspectives: in it, poetry both is work and is explicitly and confidently *about* work. While for Perloff the poem is about failure at the level of poetry, a new and desultory version of M. H. Abrams’s “Greater Romantic Lyric” and while for Bernes it shows failure of poetry precisely because of the nature and the conditions of work it depicts, the poem also offers an alternative reading that emphasizes encounter and sociality over dejection or alienation, an encounter between poetry and labor that leaves neither unchanged.

“The Instruction Manual” opens with a speaker in a state of both dejection and alienation. Like Coleridge yearning for winds to “send [his] soul abroad,” the poet of the opening (like the painter of “The Painter”) cannot create. The poem begins:

As I sit looking out of a window of the building
 I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new
metal.
 I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an inner
peace,
 And envy them—they are so far away from me!
 Not one of them has to worry about getting out this manual on schedule.

And, as my way is, I begin to dream, resting my elbows on the desk and
 leaning out of the window a little,
 Of dim Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers! (14)

The rest of the poem, following the “out-in-out” structure Perloff evokes, consists of the speaker’s imaginative investigation of the city, an idealized and colorful place of escape from work, and his ultimate return to the site of the poem’s beginning: “We have heard the music, tasted the drinks, and looked at colored houses. / What more is there to do, except stay? And that we cannot do.” Ashbery has described the poem’s genesis in his work as a textbook editor in New York, also emphasizing the temporariness of escape and circularity of motion: “The poem ends with me returning to the boring task I have to do, where the poem began. It leads back into me, and is probably about the dissatisfaction with the work I was doing at the time” (cit. Perloff, *Indeterminacy*, 263).

The Guadalajara of this poem is indeed as colorful and exotic as only the “poetic imagination” could make it; the clichéd costumes and cartoonish figures available to the poem evoke certain forms of travel promotion.¹⁷ True to form, the presence of this generic language means it is easy to overlook the fact that the scene of communal leisure and festival celebration occurring there is also still a scene of work. Women serve fruit, a caretaker’s daughter is scrubbing a flight of steps, men sell hats. Even the musicians wear “creamy white uniforms”: art is official, and presumably on the clock.¹⁸ But beyond these figures, the idea of work is built problematically into the structure of the poem and into the vision of intimacy it provides, such that work is both the problem that provokes the poem and the revelation it offers. After describing the plaza scene, Ashbery turns to the interior space of a private home:

Let us take this opportunity to tiptoe into one of the side streets.
 Here you may see one of those white houses with green trim
 That are so popular here. Look—I told you!
 It is cool and dim inside, but the patio is sunny.
 An old woman in gray sits there, fanning herself with a palm leaf fan.
 She welcomes us to her patio, and offers us a cooling drink.
 “My son is in Mexico City,” she says. “He would welcome you too
 If he were here. But his job is with a bank there.
 Look, here is a photograph of him.”
 And a dark-skinned lad with pearly teeth grins out at us from the worn
leather frame.

We thank her for her hospitality, for it is getting late...

This passage is remarkable for the degree to which the speaker’s “daydream” has taken on a local habitation and a voice: the woman’s warmth and hospitality stand in contrast to the loneliness and isolation of the speaker, who is suspended above an impersonal street scene at the poem’s beginning. But if this section is supposed to provide human contact outside of work, it is here, at the poem’s center, that a form of informational labor becomes most distressing. The poem has led us spatially deeper, in from the frame to the intimacy of a domestic interior, but the mysterious “dark-skinned lad with pearly teeth” who seems positioned as the goal of the encounter is missing, removed to an industrial and financial capital.

But if work creates an absence at the poem’s heart, it also, paradoxically, functions across distance and across racial and economic difference to set up the young

man as the speaker's double. The speaker's "travel" to Guadalajara in the first place is bound up with his work, both as a poet and as a writer of instruction manuals, just as the young man's is with his banking job. And one step further: by including the representation of the young man as a photograph, the poem reminds us of the central role of artistic making in its reflections on the wider world of work. A moment of *ekphrasis* serves as simultaneous reminder of both types of labor, foregrounding the form-giving capacity of aesthetic production. Instead of providing escape from labor, the imaginative work done by "The Instruction Manual" provides an encounter with other types of work and a failed encounter with another worker—a recognition of work's presence in poetic "escape" and an acknowledgment of the displacement and emptiness caused by work at the core of poetic experience. Through the figure of *ekphrasis* present in the photograph, the poem thematizes the particular capacity of aesthetic production to mediate labor relations, serving as the means of encounter between two very different workers. Again, the function of this formalization goes beyond description or simple representation. Instead, the aestheticized figuration of this encounter-in-absence opens up a reading of the poem as critique of the alienating effects of informational labor and the physical effects of an economic globalization that removes workers to cities such as Mexico City and New York: in locating the concentration of financial capital in Mexico City, Ashbery foreshadows developments usually seen to begin at a later moment, in the late 1960s and following. If in Ashbery's later work, as Christopher Nealon has shown, we find a poet who is "keenly aware" of "something like the consolidation of capitalist spectacle in 1970s New York" (10) even as he chooses, according to Nealon, to turn away from rather than to engage this dynamic, in this poem the poet gives a window on a different version

of capitalist consolidation: the migration of workers from outside the capital to Mexico City as a result of Mexico's import-substitution model for industrialization, a rapid process that would cause the city's population to double in the decades between the 1940s and the 1960s.¹⁹

Moreover, although alienated work is present even in the poem's escape, the poem also offers the possibility of sociality, again through the activity of *poiesis*, even in the most deadening conditions of work. At the end of the poem, Ashbery does turn back to the task at hand: "And as a last breeze freshens the top of the weathered old tower, I turn my gaze / Back to the instruction manual which has made me dream of Guadalajara." The imperative construction of "made me dream" in this closing stands out: the speaker is not supposed to have been dreaming, and characterizing the job of technical writing as in some sense the agent behind the dream, conditioning its production, suggests a re-evaluation of that task. In what sense has the activity of poetic labor changed the speaker? The poem's ending further expands the way that poetry works in this poem. First, it evokes heightened sensation ("a last breeze freshens") out of the ordinary, color out of urban existence. But more important, the experience the poem makes also has to do with encounter at a level beyond the rejuvenation of the senses, and beyond the one frustrated by the Mexican bank. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker is a single "I" who sits, separated from the "they" of the world, the people "so far away" from him. All he can do is "look," a verb which occurs twice in the opening three lines. By the section about the old woman, however, he has been joined by someone else located deictically in Guadalajara with him: "Look!" he exclaims at three instances during the poem's middle. From all appearances, the looking "I" has become a looking

“we” at some point during the poem. Like *ekphrasis*, here *deixis* becomes a figure for poetic work, which involves the creation of a new sociality and the possibility of human communication over and beyond that which is frustrated by the demands of non-poetic labor.

Thus we find a different model for Ashbery’s poetry than the one offered by Nealon, in which Ashbery looks away from the workings of capital—and, as Nealon admits, is “haunted by the question of who gets to opt out of violence: more often than not, those who have no choice but to suffer are imagined as far away, or indiscernible” (89). Instead, at an earlier moment, Ashbery travels imaginatively to that “far away” place, where the transformations towards “the consolidation of capitalist spectacle” are underway, and inescapable. Ashbery’s poetry acknowledges the possibility of this dream-like motion towards sociality across distance and difference, negotiating the encounter with its hypostatized “other” work. Poetic work recognizes its quasi-double in the figure of the banker, self-consciously formalizing both the presence and the absence of that double (an absence problematically created by the demands of work itself) through the figure of *ekphrasis*, and creating a fiction of company with whom the experience may still be shared through the figure of *deixis*. The wistfulness of the poem’s fade-out ending is compounded by the dramas of meeting and missing the poem sets up: we might imagine the old woman’s son staring out the window in Mexico City, also dreaming of Guadalajara, or of New York. Or as Ashbery writes in “Paradoxes and Oxymorons”:

You look out a window

Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don’t have it.

You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other. (*Shadow Train*, 3)

The work of poetry is to produce forms for these sorts of encounters even as it helps reveal the reasons behind their real failure, making them visible against another sort of work which would render them impossible to imagine.

The poet-worker thus produces something—poetic form, here represented by *ekphrasis* and *deixis*—that reveals the possibility of creativity, material engagement, and sociality even within the type of work in which she does not participate; this revelation happens beside and is shaped and threatened by the same forces as other types of work. This tension between the presence of imaginative possibility and the danger of its co-option by capital resembles what Antonio Gramsci describes in the section of his *Prison Notebooks*, “Taylorism and the mechanization of the worker.” Gramsci’s claim that under Fordism “the only thing that is completely mechanised is the physical gesture,” thus “[leaving] the brain free and unencumbered for other occupations,” is drawn from the figure of the scribe, a precursor to the journalist or the writer of instruction manuals. For the work of writing to be subsumed under the demands of capital, the brain of the writer must be completely disengaged. Furthermore, Gramsci also predicts the co-option of this remainder of mental freedom pointed out by thinkers such as Paolo Virno, who will emphasize the degree to which human creative and social capacities are put to work by capital under the figure of the “virtuoso”:²⁰

American industrialists have understood all too well this dialectic inherent in the new industrial methods. They have understood that [...] not only does the worker think, but the fact that he gets no immediate satisfaction from his work and realizes that they are trying to reduce him to a trained

gorilla, can lead him into a train of thought that is far from conformist.

(308-10)

In this situation, the doubleness of the poetic work seems especially important. The dramatization of the bored textbook writer who finds not escape but community, however imperfect, in his imaginative creation, might be seen as a sort of subversive work, crossing separations between types of labor, moving imaginatively to an outside from the inside of waged and alienated capitalist work, and then pointing back to the “inside” of labor from an imaginative perch. If, in Perloff’s words, “Ashbery’s speaker does not achieve the epiphany towards which the Greater Romantic Lyric usually builds” and “the long Whitmanesque lines that frame the daydream itself here express the very opposite of Romantic ecstasy. The speaker seems to be yawning” (*Indeterminacy*, 265), the fact that the poem “leads back to” the dissatisfied worker is not its failure but its point. Instead of troubling the boundaries between self and world, subject and object, the structure of the Greater Romantic Lyric stages the willful adjacency, or the knitting-together, of two types of work otherwise presumed to occur separately and to have nothing to do with each other.

*

This doubleness of work, a view by which poetic work and work under capital resemble each other, the former enveloping and offering a new perspective on the latter, even as it partakes of the same structuring and transforming forces, also lets us relate formally divergent schools of poetry, positioning them in relationship to each other on the basis of their engagement with broader transformations in labor history. I want briefly to turn now to certain strains of contemporary writing that, like Ashbery’s work, might be

seen to give a double vista on problems of labor and poetry: a view that shows not only what poetry can illuminate about work, but also what forces underlie and might threaten the potential creativity present in both activities. Although the poets seen as part of a contemporary conceptual movement, the North American figureheads of which include Vanessa Place, Caroline Bergvall (discussed in Chapter 3), Robert Fitterman, Christian Bök, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Dodie Bellamy, are far from a uniform set (deep stylistic, ideological, and political differences exist even among those named), we might group them together by the techniques they tend as a set to employ. Generally speaking, conceptual poetry renounces ideas of authenticity or poetic originality, relying instead on the manipulation of “pre-fabricated” material or information and often using techniques such as collage, copy-and-paste, appropriation, or procedural methodologies that de-emphasize or even obviate the place of specifically poetic production.

But although conceptual writing appears to skirt the issue of poetic making in a narrow sense, at the heart of conceptual written production lies a central concern with *poiesis*. The predecessors of conceptual writing are as diverse as its manifestations, but most salient among these is the conceptual art movement of the 1960s and following, and its quest to “dematerialize” the art object.²¹ Yet translated into writing, this quest leads to a paradox: to write about the conceptual art object is not to make it, but to write about the conceptual written artifact is to make it. “Failure,” according to Place and Fitterman in their 2009 *Notes on Conceptualisms*, “is the goal of conceptual writing” (20)—or, elsewhere, “Note: failure = embodiment” (46). Since a text, or a poem, must be present to be read, all existing conceptual writing involves the failure to avoid having been produced. Like Ashbery’s failure in “The Instruction Manual” to escape into an

imaginative world without occupation, conceptual poetry has built into it a failure to avoid the work of making. Furthermore, just as Ashbery's work contains a poetic response to late twentieth-century capitalism's shift towards information-based and increasingly globalized labor, so too does much contemporary conceptual writing situate itself at a particular historical and technological moment, one having to do with the rise of the internet. In his introduction to his anthology of conceptual writing, *Against Expression*, Kenneth Goldsmith links the development of conceptual methods to the sheer amount of linguistic information available online to readers and writers alike: "faced with an unprecedented amount of digital text," he writes, "writing needs to redefine itself to adapt to the new environment of textual abundance" (xvii). "We aren't hammering all day on typewriters," he continues. "Instead, focused all day on powerful machines with infinite possibilities, connected to networks with a number of equally indefinite possibilities, writers and their role are being significantly, challenged, expanded, and updated" (xvii).²²

While surely it is true that at least some of us do still spend large quantities of time hammering away at a keyboard, it is also certainly true that technological change over the past half-century or so has transformed both the nature of work and the nature of writing. A vast subject, the implications the rise of internet culture—including the commodification of creativity under neoliberalism and the harnessing of even "poetic" energy into the technological information economy, further examined in my coda—have been both vexing for and productively explored by poets and critics.²³ This is also a moment at which, under the rubric of "writing for the internet," a diverse array of new information-based labor types (possibly including poetry), are connected through their

presumed *invisibility*. As media and labor theorists Andrew Ross, Gregory Downey, and others have pointed out, joining critiques of “immaterial labor” discussed earlier, these types of work tend overwhelmingly to be “obscured by the perpetual marketing claims of both the technologies that surround [them] and the content that flows through [them]” (Downey, 145). Finally, then, it is a moment at which poetry’s form-giving capacities become especially important. Both internet-based and poetic labor (“conceptual” or not) need to be situated not solely among the abstract dramas of zeroes and ones, concepts and allegories, information management and organization of “writing in the information age.” Rather, they occur at a moment when, in Perloff’s words, “the internet has made copyists, recyclers, transcribers, collators, and reframers of us all” (*Unoriginal Genius*, 49)—a formulation that highlights, once again, the complexly uneven material aspect of such “immaterial” work.

Thus Ashbery’s work in *The Tennis Court Oath* and “The Instruction Manual” tracks the reorganization of labor under the structuring forces of hegemonic US capitalism, working across both east-west (US-Europe) and north-south (US-Mexico City) vectors to show different moments of that transition and formalizing, through specifically poetic devices, issues of growing inequality that concern living labor. In *The Tennis Court Oath*, we find a unique formulation of a specific historical moment, one at which French labor is poised on some indeterminate edge of “the factory,” influenced by but pushing back against American models. “The Instruction Manual” gives a different but no less specific picture, elsewhere and slightly earlier: the incipient rise of information-based managerial labor, the promotion of American interests in and through Latin America, the moment of global financial restructuring that led to the transformation

of Mexican cities and villages, and the human dramas of meeting and missing, tourism and labor, happening within and through these transformations. The continuing influence of many of the same material and historical complexities can also be seen in the work of the contemporary poet Ara Shirinyan. For Ashbery in “The Instruction Manual,” both the changes in the urban geography of Mexico the poem registers and the language for the representation of the experience of travel available to the poet are influenced by specific political, cultural, and economic US interests, such as Disney and the CIA (see note xvii). The organizational presence of the CIA is at the heart of Shirinyan’s project, as are questions of travel, tourism and its representation, and sustained and exacerbated inequality under US imperialism and hegemonic cultural and “immaterial” labor. Moreover, Shirinyan’s work—like Ashbery’s in the *Tennis Court Oath*—conjoins poetic work and changes in informational work (online journalism, rather than print) that occur along unevenly balanced national lines. As for Ashbery, for Shirinyan poetic labor occurs within and gives form to these developments.

Conceptual methods of re-appropriation and reframing are central to the composition of Shirinyan’s 2008 collection *Your Country is Great*. For this book, Shirinyan ran a Google search for the phrase “[country] is great” for every country listed in a 2006 edition of the CIA’s World Factbook and then selected and lineated the results into the book’s poems. (The first volume, 129 pages long, only includes countries from Afghanistan to Guyana.) According to the introduction to a selection of his work in *Against Expression*, “Shirinyan persuasively demonstrates [language’s] leveling quality, demolishing meaning into a puddle of platitudes in a time when everything is great, yet nothing is great,” “collapsing the space between the real world and the World Wide

Web” (522). After this introduction, we might expect to escape from concerns of specifically poetic labor. The leveling model of both poetry and the internet, these commentators suggest, means the absence of a great deal of work, with the drab result of global and virtual equality.

This is a misleading formulation of Shirinyan’s work, which contains not one but two sources of distinction and differentiation, both of them linguistic and both of them decidedly non-virtual. First, the work of *poiesis* is present as material selection and lineation, and all the more visible set as deliberate “artistic” choice working in dialogic relation to, both with and against, the other voices and registers the book assembles.²⁴ Does this authorial presence compromise the democratic leveling held out as dubious payoff, above? Shirinyan’s decision *not* to give up lineation or to delegate it to aleatory procedure but to foreground the element of authority and selection in the work has its corollary in his decision to use the CIA Factbook, and to mention it by name, rather than to use another or a less specific way of listing “every country in the world.” If Ashbery’s initial engagement with conventional travel writing raises the problems of literary participation in such framing endeavors, by aligning the poet and the forces of the CIA, Shirinyan suggests that both are potentially problematic forces of power that in some way dictate “what is there,” carving out poems from a mass of language then left out of the book, or choosing to recognize some countries and not others.²⁵

But Shirinyan’s work extends beyond a critique of authorial privilege, showing poetic and non-poetic labor as adjacent but not synonymous, occurring within and revealing a situation of unevenly distributed economic precarity.²⁶ “Albania is Great,” for example, proceeds as follows:

Albania is great. I missed that place a lot.
 I got offered cigarettes and alcohol by
 like everyone I knew
 and some people I didn't know.

Albania is great!
 Not quite as third-world
 as parts of Africa, but
 not exactly Michigan either
 if ykwim.

I liked everything about my stay
 and i just wanted to let you know
 that Albania is GREAT!!!

Although the conversational tones, relaxed standards of grammar, capitalization, and punctuation, and acronym “ykwim” (“you know what I mean”) are unmistakably products of the internet, these voices are slightly distinct. The first recounts an individual’s travel adventures, while the second reflects with a slightly expanded perspective, gesturing beyond personal experience towards a more global, if limited, perspective. The third voice—the third stanza of repurposed language, rather—raises the question of the context in which this language is produced: clearly this is a travel review, a comment left on some sort of travel or accommodation website. While it is possible to imagine the first two speakers writing out of a roughly “poetic” desire, on a personal

website or blog, the third is different: it is as much about the exchange of services as about the experience of a place, written for purposes other than self-expression.

Is writing an online travel review “work”? It is, more often than not, disguised as not-work. As Ross points out, “the rapid flowering of Internet amateurism has hastened on the process by which the burden of productive waged labor is increasingly transferred to users or consumers—outsourced, as it were” (22). What Shirinyan’s poems reveal, among other things, is a global community of workers, information producers, travel reviewers and travel-guide writers, promoters, advertisers, advocates and enthusiasts: many people writing not from the perspective of the first-world voyager (your country is great) but as global makers of language (*our* country is great). Thus while the travel writer is most often assumed to share with the poet the stance of privilege and authority, the similarities between this global linguistic making and the American poet’s work become visible even as awareness of poetic privilege and linguistic authority persist.²⁷

“Albania is Great” contains the stanza:

Hiking, camping
 mountain-climbing
 hunting—North
 Albania is great
 for all of this.

By breaking the lines so that one of them is the title of the poem, and the term of the Google-search, Shirinyan not only reminds us of his process, and reveals the controlling hand of the poet, but also creates a meta-poetic moment of figural doubleness in which both poet and his appropriated text work as if with synchronized gestures to produce the

same “object.” The title of the poem made by the poet is the phrase written by an anonymous North Albanian writer as work, for material and economic ends: the poem, in other words, produces a moment of encounter between two very different producers. Certainly this is not the moment of erotic possibility suggested in Ashbery’s poem and thwarted there by labor transformation; certainly both the mechanics of poetic representation of labor (here figured by lineation into the poem) and the type of labor the poem brings into view (a more abstract picture of generalized internet production often hidden as sociality) are different in Shirinyan’s work than they are in Ashbery’s. Nevertheless, the poem becomes a similar site of communication: even while remaining necessarily differentiated, the poet and the internet writer are connected through the act of making language.

This “connection” is neither stable nor symmetrical. Doubled or otherwise expanded, historically or geographically, poetic work offers a perspective that might reveal problems for labor, poetic and otherwise, as well as its possibilities. Claims for the power of expanding global networks of information, even those made by critics of poetry, often suggest an eventual effect of flattening, leveling, or equality. Perloff, for example, writes in *Unoriginal Genius* that today’s poetic communities are more likely to be rooted in common “interests and allegiances” (4) than in particular locations: “where poets actually live,” she writes, “is much less important than what they do, and mobility—whether of texts, now eminently movable, or of their authors—is the status quo” (6). But in foregrounding its own lineation and construction, Shirinyan’s work reminds us that language, even in conceptually based writing, is “a more physically material event than a disembodied or transparent medium” (Dworkin, xliii). It also reminds us of the continuity

of this work with other types of labor, as material and placed activity. Finally, this continuity of material making that spans poetic and non-poetic activity does not mean the realities of economic globalization disappear: it is no accident that Ashbery's final imaginative foray to the clock tower at the end of "The Instruction Manual" shows him both the richer and poorer quarter ("its homes a deep blue") of the city, or that the scene of "A Life Drama" seems fragile and flickering. But where Ashbery's accent falls on the possibility of encounter, Shirinyan's work, over half a century later, emphasizes impossibility, and a final incompatibility between types of labor: the five pages of Shirinyan's work that are left blank except for their titles—implying no results for "[country] is great"—suggest a final dead-end situation brought about by worsening global economic inequalities of labor and technology. In the case of *Your Country Is Great*, the absence of searchable linguistic production in Antigua and Barbuda, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, and Equatorial Guinea also means the poem cannot be made. And in a final ironic twist, at a moment at which a US president has come into power on the promise of making the country "great again" through a series of xenophobic, sexist, racist, and neo-imperialist actions, it becomes all too obvious that one country's "greatness" only comes at the devastating expense of not just work but lives, in that country and elsewhere.

Through specifically poetic figures for the relationships of labor towards which it strives or by which it was formed, Ashbery's work gives us a version of poetic labor that remains distinct but is firmly embedded in a global context of work. So too does Shirinyan, through lineation and titling, poetically invoke a global situation of labor that includes poetic production. Moreover, Shirinyan gestures towards the advancement of the

mechanisms of uneven global economic development that were incipient in Ashbery's work, now present less as threat than as reality. Without eliding the vast differences between types of work (or between types and lineages of poetry) these poems demonstrate the complex interrelationship between *poiesis*, "immaterial labor," and various kinds of "older" work or work done "elsewhere" that troubles an easy picture of any kind of labor, offering a doubled perspective that figures and reflects upon various kinds of work or workers. These poets' work suggests that types of labor—material, "immaterial," poetic—are inextricably linked, jointly if unequally subject to the same pressures, and best thought together *through* the shared vulnerability that poetic form helps make visible.

¹ In the post-war US, these are the developments theorized at the time as the rise of “white collar” work by thinkers such as C. Wright Mills. It is important to distinguish here between the rise of the white-collar middle class, which initially occurred simultaneously with growth in blue-collar labor, and a later period of deindustrialization, characterized by the loss or outsourcing of manufacturing jobs and the substitution (in some cases) of information- or service-based ones. The resulting picture, according to a 1986 Bureau of Labor Statistics paper, is that “[d]espite the overall stability in the absolute number of goods-producing jobs, the change in shares between the goods- and service-producing sectors has been dramatic. In 1959, the latter sector accounted for 60 percent of all employment and the former, 40 percent; by 1984, that ratio had shifted to 72 percent of employment in the service-producing sector and only 28 percent in the goods-producing sector” (4). See Bernes for a general overview; see Panitch and Gindin (chapters 3 – 6) for these changes in the context of the rise of global finance capital. For more recent statistics, Baker and Buffie track blue collar work in the mining, manufacture, and construction industries, finding that such work amounted for a total of 31.2% of “non-farm” US employment in 1970, compared with 13.6% in 2016.

² As a category, “immaterial labor” generally encompasses the rise of communication or affect-based jobs, as well as intellectual labor. Curiously, theories of “immaterial labor” tend to emerge after the initial rise of such work; they often also point towards these developments as work’s future. Key accounts are those by Maurizio Lazzarato (1997), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (first in *Empire* [2000], and then revised in *Multitude* [2004]), and Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005). As we will see, the problem of labor’s lingering “past,” or the complicated co-presence of multiple labor types, is one that poetry finds ways of addressing.

³ In addition to Dyer-Withford’s, see the critique of labor’s “immateriality” mounted by George Caffentzis. See also Henwood (*After the New Economy*) for an explanation of what the optimistic thinking about the “new” technological, information-based, allegedly prosperous American economy of the late 1990s leaves out or obscures, including its material conditions.

⁴ “The accumulation of capital,” Harvey writes, “has always been a profoundly geographical affair. Without the possibilities inherent in geographical expansion, spatial reorganization, and uneven geographical development, capitalism would long ago have ceased to function as a political-economic system. This perpetual turning to what I have elsewhere (see Harvey, 1982) termed ‘a spatial fix’ to capitalism’s internal contradictions [...] coupled with the uneven insertion of different territories and social formations into the capitalist world market has created a global historical geography of capital accumulation whose character needs to be well understood” (23).

⁵ Chhachhi provides an overview: “The landscape of labor straddles multiple temporalities in resurgent capitalism of the twenty-first century. Hard manual labor coexists alongside trafficked sexual labor, child labor and new forms of work and labor in the knowledge economy, leading some to argue for a third Great Transformation toward cognitive capitalism. There is a sense of *déjà vu*: new classes in the making, alongside sweatshop labor, factory fires, mining disasters, a ruthless process of accumulation

through dispossession in the countryside, the decimation of traditional working classes” (914).

⁶ Ashbery responds: “That is the way it has happened to me in more recent times. In fact, since I don't have very much free time (poets seldom do, since they must somehow make a living), I've conditioned myself to write at almost any time.”

⁷ Andrew DuBois, for instance, discusses the difference between the “academic and restricted” style of Ashbery’s early poems and Ashbery’s more expansive and more ambiguous later work (8). John Shoptaw emphasizes its “formality”: “the overt, intricate formality of these poems [...] tends to obscure whatever contents they may or may not contain” (19). Richard Howard, similarly, notes that “a quick glance at the table of contents tells us, first of all, how thoroughly aware Ashbery is of his conventions—more than aware, elated to have them at hand” (22). Perloff seems to find the volume uneven: “Too much disclosure produces contrivance; too much concealment, unintelligibility and boredom. In Ashbery’s early poems, these twin dangers are not always avoided” (*Indeterminacy*, 263), while for Bloom the “promise and splendors” (2) of this first volume represent the influence of Stevens (and are continuous with later work, with the exception of *The Tennis Court Oath*).

⁸ Fred Moramarco reads this poem in relation to Abstract Expressionism, noting that the painter’s act of painting the sea with the sea “almost anticipates the conceptual art of the 60s” (449). For Leslie Wolf, the poem allegorizes a shift from mimetic language though the dissolution of the subject to the “new and complicated freedom [that] emerges as the fulcrum of the dialectic between the artist and the world shifts inward” (227); like art, Wolf argues, poetry becomes a matter of action or process rather than signification. DuBois reads the poem in relation to John Hollander’s idea of “notional ekphrasis,” or “a poem about [...] an object that doesn’t actually exist”: for him, the sestina is a negotiation between “Ashbery’s early dream of total mimesis” and the actual possibilities available to art (32).

⁹ Positioning Ashbery as a precursor to some versions of conceptual poetics, DuBois historicizes this method of construction out of linguistic saturation: “[Ashbery] knows how we pay attention in a world of commercially utilized airwaves, of sensory glut [...] Ashbery’s work throbs with meaning, yet some meanings will be made hard to articulate, as Ashbery circumvents or obstructs our strategies for transparency. He does this in part by overwhelming us (in imitation of the world in which we live) [...] nor does he excuse us from the obligatory desire to organize all this, to locate all the possible meanings in a proliferation of words” (xv). See also Lerner for a discussion of the importance of motion and time for Ashbery’s language: “Throughout [his work],” Lerner writes, “Ashbery pins us to the moment of reading and frustrates retrograde interpretive strategies that would stop the flow of language at its source” (203).

¹⁰ For an analysis of Ashbery’s “American” formation in Paris, see Herd’s chapter “An American in Paris: *The Tennis Court Oath* and the poetics of exile” (69-92); for its French influences, see Shoptaw (both French and American, primarily painterly), Fred Moramarco (Raymond Roussel), Daniel Kane (Man Ray).

¹¹ Ross explores how transformations of labor and empire are related, telling “the story of French modernization and Americanization on the one hand” and “the story of decolonization on the other.” For her, in a parallel version of Bernes’s worker, it is the

tension between these two fronts of change “that makes the emergence of the character and social type of *jeune cadre*, that high priest of Fordism, something of a national allegory for modernizing France of the 1950s and 1960s. Midway between owner and worker, managing the proletariat but punching a time clock too, the *cadre*, like France itself, was a ‘dominated agent of capitalist domination’” (7).

¹² The late 1950s and early 1960s, Bernstein writes, represent “a moment of coexistence, within an extraordinarily divided and diversified working class, of the traditional working population (which remained the most numerous but tended to stagnate or decline) and a new class of industrial wage-earners, far removed from the classic version of the industrial worker and much more integrated into the French society in the age of growth” (137). The concern with rural versus urban labor reflected in *The Tennis Court* might also be put in the context of French history: according to Bernstein, in 1954, 44% of the French population lived in rural areas, 56% in urban areas. By 1968, the figures shift to 33.8% and 66.2% (130).

¹³ Popular novels, Ross notes, attest to “the consolidation of a massive French, urban middle class in the 1950s and 1960s under the auspices of capitalist modernization” (138); Ross examines three examples of such novels, the protagonists of which are all in the business of “image production” (130). Popular magazines such as *L’Express* and *Paris Match*, she also notes, serve similarly “to unite the various characters into a coherent group” (140); such magazines, by virtue of their availability, sharability, and weekly rhythm of production, were intentionally geared towards the production of this new class (143).

¹⁴ For Andrew Ross, Ashbery’s work embodies the sort of response called for by Benjamin’s “author as producer” paradigm, but this response is primarily (only) to cultural developments: the poems “do not express an *attitude* toward mass culture” but instead “are *transformed* by mass culture because they have structurally absorbed if not wholly integrated a wide range of demotic elements into the medium itself” (202). Since Ashbery’s collage techniques emerge after, and out of, the failure of the European avant-garde, Ross argues, in the end the book highlights “the various levels of artifice and convention which separate us from any unmediated expression of sympathy with, or complaint against, the protocols of mass culture. To recognize this is doubly important if it involves the reader in critically following through exactly the same procedures by which we constitute ourselves conventionally as citizens in a mass consumer society” (209).

¹⁵ See Nicholls for an overview of *The Tennis Court Oath*’s critical reception and an analysis of its particular importance for language poetry. Ashbery’s influence now extends beyond Language poetry; the jumps and fragments of *The Tennis Court Oath*, for example, have been absorbed by many contemporary writers, and at least two contemporary and globally engaged books (Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Coffee House Press, 2011, and Lucy Ives’s *Orange Roses*, Ahsahta, 2013) take their titles from it.

¹⁶ Working in a similar vein, Mutlu Konuk Blasing locates Ashbery’s shifting techniques as part of a larger system, positioning the poet’s work in relation to Fredric Jameson’s calls for “an ‘as yet unimaginable new mode of representing [...] the world space of multinational capital’ from which we have as yet no distance” (113). Blasing

reads the search for distanced perspective in “The Instruction Manual” as part of Ashbery’s concern with finding room for “the subject.” Ashbery’s project is to offer poetic space as an alternative, deliberately marginalized place of waiting and a “kind of preserve where the subject [...] may be kept alive” (152).

¹⁷ Jeffrey Gray reads the poem as an encounter rendered impossible by the conventions of tourism and touristic language: in the poem, “the earliest instance in which Ashbery introduces the idea of an unrecoverable presence (the ‘real’ Guadalajara), we see, through a hackneyed touristic narrative, that the staged and the unstaged are indistinguishable. Here, too, prefiguring the poetry to come, the fantasy of travel is seen as a flight from duty” (113). Jean Franco, on the other hand, points out that the register of caricature and cartoon was in fact deployed by Disney and other popular commercial interests during the Cold War era to represent an American-friendly Latin America—“a Latin America,” she writes, “that people could live with, a place of picturesque customs that could be captured on film and artisan products that could be taken home and put on display. Disney saw Latin America as a potentially unspoiled reserve for tourism” (26). Given Ashbery’s lifelong propensity for popular movies and television, especially cartoons, it is not at all surprising that he draws on this register.

¹⁸ I am grateful to several classes of students at the University of Virginia, who have all pointed out this element in the poem.

¹⁹ Mike Davis describes this phenomenon in *Planet of Slums* (55). See Diane Davis for detailed investigations of these developments. Also see Michael Dowdy’s chapter “Godzilla in Mexico City,” which examines literature dealing with the effects in that city of “the transition from industrial models of urban development to the production of urban space through heritage tourism, telecommunications, financial services, and service, cultural, and entertainment industries” (188). Franco, similarly, notes the vast transformations that occurred in Mexico in the 1950s and following: “I left Mexico City in 1957 and returned in 1967 to a place that I hardly recognized,” she writes, noting the rapidity of the change from an unpolluted and vibrant cultural center to a modernized city of freeways and industry (186).

²⁰ Virno explains this difference: “there is not a clean, well-defined threshold separating labor time from non-labor time [...] the intellect remains outside of production; only when the work has been finished does the Fordist worker read the newspaper, go to the local party headquarters, think, have conversations. In post-Fordism, however, since the life of the mind is included fully within the space-time of production, an essential homogeneity prevails” (103). For Virno, the “virtuoso” who labors without an end product, “previously a special and problematic case [...] becomes the prototype of all wage labor” (61). The question then becomes how to move “from a servile virtuosity to a ‘republican’ virtuosity?” (69), and the “key-terms” proposed by way of solution are “civil disobedience” and “exit”—both of which might be found in different readings of “The Instruction Manual.”

²¹ In *Unoriginal Genius*, Perloff traces out the lineage of contemporary conceptual writing through separate, if related, lineages of conceptual art, concrete poetry, Oulipo, and “translational poetics.”

²² See also Perloff’s opening and closing remarks in *Unoriginal Genius*. Brian Reed, similarly, links contemporary poetry’s interest in re-appropriated language to

technological and informational saturation, concluding an examination of a wide range of contemporary poets, “As smartphones and tablet PCs acquire more and more functions, and as other unforeseen digital technologies become widely available, people in the developed world are liable to find their lives and livelihoods increasingly enmeshed in cybernetic circuits and globalized information-flows. The distinction between ‘my’ words and ‘someone else’s’ might, as a consequence, gradually stop mattering much at all” (787).

²³ Joshua Clover points out the way conceptual poetry has situated itself as a “cultural synecdoche” for a crisis in contemporary labor: such poetry, he writes, “tracks the hyperproduction of services, immaterial goods, finance” counter-posing against capital’s exploitation of human creative capacities of language and thought a “rejection of art as a form of virtuosity that indexes a necessarily human potentiality” and proposing instead an eventual (problematic) form of “machine virtuosity.”

²⁴ Shirinyan’s note at the beginning of the book underscores this point: “All the misspellings, irregular capitalization, and punctuation inconsistencies are as I found them. As I read through the rough collected material, I occasionally deleted results that did not fit whatever idea I had about the piece. The line breaks are mostly rhythmic and Rob Fitterman’s suggestions toward this end were very helpful.”

²⁵ It is worth noting that Shirinyan was born in “what was then the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia,” according to his publisher’s website.

²⁶ Eric Rettberg uses travel, rather than work, to show how—far from presenting a conceptually-motivated linguistic sludge—the book is about “what it means to have an identity, and to relate to other people, in a transnational, increasingly digital world” (59).

²⁷ Gray identifies as salutary the often negative global experiences associated with travel, embracing travel’s effects of dislocation and disorientation (although at considerable expense): “the centrifugal, often debilitating movement of travel,” he writes, “may effect a subjective and textual liberation. My concern is not only with the psychological shocks and changes to identity, nor even with the ‘real world’ shocks of culture and geography during this period, but particularly with travel as a mode of understanding and composition, a path of *poiesis*” (17).

Songs and Sonnets:
Alice Notley, Catherine Wagner, Sandra Simonds, and Poetry's Disobedient Work

Grandfather
advised me
Learn a trade

I learned
to sit at desk
and condense

No layoffs
from this
condensery (Lorine Niedecker, "Poet's Work")

working with me to pick apart
working with me to re-make
this trailing knitted thing, this cloth of darkness
this women's garment, trying to save the skein
(Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken")

The labor shifts and transformations discussed in the previous chapter take place primarily in the public sphere, outside the home. While this side of work has frequently been seen by economic theorists as the whole picture, my aim in the chapter that follows—as throughout this project—is a more attentive and more complete version of “work.” Encompassing more than waged, market-driven, or “productive” work, this view includes not only poetic labor but also, here, the complicated nexus of activities referred to as reproductive or domestic labor: childbearing, housework, affective labor, and care work. Like poetic labor, reproductive labor is often glossed over as “not-work.” The central figures of this chapter—the mid-century and contemporary American poets Alice Notley, Catherine Wagner, and Sandra Simonds—share a joint project of making reproductive labor visible, and struggling against the paradigms in place for both thinking and doing it. For Ashbery and Shirinyan, figures of *ekphrasis* and *deixis* served self-

referentially to point towards specifically poetic capacity. For the three poets gathered here, this capacity appears through the mode of the song (lullaby, ballad) and the form of the sonnet. This form and this mode, as we will see, are bound up with but also able to transform our understanding of gendered functions, holding various types of work in tension in a way that brings structuring paradigms—but also new alternatives—into view.

Although Notley's career begins several decades before those of the latter two poets, in some sense enabling or paving the way for the work that follows, this chapter is not so much the story of influence as it is of three parallel versions of this struggle. While each of these three poets undertakes a unique project, within her own matrix of poetic, personal, economic, and social concerns, all three write about a trifecta of economic (often academic), reproductive (often biological) and social (affective and care-based) labor in different proportions and with different social and historical inflections. Notley and Wagner use the figure of "song" to think or perform poetry's role in and against these forces, while Simonds turns to the sonnet as an emblem of poetic labor. For all three, the question of work is a complicated and multi-faceted one, opening onto questions not only of historical conditions and economic structures, but of bodies, subjectivities, affections, emotions, and the possibility of poetic expression in the first place. All partake in what has been a centuries-long battle to *make visible* types of labor that are not so much forgotten as they are deliberately obscured, for the comfort and profit of others. This battle continues on many different labor terrains—as Saskia Sassen, Jacques Rancière, and others remind us—and is a central theme throughout my project.

In this chapter, I argue that part of resistance entails this making-visible. Additionally, part involves the use or *détournement* of form. Key here are the special

qualities of both song and sonnet: namely, the lullaby's unique position as part of the actual work of putting a child to sleep, the folksong's imagination of an alternative, collective subjectivity, and the sonnet's tradition as crucible for the individual subject. Part, furthermore, involves the capacity of poetry to point outwards from itself, directing our attention to types of domestic or reproductive labor performed, and sometimes ignored, in other places, on a global scale. The poets examined in this chapter are white, US women, and in it the notion of the global appears differently: while these poets participate in labor that also happens elsewhere, and while their work is dialectically shaped by that labor, these poets' attention is generally—for obvious reasons—directed closer to home (in a literal and figurative sense). I return to the question of domestic labor to think further through its global nature—to explore global connections as a *problem*, where here they are seen primarily as a possibility—in the coda of this dissertation, which also carries these concerns, here examined primarily in the present and recent past, into the future.

And part of poetry's work, finally, involves the uneasy juxtaposition, conjunction, or even conflation of modes of labor not “supposed” to be compatible. But this is not to say that poetry renders different forms of work indistinct. Instead, as different modes of both poetry and work slide in and out of the poems, different configurations of gendered reproductive and poetic labor allow us to differentiate between types of labor, and to keep in mind multiple—sometimes conflicting—ways of viewing them. If Ashbery and Shirinyan's poetry takes its kaleidoscopic aspect from the juxtaposition of different historical modes of work, the poems examined here are dizzyingly kaleidoscopic in their ability to contain what I am calling different adjacencies of work, teasing out tensions

and differences between them. Sometimes Notley, for example, juxtaposes a certain mode of “song” with the actual biological work of pregnancy in a way that makes both activities seem mystical and transcendent and allows for a critique of that mysticism; at other moments, she participates in the project of making ordinary daily reproductive labor visible through a different poetic mode. Wagner and Simonds, similarly, juggle forms of work and modes of poetic work in a way that brings to light similarities and differences between these, and allows for both valorization and critique.

Thus in the work of these three poets, we find a way of representing labor that is flexible, dynamic, and in motion; it allows for multiple valences for the same activity, for work that is at once resisted and performed. These tensions, differences, and valences point towards a central preoccupation of this project: the *value* of domestic and reproductive work, as well as the work of poetry. But when we say “value”: valuable for whom, and in what way? In a similar way that literary value is complexly related to economic value, gendered reproductive labor exists heteronomously, both controlled and used by capital yet still, at moments, valuable in other ways beyond it. It is useful here to think with what Susan Fraiman has called “a feminist ambivalence toward domesticity” (18): part of the problem with writing about gendered reproductive labor is that attempts to champion it for the people—mostly women—who perform it risk naturalizing or essentializing it, or obfuscating its difficult material character. But overemphasizing this difficulty also leads to views of it as undesirable, demeaning, or worthless—in the words of Angela Davis, “invisible, repetitive, exhausting, unproductive, uncreative” (“Obsolescence,” 222). Perhaps the upshot, supplely modeled here in a variety of poetic ways, is that for poetic work as well as for gendered reproductive work, the same activity

can mean different things for different people, or different things under different circumstances, or just many different things at once.

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Both outside and inside the context of literary criticism, the discourse surrounding domestic and reproductive labor is ample, and sometimes frustrating. From a historical perspective, beyond the domain of poetics exclusively, this work is often associated with battles of yesterday's feminists: problems raised and exhausted by the 1960s and 70s "wages for housework" movement, an "internal squabble about Marxist terminology," an internecine quarrel of a few decades ago.¹ Issues of reproductive labor have been a more or less shadowy part of Marxist economic theories at various moments, with Engels's 1884 tract *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* as a fundamental text. Here Engels claims that "the determining factor in history is "the production and reproduction of immediate life." This factor, in turn, has a "twofold character." "On the one side," Engels writes, is "the production of the means of existence" (food, clothing, tools, etc.) and on the other, "the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species" (35 – 36). But while the material necessity of such work seems beyond contestation, it has often been "relegated to the margins" (Barker, 574) of economic thinking. As Drucilla K. Barker summarizes: "ostensibly gender neutral, malestream economic subjects are abstract, disembodied consumers or producers." Because of this gendered and racialized bias, she writes, "work that involves caring for others is particularly problematic because its affective dimension means that it does not fit neatly into the category of work, and dominant gender ideology constructs it as a 'labor of love'" (574). Thus much of the thinking done by wages for housework activists

and thinkers such as Silvia Federici, Selma James, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa—while it did concern issues of technical terminology and status vis-à-vis Marxist “productive” labor—was undertaken with the aim simply of making such labor visible. The call for a wage, as Federici has written, is intended less as a monetary demand than as a way to reveal the impossibility of actually paying this wage in a system built around exploited and unpaid labor.²

Like Marxism itself, however, many Marxist-Feminisms have rightly been criticized for their white bourgeois stance, which centers discourse and action around the figure of the (American or European, white) housewife. But a full study of reproductive labor both past and present needs to include factors not only of class and gender but also of geography, nationality, ethnicity, and race. The structuring forces of global capital mean the exploitation of workers and workers of color, both waged and unwaged, in and outside the home: as Mike Davis damningly points out, research suggests that the third-world structural adjustment programs of recent decades “cynically exploit the belief that women’s labor power is almost infinitely elastic in the face of household survival needs.” He continues: “This is the guilty secret variable in most neoclassical equations of economic adjustment: poor women and children are expected to lift the weight of Third World debt upon their shoulders” (158).³ Many theorists of labor today also point out, relatedly, the “feminization” of labor, a term which can refer both to increasing participation of women in sectors not traditionally female and to the restructuring of other jobs and workplaces to more resemble traditionally “feminine” sorts of work: flexible, undervalued, affect-based. I return to the complex entanglement of “gender” and “labor” as in some cases mutually constitutive, as well as the tricky question of the valorization

of reproductive work (which has often happened differently along racialized lines) in my coda.

In any case, from the “migrant domestic workers whose livelihoods depend on the trust and goodwill of their employers” as well as the “proper performance of affect, respectability, and domesticity” (Barker, 582) to workers in the global garment industry to the surrogate mothers to whom I turn later in this chapter, thinking of any labor in the global political economy—but especially gendered domestic and reproductive labor—means thinking of the workers who are rendered most precarious and vulnerable in it. Poetry, I hope to show, becomes a way of thinking these problems in newly reinvigorated “intersectional” terms, working and thinking along axes of race, class, and nationality, as well as gender. Again, consideration of these workers does not mean only recognizing the work they do; it also means recognizing the value of the resistance they might be able to offer. “Reproductive labor,” writes Dalla Costa, “must be seen as something more than a source of capitalist value. For in its antagonism to the process of accumulation, it is now a privileged terrain for those movements that have started exploring new paths for a different development, everywhere on the planet” (9). If poetic work has seemed to share reproductive work’s invisibility, they both need now both to be taken as sites of struggle.

Questions of recognition, representation, inclusion, and expressive possibility are also at the heart of poetic discourse around reproduction and textual production. Notley, Wagner, and Simonds stand as part of a long history of women’s writing about their work. A fuller picture of “women’s work” and poetry would want to attend to productions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or earlier (Anne Bradstreet, Anne Letitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Christina Rossetti, among others)⁴; an even fuller one,

to look outside the academic canon and the Western tradition and to include folk and oral genres.⁵ But even into the twentieth century, writing about gendered reproductive labor—motherhood, especially—has seemed taboo for American female poets, especially for those writing in more experimental modes. As Notley herself writes in 1998, looking back on her earlier work in the 70s and 80s, “it seemed one had to disobey the past and the practices of literary males in order to talk about what was going on most literally around one, the pregnant body, and babies for example. There were no babies in poetry then. How could that have been?” (“Poetics”). Tillie Olsen, whose work has itself been too often overlooked, puts down some of the reasons for “silences” of women’s published voices, as well as the voices of people of color, pointing out that these silences stem from pressures of time and labor, not from lack of education or will to write, and not (exclusively) from a sexist or racist publishing industry or readership. For women who are mothers, she writes, “the circumstances for sustained creation have been almost impossible [... since] more than in any other human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible” (18).

Olsen’s remarks are at the heart of the matter, but Notley is nevertheless slightly deceptive: by the 1970s there were, in fact, babies in American poetry, a few of them, and their increasing presence represents one of the major developments in poetry across the century. A touchstone early example, Mina Loy draws on Modernist energies—as well as an emerging feminist and suffragette movement—to write her 1914 poem about childbirth, “Parturition,” which focuses on the physical state of birth-giving (“Mother I am / Identical / With infinite Maternity [...] The was—is—ever—shall—be / Of Cosmic reproductivity”). (Admittedly, the presence of an actual baby is hard to detect in this

poem, and as a mother Loy is perhaps best known for having left her two children with a nurse in Italy and run off to America.) Later, the rise of the American confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s will bring all sorts of formerly forbidden material into poems, including the bodily experience of motherhood. The speaker in Sylvia Plath's "Lesbos" (1965), for example, cannot imagine a connection with another mother in the overwhelming presence of the raw materials of motherhood, the "stink and fat of baby crap," these materials that both stall and make up the poem itself. Later—and a key, if quiet, figure behind this project—is Adrienne Rich, whose shift from poems that are in W. H. Auden's phrase "neatly and modestly dressed" (278) and indebted to a heritage of classical music and great books to poems that radically seek to explore and explode paradigms for gender and motherhood occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s (*Leaflets* in 1969, *The Will to Change*, 1971, *Diving into the Wreck*, 1973), alongside and under the influence of feminist and women's liberation movements of that era.⁶

Yet it is telling that these three (and other) examples of poetic rupture—motherhood into verse—are more often examined in light of their poetic genealogies than with respect to the historical moments and movements of feminist awakening and activism in which they occurred: Loy in contested relation to Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, Plath alongside Robert Lowell and John Berryman, Rich working with and against Wallace Stevens and Auden, etc. Especially in the cases of Loy and Rich, who were both connected to strains of Marxist or materialist feminism in their respective milieus, the part of poetic innovation that has to do with the recognition and representation of gendered reproductive labor needs to be thought in broader terms than the inclusion of messy subject matter.⁷ Although certainly precursors for writing about "taboo" topics are

crucial for generations of poets who follow, the figure of a “disobedient” poetics, to use Notley’s phrase, points towards more than just the audacity to write about subjects largely absent from the history of poetic representation. (“Disobedience” itself, as my coda will address, tends to be a two-edged sword, increasingly valuable for and not against contemporary economic forces.) The particular contribution of the poets discussed here, including Notley, is that their disobedience represents and makes visible a politicized understanding of certain forces of labor and gender. It lays bare not only the work itself, but also the factors, poetic and otherwise, that keep this work out of sight, in place, and separate from other sorts of labor—and that keep poetic work out of the equation entirely.

Finally, it is worth noting that for this version of reproductive and domestic labor, motherhood is not necessarily the crux of the matter, although it is often still central, especially for Notley. Like Rich, Lorine Niedecker also stands at the root of this project and deserves a mention here. Bypassing issues of motherhood *per se*, Niedecker’s work represents the brave and unruly knotting-together of many types of work that I argue is a unique capacity of poetic form. From poems about marginalized care work (Niedecker’s work as a hospital janitor) to depictions of the gendered and disappearing world of factory work, and through poems that are sometimes handwritten and hand-sewn, Niedecker both reminds us of and complicates notions of “feminine” production. In contrast to a view of poetry’s labor that would naturalize that work—“the ways in which women [mothers who are also poets] in the twenty-first century live with expanded possibilities while observing numerous unavoidable constraints,” as one recent anthology has it (*Grand Permission*, xxv)⁸—the poets represented here seek exactly to reveal and

then to explode these “unavoidable” constraints, expressing and continuing a “struggle against unsustainable contradiction” (Dalla Costa, 7).

*

A poet and the mother of two sons, Alice Notley serves as a first example of some counter-configurations of poetry and work. Across her varied career, which began in the 1970s and continues today, Notley has insisted on two things. First, she holds herself stubbornly apart from any sort of “real” work, including the teaching jobs occupied by most poets of her age and status. Tongue-in-cheek, she paints herself as the frivolous housewife scribbling poems while her husband, poet Ted Berrigan, is “out teaching & fulfilling professional engagements & making the money that doesn’t go far” (82).⁹ Second, however, Notley insists that poetry *is* a form of work. “You are a cultural worker and you are working very hard,” she says, referring to poets, herself included. “And your work isn’t measured in money, that’s all, because no one will give you any. You have to keep telling yourself that you’re right and you’re probably working harder than everyone else. Because if you’re a poet, then you never stop working” (Rogers interview). Notley’s version of the poet is a worker, but—to return to Notley’s language for it—a disobedient one.¹⁰

Yet even as Notley insists on this basic opposition between poetry writing and monetized work, or commodity production, her poems in fact give out onto a different view of *poiesis* and economic participation. For it is not strictly true that Notley has never worked except as a poet. While Notley is perhaps best known for her later work in a narrative-epic mode (the visionary voyages and voices of collections such as *Descent of Alette*, 1996, or *Culture of One*, 2011, for example), her poetry from the late 1970s and early 1980s bears much more resemblance to the quotidian chattiness of the New York

School, of which she is often seen to be a part. Scattered with references to friends and parties and readings, these early poems provide snapshots of the work of raising a family on the lower East Side. In collections such as *Waltzing Matilda* (1981) and *Songs for the Unborn Second Baby* (1979), Notley details domestic demands: housekeeping, feeding a family, caring for sick children, and the physical work of reproduction in the first place.¹¹ In and through these two volumes of poetry, we find a more complex picture of the relationships between types of labor: between alienated labor under capital, the day-to-day duties of motherhood (what Notley terms “dailiness”), the physical labor of childbearing, and the cultural and creative labor of making poems. By aligning the latter two—childbearing and poem-making—Notley offers a new way of thinking both.

Notley’s book *Songs for the Unborn Second Baby* was written from February to June of 1974, when Notley and Berrigan were living in England, and when Notley was pregnant with her second son. While its five sections might be seen each neatly to represent a month of pregnancy during the span of its composition, the book as a whole is difficult, messy, and unfocused. Its work involves close attention to all levels of language, from the metaphorical to the material. In the sections that follow I dwell on a few passages from the text, the details from which help illuminate the whole. The first song begins:

Pregnant again involucre
(sounds gorgeous)
 Pregnant
 not the repast of news or psychological
though arithmetical
 (stars, filth)
 I ingeminate

melon strolling on two tendrils,” etc.¹² Notley is markedly *not* interested in fanciful metaphors like these; although the word “cavernous” is itself a metaphor, her aim is closer to mimetic accuracy than imaginative figuration.

But second: Notley’s negative relationship to metaphor here also engages prior uses of pregnancy *as* metaphor, in particular calling our attention to the gendered dynamics of the metaphor of pregnancy for poetic creation. Representing inspiration and creativity as gestation and birth seems fairly well coextensive with male writing about poetics in the Western tradition, with numerous examples of poets “great with child to speak” (Sidney) including Plato, Homer, Horace, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Pope, among others.¹³ More specifically, in this poem Notley is taking up the claims for biological reproduction—for the force and power of new growth—made by William Carlos Williams, whose work and misogyny she grapples with in another work of this period, *Dr. Williams’ Heiresses*. “But I wrote my poem & I used for its form,” she writes to Williams, “your Paterson & an O’Hara ode & those cantos [...] & it is held together by flowers, as ‘Asphodel’ is—we had a bewilderingly luxuriant garden there [in England]— & by the presence of the opposite sex ‘you’ & by the will to write poetry” (9). Notley’s intervention is clear: contrary to most past examples, in Notley’s work vital force is literal and female, not male and metaphorical. Song is no longer the result of a period of “gestation,” nor is the poet “pregnant with song”; instead, throughout the poem Notley signals that her song is produced to accompany an actual pregnancy. The work of poetic production and the work of gestation, germination, and physical reproduction are thus separated and gendered, although simultaneous and related.¹⁴

The question of the relationship between *poiesis* and gestation is threaded throughout the entire sequence, starting again from its first line: “Pregnant again involucre / sounds gorgeous.” Involucre, which does sound gorgeous, is the botanical term for the thin covering of the base of a flower. It is also a more general term for something that envelops or enwraps, such as a pregnant body. Breaking the line over this word, Notley draws attention not only to the possible physical similarity between flowers and a pregnancy—the things that hold the poem together—but also to the language of materials *and* to the material of language, no accidental chiasmus. A little later in the poem another Latinate verb appears, “ingeminate.” This word only deceptively resembles “inseminate” or “germinate,” with the implication that Notley refuses the metaphor of sexual reproduction that could refer to poetry (inseminate), just as she refuses the metaphor of biological reproduction (germinate) that could refer to poetry or to pregnancy. Instead, the word refers to the literal work either of language or of pregnancy, holding them together in non-metaphorical simultaneity. First, in an arcane usage of “ingeminate” as an adjective to mean “doubled,” Notley might refer to the “flat state” of pregnancy: I, except two of me. But “ingeminate” as an adjective might also characterize the mode of this poem: complicated etymologies mean meanings double and repeat, ambiguously. And finally, as a verb the phrase might also mean “I reiterate”: Notley, again, insists that creation is no metaphor. Instead, the speaker dreams punningly in the next few stanzas of an actual, literal engagement with the material of language, a composition-as compost or a compost-as composition. The “dream” of this poem throughout is the close adjacency of reproductive and linguistic process that the word “ingeminate” itself makes, in the way it holds tightly together multiple meanings.

This simultaneity of material making, in turn, provides the clue to the *Songs*' movement across the volume. Although the poem strongly resists classificatory efforts, it is nevertheless possible to delineate several of its main modes: besides the inset lyric (occasionally titled), like the dream of the composting composition, we also find the prosy outburst that is often a record of daily experience, "about" pregnancy—

It was one month behind this one in schedule process that is
As I was five months pregnant that April so I am six
Months pregnant this April and this pregnancy seasonally
Almost imitates the last, except where I was serene thoughtless
In the sweet

Interruption

You just

Called me up and I became myself! How mysterious! for I was
Depressed again not my real self you see watch TV
With read endless books...

—as well as the Williams-esque description of or meditation on flowers, leaves, and stars. For example:

light temptation, small light vessels
for rapid moth
to other planet or bright star
But we stay
With our striped petals [...]

However, outside of these three modes lie the perplexing lines that end the first selection given, from "reflex you refractor" down to "emeralds sacral putrid but," whose meaning and mechanisms are less apparent.

A key moment of this sort of poetic production occurs later in the poem, in the fourth section, which starts in the "daily diary" register but quickly dives down into something much different:

April 24

Starting the 7th month

(big freakout yesterday)

Black Sea arm
 Natural shade spiteful
 Sturdy fabric defect gem
 Gem defect sturdy fabric?

Blackthorn
 Lighthouse
 You can't see a PATTERN developing

A propensity for seeming to fall apart

In order deliciously to pull back together

“They can be quite
 entertaining in the dark”

“Freakout” might in fact not be the wrong word for passages like these: dissociative, spread across the page, full of paradoxes, non-sequiturs, and concrete nouns that seem anything but concrete. There is, however, no discernible subject here, or no place to anchor the emotion of the freakout. Instead, the most substantial “matter” of this passage involves language: the material of language, as well as the language of materials, are put into play. “A propensity of seeming to fall apart / in order deliciously to pull back together” self-referentially describes the motion of the words. From the first excerpt, then, “reflex you refractor” could also be “reflex you refract or”: a noun becomes a verb, and a new “you” as a subject of address emerges. Or from the second: if at first “Blackthorn” and “Lighthouse” read like proper names, the suggestion of “pattern” makes us go back to the pair again. “Black” and “light” stand in opposition, so perhaps “thorn” and “horse” are supposed to be acting similarly, related through the syllable “hor” in both of them. Similarly, the layout of the phrases calls attention to the alignment down the page of “L” and “T”: a complicated pattern of words, meanings, sounds, and even individual letters.

Above all, these words, sounds, and things remain in motion: the pattern is “developing” but never quite emerges, and the activity of pulling apart and coming back together remains, at the most basic level of language, the work of the poem. While the phrases “emeralds sacral putrid” and “sturdy fabric defect gem” might seem to describe the material aspect of pregnancy, in fact the poem is more dynamic than descriptive: the motion of materials from “sturdy fabric defect gem” to “defect gem sturdy fabric” is meant to stand beside, to accompany, the physical work of the pregnancy itself. The poem is an assemblage of moving parts or different forms of motion and textual production, rather than a stable, stationary, produced object.

This processual aspect seems at first to stand in strange relation to the volume’s title, *Songs for the Unborn Second Baby*: what kind of ungainly lullaby or birthday gift would these songs be? That this “song” is a process is key to understanding Notley’s particular re-configuration of poetic work. Toward the end of the poem, as the baby’s arrival, or materialization, approaches, the question of its name comes up: “How you gonna call your pretty / little baby? call it / I love the ground whereon he stands,” Notley writes. “I love the ground whereon he stands” is a line from the folksong “Black is the Color of my True Love’s Hair”—the baby’s name, in other words, is *song*, or the substance and activity of this verse. A little later, Notley repeats: “How you gonna call your / pretty little / riddle? ridiculous and full / of entertainment, quaver and pavement.” The unborn baby and the song partake of the same moving play of language. We might think of the title, “songs for,” as the “for” of “sketches for” or “drafts for” a painting or other work of art: the preliminary materials gathered together, part of the process of the creation of. Again, the poem evokes the dream of simultaneous work: pregnancy and

poetry stand side-by-side, linked not as product grounded in or producing a subject but as material process, dynamic and difficult.

There is also a way, however, to read these poems as having more to do with the lullaby than their moments of chaos and discord would suggest. Throughout this project, and especially in this chapter, I have been tracking the closeness of poetic work and other types of labor—poetic work that occurs in some relationship (other than or at least in addition to the thematic) to another activity. The lullaby, though, is a special case. Although the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* entry for “lullaby” calls it “a type of lyric in which the poet takes on the role of a singer caressing, persuading, and commanding an addressee into stillness and sleep” (825), the lullaby is more simply and intuitively defined as a song sung by someone putting a child to sleep. In other words, a lullaby’s poetic work exactly coincides with a form of labor. But this definition of “lullaby” as a poem that “imitates a spontaneous song performed by a caregiver, most often by a woman, for a young child”: what is it, if not another way of saying “a lullaby imitates a ‘lullaby’”—an unsubtle way of differentiating between a “real poet” who is probably male, and a “caregiver” who is probably not, or in any case is ultimately most interested in the song’s ability to put the child to sleep? This prioritizing of literary work at the expense of actual labor ignores the fact that the lullaby’s formal features (the repetition of “the soothing syllables *lullay* and *bas*,” or its regular cadences and rhymes) come out of this work. More distressingly, it would seem to draw a firm line between these kinds of labor. And even more distressingly, it would seem to appropriate the forms generated out of the specific skills and knowledge of care-giving work for their literary value, simultaneously dismissing those who perform that work.¹⁵

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici describes the historical processes by which, starting in the late Middle Ages and continuing today (see Mike Davis's remarks, above), women's bodies—"maternity, childbirth, sexuality"—"have been appropriated by the state and men and forced to function as a means for the reproduction and accumulation of labor" (16). These processes, which include witch hunts, enclosure movements that worked against communities of women, forced conversion to Christianity, the prosecution of prostitutes, and, more recently, the privatization and patenting of traditional medicinal practices, often aim specifically to devalue women's knowledge (skills such as midwifery and knowledge of forms of birth control) in order to bring them under capitalist control. We can assume that songs—lullabies, working songs—are part of this knowledge. With this argument in mind, we can see how the spiky difficulty of these *Songs* is not at all incompatible with the lullaby but, rather, resists any codification of the lullaby as a recognizable and possibly masculine literary device, refusing to be a source of value for any economy beyond its immediate performance. Notley's work points back towards what Federici paints, even at the risk of essentializing, as a particular and inaccessible women's knowledge, accumulated and powerful, giving us a version of that knowledge that resists easy reading or recognition.

Yet the "outside" status of this work is crucially neither stable nor permanent: in other words, it is important to emphasize that Notley is *not* championing poetry or pregnancy as given or universal activities that are in any way removed or safe from actual economic forces. In framing both poetic and biological production as work, Notley is also working against the sentimentalizing and essentializing views of pregnancy that have been and continue to be used to mask the co-option and exploitation of women's labor

and bodies. The problem is not only that these views misrepresent pregnancy as not-work for some. They also pave the way for the exploitation of different bodies whose work has not and will not be sentimentalized or essentialized at all. A recent article in the journal *Globalization and Health* on assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) that rely increasingly on women in India and the developing world points out that if housework is by now (sometimes) recognized as labor, biological work may not be. In this case, “the images, language, and slogans used to promote ARTs serve to reinforce the ‘tragedy’ of childlessness and the sentimentality of childbearing, particularly motherhood, while deliberately ignoring, omitting, or playing down the concerns and complications that come with medical intervention” (4), as well as the way in which the physical reproductive labor of childbearing is subject to the global flows and inequalities that characterize the “modern routes of capital” (3).¹⁶ The article’s authors cite the promotional material used to attract potential clients to one such clinic, which reads: “The moment a child is born, the mother is also born. She never existed before” (5). Without criticizing the existence of these reproductive technologies or the women who choose them for any reason, it is nevertheless crucial to recognize what this rhetoric effectively obscures: a real woman’s body “somewhere else.”

This language is recent, but the problem of the deliberate obfuscation of women’s reproductive labor—especially the labor of women of color—is longstanding. As Angela Davis underscores a 1985 piece (which opens with an excerpt from June Jordan’s “Poem about my Rights”): “Reproductive rights [...] entail more than access to abortions and safe birth-control methods [...] they will require nonrepressive laws governing new reproductive technologies involving donor insemination, in vitro fertilization, and

surrogate motherhood” (38). Certain versions of feminism have rallied around the right not to bear a child, but for others, now as at different historical moments and in the US as elsewhere, the right *to* bear a child at will has not been evident, as Dorothy Roberts reminds us.¹⁷ What we see repeatedly is that this fissure in reproductive labor—motherhood versus biological labor—is used against women unequally: the forces of power and capital that uncouple these concepts, depriving women in certain places or of certain races *de facto* of the ability to “be mothers,” profit from the labor of their bodies or the prevention and control of that labor. In other words, it is all the more important that we recognize the real, material work that is a part of biological reproduction in the face of the forces, rhetorical and otherwise, that effectively obscure them. In *Songs for the Second Baby*, poetry becomes the dynamic and material process of song, and provides a potent counter to them.

Finally, this nexus of biological reproduction / obscurity / song is not the only strand of thinking about domestic and reproductive work in Notley’s poetry, which also gives a nuanced picture of more ordinary care-giving and housework. Written in 1980, the poem “Waltzing Matilda” chronicles a different side of motherhood than the “literal” pregnancy evoked in *Songs*, beginning still in language of flowers, but in a transformed register: “I am an exhausted not-that-chrysanthemum Oh brother / Nothing’s funny nothing’s pretty.” The poem ends by reproducing an exchange between mother and son: “Mom why don’t / people read in the dark? They can’t see the words in the /dark. I can. Please go to sleep now. Please, honey” (78). In this not-lullaby, poetry does not “perform” work (the work of putting the child to sleep, or the work of making the child) as it does in *Songs*. Instead, these lines are about the work of motherhood but at a

documentary remove, as if recording a conversation. The rest of the poem consists of sections written in this diary mode, as well as those that take the form of an exchange between Notley as a weary wife and mother called “Anonymous” and her mysterious “Advisor.” The visionary activity of poetry—the *Songs* version—seems displaced to the domain of this “advisor,” who offers as her final advice in the poem:

So what if you're obsessive? So what? The wind is beating at the windows & it's cold & trying to tell the truth is boring when there are only two possible truths to tell: A) that your life is subject to the manipulations of the rich & powerful & acquisitive [...] & b) that you are this minute catching yourself at aging, loving, baby-sitting, being vain, washing the dishes, being complex, etc. Now I suppose you're asking why B) is boring. It isn't except when you can't tell it because there is too much of A) going on in your life. So buy yourself a Fischer-Price Activity Center, some glue & scissors etc. & get on with it all. (93)

This ambivalence about the daily physical and emotional duties of being a wife and mother returns us to our opening questions of housework, recognition, compensation, and struggle. If the point of the “wages for housework” movement was, again, not the wage itself but the visibility that a wage would grant, Notley’s work also struggles toward that visibility. “I hate the diapers the dishes / just now those yellow daffodils & you,” Notley writes in *Songs*: rather than sentimentalizing or naturalizing the physical and affective labor of motherhood as “a labor of love,” or creating an impermeable division that would relegate such labor far outside the realm of poetry, Notley’s poetry recognizes and represents the status of housework as work, as involuntary participation in a capitalist economy—“subject to the manipulations of the rich & powerful & acquisitive.”¹⁸

Thus Notley’s reconfiguration of poetic and domestic labor holds in tension several kinds of this labor, insisting that certain forms of work be recognized as work, while holding others stubbornly outside, as not-work. Writing this time in 2011, Federici

(like Dalla Costa) acknowledges the “double character of reproductive work as work that reproduces us and ‘valorizes’ us not only in view of our integration in the labor market but also against it” (“Preface,” 2)—that is, work that is capable of transforming how we see work. I will return again to this work’s transformative potential. For now: in separating “reproductive work” into its component parts, recorded dailiness alongside the “mysterious” essentialized physical labor of childbearing itself, Notley’s poetry formalizes one aspect of the double or multiple character of reproductive work. For Notley, as for Federici in her later work, reproductive labor is both subsumed under capital (and needs to be recognized as such) and also remains something else: when poetic production and biological reproduction can be closely aligned, they come into visibility as powerful potential outside spaces.

*

For Notley, song becomes the figure for an activity, poetic making, a type of work that is material but that resists the material forces of labor under capital operating in conjunction with it, aligning itself instead with another type of material making. In the work of the contemporary poet Catherine Wagner, song also provides a focal point for an exploration of the place and power of poetic production. For Wagner, however, song is more important as one mode of production among other modes than as a productive activity on its own. Her poems, like Notley’s, move in and out of this mode—but it is the move *into* song that is most important in Wagner’s work. The “break” of the expression “to break into song” is a literal one: a break out of a daily existence that includes several kinds of work, all of them problematic, and into new activity and new ways of finding and making meaning and subjective experience. The problems Wagner writes through—

how to carry out or move past a relationship, how to think about pleasure and desire, how to bear one's place in an unsustainable and destructive economic system—are not exclusively about labor, but her solution is a particular mode of *poiesis*: song. Using rhythms of the ditty and the ballad, riffing on their repetitions and nonsense words, and evoking their tradition of anonymous authorship and shared community, Wagner posits this mode as an alternative way of proceeding, a place into which the poem can break—although, again, not permanently—as it explores the failures and resists the forces of contemporary life under capital.

This question of exploration and resistance—the location of the non-song mode—is important. If Notley writes strongly against the deadening “dailiness” of reproductive labor, Wagner writes firmly and committedly from within it. Across her four books—*Miss America* (2001), *Macular Hole* (2004), *My New Job* (2009), *Nervous Device* (2012)—as well as in her prose, she is preoccupied with the various types of work she performs and with her own enmeshment—as writer, mother, homeowner, woman, or simply human being—in an economic system. *Macular Hole* takes up various aspects of the economics of everyday life: gendered domestic and reproductive labor (“Working for another until one is more than exhausted / is not the same as having perfect love for him,” 30), home ownership, debt repayment. *My New Job*, as its title indicates, is similarly structured around questions of exchange and labor: its first section is entirely constructed of poems written in between sets of physical therapy exercises, conditioned by kinetic, quantified, repetitive and compulsory work, while its second explores the economics and power dynamics of sex, foreshadowing the title of a poem in the following collection:

“Regarding the Use-Value and Exchange-Value of Orgasms, With a List of Orgasm Analogues” (43).

In addition to reproductive labor, care work, physical motion, housekeeping in several senses, and sex, by Wagner’s most recent collection even poetry writing—especially poetry writing—is inseparable from economically conditioned labor. “Funny to be moved by exigencies of market to write poems,” Wagner writes in an address to her editor Garrett Caples, “to deadline, out of time ‘must write poems to fill the huge demand for them’” (1). Yet if Wagner, like Notley, is somewhat wry about the “huge demand” for poetry, unlike Notley she positions poetic production as part of a real-world economics. This work, more specifically, is shaped by her participation in the contemporary system of academic labor (Wagner is professor of English at Miami University in Ohio), a problem Sandra Simonds will also take up. In a 2012 essay on adjunct labor, Wagner sets up poetic production, parenting, and academic work as competing variables:

My job and son keep me busy and I have little time for activism or writing the poems that keep me sort of sane and which I must write to keep my strange job and get “merit points” toward raises. If my salary went down and my teaching load went up I would enjoy my son for even shorter portions of the evening and I would write and think less.

That poetry participates in economic system of contemporary capitalism is one problem¹⁹; that it is a “merit point” for promotion in an exploitative system is another.²⁰

This is where Wagner begins, but not where her poetry inevitably ends. Speaking generally, much of Wagner’s writing is introspective, confessional, brash, and painstakingly self-aware as it probes the literal “investments” of the speaker along these

various vectors. The poem “My New Job,” at the end of that book, serves as an example of this sort of poetic work at its most intense:

I am Invested in
 by a Huge Fund
 Heavy highquality
 furniture
 Sense of heavy
 Addiction glossy pleasance

I was lying Down on a yoga mat
 My bones
 basketing air Barely draped in
 skin
 the basket Effulged by local
 Air Highquality scented
 humid air
 to support My orchid Skin (107)

In this poem, the speaker is doing nothing—is immobile, lying down on a yoga mat. In that sense, this poem is an ultimate act of individual introspection, turning in stillness to probe the individual breath, that sacred root of “lyric” poetry most narrowly construed.

Yet Wagner’s turn inward hinges cannily into a turn outward. Even doing “nothing,” the body is still participating in the system and structure of labor relations: even the air is placed (“local”—and here the word, coupled with “highquality” and “yoga

mat” takes on a decidedly bourgeois commercialized valence) and valued (“Highquality”). Later in the poem, Wagner speaks of herself along with “the other breathers / Workers” (108), “hooked” by the light she poetically contemplates (“When I concentrate The light bending / All at once Hooks my outsides”) into the exterior—and economic—world.²¹ On the one hand, this mode might seem to be a model for poetic production: careful, thorough, inclusive, and under no illusions about its ability to escape the world it describes. The limitations of this mode, however, are also clear: the speaker risks a sort of introspective stasis, even paralysis, as every action from breath to childbearing to sex to poetic production is reduced to its economic function. As Wagner writes in a poem from *Macular Hole*, “the whole world’s disappeared / viewed as exchange” (8). Though Wagner can and does sustain this level of inspection across pages, poems, and collections, the key to her poetics lies rather in the break out of it, into the realm of the folksong, children’s song, ditty, or ballad.

The poem “A Well is a Mine: A Good Belongs to Me,” from *Nervous Device*, demonstrates this motion. At first, the poem stages a dialogue, mostly in couplets, about oil dependence and identity politics, slave labor and global relations (“‘I’m afraid to speak for anybody in a different identity category.’ / ‘And how many slaves will you need to maintain your standard of living sans oil?’ [...] ‘Can’t come to your birthday party, it’s my slave week,’” 5) that breaks down into mathematics near the end:

$$\frac{\text{“Freedom”}}{\text{Reality}} = \text{Art.”}$$

$$\text{“Then Art x Reality = Freedom.”}$$

“Freedom
 _____ = Reality?”
 Art

“Where art is politics.” (6)

These calculations are not jokes: it would be possible to spend a long time—as Wagner does—thinking about the relationship between these variables. But by posing them here as mathematical equations, Wagner foregrounds their insolubility, the fact that they don’t have “solutions,” calculable or not—once again, a state of stasis or paralysis.

The poem’s final couplets, though, demonstrate a different type of “solution”:

“Where am I to go? Oh hey, hey, hey, Johnny, where am I to go?

“I am where to go! I am where to go, dear Johnny.”

“What are you to me?” “Hey, hey, hey, Johnny—I’ll tell you when
 you’re mine.”

“Go our separate way together, tell me when you’re mine.” (7)

If calculation, dialogue, and logic reach a standstill before systems that baffle and threaten silence, the result is not—crucially—the end of the poem, or the end of poetic work. Instead, stasis prompts a jump into folksong. While this particular shift doesn’t leave thematic concern behind—the ballad-words stage what they do (lead somewhere away from confusion) and what they don’t (escape problems of relation and possession)—it keeps the poem going past the moment of failure.

On a first level, this juxtaposition of the two modes, which occurs in each of Wagner’s collections, is admittedly an effective way to punctuate what seems like “thinky” poetry. Often and deliberately startling or off-putting, as in the end of “A Well

is Mine,” the switch occurs without transition, and the song-mode requires a very different type of reading than the careful, worried, even academic attention demanded by most of the work. Just as Notley’s “freakouts” are initially baffling, so too is Wagner’s tendency to sing. From *My New Job*, for instance, the poem “Well in your chasm of faith opportunity tree why don’t you crampon up” fiddles with a children’s song, yoking a mystifying title with typography that insists upon sung performance, and pushing already childish lyrics past doggerel into nonsense:

Down by the BAY
 where the muskmelons GROW back
 to my HOME I dare not
 GO For if I do My momma
 might say
 DID YOU EVER SEE AN OSTRICH
 STAPLING WITH A BOSTITCH? (34)

Or even more provocatively: the same collection includes a section called “Hole in the Ground,” which takes its title from a folksong and is mostly about sex. Wagner performs the poem titled “Song” as actual song:

Penis regis, penis immediate, penis
 tremendous, penis offend us; penis
 ferule us, penis protrude from us [...]
 Vagina regina, vagina align us,
 vagina astride us, vagina assault
 us. Vagina inside her (57)²²

The “shock” value of these sections is part of the point: they stage a version of poetic work that sets itself against interpretive close reading or theoretical thinking, as well as providing comic or musical relief, an explosion of pent-up lyrical energy, or a hilarious catharsis. At this level, “disobedience” again becomes important. An academic laborer who has, in her own words, “one of the jobs that poets are supposed to want at our moment in history,” and whose poems are produced in part to secure that job, Wagner is probably not “supposed” to sing about vaginas and penises to an audience expecting an ordinary poetry reading—although “disobedience” and refusal can cut both ways, as we will see, and Wagner’s provocativeness might equally be seen as part of her poetic “brand,” key to the success that keeps her employed.

But “shock” might also not be the right word for these moments of song. In an essay on the website *The Poetic Labor Project*, Wagner wonders about various ways poetry might fit into the current configuration of adjunct labor, walking us through two ways poetry has been seen as “antacid” to the “ill feeling” produced by the current broken system. One of these is a Shelleyan faith in poetry’s transcendence and revelation, while another is poetry’s function as retreat, realm apart from which the situation might be surveyed and reviewed. But “a third antacid ignores questions of efficacy and realpolitik,” she writes. “[W]hen I take it, I am trying to write poetry that remains as unknown to me as possible while I write it. My writing will always reproduce the park-like infested trap, but maybe the reproduction will fit together oddly and something will be different and a corner will emerge that was not there before.” These qualities of strangeness, incomprehensibility, and childishness—Wagner quotes her young son on the

logic of corners as inspiration for her formulation—come out in the moments of song, positioned here as deliberate action against the academic system of labor.

Yet to renounce all “content” here is also wrong—first because shock and disobedience themselves are not without problems, but more importantly because to place too much weight on this humor as subversive or carnivalesque in itself would risk setting up this part of Wagner’s work as an “outside” poetics, a realm of lyrical non-meaning, a non-fungible somatic music, etc.—the place Notley’s work gestured towards but could not, I think, remain. For Wagner, the jump to song doesn’t necessarily mean that poetic work happens on the other side of thought; rather, it is an alternative mode of carrying on the same train of thought—the dilemmas of the working poet, body, lover, person—through the activity of *poiesis*, framed in a way that bypasses the self-aware paralysis brought on by responsible and necessary attempts to think one’s place in the world. The “folk” component of “folksong” (or ballad), seen this way, becomes a way of getting outside the self, the “I” of the poems, if not the activity of poetic making. As the *Princeton Encyclopedia* notes, although the actual authorship of the traditional ballad Wagner evokes is individual, the form itself is strongly linked into notions of community.²³ In the words of Susan Stewart,

Ballad, hymn, and other song forms using this structure are meters with a particularly rich legacy of accrued meanings. To use these forms means that one carries over into writing an enormous weight of social and cultural resonance. [...] The coordination of song and the coordination of social life under a common temporal framework [here, common meter] emphasize integration and solidarity. (41)

Seen in contrast to the musings of a poetic “I,” object of self-scrutiny whose individual breath, even—to say nothing of her poetic production—is swept up in the forces of the market economy, the manifestation of folksong is not meaningless but charged with historical and social meaning. Against the individualized “I” is an anonymous and possibly collective maker of poetry, the ballad singer, whose presence points toward the possibility of a collective public, a deeper past, and a present community.

The gesture of breaking into song, then, is a breaking out of one mode of labor, and into poetic work in a more communal sense; it must include both modes. From *Macular Hole*, the poem “San Francisco Ballad” is exemplary for the way it toggles between them:

I told you I’m ugly and I’ll tell you why

Oh, ho, blow the man down

I saw you today and you looked mighty fine

Give me a rhyme to blow the man down. (18)

The first and third lines of this excerpt stage classic dilemmas of the poetic “I” not out of line with the body of Wagner’s work: self-regard, self-excoriation, self-explanation in the first line, sight of the other and desire for that other, or creation of the subject through that desire, in the third. But in each instance self-scrutiny stalls and the poet jars the poem into ballad-mode to continue. The absence of rhetorical connective tissue throws into sharp relief a poetic construction that relies less on the speaker’s private identity and more on a set of tropes and phrases that repel “personality,” located instead in the socially and historically charged rhythms, rhymes, and cadences of song. Although they refuse to participate in the same sort of language and subjectivity that makes up the rest of the

poem, these musical introjections are not semantically toothless. Not only do they gesture towards a different sort of poet, the collective and proletarian voice of the sea-chantey, but they also invoke the potential power of this type of poem, the use of breath and rhyme against structures of power (“blow the man down”). It’s a brilliantly childish—or childishly brilliant—move: the failure of one mode means a move into the other, the two held in tense counterpoint.

For Wagner, just as for Notley and for Simonds, it is the juxtaposition, simultaneity, or adjacency of modes and types of labor that is above all important, not only for the texture of her verse but for what the tension between modes reveals about poetic and non-poetic production, both. Poetic autonomy—here, the autonomy of the poem pushed beyond the individual speaker and into the mode of song—exists for the tension it creates with the insoluble but inescapable dilemmas of the individual poetic maker.²⁴ In Wagner’s work, poetic making doesn’t solve any problems, not even the problem of poetic making; it is subsumed back again into relations under capital, into “merit points” for an exploitative academic structure as the product of an individuated subjectivity itself constructed at least in part by the forces it struggles to resist. Yet poetic production, figured as song and rooted in residual ideas of a more communal making, is nevertheless a source of strength and power of its own.

*

If for both Notley and Wagner, the lullaby or the ballad comes to stand for poetry’s self-aware resistance to—but also its adjacency with—care work and reproductive labor, another contemporary poet, Sandra Simonds, similarly undertakes the staging or co-mingling of types of work through possibly the most self-reflexive of poetic

forms: the sonnet sequence. Published in 2014, Simonds's third collection of poems is simply called *The Sonnets*. Its 56 fourteen-line poems use poetic labor to pose questions about subjectivity, affect, and domestic and reproductive labor. First, it is worth a glance at the history of the sonnet and the sonnet sequence, a tradition to which Simonds's work belongs even as it chafes at that tradition. In her study of the form, Jennifer Wagner shows the "fascinating gendering of [the sonnet] genre" (13), rehearsing a standard paradigm by which the Petrarchan love-sonnet is domestic and thus feminine, while the sonnet's later "public" voice (in Wordsworth, etc.) is linked to its masculinity.²⁵

In Simonds's hands, by contrast, the form is neither the space for the production or expression of a subject determined by its relation to an object of desire nor exclusively the space for the staging of exterior or "public" concerns. Simonds refuses the distinction between love poem and political sonnet, between poem that makes a world and poem that foregrounds its status as made artifact. Instead, in Simonds's poems, subjectivity, labor, public and private spheres, and poetic and non-poetic production are revealed as intricately and inextricably linked. The sonnet becomes the crucible for holding together various types of work, for exploring the tensions and pressures its compression creates, and for modeling a sort of resistance to work, even to the work it performs.

Despite the poems' claims to autonomy from poetic history—"Everything / I say here I own," Simonds writes in "American Songs"—the continual recall of poetic history is as much a function of the sonnet in Simonds's sequence as it is in any other.²⁶ Stephen Burt and David Mikics frame this historical or genealogical mechanism in their introduction to a recent anthology of sonnets: "Because we recognize the sonnet now—

faster than we recognize any other form—as an inherited form, one with a history,” they write,

the sonnet form works especially well when a poet wants to remind us that the present is surprisingly like the past, that we are like those far from us in history, that we do not differ so much from the people who love and fear and grieve in poems by Sidney and Shakespeare, or for that matter in poems by Sappho and Virgil. (24-25)

For Simonds, on the other hand, this relationship to the past is more likely to be framed as a struggle. In a post on the *Best American Poets* blog, she writes:

In real life relationships people are always vying for power but in the sonnet, it’s the poet and the sonnet that are in a struggle to the death. The problem is that the poet is at a huge disadvantage because the sonnet has the history OF THE SONNET on its side and almost always wins.

Much as it might seem the throwing-off of tradition, even the messy innovation of Simonds’s poems—her flagrant disregard for standards for line, meter, and subject matter—locates itself in a history of form; the history “OF THE SONNET” is evoked, not bypassed, by gestures away from it.²⁷

This history, in turn, is important both for the form itself and also for the type of labor it tends to associate with—or, more importantly, dissociate from—poetic production. The “work” of the sonnet has most often been framed as introspective, antithetical to other types of labor: Sidney’s muse, for example, famously commands him to begin poetic production by turning inward (“‘Fool,’ said my muse to me, ‘look in thy heart and write’”). On the other end of the spectrum, in his sonnet “Mowing” Robert

Frost gives us a version of the “public” sonnet that nevertheless has “the poet working alone and timelessly, saved from the stress of human society,” in Burt’s words (239). Here Frost frames poetic production as occurring beside—but crucially, distancing itself from—agricultural work. The poem begins with the sounds of poetry and the sounds of labor merged, it would seem, in perfect seamless mimesis: “There was never a sound beside the wood but one, / And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.” But the sonnet goes on cannily to unravel this first statement: the sonnet is itself the strong presence of its own sound, not just of this poem, Frost’s, but—as many critics have pointed out—rich with the echoing sounds of literary allusion (Marvell, Shakespeare). The poem concludes by staking out a strong claim for the stand-alone stability of agricultural labor—its difference, being ongoing “fact,” from the temporal and historical pause and the differentiated sonic register in which the poem takes place: “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows. / My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.” But the stakes here are not so much a delineation of agricultural work as of the boundary between mowing and *poiesis*. No accident that the poem ends with the odd passive “to make”: the poet (we have seen) actively “makes” with a different sound, in a different realm. The “working” subject emerges with the claim for *poiesis* as the engagement with the sounds of (male) literary history, against other sorts of work.²⁸

I dwell on this sonnet, although it’s in no way unique, because it underscores the labor division these poems complicate. Just as Notley refuses the separation between childbearing and poetic production, bringing the two activities as close as possible, so too does Simonds begin by coupling, rather than separating, poetic and reproductive labor. The sonnet “Golden Buddha” exemplifies this gesture:

I'm going to tell you a sonnet and it's going to go by fast, so
 you're going to have to listen. It will have a moral. It'll be tight
 like a haiku. It will take place when I'm in twelfth grade and I'm going
 to be the main character. It's 1994. In this sonnet, I will
 slip Chinese menus on people's doorknobs
 with red and blue rubber bands in Manhattan Beach, California
 at the same time I imagine my classmates are slipping on condoms
 to prevent themselves from making more of themselves.
 This is what I do every day after school to help out my family.
 This sonnet sincerely hopes you understand that even though
 it's about class and poverty and giving my mom an extra \$75 a
 week
 and all of that important stuff that it's also about how this work,
 walking from pink house to yellow house to gray house, gave me
 beautifully
 sculpted calf muscles as well as the ability to write this sonnet. (24)

While it disregards conventions for rhyme scheme and meter, this poem is certainly a sonnet, breaking grammatically for a declarative summation after the octave and naming itself a sonnet at three points in the poem (beginning, middle, end). And yet it mobilizes the grammatical agility that is a signature sonnet feature, most often used in service of the logics of desire or power, in decidedly un-sonnet-like ways. If "I'm going tell you" situates us in the realm of storytelling, "it's going to go by fast" stands in opposition to the sonnet's characteristic "monumental" quality. Simonds then evokes the fable ("It will

have a moral”), the haiku, the novel or bildungsroman (the idea of the “main character” is particularly funny, a jab the sonnet’s inheritance of self-centeredness), and the personal or biographical narrative. In short, Simonds turns the sonnet into a generic compendium, a form that encompasses and performs the work of multiple literary genres, even as it playfully exaggerates the sonnet’s own traditional self-reflexivity.

In addition to expanding the literary work of the sonnet to include other types of literary work, this sonnet also stresses the contiguity of this work with other (non-literary) labor, emphasizing their joint influences on the literary subject. First, the sonnet makes visible the specific historical, geographical, and biographical contexts and colors (“red and blue rubber bands,” “pink house to yellow house to gray house”) of a certain specific scene of economic labor: in this it might even be seen to resemble Ashbery’s “Instruction Manual.” Yet more than simply being “about” this type of work, it’s about the collusion or confluence of different sorts of labor, as the sestet spells out. Reversing the paradigm by which the sonnet “constructs” a subject (and toying with this paradigm, as “the sonnet” itself is personified), here the economic labor the sonnet recounts shapes—physically shapes—the body. It also underlies or parallels or contributes to the performance of poetic labor undertaken by this same worker. Waged labor is aestheticized and possibly sexualized (“beautifully / sculpted calf muscles”), while aesthetic labor is tied back to economic work. “This sonnet” is the product of a body produced by work; this sonnet wants you to see that work.

But why does the sonnet want us in no uncertain terms to understand the shared or mutually active role of different sorts of labor in shaping poetic subjectivity? It is true that from the collection’s outset we’re given to understand that occupation is a central

theme of the lyric sequence: the first sonnet in the book, “American Girl,” is a description of a job at a Hollywood dentistry clinic (“In college I had this job as a file clerk for Dr. Glassman,” 11). There’s also the occasional reference to Simonds’s present occupation (“Sand’s taught English Comp all / day long,” 34; “Sometimes I try to make poetry, but mostly / I try to earn a living,” 72). The idea that labor shapes the laboring subject is nothing new, of course, and opens out onto a series of debates about the relationship between work and the worker, from Marx’s thinking about alienation to studies of personality and standardization under Taylorism to the sort of thinking about the quality of affective and subjective labor that characterizes theories of “post-Fordist” or even “post-work” work.²⁹

But the book’s third poem, “Because I have given birth,” inaugurates its through-line of concern with gender, childbirth and childrearing, domestic work, and the body. “The cellulite / on my ass won’t erode,” Simonds writes in “Great Smoky Mountains National Park.” “Call me crazy, / but isn’t there a six-week-old infant in my lap?” (14). “Ode to Marriage” once again uses the sonnet to engulf another genre (the ode), and to make visible a type of labor in all the strangeness of its traditions: “Hold on. I’m stuffing walnuts into the carcass / of a goose because this is a Christian holiday” (15). “Bikram Yoga” begins, “I was tired because I have a two year old son” (17), while “PeruvianPanFlutes” ends, “We spend our entire lives cleaning up” (20). “House of Ions” is an inventory of physical stuff and a tour “through adulthood’s prescriptions for antidepressants left unfilled / then nursing a bottle of beer in the full health / of Florida beside the turtle-shaped pool, / back through the milky nipple of newborn motherhood”; it ends, “Sight usurped by continuous labor” (31). Simonds’s are not poems about the

tender delights or creative joys of motherhood: this labor is material and sapping. It affects the body and intrudes into the sonnet's registration and expression of desire; it takes up a great deal of time and attention, even to the point of endangering the senses (of sight) necessary for poetic production. John Milton's sonnet about blindness serves as an instructive contrast here: this is definitely not *that* blindness.

In other words, Simonds's concern is not, or not only, to document or make visible the activity of care work: it is also to show the impacts of this work on the working subject. Moreover, this work becomes inseparable from other shaping forces. Just as "Golden Buddha" makes clear that poetic and waged labor work together to inform body and subjectivity, the poem "Commemorative Gift" stands similarly for poetic and reproductive work:

Take raw material drawn from remotest zones: momentum,
Cummingtonite, extract of nightshade, chemicals for pregnancy
tests and then throw them into a locomotive of zeros
that drags the kids by their tunnels into grown-ups.
At home, your child wears wet pajamas with a repeating
Sponge Bob pattern over his chubby thighs.

It's time to change him. [...] (23)

Much like Notley in *Songs for the Unborn Second Baby*, Simonds is concerned with the dual registers, material and affective, of this sort of labor, keeping them tightly juxtaposed in the space of the octave but grammatically separate—with the difference that here the language of the material pregnancy splits playfully over the line, "chemicals for pregnancy / tests": the biological back to the commercial. Similarly, even the child's

pajamas bear a pop-cultural marker. If for Notley, biological reproductive labor was pried stubbornly and delicately apart from other sorts of work, including care work, here Simonds merges them—or rather, keeps them together but separate, pointing to their attempted merger under the forces of capital, the sort of commercialization represented by the pharmaceutical and entertainment industries.

The sonnet’s conclusion takes this tight knot of labor a step further in a way that does not immediately seem to follow its beginning, turning to the “Commemorative Gift” of the title:

Thank you for your thirty years of service,
thirty years of pushing the purple and green buttons.

Thank you, bit of emerald placed with tweezers
just left of the three on the wristwatch.

Here’s to the jewelers’ thumb-finger pincer grasp,
scratched magnifying glass, renewable contract. (23)

The first two lines, I take it, voice the intent behind the commemorative gift itself; the second turn to praise to the gift, which appears to be a watch, and to hint at its making; the final lines celebrate the delicate labor that made the instrument. “Renewable contract” seems out of place, out of sync with the “artisanal” and old-fashioned labor presumably undertaken by the jeweler: a “commemorative gift” of a jeweled wristwatch belongs to the register of white-collar commerce, a reward for a dedicated businessman or a successful middle manager. This expansive and surprising gesture of thanks, then, puts the recipient of the watch—presumably the speaker—and the jeweler and the watch itself into parallel relationship, while the “renewable contract” at the end links all work to the

flexible and precarious conditions increasingly common for—for example—a junior university professor.

The end of the poem thus “celebrates” a work that is a jumble of care work and commercialized reproduction; of mid-century white collar labor that might be so “rewarded”; of the artisanal labor of the jeweler; of the contractual labor that is precisely not of the sort ever to be “rewarded for thirty years of service.” If the central type of work here performed for thirty years and now “celebrated” is the former, the material and economically subsumed work of motherhood detailed in the octave, it is emphatically *not* separable from other sorts of work. Like the body of the poet at the end of “Golden Buddha,” the watch here becomes a figure or an emblem for *aesthetic* work: aesthetic work serves to pull together and hold in configuration all sorts of other labor. The poet’s body working and shaped by work in “Golden Buddha” or the watch in “Commemorative Gift” might be seen as the “subjects” produced by the poem—equally the products of poetic and non-poetic production, shaped both by a history of poetic form and by “outside” cultural, historical, and political forces.

There are two implications to this poetics of the emblematic near-conflation of labor. The first has to do with the production of gendered subjectivity, a debate that crystallizes in a written exchange between Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler in the late 1990s. For Butler, who laments the relegation by many contemporary Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers of issues of gender and sexuality to the sphere of “the cultural,” and outside of the sphere of political economy, Fraser’s 1997 book *Justice Interruptus* ignores the fact that the production, exclusion, or suppression of certain configurations of gender and sexuality is in fact essential to the entire economic structure.³⁰ Although

Butler admits that Fraser does consider the economic aspect of gender insofar as it shapes the division of labor, she emphasizes the importance of locating the construction of sexuality and subjectivity in the realm of the economic and the political:

Struggles to transform the social field of sexuality do not become central to political economy to the extent that they can be directly tied to questions of unpaid and exploited labour, but also because they cannot be understood without an expansion of the “economic” sphere itself to include both the reproduction of goods as well as the social reproduction of persons (272).³¹

It is here, in this complicated unpacking of the relationship between labor, subjectivity, and economics, that Simonds’s project makes a first intervention. The love-sonnet has traditionally been a privileged crucible for the desiring, gendered, or sexualized subject, as critics from Joel Fineman to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have pointed out.³² Although many of her poems *are* love poems, it will by now be obvious that the sonnet’s configuration and reconfiguration of the economic and gendered subject is more germane to Simonds’s project than the forces of gendered desire; Simonds reminds us that gendered subjectivity is inseparable from performed labor. The sonnet “Collapsible Sledgehammer” begins by dramatizing the collapse of the border between the cultural (aesthetic) and economic spheres worried over by Butler and Fraser: “Documentary films are so boring. / It’s like people going on about the gold standard (yawn)” (33). Held close by the simile, culture and economics work in tandem in this sonnet; they produce a speaker who yawns. The expression of fatigue is not out of place: instead of a privileged site of private introspection or the production, examination, or expression of autonomous

desire, the aesthetic space of these poems is one packed to the gills with reminders of its material conditions. There is no escape from domestic work, no way to untangle types of work or work from the worker, no “private subjectivity,” no un-infiltrated “personal life,” and no escape from the capitalist economy.³³

Moving beyond the picture of economics and subjectivity suggested in Simonds’s work, a second implication has to do with the status of poetic making itself. That the simile is what holds together types of labor, or that the aesthetic object (the watch) becomes emblem of work, is key: like my project as a whole, Simonds foregrounds the central role of poetic production in revising schemas of work and life. Roland Greene’s study of the lyric sequence is helpful in framing Simonds’s innovation in this area. For Greene, the defining attribute of a “Petrarchan” (“post- or otherwise”) lyric sequence is its “fictional” aspect: that is, its ability to create a world, as well as the inter-subjective relationships within that world (13 – 14).³⁴ Yet Greene also points towards a counter-tendency in many later lyric sequences that he calls “artifactuality:” “this new disposition,” he writes, “often entails an acknowledgement that the work does not tell of experience lived or seen, but is a *thing made*” (14, italics mine).³⁵ These poles of “nominativity” and “artifactuality” (15) simply make no sense for Simonds’s work. The poems are made, and foreground their making, and create the world in which they are made; the “speaker” of the poems, as “Golden Buddha” spells out so clearly, is both subject and artifact, both “thing made” by or subject to labor of several different types as well as maker in her own right. Placing poetic making back into the “world” made by the poem—back beside a host of other sorts of making—Simonds’s sonnets remind us not

only of poetry's role in making a world and the subjects within it, but of the work that shapes both subjects and worlds.

The resulting sequence is fiction of made things, or—to use a term that preoccupies Simonds throughout the sonnets—a fiction of “surfaces.” A giddy tour through the cultural clutter of Bikram Yoga and NoDoz, Floridian kitsch, PTA dads, cookie-cutter housing developments, Brad Pitt, Facebook, and Twitter, the poems set out fairly obviously to flaunt the sonnet sequence's “high cultural” associations: the only “court” here is the one at the mall, where Sbarro and the Panda Express are. More important than Simonds's accommodation of the form to “new” content, however, is her expansion of the form to include formal gestures apparently counter to it: far from any smooth or polished shine, poetic surfaces here are roughened, uneven, marked by collisions of and tensions between types of production. Salient among these is the tension between poetic making and other sorts of work. Indeed, what finally sets Simonds's sonnets apart is a willful freedom with and *against* poetic labor.

In other words, *The Sonnets* works via a challenge to the type of labor and attention most standard for the “craft” that writing a sonnet generally involves. The poems appear flippantly to dismiss the form they employ over and over, pushing at the limits of what counts as a line, a rhyme, or even a word. For example: the sonnet “Ducks Floating Serenely across Pond Make Scenery Serene” begins “Fuck all I say fuck all” (the line repeats) and includes the word “fuck” nineteen times in fourteen lines; “I Love You So So So Soooooo Much” has twelve little <3 signs (two of which appear on their own lines, although they don't count in the poem's fourteen); “Fruit in Warehouse” has

“Dylan Klebold” (the Columbine shooter) in every line except for the ninth. “Collapsible Sledgehammer” includes a functional Internet URL *as* a line:

[...] In this interview

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrKK9v-RoIk>

Werner Herzog thinks women don't understand

The “exhilaration” of being shot [...] (33)

Simonds delegates the work of poetic production to the Internet, doubles and redoubles the same word or phrase. Leaving no doubt about Simonds's stance vis-à-vis poetic “originality”—the claim, say, for rich and varied syntax or “authentic” emotion—the poem “This is the New Romantic” is very clear about the poetic values at stake here, by which the primary pressures and rewards are bound very firmly up in economics: “This is the new romantic®: I'll post everything / on the internet to devalue® it® for free” (18).

As is the case with Wagner, these gestures of formal disobedience are intended not exclusively for the “shock value” they produce by working against cultural expectations for the sonnet form. Instead, they stem from and work to illustrate the economics of poetic production. Rather than operating under the principles of a poetic “economy of words” (Pound's injunction to “use no superfluous word,” for example), or indeed the limiting principles of the sonnet's formal strictures (Wordsworth's escape from “too much liberty” within the “narrow room” of the sonnet), these poems are shaped and conditioned by real contemporary economic pressures.³⁶ “Sometimes I try to make poetry, but mostly / I try to earn a living”: the verbs are not identical, and at its most extreme, the tension between “making” and “earning” (we will put housework and care work here too) means the refusal of the former. The sonnet “No Sonnet” effectively

catalogs the sonnets left unwritten, and the poet's refusal to write them: "No Civil War Sonnet. No sex reassignment surgery sonnet. / No Black sonnet. No climate change sonnet. / No" (35). The word "no" by itself is the sonnet's third line and also the twelfth; every line begins with "no."

On the one hand, this is childish refusal and facile *paralipsis* (a figure that will be crucial to the conclusion of this project); refusal here nevertheless produces a sonnet. Yet given the fictional world of the sequence—a world of overwhelming demands for non-poetic labor and attention—the act of refusal starts to look strategic. In her 1972 essay "When We Dead Awaken," Adrienne Rich captures the tensions of this economy of time and attention. Writing of her years after the publication of her first book, and after the birth of her children, she says: "I wanted, then, more than anything, the one thing of which there was never enough: time to think, time to write" (24). For Rich, this pressure leads to the discovery of a new style of scraps and fragments first visible in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" (itself a poem about housework and reproduction).³⁷ If Rich's reaction to the friction between modes of work is fragmentation, Notley's is "freakout"—a way of making the language work like material—and Wagner's is breaking into stubborn song, Simonds's is refusal: refusal of innovation, refusal of invention, or even refusal of the sonnet form. As in Shirinyan's *Your Country Is Great*, in which the uneven distribution of global capital renders impossible the operation of a certain conceptual poetics, here the close association of poetic and reproductive labor endangers the possibility of constructing the sonnet itself.

Simonds manages to evoke the incompatibility of two types of work while continuing both. This refusal-in-performance is, as we will see, important for the ongoing

struggles of reproductive labor—for, once again, working towards the transformation of the labor of human care and reproduction that must continue in some form but must not continue in its current unsustainable and exploitative forms. Mobilizing the sonnet's traditional resources of compression, its privileged role for the exploration of subjectivity, and the lyric sequence's capacity for world-making, Simonds's *Sonnets* effectively uses *poiesis* to point outwards, towards the types of work that shape both the form and the poet—shape, and threaten. While the labor itself is exhausting and unsustainable, *poiesis* comes paradoxically to provide an energetic and buoyant force, a vibrant and varied set of surfaces, and a space and a tone for production *and* refusal. The poetic subject here might be made through the constraints of literary form, but is decidedly yoked back into the outside world of history, culture, and labor—as in “The Soul as Lo-Fi Diva”: “She wears watermelon lip gloss and licks her lips / to a metronome set to civil disobedience” (70).

¹ In the words of Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard, on “the domestic labor debate”: “while it was going on (and still today) everyone knew it was of great political importance, and that passions surrounded it, but equally almost no one understood what the heck it was actually about. Most of the literature is unreadably abstruse” (51).

² Silvia Federici writes in 1975 that wages for housework “is a revolutionary demand not because by itself it destroys capital, but because it forces capital to restructure social relations [...] To demand wages for housework does not mean to say that if we are paid we will continue to do this work. It means precisely the opposite. To say that we want wages for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it, both in its immediate aspect as housework and its more insidious character as femininity” (19). See Caffentzis for an overview: “The invisibility of housework,” he writes, “hides the secret of all capitalist life: the source of social surplus—unwaged labor—must be degraded, naturalized, made into a marginal aspect of the system, so that its producers can be more easily controlled and exploited” (175 – 176).

³ Barker calls for recognition of “the problem of care as a problem for individuals and families that is shaped and constrained by the biopower embodied in nation-states, global capital, and transnational organizations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Social exclusion, isolation in the home, and the invisibility of domestic workers in the public sphere,” she continues, “are necessary to the profits and functioning of global capital today” (582).

⁴ For an inclusive overview, see Premo Steele.

⁵ For example: in her study of women’s working songs in ancient Greece, Andromache Karanika notes that “the context of labor becomes a metaphor for poetic composition and performance but also provides a platform for a repertoire [including] songs directly associated with the tasks at hand.” Because such songs are “seen as lacking in variety,” they “have been little more than a footnote in most scholarly works” (2), a condition Karanika’s book seeks to remedy through its study of harvesting songs, mourning songs, lullabies, etc.

⁶ Rich’s 1976 book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* is a *tour de force* for thinking about gendered domestic and reproductive labor, working through many of the issues examined here with ample historical evidence and while keeping in mind the work of poetic production. Most notably, Rich dwells upon the dual character or split at the heart of this work, the tension between the affective and physical “experience” of motherhood, site of pain but also potentially of women’s power, and its economically conditioned manifestation as oppressive and isolating “institution.”

⁷ Mina Loy was acquainted with anarchist feminist Emma Goldman in Berlin in the 1920s. Rich’s associations with the women’s liberation movement and later radical feminists and activists (Shulamith Firestone, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, others), in part through her teaching at City College from 1968 to 1978, are well documented—although not by most poetry critics.

⁸ The poets represented in the anthology *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood*, writes Rachel Blau DuPlessis in the book’s forward, exercise

“some discretion about material conditions and social class” (x); instead of “material conditions,” the anthology claims to foreground the “daily acts of improvisation, exploration, and acceptance” (xxv) necessitated or facilitated by motherhood as sources of poetic inspiration, possibility, and innovation. It is interesting to note that an awareness of these material and social conditions is in fact much more prevalent in many of the anthology’s essays than its editors seem willing to admit.

⁹ In an interview with Edward Foster, Notley describes this relationship: “I was the person who had the babies, and then we came to New York and lived inside this little tiny space, and sometimes Ted worked, and sometimes he didn’t, and I hung around and wrote poems, and we were always surrounded by these babies, who grew up” (90). For contrast to this type of work, compare Notley’s statements about “workshop poets” shortly following: “There’s this factory. You know, there are these factories around the country. They turn out these teacher-poets, and they make factory poems, and they go teach everybody how to make them” (91).

¹⁰ Notley speaks explicitly of “being a poet” as form of resistance: “No one wants you to write poems anyway so there’s this sort of built-in edge to writing poetry. Anyway it’s almost sort of a forbidden activity. People don’t mind that you write poetry, but they don’t want you to do it all the time and to offer it up as a profession or a commodity or something that’s equal to all the other things people do” (Foster interview, 97 – 98).

¹¹ By Notley’s own admission, this work is not outside but essential to the economic system it supports: “my kids participate in the economy and they can’t think of anything else to do about it,” she states (Rogers interview).

¹² Plath’s “Metaphors,” in full:

I’m a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf’s big with its yeasty rising.
Money’s new-minted in this fat purse.
I’m a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I’ve eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there’s no getting off.

¹³ Kiran Toor provides an overview of authors who “explicitly link the rhythms and mysterious developmental processes of gestation and childbirth to the creative processes of authorship.” “As Ray Stephanson points out,” she writes, “by the time of Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755, the conjunction of mental and procreative processes is fully embedded in the language of conception. According to Johnson’s Dictionary, To CONCEIVE is ‘1. To admit into the womb. 2. To form in the mind; to imagine’; and WOMB is defined as: ‘1. The place of the faetus in the mother. 2. The place whence any thing is produced.’” (261).

¹⁴ See McCabe for a discussion of the gendered reconfiguration or re-embodiment of the philosophical space of the cave or womb in *Descent of Alette*: “At best the body is a site of reproductivity,” she writes, “but even then the body we inherit from Plato leaves woman out of the scene; as I have recounted from Butler [*Bodies That Matter*, 39-40], the womb-like chora does not touch or influence what it reproduces; it is merely the

container, the receptacle [...] Notley's project relies upon reclaiming an aesthetics that might accommodate a somatic 'sophia,' or wisdom" (51). Here again, poetic making and motherhood are aligned; the object of Alette's epic quest is "'our mother' 'the first woman'" while as McCabe points out, Notley's quotation marks "[score] her work as a made thing, stitched" (51).

¹⁵ Daniel Tiffany classes the lullaby among versions of "vernacular" poetry whose essential obscurity sets them apart from an "elite and self-consciously literary tradition of poetry in English"; he sees "lyric obscurity" "not as an obstacle to fashioning social relations [...] but as an element essential to the formation and maintenance of coherent communities" (83 – 84).

¹⁶ According to Sarojini, Marwah, and Sheno: "This practice [of travel-based IVF which involves the oocytes of women or surrogates of the host country] has the potential to be unethical and exploitative as the seemingly free flow of people, capital, goods, and services takes place, and is made possible at all, within global relations that are characterized by stark inequalities. Not only do unresolved questions of access to these expensive technologies for the majority in third-world countries remain, there are far-reaching implications for economically vulnerable women from these countries who participate in ART programmes. This unequal power equation is present not just in cases of foreign clients but also when the recipient individual or couple is from the third world country in question."

¹⁷ Roberts points towards not only the practices of "slave breeding" common in the antebellum US, but also to the government's forced sterilization campaigns for poor Black women that continued into the 1970s, later birth control initiatives for similar groups in the US and in Puerto Rico, and unmonitored and unsafe third-world testing of the contraceptive Norplant.

¹⁸ In an interview with Maggie Nelson, Notley states: "I utterly do despise dailiness as it stands. I can't abide what the world has become, the frozen-ness of our product, this evil thing that we kiss the ass of every hour. I want a dailiness that is free and beautiful" (134).

¹⁹ See brief discussions of aesthetic autonomy in the introduction and coda. Sarah Brouillette points out the way such structuring measures as individualized "merit points" are congruent with larger changes to the university on the model of neoliberalism (the "two emphases" of "saleable output of the flexible creative individual and on collaborative project-based models of inquiry," she notes, "might appear contradictory, but in fact they complement one another"). By creating "networks of temporary and flexible workers who are supposedly averse to stable work patterns," she argues, these measures are "the apotheosis of neoliberal management ideology" ("Academic Labor").

²⁰ In her essay for the *Poetic Labor Project*, Wagner describes the university as a "park-like sharecropper estate," calling for a general recognition by tenured faculty of the problem of contingent academic labor, even if it comes at—as she points out—the expense of their own security, stability, and comfort.

²¹ I am grateful to Amy De'Ath for making sense of this poem and the way it creates and positions a subject dialectically "hooked" into capital's outside in her paper at the ACLA Conference in New York, in March of 2014.

²² A link to Wagner's performance of this poem at the 2009 Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNb8GEO0-Jw>. The audible audience response is worth noting, as it moves from awkward laughter at the poem's beginning to more general hilarity (including Wagner's) by the poem's end.

²³ According to the *Encyclopedia*, "the origin of the British popular ballad was once hotly argued among ballad scholars," who were divided between "individualists" and "communalists," the latter group insisting that "the prototypical ballad was concocted in assemblies of the folk in the exultations of choral dance. Current opinion," the entry continues, "concedes that the traits of 'balladness' may be explained by the communal theory, but holds that all extant ballads are originally the work of individuals" (116). The entry notes also that "there may be an 'I' in a ballad, but the singer does not forget his or her position as the representative of the public voice" (115).

²⁴ See Brouillette: "We need to stress that neoliberal investment in the ideal of autonomous labor is integrally limited by the valorization of intellectual property as the necessary end of all acts of creation. The history of cultural production studies suggests that the idea of autonomy should be retained not under the sign of personal freedom to invent, but rather as a measure of a persistent consciousness of the limits of capitalist markets and of the contradictory ways in which opposition to capital can be useful to it" ("Academic Labor").

²⁵ Wordsworth's embrace of the form, Wagner writes, involves his "[recuperation of] a form originally associated with the voice of a male poet from a 'feminization' of the genre" (13). Wagner also provides an object lesson in the dangerous tendency of overly genealogical literary criticism to reproduce limiting or discriminatory hierarchical structures: "it is not oversight on my part," she writes, "that the post-Wordsworthian authors I go on to consider do not include the well-known sonnet writers of the later part of the century. For all that Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning accomplish in their own handlings of the traditional form, neither one belongs in the subsequent chapters of this study. I take that to be Wordsworth's doing, suppressing as he does the private, sentimental, and supposedly 'feminine' mode in favor of that 'manly' and characteristically self-aggrandizing deference to his own egotistical sublime" (17).

²⁶ "American Songs" includes the lines:

This was going to be a gorgeous crown
of sonnets about atoms and bombs.
To tell you the truth, though, I don't know jack
about crowns or Adam and Eve. But isn't that what's
awesome about being an American poet?
You can just say, "History, you're a ho," and then
Lady Mary Wroth will crawl back
into her English hole [...] (59)

This dismissal of history in effect brings Lady Mary Wroth back *out* of her hole, into the poem. With her powerful reworkings of the sonnet's gendered paradigms of desire and dejection, Wroth is one obvious predecessor. Charlotte Smith is another, both in terms of her concerns with the profession of writing and in light of the sociality her sonnets invoke and create. Mary Anne Myers notes: "From her reading of Petrarch, Smith learned and

taught other poets how to use the sonnet as a social medium by constructing a self-reflexive dialogue in a conventional form with the hope that readers might be moved to respond; we might think of her impulse as similar to those driving many of today's Facebook postings or Tweets" (241).

²⁷Simonds signals her own position in the line of "awesome" and transgressive American poets: the cover design of the book is based on the Joe Brainard's cover for Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets* (1964). Other predecessors include Ron Padgett and—perhaps most importantly—Bernadette Mayer. Juliana Spahr describes Mayer's work with the form, framing her innovation in fairly standard sonnet-terms of gender, subjectivity, and desire: "So despite constant allusions to the tradition of the sonnet, Mayer's are not within the box. [...] they celebrate multiples as they jolt readers out of the conventional patterns of reading desire in order to show other possibilities." Jeff Hilson echoes: "Bernadette Mayer's sonnets are wonderfully 'real' in the sense that they don't hide their content behind traditional constraints. [...] She shows no particular reverence for a form that has traditionally 'enclosed' women, but clearly revels in inhabiting its structure" (13).

²⁸As Wagner writes: "This insistence on the process of knowing, on probing the difference between the metaphorical laboring in sound that he makes and the ghost scythe-sound that he momentarily identifies with, is an insistence on the poet's own identity that is ultimately the claim on the world that every Frost sonnet makes" (189).

²⁹Arlie Hochschild's 1983 classic study *The Managed Heart* explores the performance of "emotional labor" through the example of the flight attendant and includes a consideration of its gender and class aspect: she sketches out what she calls the "transmutation of the private ways we use feeling" into "feelings that nowadays often fall under the sway [or are produced by the demands of] large organizations, social engineering, and the profit motive" (19). As Alan Liu summarizes: Hochschild's "key insight is that although the control of emotional labor may have been instituted from the top, there was a disturbing way in which the line between external and internal emotional governance—between the emotion one was told to 'display' and the emotion one really 'felt'—tended to blur. Control was also self-control: it went all the way down into identity" (122).

³⁰Butler reminds us that this "cultural" reading "rests on a selective amnesia of the history of Marxism itself": "How quickly—and sometimes unwittingly—the distinction between the material and the cultural is remanufactured when it assists in the drawing of the lines that jettison sexuality from the sphere of fundamental political structure! [...] After all, in addition to the structuralist supplementation of Marx, one finds the distinction between culture and material life entered into crisis from any number of different quarters. Marx himself argued that pre-capitalist economic formations could not be fully extricated from the cultural and symbolic worlds in which they were embedded, and this thesis has driven the important work in economic anthropology—Marshall Sahlins, Karl Polanyi, Henry Pearson" (274).

³¹Fraser does, however, elaborate: "The construction of breadwinning and caregiving as separate roles, coded masculine and feminine respectively, is a principal undergirding of the current gender order. To dismantle those roles and their cultural coding is in effect to overturn that order. It means subverting the existing gender division

of labor and reducing the salience of gender as a structural principle of social organization. At the limit, it means the deconstruction of gender” (61).

³² Like the history of most, if not all, poetic forms and modes, the sonnet is most often a form used by men, to construct a “male” subjectivity: “[f]rom the start focusing on heterosexual desire as a destabilizing force within a world of gendered hierarchy,” summarizes Diana Henderson, “the early sonnet both attended to women and presumed identification with a male subject” (57).

³³ This vocabulary of the “private” and the “personal” is employed by Fraser in her response to Butler: “In the late capitalist society of the twentieth century,” Fraser writes, “the links between sexuality and surplus-value accumulation have been still further attenuated by the rise of what Eli Zaretsky has called ‘personal life’: a space of intimate relations, including sexuality, friendship, and love, that can no longer be identified with the family and that is lived as disconnected from the imperatives of production and reproduction. In general, then, contemporary capitalist society contains ‘gaps’: between economic order and the kinship order, between the family and personal life, between the status order and class hierarchy. In this sort of highly differentiated society, it does not make sense to me to conceive the mode of sexual regulation as simply a part of the economic structure” (284).

³⁴ “The nominative lyric sequence,” Greene writes, following Paul De Man, “is a dense, highly developed technology for activating ‘the autobiographical moment,’ where two subjects face each other—in a sense, constructing each other—across the fictional divide” (14).

³⁵ Examples include Eliot’s *Waste Land* and Pound’s *Cantos*; in these, “the relevant whole is unlikely to be represented as an individual psyche, in the manner of Petrarchism, but instead is often seen to be something unmanageable or unknowable in its totality—a dynamic relationship between genders, an entire culture, or perhaps the world itself” (15).

³⁶ Certainly, of course, both Romanticists and Modernists developed these formal structures and principles in relation to social and economic pressures of their day even if these have now become, for some, more important as strictly poetic rules. See, for example, Anahid Nersessian’s *Utopia, Limited*, which views gestures of formal constriction (such as the sonnet’s) as responses to real-world scarcity and alternative models for a better society structured around sustainable and responsible—rather than unlimited—desire and consumption.

³⁷ Rich writes of the development of this style, which stands in contrast to the “conscious craft” of her first collections: “in the late 50s I was able to write, for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman. The poem was jotted in fragments during children’s naps, brief hours in a library, or at 3 a.m. after rising with a wakeful child. I despaired of doing any continuous work at this time. Yet I began to feel that my fragments had a common consciousness and a common theme” (24). While Marilyn Hacker links this technique into a genealogy of modernism (“to read a woman poet using and subverting the modernists’ collage / quotation / fragmentation techniques—in a project of specifically womanly and mordantly feminist inquiry—was a heady pleasure,” 16) there is, I believe, a fascinating alternative history at work here, one that has more to do with pressures of time and work than with literary influence and inheritance. Rich

opens this essay with a move towards this history, citing Virginia Woolf's concerns, in *A Room of One's Own*, with the same tension between (several kinds of) reproductive labor and literary work: "Like Virginia Woolf, I am aware of the women who are not with us here because they are washing the dishes and looking after the children. [...] And I am thinking also of the women whom she left out of the picture altogether—women who are washing other people's dishes and caring for other people's children, not to mention women who went on the streets last night in order to feed their children" (20).

Poetics of Edge-Work:
Contemporary Poets and the Value of Form

*and therefore we shall be right in refusing to admit [the poet] into a well-ordered State
(Plato, Republic, X)*

Previous chapters have been structured around categories such as factory work, immaterial (or material) labor, managerial work, labor of information, reproductive or domestic work, and intellectual or creative production, which provide useful narrative arcs or focalizations for locating the concerns common to the poets discussed. We have also seen how poetic form can help stretch or complicate these pre-existing categories in the face of the general shifts of labor—expansion, automation, precarization, and globalization—that are widely felt today. Attention to form, too, lets us glimpse unlikely connections between seemingly disparate activities, new or lingering versions of older forms of work, and new vistas beyond the categories themselves at specific historical moments, while also registering the unique place of poetic work among them. But these collective stories of technology, globalization, reproduction, creativity, and resistance are primarily retrospective, centered around changes from mid-century to the present. In this chapter, I focus instead on a forward-looking dimension of the contemporary moment, in which a record 65 million people worldwide have been displaced from their homes due to “war, persecution, poverty, or environmental devastation” (Sengupta) and in which, according to International Labor Organization predictions, the global population of the unemployed will rise above 200 million for the first time in 2017 (Farrell). In other words, the question of the limits or the edges of work—precarious work, the absence of

work, the exclusion of many workers from the visible economy, and the consequences of that exclusion—is crucial for understanding the contemporary global situation.

Following Saskia Sassen, we can categorize this present crisis as one of large-scale expulsions: the expulsion of people from their homes or homelands due to war, ecological catastrophe, or economic crisis; the expulsion of large sectors of land or areas of water from what is considered living or livable territory; the expulsion of many workers from the formal economy and the existence and questionable stability this might guarantee. Sassen marks this era as the significant transition, beginning in the 1980s, from “from incorporation to expulsion.” This development is linked to the rise of global “predatory formations”—systems of finance and imperialism (corporate or otherwise) so large and complex that their workings are barely perceptible even on a conceptual level, even as they give rise to equally complex material transformations on the ground. Sassen writes:

the move from Keynesianism to the global era of privatizations, deregulation, and open borders for some entailed a switch from dynamics that brought people in to dynamics that push people out [...] To talk of this decay [of the welfare state and organized labor] is not to romanticize the twentieth century, a period marked by devastating war, genocide, starvation, and extreme ideologies of both left and right. But the world that we began to build in the wake of devastation, starting in the West in particular after World War II, was driven by a logic of inclusion, by concerted efforts to bring the poor and the marginalized into the political and economic mainstream. The Keynesian, egalitarian, and nation-based

assumptions underlying this project of building the just society began to crumble toward century's end. We have been slow in understanding and labeling the powers and dynamics that have emerged from the dust. (211-212)

If prior moments—such as Ashbery's Parisian milieu of the 1950s—were marked by the conscription of large numbers of people into forms of labor, today we see rather their exclusion or expulsion from stable or place-based categories of work.

Of course the notion of expulsion, by which large populations are displaced or exploited in ways that render their work or their persons impossible or “invisible,” is itself not new: the logic of capitalist inclusion for some has always been and is still the logic of exclusion for many. In addition to the exclusion of reproductive and domestic labor, the simplified picture of a “past” of feudalism, serfdom, and slave labor—of a Marxist teleology that proceeds through and out of capitalism—has come under strong critique by theorists such as Cedric Robinson, Paul Gilroy, and others. In *Black Marxism* (1983), Robinson traces the persistent conflict between modes of Leftist thought that derive from Marxism and those that comprise a separate Black Radical tradition—a division stemming at least partially from the former's failure to recognize the historical experience of Black populations working under the material and non-abstract categories and legacies of slave labor. This work shows the incompatibilities of ideology and consciousness produced by mass exploitation and displacement with other, more universalized versions, and the ways in which the history of capitalism has been and is shadowed by the presence of slave labor. Robinson is clear: “Marxism's internationalism was not global,” he writes; “its materialism was exposed as an insufficient explainer of

cultural and social forces; and its economic determinism too often politically compromised freedom struggles beyond or outside of the metropole” (xxx).

As the new and different expulsions produced by neoliberal globalization shift and intensify, it is all the more pressing—given the shortcomings of too-rigid conceptual frameworks—that we find new ways of thinking about work in its contemporary dynamic. In particular, the literature produced alongside today’s expulsions, forces, transformations, and resistance movements uniquely offers ways to think about them. As a way into this past-contemporary-future moment of the “outside” and its complexities, I take up poems by four contemporary poets—Mark Nowak, Fred Moten, Caroline Bergvall, and Bhanu Kapil—who address these problems of precarious activity that occur as certain older ways of doing and conceptualizing labor break down. These four help us ask questions about work that do not privilege ideas about labor that are increasingly (and perhaps were always) insufficient; all four account for a global situation whose “brutality and complexity,” to borrow Sassen’s terms, sometimes elude individual makers but must still be reckoned with. All four poets approach the reconfiguration of poetic work in a contemporary age of widening economic inequality and global expulsion, each taking up a different set of expelling forces: North American deindustrialization, race-based underdevelopment in the US, conflict and crisis leading to mass migration across the Mediterranean, and racist / xenophobic nationalist logics in Britain, respectively. These poets’ work provides a repertoire of formal strategies particular to poetry that resonate with people or workers at the margins of “what work is,” or who are denied access to recognizable forms of work altogether under the influence of these forces. For Nowak and Moten, this poetics takes the form of an insistence on the presence and the

persistence of poetic labor, manifest as lingering and listening, respectively. In the second section of the chapter, I pivot from a place-based and US-centered approach to one centered around global motions. For Bergvall and Kapil, non-American poets who nonetheless write and publish in American context, poetic form becomes a process of radical invention, a giving-form to bodies and movements pushed so far out of the public eye as to seem invisible and ungraspable.

Taken as a set, these poets give a new understanding of the value of poetic form and *poiesis* as making, situated in different versions of linked crisis. It might seem strange to insist that something as archaic and material as literary form is necessary now, since the developments I trace are indeed linked to immaterial flows of finance capital and its chains of abstract speculation, technological codes, and almost instantaneous transfers of money and information across large distances. But there are at least three reasons why literary form is useful in this context. The first has to do with a transformed relationship between language and capital. If it is true that “most of the world’s population,” as David Harvey writes, “is becoming disposable and irrelevant from the standpoint of capital, which will increasingly rely upon the circulation of fictitious forms of capital and fetishistic constructs of value centered on the money form and within the credit system” (110-11), what could language possibly have to tell us? Harvey’s use of “fictitious” is telling: as Arjun Appadurai shows, even these systems of finance are based on the use and misuse of categories of language. In an abstract sense, then—even if we do not wish to align “poetry” with any language of “truth”—the powers of language are still paramount; from the standpoint of capital, the problem is at least in part a linguistic one.¹

But “the standpoint of capital” differs significantly from “the standpoint of people,” and here again, poetry comes to play a role. As Nowak, Moten, Bergvall, and Kapil show, poetic forms and poetic language can give the lie to claims for the disappearance of whole classes of people and arguments for the inseparability of recognizable work and recognizable subjectivity. Even those who are not “subjects” of capital, it turns out, are able to be “subjects” of the poem or makers of forms in their own right, historically and still today. And finally: poetic language and poetic form, I will argue, are uniquely situated in their capacity for concretely registering complex and abstract transformations—less the flows of capital, which remain abstract, than the traces they leave in terms of the material existences they affect. Sassen’s project in fact entails a strong argument for new means of recognizing, representing, and making visible: she argues for the necessity of “[bringing] above ground” “conceptually subterranean conditions” and of “[capturing] the visible site or moment of expulsion, before we forget” (215). Part of the point is that crises of expulsion by definition trouble or resist existing narratives, or don’t fit the temporality of narrative at all (the language of “capture [...] before we forget”). “The edge,” Sassen notes, is a different space for each different form of expulsion (economic, social, ecological); at present, it “is where general conditions take extreme forms precisely because it is the site for expulsion or incorporation” (211). Sassen’s call is for new forms suited to these developments—in short, a new poetics. We need a way to think about what takes place when and where these narratives of categorizable work, habitable location, linear time, and stable subjectivity fail.

The value of poetic form in this chapter is not so much that it proposes alternate narratives for the historical and economic forces that condition various versions of crisis

today, much less solutions or ameliorations. Instead, poetic form is the site for what falls out of those narratives but still urgently needs to be seen or sensed, providing formal manifestations of the liminal complexities of work, race, gender, and globalization that have often eluded theoretical or philosophical categorization. This visibility differs from the kinds of visibility afforded by the press, documentary representation, political awareness-raising campaigns, etc. Certainly those versions of visibility, often geared towards immediate substantive action, are necessary. But as Bruce Robbins suggests in his article on the “Sweatshop Sublime,” thinking about global interconnectedness has a value of its own, outside of any action or even when its difficulty leads to paralysis. One of the tasks for the intellectual or academic is to do the conceptual work of counterposing the “constraints, obscurities, hesitations, and self-questionings, the inevitable by-products of capitalism in its global mode” against the “tempting simplicity of action” (96), while recognizing the value of this sort of work as it is performed by others as well. Robbins’s thinking is partially in accord with mine here. These subterranean shifts in banking and finance, corporate land grabs, dynamics of mining and land use, climate change, and mass economic restructuring might seem closer to Robbins’s sublime: ambitious or impossible as poetic subject matter, and too big and complicated for the contained intimacy poetry can and does afford. (I will return to this difficulty and impossibility in my coda.)

But I also want to imagine that poets are more uniquely positioned *within* the global division of labor, not necessarily at the birds-eye remove Robbins describes, but as participants in it, makers as well as contemplative or imaginative thinkers. The line between “poet” and “global worker” is here less solid than Robbins’s distinction between

“academic” and “sweatshop worker.” Unlike theory, which according to Robbins can model difficulty elsewhere, or the novel, which might help us visualize and sympathize, this poetic work has most to say about these elusive developments at the moments it is most self-aware of the intricacies of its own material construction. Perhaps because her thinking and making are inseparable—to give one more reason for the Platonic expulsion—the poet has always occupied a liminal position in terms of labor, on Sassen’s “systemic edge,” or what Moten calls “the edges.” Represented by Nowak, Moten, Bergvall, and Kapil, a poetics of the “systemic edge” suggests the possibility of continuity between poetic work and those without work, or whose work is denied, bringing into focus a new (non)place for poetry at the contemporary moment through its position at, and capacity to give form to, these various edges.

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Poets examined in previous chapters have registered movements in labor via self-reflection on poetic or artistic activity (*ekphrasis*) or using the forms most associated with “lyric” (songs and sonnets), but the poets gathered in this chapter serve, above all, as instances of an impulse to formalize, a desire to bring into view certain activities and transformations. In this, they can be seen to extend a thread of American poetics most commonly associated with registering and representing labor dynamics: “documentary poetics.” Exemplified by figures such as Muriel Rukeyser, Charles Reznikoff, and Mike Gold and Tillie Olsen, these poets’ object of interest tends to be some version of the “working class” traditionally conceived. Although the “working class,” always historically fraught, has undoubtedly transformed almost beyond recognition, and though the adjective “documentary” perhaps no longer suffices as an adequate way to describe

poetic work, we might nevertheless take a moment to examine the continuities and discontinuities between these poets and their predecessors. For Nowak, especially, but also for the three others, the activity of a poetics of documentation remains important, although the mechanisms of this work and the position of the poet vis-à-vis any “object” are vitally transformed.

As the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* explains, “documentary poetics” leans heavily on innovations in film, and in particular on the insights and innovations of Dziga Vertov, whose early Marxist writings gave the term the radical political edge—documentary in service of revolutionary change—that it still holds today.² In America, documentary poetics and labor activism were especially close during the 1930s and 40s, as Michael Denning and others have noted.³ Interest in documentary poetics rose again later, in the 1960s and 70s, along with the anti-war and civil rights movements. It is, however, the 1930s and 1940s era that remains a horizon of interest, even nostalgia, for many thinkers about poetry and work: the specific capacity of the documentary poet is to be a part of the revolutionary struggle of the worker by performing the separate but parallel work of *documentation*, a work that includes activities such as fact-gathering on the ground, mediation, transposition, and representation of the working class in the vehicle of a poem or other work of art.

Yet neither the notion of the “working class” nor the poet’s ability to “document” it has been stable, even before late twentieth century shifts in the global economic system. As theorists such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe point out, class distinctions and identity—the “working class”—are themselves part of an ideological

apparatus; that is, they exist in part formed by the discourse around them, rather than as stable objects available for documentation.⁴ Or, in the words of Jacques Rancière:

there is no worker's claim that does not set the true portrait of the worker over against the commonplace scenes invoked against him by his enemies. But neither is there any true portrait of the worker that does not immediately disappear, by virtue of the power conferred on the identifying image [...]. A question of identity, of image, of the relationship of Self and Other, both involving and concealing the question of maintaining or transgressing the barrier that separates those who think from those who work with their hands. (105 – 106)

To “document” the working class as such, these thinkers suggest, is to participate in its creation, even perhaps its maintenance.

Beyond this problem, there is also the issue of documentary and poetic objectivity: to what extent is poetic license—or a different side of poetic labor—permitted when the purpose of the poem is ostensibly to expose the world as it is? In her concern to register the uneasy co-presence of aesthetic activity and exploited labor, Muriel Rukeyser prefigures the concerns addressed in this chapter. Questions of the transparency (or not) of poetic labor are shot through her foundational documentary poem, *The Book of the Dead* (1938). Weaving together documentary materials such as court testimonies, newspaper articles, and personal accounts from a variety of perspectives with various poetic forms—Dante's tercets, incantatory segments that evoke the Egyptian Book of the Dead referenced by Rukeyser's title—Rukeyser sets out to tell the story of the 1930s Gauley Bridge tragedy: the death by silicosis of hundreds of miners

in West Virginia at the hands of the Union Carbide mining company, as well as the company's subsequent cover-up.

The Book of the Dead opens with a poem called "The Road," which begins from an outside position, in the preparatory stages for a mediated journey "towards" its subject matter:

These are roads to take when you think of your country
and interested bring down the maps again,
phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,
reading the papers with morning inquiry (73)

While certain of Rukeyser's critics have taken issue with her self-aware stance as an outsider to the Appalachian working-class voices that she records, Rukeyser's concern with mediation (statistics, newspapers, poetry itself) reminds us of the ongoingness of material aesthetic work and is crucial to the poem's unfolding.⁵ Specifically, "The End of the Road" is haunted by the Vertovian presence of "the photographer": as the vista of the affected river and town swing into view, Rukeyser presents this figure as he "unpacks camera and case, / surveying the deep country, follows discovery / viewing on groundglass an inverted image." Slightly later, in "Gauley Bridge," a little boy running "blurs the camera-glass fixed on the street"; the camera here is clumsy (the image must be righted), imperfect, and possibly complicit in the events it seeks to document, the glass of the camera also linked to the presence of silicates. In a final poem called "The Book of the Dead," the poem's scope widens to encompass the American West and the Spanish Civil War, and then even more dramatically to advocate for a greater vision and symbolic and historical understanding, before ending in a sweeping call to activism and love:

“Defense is sight; widen the lens and see / standing over the land myths of identity / new signals, processes” (110). To “widen the lens,” even to *shatter* the lens, to admit the limits of a narrow view, to acknowledge the complicity of aesthetic making in an expanded view of labor and inequality, and to push further the formal capacities and strategies available to poetic making: these initiatives are all part of Rukeyser’s call. But Rukeyser does more than demonstrate poetic innovation. Rather, she offers another version of the model of doubled or multiple types of work that has been important throughout this project. To register the special material presence of aesthetic making in mutually shaping or illuminating co-presence with the voices or works of non-poets, even while foregrounding the differences between work—hopeful as it sounds, this command might stand well for the poets examined here.

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Mark Nowak’s work most resembles that of the mid-century American documentary poets, yet expands beyond their concerns of social documentation. In Nowak’s poems we find a version of poetic labor that quietly persists, much like the disenfranchised but resistant workers made vivid in their documentary content. Nowak’s poems mark another hinge moment in terms of labor: the moment of deindustrialization and its aftermath in the American Midwest and beyond. A labor activist as well as a poet, Nowak speaks often of his working-class background as the son of Polish immigrants.⁶ His upbringing in the failing industrial city of Buffalo, New York, is the subject of his first book, *Revenants* (2000). His next collection, *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004) chronicles the events and aftermath of deindustrialization in the United States, exploring dynamics of economics, racism, constructed masculinity, and language through a range of forms

and formats, including photographs, bibliographies, and meta-poetic meditations on grammar. Much like Rukeyser's, Nowak's concern in this collection is simultaneously to interrogate the structuring force of language and to document communities in distress and the forces behind their demise, incorporating voices and materials from those communities. The book includes a veritable chorus of voices from Midwestern towns experiencing economic crisis via public policy documents, academic accounts, and first-person snippets culled from papers such as the *Duluth News Tribune* ("It's scary. It's very scary," 137; "The plant was usually blowing steam out of it. Today there was nothing," 149; "It's kind of a sad occasion to see a place shut down where you worked for 26 years," 153).

Coal Mountain Elementary (2009), similarly, works with and outside of poetic forms, holding up documentary materials and material by workers alongside and through poetic work. A project undertaken in collaboration with photojournalist Ian Teh, it includes many of Teh's striking color photographs of miners and mining communities in China, as well as Nowak's own equally powerful photographs of American mining towns—usually signs or abandoned vistas rather than people. Even to leaf through the book is to be asked to think about work across geographical distance; the smoggy skies, half-legible signs, and industrial tones of gray and rust-red that are common to both locations already prove provocative for comparison. The book is structured into three playfully grim "Lesson Plans," complete with "procedures," "discussion questions," "objectives," etc. ("Students will: / 1. recreate the historic process / of making coal flowers," p. 4). Here, accounts of the 2006 mining disaster in Sago, West Virginia, are interwoven with Chinese newspaper accounts of mining catastrophes in the northeastern

and northern regions of China (Shanxi Province, Liaoning Province, Hebei Province) and with language from the educational materials provided by the American Coal Foundation itself. As with *Shut Up Shut Down*, a first effect of Nowak's documentary poetics is a strong first-hand account of the linked global forces as they are perceived—and they are perceived—by those affected directly by mining catastrophes: “it's all the management's fault,” says a woman named Ge whose nephew and brother-in-law have just gone missing in a Chinese mine collapse (82). A strong sense of systemic and transnational failure pervades the book, in no small degree presented directly through the voices and images of mining workers.

Although Nowak expands his scope to include more global and intersectional viewpoints, his object of interest remains the mining industry: locus of the gritty “working class” and site of classic debates around organized labor. In the words of Amiri Baraka, in his afterword to *Shut Up Shut Down*, “Nowak enters, socialized in a contemporary forwarding, advance, recall, re-assertion of the life, the sticks and stones: a child of immigrants, and with the sturdy underpinning of class (as life distinction), class alienation” (160). But beyond this “sticks and stones” classed component of Nowak's work and the US-centered and often highly masculine material world documented by it, Nowak's poetics also gestures towards a picture of work that includes more than mining and its satellite labors, or the lack thereof. Nowak's statements of his own poetics have contained a wider and more flexible view of global labor. In a brief but provocative piece entitled “Notes Towards an Anticapitalist Poetics,” which appeared between the publication of the two later collections, Nowak writes:

The questions poets need to be asking today are vital to us all: What is the relationship between a US-controlled agenda for globalization (with Bush crony Paul Wolfowitz as head of the World Bank) and the future of language and the imagination amidst ubiquitous privatization? Can the free market forces of the US publishing industry (including the massive, almost exclusively non-unionized chain bookstores) and the vastly expanding US model of creative writing production within the MFA industry produce anything other than neoliberal writers and neoliberal tracts? As the U.S. economy transitions from a modernist manufacturing economy to late capitalism's service economy, what would a service economy poetry and poetics look like, and who among us is prepared to step forward and imagine it?

Cultural production, the service economy, immaterial labor, globalized labor and poetic labor under neoliberalism: the issues that would amount to a "service economy poetry and poetics" range beyond Nowak's thematic documentary concerns so far.

Some critics have approached the question of contemporary labor and literature "beyond" the working class through the lens of subjectivity. To discuss Nowak and other contemporary poets (Myung Mi Kim, Ed Roberson, Juliana Spahr, and others), Margaret Ronda evokes Michael Denning's concept of "wageless life," or forms of subjectivity pushed beyond what might previously have counted as that of the "worker." Denning notes:

Understandings built upon wage labour cannot, we are told, account for the reality lived by the most numerous and wretched of the world's

population: those without wages, those indeed without even the hope of wages. Bare life, wasted life, disposable life, precarious life, superfluous life: these are among the terms used to describe the inhabitants of a planet of slums. It is not the child in the sweatshop that is our most characteristic figure, but the child in the streets, alternately predator and prey. (79)

For Ronda, Nowak's work points towards a negation of subjectivity: dispossession not at the level of towns, jobs, or materials but of personhood. For her, the book is about the failure of poetic language that is linked to or stems from this failure of the subject.⁷

Certainly Nowak and his contemporaries confront the issue of subjective annihilation and / or linguistic breakdown under late capitalism. Yet Denning also notes that the "frame" of working-class subjectivity and solidarity is a narrow one, suggesting that "we decentre wage labour in our conception of life under capitalism" (80) in an effort to pay more attention to life beyond waged labor. In *Shut Up Shut Down*, especially, the overall effect of Nowak's work is not a silence of voices—despite the inclusion of white space, fragments, forms of stuttering—but their multiplicity. A de-centering of a single subject yields versions of expression of the same theme through a range of positions. Nowak's formal work involves the nuances of language used by each speaker or structural position and the way these voices come together or fail to: a texture of words woven out of economic catastrophe. The book's title contains a play on this dual dynamic: if it is undeniable that the plants and mines in question "shut down," it is certainly not true that the people of those places "shut up." Instead, the book is about the imposition of one sort of "shutting" (down, of industry) and the refusal of another (up, of

voices). Nowak's book implicitly emphasizes the contrast between "up" and down" rather than the similarity of "shutting": shut down, speak up might be better for it.

Rather than a record of subjective expulsion, then, Nowak's work is one of unlikely inclusion—of the rendering of the voices of expelled workers via the work of poetry. That this inclusion occurs via formal invention and innovation is one point where Nowak diverges from understandings of "documentary" practice: for Nowak, there is no claim to poetic transparency or objectivity. In a discussion of Nowak's poetic practice that pairs his poems and Kenneth Goldsmith's long conceptual poem *Day*, Michael Leong has argued for the importance of the "de-skilling" of poetic labor to Nowak's oeuvre, suggesting in the end that "we must also understand a concomitant 'reskilling' operating within [Nowak and Goldsmith's] processes of composition": a shift from a notion of privileged autonomous poetic craft to a poetics of engagement with the archive (of newspaper materials, especially). But although Nowak poses the question in terms of "service" poetics, a notion that also invokes the idea of incompatible skill sets, we might frame the issue in terms of presence and expressive possibility rather than abstractions (mental capacities) or absences (what kind of skill is not present) by turning to Denning's idea of a "superfluous worker," or a position of superfluity: the laid-off worker who, nevertheless, exists and has things to say about work. Frequently, Nowak's poetic work takes place as a superfluous operation, adding a "poetic" dimension to the materials Nowak catalogs in a deliberate way that makes no other claims for poetic work besides its presence.

This dynamic is especially evident in what we could call the "instructional materials" sections of *Coal Mountain Elementary*, the mock lesson plans interspersed

between prose accounts of mining disasters and Teh's and Nowak's photographs. For example:

MATERIALS:

Pen and paper,

A computer with Internet access (147)

or

DIFFERENTIATION:

In preparing to write

the short stories,

pair students

with strong writing skills

with other students

who may be

more creative

but need help

in writing their stories (168)

Each of these excerpts contains explicitly meta-poetic statements in the guise of lesson plans for teachers. Nowak underscores what is already evident about his work: it uses internet-based research, puts poetry towards "writing [the] stories" of others, and relies at least to some degree on "appropriated" text. Yet in addition to this is the formal arrangement of these statements as short-lined lyric poems shot through with white space in the midst of a textual and representational environment otherwise heavily charged with color and linguistic texture, via the photographs and prose blocks that carry the

substantive content of the lives, faces, stories, and contexts of the miners and communities the book tracks. With these deliberately broken and spaced lines, Nowak evokes the lyric inset characteristic of prosimetric forms (elsewhere, he has spoken of being inspired by the Japanese *haibun*), in which the reader would be justified in expecting to find the images, musical language, rhetorical devices, etc. that are absent from sections of prose and photographs. In fact, though, the operation of these poems is somewhat the opposite. Perhaps more than anywhere else, here Nowak's language is unoriginal and standardized; it's difficult to determine to what extent these lines adhere to the original educational materials of the American Coal Foundation, but their reliance on them is clear. These sections give *instructions* for the set-up, execution, and continuation of the book's "lessons" in a markedly functional manner. Even as the language has unmistakably been worked into a poetic form and reminds us of material artistic practice, the sections themselves are firmly tied back into another non-poetic work, into the realm of pre-existing instructional materials.

For Nowak, poetic craft is not absent; rather, it is manifest as an extra layer of labor, another step, a process that adds new sounds to existing language, turns sentences into new forms, and invites new ways of reading and modes of attention that exist in concert with—above all, not overpowering—other media. To what end? Certainly not lyrical "effect," except ironically (and Nowak has elsewhere been ironic about poetic devices that manipulate affect, at one point claiming to have resisted ending *Coal Mountain Elementary* with a particular photograph because he wanted to avoid "that lyrical, desperate power chord with which far too many poems end," Wagstaff, 474). Instead, in these parts of *Coal Mountain Elementary*, poetic labor is most strongly visible

through the way it resists its own displacement, operating from a decentered or otherwise radically altered center, one that not only allows for the operation of other voices but, moreover, owes nothing to the functioning of poetic “craft” that (one suspects Nowak might believe) an MFA program values and teaches.⁸

Despite its apparent uselessness—despite the fact that it has, in a sense, nothing to do, and nothing to do with the “old ways” of conceiving poetic labor in terms of originality, meaning, or affect—poetic work is made visible. This odd persistence is at the heart of Nowak’s version of a poetics of contemporary labor. The types and groups of workers Nowak is most concerned with resemble other workers not only in the exploitative nature of their mining work—the way it exhausts or jeopardizes their time or their bodies—but in the way either the potential absence of that work (in the case of deindustrialization) or its excess destructive force (through deleterious environmental impacts, or through working or structural conditions that lead to dehumanization or death) threaten to silence or render invisible the workers themselves. As Denning reminds us, the vocabulary of the “redundant, superfluous, precarious” worker has been present in theories of labor at least since Marx as the opposite of the productive worker (97). The goal, Denning suggests, is to find a way to talk about the increasing number of workers in this position in a way that does not *de facto* reduce them to human refuse, garbage, waste, or non-existent subjects whose activity, if it exists at all, is meaningless.

As a poet, Nowak operates at this last level of the superfluous: Nowak’s work would be almost equally effective as photo-journalistic essays, and using the bibliographies Nowak himself provides, a reader could easily obtain a far better sense of the deindustrializing regions of middle America and Appalachia than any poem in the

collections provides. Nowak makes very little claim for any vision or understanding produced by poetic labor itself. The information we need about the world is already there, or it is present in the book; poetic labor exists separately. Like the character Francine in the poem “Francine Michalek Drives Bread” (“More than anything else [...] you have to start / with the idea /// that where there’s a worker / all is not yet / lost,” *Shut Up*, 112), whose constant low hum runs throughout the poem’s story of work and dispossession, Nowak’s poetic work reminds us of its presence even when it has ceased to seem useful or central. Although it offers little content towards understanding or picturing the global situation of workers, *poiesis* happens at a quietly parallel level. An ongoing activity and a sensed presence, it both brings out other voices and commands attention even in its precarity. Its marginalized superfluity is not (yet) reducible to silence.

*

Fred Moten’s evasive, lyrical, sonically textured poetics seem far removed from Nowak’s pared-down ones. Moten’s critical work, which bridges theory, performance studies, and black radical and experimental traditions, similarly, is far from Nowak’s more plainspoken labor activism. Yet in a different way of conceptualizing and performing poetry’s formalizing work, the sonic figures generated by Moten’s poetic labor also entail a strong connection to labor politics, adding dimensions to Nowak’s picture of a deindustrializing America and expanding the idea of a “service poetics.” In his 2014 book *The Little Edges*, Moten, like Nowak, re-directs our attention to “the edges” of experience and the sonic nuances of the poem, and also to the edges of “mainstream” labor and the marginalized black and Latino/a workers whose names and voices haunt the book. Via the concept of “the edges,” and its formal enactment in his

poems, Moten gives us a new way to understand changes in labor, through the aesthetic work on and for the senses provided by poetic performance. What is most distinctive about Moten's work is the affective claim it makes on these liminal spaces through *poiesis*: what was a persistent but quiet remainder of poetics in Nowak's work is, here, full-throated and ample lyric work, necessary for the way it makes these margins into habitable spaces, at least for the duration of the poem.

Complicating and expanding "what work is" is central to Moten's project. In his critical work, Moten (like Robinson) emphasizes that the deep historical experience of the black subject has been one of exploitation, marginalization, and the denial of subjectivity brought about by slavery and its aftermath. But where Robinson rejects Marxist thought for its failure to account for these experiences, Moten turns this thought inside-out in order to account for them. The black worker, Moten stresses, has in fact been made to function more like the commodity, the object exchanged and used, rather than formed or treated as a human subject. In his critical study *In the Break* (2003), Moten examines a series of lectures delivered by members of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, a group formed in Detroit in the late 1960s. Through their work, he explains:

thinking labor-powers as a commodity requires brushing against, if not necessarily fully confronting, the trace of a breakdown between the person and the thing that is, on the one hand, before the absolute differentiation of these terms each from the other, and on the other hand, reestablished always and everywhere in the fact of slavery. [...According to Marx, if the commodity could speak it would say that its value is not inherent; it

would say, ultimately, that it cannot speak. But commodities speak and scream, opening tonal and grammatical fissures that mark the space of the very globe-girdling, nationalist-under-erasure political agency and theoretical intervention. (213)

The point for Moten is that the speeches and screams of the commodity (who is also a human being denied full agency and expression under conditions of capital) have never been absent, although they have never been heard. They need now to be listened to, and this listening requires a new way of (poetic) work.⁹

That Moten's jumping-off point here is a group of labor activists in industrial Detroit is no accident: Moten's theories about black labor do not posit a past that is far-off or "over." Turing Joyce's conception of ongoing historical time ("history is a nightmare from which I cannot awake") into the embodied experience of time and place ("I ran from it but was still in it," from *The Feel Trio*), Moten deals with continuities of work, race, and exploitation that persist and mutate over time. Continuing forward, Moten's work takes place primarily after the moment of American deindustrialization, when globalization and the rise of the service economy have wrought distinct changes of their own. As Arne Kalleberg notes, the shift from "the [postwar] age of security" to the "age of flexibility" also entails a "geographical relocation of production." "Advances in information and communication technologies," Kalleberg writes, as well as increased ease in moving "goods, capital, and people" mean "employers [can] exert control over decentralized and spatial diverse labor processes" (27). If the centers of labor are now less centers than nodes in chains of goods and services, the organization of jobs themselves also becomes decentered, untethered from the constraints of timetables and

hourly wages. Kalleberg continues: “The growth of the service sector has also fueled the expansion of contingent and nonstandard work, since jobs in the service sector are often easier to schedule in a flexible way” (30). Finally, if this development occurs—it seems—everywhere, it does not occur everywhere in the same way for everyone: Kalleberg and others note the deep racial and gender-based inequalities that persist and are exacerbated in this new and diffuse regime of work.

It is in part because it does not fit into any stable landscape or place that Moten’s work is relevant to thinking about labor today. *The Little Edges* is composed of several long sections, often in what Moten calls “shaped prose,” or “a form that works the ‘little edges’ of lyric and discourse, and radiates out into the space between them.” Moten’s is an investigation of a conceptual space: “the edge” of places, times, aesthetic and personal experiences. These investigations are not abstract; instead, Moten’s poetic work is also to transform the space of “the edge” into a center in its own right, still operating beneath or at the extreme margins but nevertheless expanding into rich music of its own. In her study of Michael Jackson, Judith Hamera locates Jackson’s performances between a childhood labor milieu of Gary, Indiana (where Jackson’s father was a steelworker) and the final construction of a fanciful “Neverland,” posing “the seeming fixity of industrialization versus the neither-here-nor-there fluidity of neoliberal globalization” (752). Similarly, Moten’s performance-based poetics give us a way to understand—or to dwell in, and even to enjoy—a space of work marked by an uneasy sense of its being at once nowhere and everywhere, beyond the factory, the industrial center city, the working-class neighborhood, the office, and even the working day.

As a first example, a section of the poem “fortrd.fortrn” is worth an extended close reading. The poem opens:

precision and humility in the experiment
 is written on the way you customize your
 uniform, a ritual of lotion and stillness in
 the morning, ‘fore you make it in to work
 on the
 edge of
 your
 train [...] (6)

These lines present an image—a “you” getting ready for work—but the most important part of this “ritual” is that it demands to be sensed and listened to. Moten gives no narrative elaboration of the worker’s routine; this “you” is not a character. We can use Robert Hayden’s poem “Those Winter Sundays” (1966) as an instructive contrast. In that poem, the poet draws our attention to a father’s labor that occurs outside the boundaries of the traditional working day (“Sundays too my father got up early,” the poem begins); the poem is a marked effort to render visible a work outside work. In Moten’s poem, however, there is no sense of weekday or season, none of the external structure marked out by the word “ritual.” Instead, as the poem slows the attention into a labor of sound and rhythm, internal poetic form fills in a structure of its own. Individual phonemes are significant: in the second couplet, Moten sets up two sound patterns: the “o / r” sound, repeated over the heavily stressed syllables “*uniform*” (and carried over into “*ritual*”),

“*morning*,” “*fore*,” “*work*”; and the slightly syncopated and more lightly stressed “I” sounds opened with “*humility*” and continued through “*ritual*,” “*lotion*,” and “*stillness*.” The closure of this densely sonic section is the stressed syllable “*work*”: a word which concludes the “or”-stress sequence and closes the pattern of “w” sounds opened in “*written*” and “*way*.”

Despite the stress on “*work*” here, this passage is more about the situation of pre-work than the work itself: it is perhaps not the emphasis on work that matters but the ramping up of sensory attention in the state of pre-work. Although without fixed times, places, or characters, the couplet fills with the rhythms, sounds, minute motions, and tiny patterns of a worker’s preparation for a day of work. This attention brings us, finally, to a moment of vividness and intimacy (the smell of lotion and the small slapping sounds of its application) even in the absence of the body of the worker. Importantly, this pre-work work is aesthetic: “precision and humility in the experiment” functions doubly for Moten’s poetics, reminding us of the “experiment of ‘shaped text’” itself. Poetic labor parallels the attention of aesthetic pre-work, and draws our attention to that work: a type of labor that exists before labor, at the edges of the working day—perhaps even in the absence of any fixed conception of the working day—in the intimacy of the home before the commute to the job, and even as the working subject him or herself remains, at this point in the poem, invisible.

As the poem goes on, other elements of labor and subjectivity come into focus.

Moten continues:

you might be someone that needs listening to. you might need somebody,
too.

a lot of this is found in what we have. almost all of this belongs to you. are

gon' gimme some? naw, you on your way to work,
 little sister, that's alright, young man. bye, baby. (6)

If Moten's lines here suggest a useful reciprocity for poetic labor—they listen, they point us towards “someone that needs listening to”—they also suggest the necessity of leaving room for difference. First, this difference is sexual: the poem evokes (but dismisses) the possibility of encounter (“you gon' gimme some”). But the poem also goes on to admit and insist on racial difference:

my baby's black representational space is another world.

 black workers of the other world unite up in there, one
 named peanut the other named bush, making shit up in

 chance theater which is a farm truck in exploded rows (9)

Moten underscores that whether the labor evoked is service work or agricultural work or aesthetic work, it is shot through with gendered and racial difference.¹⁰ This difference, in these lines, is specifically linked to the co-mingling of aesthetic or imaginative and other types of labor: playing with the idea of proletarian revolution, Moten—like Marx, although ironically—envisions “another world” in which the work of making is also the work of “making shit up.” The point, in other words, is not that Moten's project is documentary in the sense of the concrete information it gives about “the edges,” but that it operates by *leaving room*: letting the worker go on her way to work, emphasizing the “other world” of “black representational space” as a place of real and revolutionary work. Rather than embark on a project of fixing this unfixed work, Moten marks it out as

elusive but sensed, and richly important. Aesthetic work relates to labor not in terms of the information it presents about this labor but in terms of the way it turns labor into a space for attention and imagination.

The possibility of the transformation of work through its conjunction with aesthetic work is further visible, and in more concrete context, in the poem “the gramsci monument.” Contrary to what its title suggests, this poem is not about theories or philosophies of labor. Rather, it is Moten’s response to a 2013 installation with the same title by the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschorn, located in the Forest Houses project in the South Bronx. It is also not “about” life, work, or the absence of work in that space, although that space is shaped by both work and the absence of work. As Glen Ligon notes in a review of the installation, the neighborhood had an unemployment rate of 21% and an overall poverty rate of 43% at the time (229).¹¹ Instead, the poem performs its own work in that space; it is about what it is to be in that space and to work *aesthetically*. “the gramsci monument” begins in the conditional:

if the projects become a project from outside
then the projects been a project forever

One reading of this tense would emphasize its wistfulness: “you can hear the way public housing as a social project embodies what could have been but isn’t,” notes critic Elizabeth Willis.¹² Yet this schema, by which cultural production swoops in as an alternative to racial discrimination and unemployment, is not the one Moten sets up. Rather than a space of compensatory production for an “if” never realized, the space of the poem *is* the realized space of that “if,” brought about through aesthetic work.

Thus “the gramsci monument” continues:

come on, come get some of this project. we protect
 the project with our open hands. the architect is in mining
 and we dispossess him. we protect the project by handing.
 let's bust the project up. let's love the project. can the
 projects be loved? we love the projects.

While the poem, like all of Moten's work, has a tactile relationship to language, riffing on the meanings of "project" and words that sound like it, and operating at the level of the minute phonetic detail, Moten's tone here is louder and grander than elsewhere in the book. In verbs and structures that invite participation ("come on," "let's bust," "let's love," and the call-and-response question and answer that ends this excerpt), the poem both suggests and performs a way of working that stands in opposition to the "architect" (here one thinks of the city planners who have decimated this particular community, and many others like it) and his "mining" (negative connotations range from environmental destruction—no accident that Sassen, Nowak, and Rukeyser all focus on the figure of the mining company—to more figurative senses of the word, the accumulation of wealth and profit at the expense of others). Although they are never referred to by the poem as such, the people who might have been seen as the dispossessed are now called "to dispossess," and instead of the work of "mining" we have the work of "handing." An echo of the phrase "open hands," this form of work means, among other things: collective action, physical making (from "hand" to "handle"), reciprocity, living labor, and perhaps, in a pun on "mine / mind," a turn away from an exploitative industry but also a turn away

from thinking, conceptualizing, or theorizing to the body, community, the senses, and presence.

This transmutation of a possible “if” into a sensible space is vital. We can remember Moten’s reframing of the potential speech of the commodity: “if” here is again the space of “impossible” speech. That speech, when it becomes audible via performance, or the poem, carries with it a “revolutionary force.” To ask about this force, Moten writes, is

to think what’s at stake in the music: the universalization or socialization of the surplus, the generative force of a venerable phonic propulsion, the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjugation, the old-new thing, the freedom drive that animates black performances. (*In the Break*, 12)

“Cultural production” animates the conditional space, exists both against and *with* what might be seen as social failure or the making-surplus of human beings: that is, it reveals even the space of that failure as something else. The payoff of listening through aesthetic work to the work beyond it is not restricted to aesthetic pleasure: it includes possibilities for new ways of sharing, hearing, being, and bringing about revolutionary change.

Moten has emphasized these ideas of collective agency and presence in his remarks on the poem—agency and presence not necessarily brought about by the poem but revealed by the work of the poem in making them available to the senses. Jose Esteban Muñoz provides the following account of the poem’s genesis (Moten wrote it on site before a reading at the project) and reception:

One interested audience member asked Fred how he felt being there, at the Gramsci Monument, in the Bronx. He talked about feeling good in the space and how rare that feeling could be [...] Someone asked him what he thought of Hirschhorn's project, and he responded by saying that there had always been something here and the installation did not unveil anything new. He used the metaphor of food to elaborate this point. He explained that sometimes, even though not always the healthiest thing to do, one must salt one's food to really taste the flavor. The bright flavor of this space was brought out by the monument, but that taste had always been there, which is to insist that the effervescence of the actually existing relationality of the Forest Houses and the promise of collectivity was and is always present in such spaces. (120)

The metaphor of salting one's food underscores that a level of aesthetic work is necessary to bring out "the bright flavor of this space": the work of the poem. To bring about a condition in which the audience is able to "love the project" requires recognizing the working and disenfranchised lives situated there and shaped by it as active and real, pointing towards them and making them visible and audible both as they are, and as they are transformed into the space and sense of the poem, from the edge to the center of experience. It is the work of poetry to reveal "was and is always present"—here, the possibility of collectivity and (re)generation. Again, *poiesis* becomes a way holding together "sound in [...] sensual space" and "blackness in the political space of labor and of postmodern global and economic space" (*In the Break*, 223). In this case, the space of the Forest Houses becomes, through the "handing" of the poem—which signals its own

distance from other sorts of work that silence and exploit—a space in which to feel, and even to feel good.

*

Nowak and Moten turn US deindustrialization and its aftermath into a space of activity and presence for and through the work of poetry. There remains the question of what work poetry can effect, and how, with respect to two other internationally felt developments in the changing global landscape of life and labor: migration and marginalization. Working through the orienting poles of heterogeneity and interconnectedness—both subjective and structural—Caroline Bergvall offers an adventurous foray into poetic possibility vis-à-vis global migration. In her 2014 book *Drift*, Bergvall’s poetry yields a positive picture of aesthetic capacity to formalize some aspects of global migration through the exceptional capaciousness of her forms and of the “lyric I” her work involves. Rather than encompass only a purely poetic past, the deep history of that “I” functions to gesture towards the desire that “I” be a space that is open, in motion, and receptive to global contemporary forces and trends, even as the other forms of the book remind us of the material difficulties of that opening.

Bergvall herself, first, exemplifies the expanded—drifting—category of “American / global” poetry that is at play throughout this project. Biographically, Bergvall isn’t American at all—she is of Norwegian-French origins, and lives and works primarily in England—but her most recent two books have been published by New York-based Nightboat Books, and reviewed and discussed primarily in the critical context of American poetry. Sections of *Drift* were commissioned by the New York publication *Triple Canopy* and staged at the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art; installations from

Drift appeared at DIA: Beacon, and an exhibition at a Lower East Side Gallery was reviewed in 2015 in the *New York Times*. Bergvall's book is, in turn, constructed around a set of "drifts": the drift of languages over time, the personal feeling of being "adrift" in projects of artistic making and at the end of relationships, and the drifting of a boat of migrants, bound from Libya for the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2011. Of the 72 people on board that boat, 63 died despite contact with several military and fishing vessels; the boat became known as the "left to die boat," and Bergvall uses a written report of the incident prepared by the European Forensic Architecture research agency as material for a long section at the book's center. Given the current circumstances of 2017, Bergvall's choice to focus on this incident now looks prescient. Although the report notes that political turmoil in North Africa in the aftermath of the Arab Spring meant that 2011 saw a record number of migrant deaths (1,822) in the Mediterranean (16), according to a more recent report issued by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), that number rose in 2014 to "3,072 in the Mediterranean, compared with an estimate of 700 in 2013." The same report "estimates that [globally] at least 4,077 migrants died in 2014, and at least 40,000 since the year 2000" (11).¹³ Given the record figure (65 million) for displaced people worldwide in 2016, the numbers will only have risen drastically today—a situation exacerbated by recent anti-immigrant and anti-refugee action by the US government.

The phenomenon of global migration is nothing new, but today's global migration crisis is unique, and it is important to note that it is the locus of intersection for an international group of forces—another set of "drifts"—US and otherwise. Classical definitions of forced migration and refugee status are inadequate in the face of today's

increasingly complicated global picture; “[d]iverse and multiple reasons beyond political persecution often underpin contemporary ‘forced’ migration with mobility rarely due to one distinctive event / process,” as Hanna Lewis, Peter Dwyer, et. al. point out (26).¹⁴ And while “political unrest” in a given country is likely to be seen as primarily the result of forces within that country, the displacement of millions of people is bound up with global flows of capital and labor: according to 2015 ILO statistics, 150.3 million of the world’s 232 million international migrants (and 72.7% of the working age migrant population) were migrant workers. Global economic forces are part of the picture in countries to which migrants travel, where neoliberalism’s emphasis on “free trade, market liberalization and deregulation, fiscal austerity and privatization” helps create a climate in which large numbers of people can and do shift according to capital’s demands, and are subsequently rendered all the more precarious in their new environments.¹⁵ They are also, finally, at play in the political situations that lead to forced migration, which are still tied to economic developments and linked to countries in the Global North; “state fragility and economic collapse” are likely to “be a result of damaging Western imposed neoliberal policies” (26). In other words, it would be a mistake to see the issue of global migration from a US point of view as a concatenation of local phenomena occurring elsewhere, in other countries; instead, such movements and motions are linked to the same developments of deindustrialization and neoliberalization in which Nowak’s and Moten’s poetic work are situated.¹⁶

In Bergvall’s work, the question of how and to what degree aesthetic work can be intertwined with these complex global processes rises to the fore. *Drift* is a multi-modal book: it comprises black-and-white drawings, sections of experimental lyric that riff on

the Old English poem “The Seafarer” and the Icelandic Vinland Sagas, the middle inset that recounts the “left-to-die boat” incident, a poem called “Shake” that leans on old Norwegian and Norse poems, a “Log” that is a record of Bergvall’s method, process, and experience (mostly in the form of personal artist’s narrative) of writing the book, and poetic / visual essays called “Noping” and “þ” that are about both first-person personal experience and changes in language over large swaths of historical time. Although the sections cluster around these issues of drift, movement, loss, and being lost, there is little substantive continuity between them: one would be hard-pressed to say *how*, exactly, these different versions of “lost” are related. The logic of the book’s construction, in other words, appears almost purely juxtapositional: a personal drift is like the drift of language is like the drift of a boat of migrants.

Clearly this logic is unsatisfactory, flattening enormous levels of time, space, privilege, and economic and social inequality. Much of the book’s critical reception has registered a degree of discomfort with Bergvall’s project. Yet while reviews tend to frame the project in terms of the “left-to-die” boat section, few seem to engage explicitly with that narrative: the book is primarily examined as an investigation of language—either an interesting or a confusingly misleading one. For a *New York Times* reviewer, for example, writing of an installation of the project, “Bergvall’s paradoxically minimal installation is packed so full of references it’s easy to get lost; unlike Géricault’s epic painting, which critiqued everything from the slave trade to the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, ‘Drift’ leaves us in a sea of disparate, seemingly disconnected sources and allusions” (Schwendener). For a writer in the *Chicago Review*, the book demonstrates the failure of a “radical individualism” (275) to register social suffering

adequately. Another writer, the most neutral of these three, achieves this neutrality at the cost of a clean dismissal of the more explicitly political content: “[w]hile part of the book is devoted to the case of the famous ‘Left-To-Die Boat’ [...] *Drift*’s particular heft derives from its investment in Anglo-Saxon” (Kaufmann).

This critical displacement—the general failure to engage with what might be Bergvall’s failure to engage the book’s political axis—is telling. I want to suggest that this problem of (dis)continuity is part of the subject of Bergvall’s book, and that the discomfort provoked by Bergvall’s juxtapositions is part of the book’s aesthetic labor. As if to underscore this, the book is printed on both black and white paper: the “left-to-die” boat sections and graphics of constellations surrounding it are printed in white on black, and there are section markers in black sheets to separate the log, the essays, and the sections of Bergvall’s graphics. But looking closely at certain sections of the text also helps us bring into focus some of the questions Bergvall is posing—even if their answers are elusive or nonexistent. Here is the opening poem, “Song 1”:

Let me speak my true journeys own true songs
 I can make my sorry tale right soggy truth
 sothgied sodsgate some serious wrecaan my ship
 sailing rekkies tell Hu ic how ache wracked [...]
 [...]
 couldn’t get signs during many a nightwacko
 caught between whats gone ok whats coming
 on crossing too close to the cliffs Blow wind
 blow, anon am I (25)

The first line of this block of text is fairly straightforward, recognizably tied to first-person modes such as narrative or, more appropriately, lyric: an injunction with a first person pronoun (“let me”) for self-expression (“let me speak”), followed by two “own true” elements (“journeys” and “songs”)—constructions that evoke the love lyric (“mine own true love”) even as they set the book’s many drifts into motion.

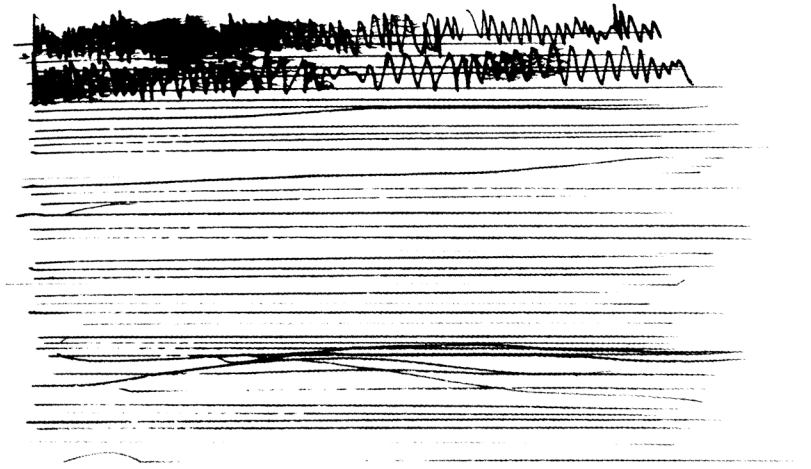
As the poem continues, the estranging effects of a vaguely (but not accurately) archaic language seem, however, to demonstrate the eventual “sogginess” of this truth: a saturation of “s” and “(w)r” sounds, a metaphorical shipwreck of sound and meaning clustered around the recounting of what may or may not be an actual shipwreck. The past materials and manifestations of language, Bergvall makes clear, are never really past. Just as in the poem / essay “Noþing,” when the “þ” literally becomes an obstacle—“It’s a fine day • you step on the top soil of your strata • you trip over some þing nearly makes you fall over” (171)—language bears the material reminder of a past, its own, in a way that both comprises and obstructs its present functioning. But it is important to recognize that this disturbance doesn’t happen only at this top level of language: instead, it has deep ramifications for the “I” of the poem and for the purported purpose of lyric self-expression (song). The poem seems to effect a dip into and out of this troubled engagement with language’s messy temporality, but by the end it has regularized slightly: “whats gone ok whats coming / on,” as if the voice returns to the mouth of a relatively stable contemporary speaker. The poem concludes with the refrain that ends each of the 16 poems in the book called “Song”: “Blow wind blow anon am I.” On one level, we can read the refrain as almost the reversal of the poem’s opening condition: the replacement of the situated lyric I who can possess her “own true” anything by “anon,” the

anonymous poet of “The Seafarer” and the Norse texts with which Bergvall engages, and a statement of desire for the buffeting of linguistic and textual histories which replaces the desire for self-expression. This reading is sonically reinforced by “anon am I,” which sounds like a feint towards the word “anonymous” in full.

But if we follow Bergvall’s lead and look into the word’s history, “anon” has meant other things: the OED gives obsolete definitions that include “soon, immediately” and “the same,” as well as “[i]n (or into) one body, company, or mass; in one; together; in one accord; in unity.” This final definition in fact hews closest to the word’s Old English etymology: “*on án* into one, *on áne* in one, i.e. in one body, mind, state, act, way, course, motion, movement, moment.” Thus what comes to take the place of lyric self-expression is not only textual history, but—via the interference of the material histories of text and language—a social body, a being-one with the motions and movements that surround the “one.” A single “own true” subjectivity is disrupted, and the desire to express one singular journey becomes an injunction to be *further* disrupted, to the point that the singular journey becomes a multiply expanded one. The inclusion of the left-to-die boat narrative is part of the sphere of the book’s space of “anon”: we might read the lines “couldn’t get signs during many a nightwacko / caught between whats gone ok whats coming” as urgently contemporary, speaking to a situation in which literally not being able to “get signs” (for the Libyan boat, the failure of GPS signaling) means death for many, and in which “caught between whats gone ok whats coming / on” accurately characterizes the present moment, and the contingent place of aesthetic labor, as well as a wider context of precarious life beyond that.

This opening poem, then, contains a hinge from an “I” who asks to be able to speak about herself and her journey to something else: an “I” who asks to be caught up in the drifts and forces of an “all.” The way Bergvall formulates this demand is hopeful: “anon am I” contains the promise of “soon,” even as it involves the continual deferral of this one-ness, pointing towards a future temporality, unfolding into an inevitably subjunctive space. What is expressed here is not so much a drifting “I” in relation to the book’s other drifts, but a drifting “I” who *desires* this relation. Bergvall writes elsewhere in the book that she operates according to the “forensic principle: that every action or contact leaves a trace” (134), but it seems to me that what the songs of *Drift* express is rather the exhortation that this principle should be operative in lyric poetry—that the poem should be open to and should register all the things with which it comes into contact. In a way, this project is continuous with the rest of Bergvall’s work; of her book *Croup*, for example, Christopher Nealon has written that it makes visible and tangible the “political histories —like Norman rule over the English —that we carry in the shapes we make on the page” (107). *Drift* carries this project several steps further: the shaper of the shapes on the page should, Bergvall suggests, carry the traces not only of history (personal or textual) but of the expanded present in which both maker and text exist.

While I have chosen not to discuss the performance-based aspects of Bergvall’s work, focusing on *poiesis* in the narrower sense of poetic (textual) making, I want finally to turn to the graphic component of *Drift*, reproducing here a page from a section of similar pages at the book’s beginning:



The idea of the forensic trace is again operative—but trace of what? Despite Bergvall’s own thoughtful and lengthy introspective examinations of her process in “Log,” I think it is the inscrutability of these lines—illegible poetry—that is important. They resist conceptualization; they evoke language for the eye but refuse much meaning. Emphasis here falls on the trace itself, held in tension with the book’s insistence that there *are* things to be traced, things that leave traces, or things that fail to be traced. Like Sassen, who insists on the differences between different sorts of “systemic edges” even as these are connected in complex and conceptually subterranean ways (215), Bergvall’s work insists on the differences between registers—between personal history, textual history, and social reality—even as it pushes them into contact with each other. If “anon am I” is a figure for the openness of the poetic space in which these are registered, the graphic component forces us not to reduce them into conceptual relations (even those created by the poetic work of simile or metaphor) that would be false. In the end, the aesthetic object might be seen as a pre-figuration of conceptual knowledge not yet available. How the drift of languages over time relates to feelings of displacement in language and in love relates to real global displacements happening on massive and brutal scales remains a

question: for Bergvall, the point of aesthetic work is to force that question, and to provide a material record of its asking.

*

Bergvall's project is ambitious and optimistic in the claims it makes for the capacity of *poiesis* to create meaningful juxtaposition and to open up spaces for relation and questioning. Bhanu Kapil, on the other hand, works along opposite lines: "One thing next to another," Kapil writes at the beginning of her book *Ban en Banlieue* (2015), "doesn't mean they touch" (13). Like Bergvall's, Kapil's book pushes generic boundaries—a radical assemblage of notes, descriptions of performances and installations, dedications, appendices, thoughts, musings, imaginings, and self-castigations—even though it was published and received squarely in the world of American small-press poetry publishing. In a sense like Bergvall, Kapil herself represents an expanded version of an "American" poet: of Punjabi descent, Kapil grew up in Britain and emigrated to the United States, where she teaches at Naropa University and lives in Colorado. Of all the poetry examined in this chapter, Kapil's *Ban en Banlieue* might seem the farthest removed from the issues of contemporary labor under consideration, although it takes place around the same central set of issues: globalization, neoliberalization, marginalization, immigration, and life and work on the "systemic edges." Yet this work is relevant for two reasons: first, it captures and commemorates a watershed moment, one just prior to a shift both towards neoliberal governance and towards heightened anti-immigrant sentiment, and thus evokes a moment of possibility that is still significant today. Second, and relatedly, it functions as an urgent critique of the demands upon and state of poetic work in the present, registering the impossibility of

returning to that earlier moment under the conditions of advanced neoliberalism and the sorts of relationships to identity politics and poetics they help create. Kapil's version of *poiesis* is a radically different one: a negative sort of work, the refusal of certain forms of literary work—but a refusal that gestures towards an alternative, by example.

Ban en Banlieue is supposed to be the story of the fictional character Ban, a young girl who is walking home on April 23, 1979, in the London suburb of Southall. She hears the sound of an erupting race riot and lies down in the road to die. As a character, Ban is protean: she is also the Indian girl (nicknamed “The Fearless One”) who was raped, beaten, and left on the street to die in 2012 in New Delhi; she is sometimes also conflated with Kapil herself. Except *Ban in Banlieue* is not in fact, any fiction at all, and not the story of *any* character. It is, rather, the story of the failure to write the fiction:

Notes for a novel never written: a novel of the race riot: (Ban.) As my contribution to a panel at the limits of the poetic project—its capacity: for embodiment, for figuration, for what happens to bodies when we link them to the time of the event, which is to say—unlived time, the part of time that can never belong to us—I would like to present: a list of the errors I made as a poet engaging a novel-shaped space, the space of a book: set: on a particular day and at a particular time: April 23rd, 1979.

(20)

I turn to the figure of *paralipsis*, or the writing of something through the pretense of not writing it, in the coda that follows this chapter. Kapil's work, however, is not strictly paraliptic: its insistence on failure does not exactly lead to the production of the fiction of Ban despite itself. Instead, the figure of “Ban” is sharpest as I have described her, above;

the book shatters her into a collection “errors” or “notes towards,” which—like Notley’s “Songs For”—end up being digressions about the difficulty of writing, personal histories of Kapil’s childhood, emigration, and relationships, and descriptions of projects undertaken. As a whole, *Ban en Banlieue* becomes a sort of artist’s miscellany, much like Bergvall’s “Log” if the central text of *Drift* were itself to have gone missing—or Notley’s “Songs For,” if the both work of the song and the work of bearing the child were to end in failure (and if the generic category of “lullaby” were not also in play for Notley).

There are several ways to read this failure, the first having to do with the nature of the project. We might argue that Kapil’s failure is the failure of the aesthetic, and we are being given to understand that the character “Ban” and the temporality she represents are too complicated—too personal, too political, too marginal, too shadowy—to be contained within any existing form. Or, perhaps the problem would lie not with aesthetic representation but with the subject herself: if Ban represents a form subjectivity that lies, indeed, at the “systemic edge” (as was also proposed for Nowak’s characters “dispossessed” of language and subjectivity in the absence of work), the point of Kapil’s failure would be to point towards a failure of subjectivity, at least vis-à-vis any mode of linguistic representation. Certainly Ban is this liminal subject, and a large part of Kapil’s project is to inquire about this subject—as, for example, in her investigations into Ban’s name as “banned,” “abandoned,” “*en banlieue*,” etc., as well as her mediations on what it means to be invisible, ignored, or systemically abject. Yet Kapil’s repeated insistence on *process*, and her turn from the page to other materials, modes, and media (glass, charcoal, minerals, mirrors, feathers, flowers, installations, physical performance, even ingestion)

leads us also to think about the work of writing, putting *poiesis* itself—Kapil clings to the term, even if she expands its terrain—squarely at the center of the investigation.

Several things emerge about Kapil’s project when it is interrogated as a critical process, rather than an example of failure (*vis-à-vis* that subject, of that subject). First, Kapil’s project invokes the body of the poet, a racialized and gendered body that bears its own history of migration and aesthetic labor. (Again, Kapil is explicit about the presence of the “poet,” even as her project takes place “in the shape of a novel.”¹⁷) A partial catalog of how the body appears in the book demonstrates its importance, as it literally and viscerally re-presents the action of the projected novel (“a brown girl [lying] on the floor of the world,” 48):

Lie down on sidewalk next to the ivy in the exact spot that the novel is set
(16)

I walk—naked, barefoot, red—from the cinema in South Delhi [...] To
this spot. The anti-rape protestors make a circle around my body when I
lie down (16)

And there I lay down on the ground (25)

I want to lie down in the place where I am from: on the street I am from.
In the rain. Next to the ivy. As I did. on the border of Pakistan and India:
the two Punjabs. Nobody sees someone do this. I want to feel it in my
body—the root cause (31)

Returning to the U.S., I lay down in the mud, removing my clothes and exposing my body with its waist and hips and suitcase of limbs (35)

These statements are in turn held in tension with the other refrain that materializes in the record of process: the unbearability of writing. Again, a partial catalog:

Though I cannot bear it. I make a table out of the notes (8)

At the last moment, it seems unbearable to read my actual writing aloud in front of a local group (17)

It is so excruciating to write about these subjects that I take years, months: to write them (77)

Kapil's "lying down" is not just the performative re-enactment of the situation she wishes to describe. Her inclusion of these moments is not, or not just, a record of performances that would comprise the "real" story of Ban. Instead, the space of *Ban en Banlieue* becomes, in Sarah Brouillette's words, the space for the story of the "complicated, material history of [this] artist's labor." The point of Kapil's inclusion of autobiographical details (emigration to America, childhood in a racially-charged London suburb, continued awareness of displacement and racial difference in the US) is that the artist's labor is intimately connected to the artist's body. To write the pressures to which another body is subjected means facing the pressures to which the artist's body is subjected—which are enough to result in the failure of writing.

But this is not, as we saw with Bergvall, a juxtaposition of different but related forces upon different bodies. Instead, a large part of Kapil's point is that her own body is in fact subjected to an extension of the *same* historical forces that emerge at the moment the text seeks to explore. Writing what prevents Ban from being is, in other words, prevented by a version of the same conditions at a different point in time and space. As Cheryl Higashida points out, Ban's original historical context has fixed and very specific ramifications: "We live in the long shadow of the historical moment that Kapil revisits," she writes. In particular, the Southall protest Kapil references occurred during the run-up to the election of Margaret Thatcher later that year, when the far-right National Front staged a rally in the largely immigrant suburb (of the "five wards surveyed in 1976," writes David Renton, "46 per cent of the population had been born in the New Commonwealth"). To secure the rally, the government deployed almost three thousand police officers. A schoolteacher, Blair Peach, was killed while demonstrating. The details surrounding Peach's death were continually obscured by police, until a report was finally issued in 2010. Peach, to whom Kapil dedicates the book, has become a figure in Britain for police brutality and its subsequent cover-up.

As relevant to contemporary events as the evocation of police brutality, however, is the broader set of structural conditions heralded by this moment: 1979, just before the election of Thatcher and the Brixton riots, before the rise of finance capital, austerity, and emphasis on the "free market" and the individual that have come to characterize a neoliberal regime. In a concluding set of appendices, Kapil poses a set of questions—"How does the Far Right organize and come to be, in a post-war society (1965 – 1983). And how do you track a parallel rise in ethnic (British Asian) fundamentalism within a

citizenry?” She frames the project as one of writing a “set of pre-conditions, the most basic of premonitions [...] Ban is a historical fiction, in this sense” (96). As Higashida writes, furthermore, this fiction is one created “in order to push against neoliberalism's hegemonic consolidation and its legacies: the grotesque inequalities growing within but especially between nations, the cooptation and commodification of ‘identity politics,’ the xenophobic and heteronormative calls for stronger nationalisms”—a set of divisions and solidifications that are increasingly salient at present (I am thinking, at the moment of writing, of the rise and election of Donald Trump, the Brexit vote, the frightening prospect of Marine Le Pen in France, and the rise of global migration and conditions of precarity in the US, Europe, and beyond).¹⁸ In other words, Ban’s global reach—beyond the Asian-British relationship its central storyline takes up—is fundamental to this initial “set of pre-conditions” and present in Kapil’s subsequent investigations of them.

Specifically, *Ban en Banlieue* raises the question of reaction to difference in literary work—which is usually its incorporation or co-option. Kapil ties her own failure to the failure to perform under the pressures of an identity set out for her not only in the sphere of everyday life, self-perception, and relationships, but in also the literary world. This dynamic comes to the fore in two moments in the book, both of which further dramatize and explain Kapil’s failure. The first:

Prepare yourselves. I collaborated with Claudia Rankine on *Stories of Brown Girlhood*—but dropped the ball. It was too hard to keep writing the stories and also it was the same story, again and again. It was the story of a girl on the floor of the world; perhaps for Claudia it was a similar thing. She had a beautiful handbag and a family; I felt that I had ruined

everything and watched as even my handbag fell apart. I do not mean that I ruined the collaboration but rather that I did not have the kind of life that supported the work with charcoal and narrative forms. (24)

This excerpt is neither a critique of Rankine's success, nor a pitting of African-American versus British-Asian(-American) identity. Instead, it re-states the dynamic of pressure and lying down demonstrated in the two catalogs given above. The story Kapil feels compelled to recount is the story of "lying down," "a girl on the floor of the world"; it is the story of a certain precarity resulting from gender, geography, and race. A different version of aesthetic work, on the other hand, seems linked to a level of financial and societal recognition and stability. And yet Kapil is not suggesting that if she had a fancier handbag, she would be able to write the story of Ban, or that the problem is primarily the material conditions of her life. In a kind of circular logic, it is not that her life is not "supported" by a family and a degree of wealth and thus cannot produce certain literary forms, but that her life *is* as it is *because* it does not have the supports of family and financial security, and because of this it will not fit into those literary forms without becoming something entirely other to itself.

In this, Kapil resists the "co-optation and commodification of 'identity politics'" that are part of "neoliberalism's hegemonic consolidation," as the second excerpt clarifies:

The project fails at every instant and you can make a book out of that and I do, in the same time that it takes other people to write their second novel that is optioned by Knopf and which details the world they grew up in, just

as I am—detailing—which is to say: scouring / burnishing—the world I grew up in too. (22)

If *Ban en Banlieue* is the story of a subjectivity just before and left outside of this regime, Kapil herself must remain outside, and find a way to write a story that remains outside: the story of the “national abject” that resists, in Imogen Tyler’s words, “[becoming] enmeshed within the interpellative fabric of everyday life” (9). Kapil’s story resists the “narrative forms and charcoal” that could be used to sketch a life, which would then be reproduced, re-told, circulated, packaged, sold, optioned by Knopf, etc. Both inside and outside of literary and academic institutions, this packaging and profiting from difference is tied into the larger dynamic of neoliberal power and governance, which is increasingly able—in the words of Roderick Ferguson—to produce “formulas for the incorporation rather than the absolute repudiation of difference” (12).

Kapil’s work is perhaps the most experimental of the texts I examine. Yet in approaching these questions of literary institutions and their absorption of minority difference, it mounts what might be the most practical—the most pragmatic and the most material—consideration and critique of the work of poetry. In this, also, we might be able to make sense of Kapil’s peculiar formulation of her project as “a poet engaging a novel-shaped space”: after all, isn’t it a poet’s job to engage in poem-shaped spaces? In a sense, it is this fundamental *formal* difference between other forms and poetry that amounts to both Kapil’s failure and to the work of the book. Kapil’s version of poetic work remains poetic precisely because it *will not* fit itself into a novel-shaped space. This is not a generic decision but a political commitment. For Kapil, the poet remains—like Ban—at the “systemic edges,” a point outside of financial stability and national, racial, and

personal identity as they are configured by neoliberal norms and market forces, including literary market forces. For Ban, this is a matter of historical position; for Bhanu Kapil, it is (also) political choice. Kapil's poetry reminds us of poetry's stubborn place at the edges, pointing towards what remains outside. This is not to champion that outside or to stabilize or romanticize it in any way. Rather, it is another way of bringing those edges into contact with poetry's own liminal forms. The poem is an encounter shaped by the work of *poiesis* attuned to the forces that, in turn, shape and surround that work; the poem on the page is the result of that encounter, given to us to read and recognize.

¹ “The failure of the financial system in 2007 – 8 in the United States,” Appadurai argues, “was primarily a failure of language” (1): the system of derivatives that caused the collapse, in Appadurai’s analysis, is based upon the linguistic-performative logic of the promise and the repeated misuse of this logic.

² For a thorough history of documentary as it informs American poetry (and American Studies) see Gander.

³ Denning describes the trifold nature of the “*laboring* of American culture” (xvi) in the 1930s: the self-conscious undertaking of politicized cultural production *about* labor on the part of American writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, etc.; the expansion of the cultural sphere to include more working-class Americans, a body of work collected and re-presented more recently by Cary Nelson (*Revolutionary Memory*) and others; a “new visibility of the labor of cultural production” (xvii), in some part linked to the rise of New Deal and WPA projects; and finally, Denning argues, the “birthing of a new American culture” from such efforts.

⁴ Kalaidjian describes how, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe “deny any natural, or unmediated, representations of class identity and class interests. Instead, with the poststructuralist recognition that ‘the so called ‘representation’ modifies the nature of what is represented’ [HSS 58], Marxism’s orthodox privileging of economic base over ideology is decisively reversed” (13).

⁵ Kalaidjian, for example, describes the “Rukeyser imbroglio” among literary critics and activists during the early 1940s. “What was at stake in this conflict,” he writes, “was the status of Rukeyser’s class allegiance and ultimately her commitment to a proletarian revolution” (161).

⁶ I often think,” Nowak has said, “that if Studs Terkel had been on the radio in Buffalo, my family might have made it into the pages of *Working*” (Wagstaff, 459).

⁷ Ronda argues that “we might read Nowak’s poetic mode less as straight oral history than as a framework for making audible the social silence that accompanies deindustrialization [...] rather than new forms of collective identity arising from economic disenfranchisement, Nowak’s poem charts a breakdown even of the language of solidarity and protest.” She contends that the group of poets she examines “systematically eliminate the fullness of subjective expression associated with the lyric”; by “confront[ing] the limits of representability” through various formal techniques such as “erasure and elision through white space, juxtaposition, and serial form,” she writes, “these works discover ways of reckoning with forms of life for which words seem to fail.”

⁸ Nowak tends to operate beyond what we might think of the mainstream poetic “workplace,” the academy, and has spoken of an ambivalent relationship with it. He describes a difficult entrance into academia: on unemployment after having worked in a fast-food restaurant, he began an M.F.A. program at Bowling Green State University as a way of earning a living through a teaching assistantship. “There,” he continues, “I started producing chance-generated texts and organizing ‘community open shares’ outside of the university, a public space for those in and outside of the college community to come together and share creative work. But to make a long story short, a poetry professor there at the time tried to force me out of the program (I eventually threatened to bring in the

ACLU). I took ‘correspondence’ courses my entire second year, as he had barred me from his two required graduate workshops, and most important for my own development and future work, I spent much of that year teaching poetry in the local public schools” (Wagstaff, 460).

⁹ Moten’s insistence on aesthetic and social possibilities is what sets him apart from Afro-Pessimist thinkers of this experience such as Frank Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, Jared Sexton, and others.

¹⁰ It goes almost without saying that the rise of the “service economy,” again, affects black, female, and minority lives in disproportionately negative ways (in addition to the conception of certain jobs as inflected by race or gender, often in derogatory ways, Kalleberg cites factors from social capital to education to the disappearance of institutional protection to configurations of space and housing, 54 – 55).

¹¹ “If I felt uneasy about Hirschorn’s choice of site,” Ligon writes, “it was because it was almost too perfect. Located in the poorest congressional district in the nation and devastated by high unemployment rates, drugs, arson, and failed urban policies, the South Bronx in the 1970s and 1980s became a global symbol of inner-city decay, visited by no fewer than three US presidents looking for a suitable backdrop to express their concern for the plight of poor and working-class people. Although the neighborhood’s fortunes have changed somewhat since those grim days, the area continues to struggle with the challenges brought on by poverty, pollution, high rates of incarceration, and the ongoing effects of the AIDS crisis” (228). Ligon himself, as he notes, once lived in the Forest Houses.

¹² Willis explains the poem as a cultural object generated in the face of or in spite of lost potential: “But it would be too easy to read failure in such projects without recognizing the value of the culture they produce—a culture generated by physical proximity and constraint.”

¹³ The IOM also notes the difficulty of collecting and organizing data. “The true number of fatalities is likely to be higher,” they write, “as many deaths occur in remote regions of the world and are never recorded. Some experts have suggested that for every dead body discovered, there are at least two others that are never recovered” (11).

¹⁴ See also Sassen, 54 – 62, on the necessity of “[r]econceptualizing the key forces of displacement” (62)—the “global dynamics of extreme poverty, mass displacement, environmental disasters, and armed conflicts that have created heretofore unseen levels of social expulsion, especially in the Global South but now also beginning in the Global North, albeit through different events” (63).

¹⁵ Lewis et. al. write that “an important backdrop to the story of neoliberalism’s emergence is the erosion of the political and industrial power of the working class since the world capitalist crisis of the 1970s” (19).

¹⁶ Faranak Miraftab makes this point from the opposite direction, starting with a story of immigration in the American Midwest and working back to global developments: “To frame the story of [the American rural rust belt] as one of immigration,” she writes, “without exposing the disposessions and displacements that have produced such population movements, suggests that it is a natural and inevitable occurrence and assumes a certain innocence in the process of globalization. To leave displacement out of the picture assumes and suggests that international migration is similar to the laws of

physics or nature: water flows to the lower plain; people move to places with higher likelihood of jobs” (39).

¹⁷ In an interview with Laynie Browne on “the poet’s novel,” Kapil states: “Perhaps the poet’s novel is a form that, in this sense, might be taken up by writers of color, queer writers, writers who are thinking about the body in these other ways.” She speaks of this as a “hybrid form”: “not hybridity that comes from the activity of theft, collage or polyphony—but from the capacity of the body to form and extend a new gesture.”

¹⁸ These connections are not just projected onto the past from the future, moreover: as Robin D. G. Kelley and Stephen Tuck remind us in their study of the relationship between radical struggles on both sides of the Atlantic, unrest in the United Kingdom in the early eighties and beyond “serves as a window into a critical historical moment when postwar immigration, anticolonialism, the collapse of Empire in the wake of post-Holocaust Europe, the eruption of the black freedom movement in the United States, the triumph of Cold War liberalism, and the transformation of the global economy created an unprecedented challenge to the racial order” (3).

Writing / Not-Writing:
Anne Boyer, *Paralipsis*, and the Model of Literary Work

Although I have argued that aesthetic work complicates the division of labor by which one person is identified with one job, I have structured previous chapters primarily around one type of labor (in its conjunction with poetic work) each. Likewise, even as I take as one of my main premises that forms of labor change unevenly over time, and that older and newer models of any given form of work are always co-present, I have traced a roughly chronological progression, beginning in the 1950s and moving up to a forward-looking moment. By way of conclusion, then, I want to proceed slightly differently. In this coda, I track one particular literary form—*paralipsis*, or writing something through the claim not to be writing it—across a range of contexts, through the work of the contemporary American poet Anne Boyer. Boyer’s 2015 book *Garments Against Women* is paraliptic in its very nature; that is, it is characterized by “a discomfort with and at times a violent refusal of ‘poetry’” (McLane) even as it is, of course, a book of poetry. But poetic work isn’t the only kind of work that proves problematic in Boyer’s work: the book’s dramas and dilemmas of work and the refusal of work spin out expansively, encompassing the linked problems of reproduction, globalization, information, resistance, creativity, transformation, and even, finally, the future of work.

As the two nouns of its title suggest, *Garments Against Women* brings literary *paralipsis* into close relation with the complexities of conceptualizing and performing gendered domestic and reproductive labor. Like the poets examined in my second chapter, Boyer helps us re-think this work without solidifying any categories, probing its dialectical relationship with gendered subjectivity and re-situating it at a historical

moment when the spheres of “public” vs. “private” or “domestic” most often used to mark this labor’s difference from “productive” (waged) work are increasingly complicated, and when shifting configurations of gender and labor often mean the co-presence of several types of labor at once. Beyond the local scene of writing and gendered subjectivity, in Boyer’s hands *paralipsis* opens onto some of the wider epistemological contradictions of thinking about social reproduction and labor more generally under contemporary global capital: namely, again, the difficulty of what Bruce Robbins has called the “sweatshop sublime,” or the perception that one’s daily existence is tied into a whole web of existences (via the mechanisms of multinational corporations or the networks of global supply chains) in a way that is not commensurate with understanding or action. Boyer’s poetry raises the problem of its own foregrounding of one sort of garment work—American, domestic—over a global labor sector whose exploitation seems, from the book’s perspective, dire but distant. In this, *paralipsis* reminds us of the problems of knowing and understanding across the spatial inequalities that are created by and have come to characterize almost *all* work in today’s version of globalization, as thinkers like Anthony Giddens, David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, and Carolyn Lesjak have pointed out—problems that, even if troubling and insoluble, need above all not to be glossed over.

As a first paradox of this paradoxical form, then, what appears as a resistance to literary form in fact reinforces one of my central claims about literary form: that form is (to use Caroline Levine’s term) “portable” (7), and that literary form functions flexibly and multiply, helping us think across distances and differences. On a first level, poetic form is revalued as the site and the useful marker of its own overdetermination, as an

entity that moves from context to context. If the language of “flexibility” has been appropriated and utilized by neoliberal capitalism as a criterion for workplace success—today’s worker must be adaptable, willing to think and move in different contexts—we might see poetic form as a model for a different sort of flexibility, one that can ask us to imagine possible similarities and channels of communication between the different spaces through which it moves, while also serving as a material reminder of difference. I want, in other words, to emphasize here this capacity for representing difference.

Although so many formalist critics have treated them as such, aesthetic and poetic labor, and the forms they create, are not exempt from pressures of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality; as critics like Dorothy Wang and Anthony Reed have argued, race in particular is and ought to be considered one important site where these pressures are worked out or worked against.¹ It is crucial to recognize how the same form can function in different ways, the fact of its presence—a purely formal congruence—leading to new similarities even as the demand that its context not be ignored requires that the differences be thought in refreshed fashion. This is, of course, important beyond thinking about literary form: accounting for the presence of race in and beside gendered labor, for instance, changes much of the thinking about the location of care-work, as well as the dynamic of resistance and refusal.

But above and beyond this role in conceptualizing labor, *paralipsis* in *Garments Against Women* brings into focus a central tension of this project: the difference between conceptualizing work and doing it. In other chapters, I have argued that conceptualization itself is an important type of work done by poetry, and that poetry’s ability to crystallize labor transformations into its own unique forms is an important first step in resisting

some forms of work and moving towards others. A second paradox of *paralipsis*, however, is that it manages to contain both conceptualization and performance. That is: Boyer's formulation "I am not writing" both *is* writing and expresses resistance to writing. This possibility is made uniquely visible in the space of the literary figure, even as the necessary but anxious admission of literary difference—which takes the form of the "refusal" of poetry—is at the heart of the paradox of *paralipsis*. In this, the form diagnoses dilemmas of resistance under contemporary neoliberal capitalism and—marking a distance between literary and other sorts of work—moves beyond them, pointing toward the transformative possibility of labor's twinned resistance and performance.

The dynamic of performance / resistance is one we have seen before, and will see further, as it plays out in the context of reproductive labor. Beyond that, though, resistance is a particular problem for creative labor today—and it is worth exploring it briefly for its ramifications into labor more generally. Two standard channels for workers' resistance involve creativity and disobedience: the disobedience of stopping work altogether, or the subversive creativity of doing it differently. Creativity in labor has been seen as inherently set against capitalist values, as the mark of labor's unalienated nature; for Marx it is what gets lost in the division of labor and the conversion of labor to the form of the commodified object.² As Erich Fromm writes, work in its fundamental pre-alienated state "is the active relatedness of man to nature, the creation of a new world, including the creation of man himself. (Intellectual activity is of course, for Marx, always work, like manual or artistic activity)" (39). For figures like this version of Marx—the "Romantic" Marx, in David Harvey's words³—and William Morris, it is the

exercise of the imagination which alone characterizes uniquely human productive activity, and it is the exercise in creativity (including creativity as self-creation) which makes work fulfilling or even pleasurable.⁴

Certainly this view of work is disputable. Kathi Weeks, following Jean Baudrillard, points out one problem with this model, which is that it is “centered on a commitment to the creative individual as unit of analysis and motor of history” (85)—a problem of scale and agency. Another problem, however, is that creativity and disobedience today are more likely to be traits prized by capital than anathema to it: performing work more creatively, in other words, does not necessarily provide a clear path towards the revolutionary transformation of work. This dynamic, theorized by Autonomist Marxists such as Paolo Virno and Maurizio Lazzarato and touched on briefly in my first chapter, is summarized by Sarah Brouillette: under a regime of what is sometimes called “immaterial labor,” she writes, “capital is busily orchestrating the incorporation of creativity into itself” (*Creative Economy*, 39). As production requires elements “loaded with ethos, culture, linguistic interaction,” capital requires new subjectivity and ideas for expansion, continuation, and transformation (Virno, 24). It thus relies on the mental energy expended in the struggle to think beyond it. “In short,” Brouillette writes,

workers disobey command, but disobedience is a prerequisite for productivity [...] Postfactory labor, especially in its tendency towards valorization of the enterprising self, finds its legitimacy in the struggle against work. Hence, in a structuring tension, the struggle against work becomes something that the best work entails. (40)

It is not difficult to understand that the contemporary (American, information-based) workplace indeed relies on values such as “creativity,” “flexibility,” “thinking outside the box,” “doing what you’re not supposed to do,” “innovation,” “daring,” “disruption,” etc.

Certainly there still exist forms of creativity that do operate outside of economic subsumption and that resist it head-on, just as there are possibilities for effective strategies of disobedience, sabotage, strike, and the absolute refusal of work. But as standard models of creative disobedience and poetic innovation seem less and less subversive, the tricky form of *paralipsis* begins to seem more and more practically important. In addition to setting up channels and pathways for new ways of thinking about labor and social relations—new categories, new connections—literary form exemplifies a certain paradox of disobedience. Preferring not to, working anyway: this is how we live under capital. We refuse work, but refusal isn’t enough, is expected, is foreclosed—and so there’s also the refusal to refuse. In some cases, there is simply the impossibility of refusal, denied many workers across the globe in precarious situations. In some cases—for literary as well as potentially for reproductive labor—there is value in the doing-anyway. In the case of literary labor, here diverging from other sorts of work, the transformative potential of simultaneously resisting and doing work is held up, a possibility made visible through literary form.

Previous chapters have all gestured towards some version of this “transformative potential” of poetic work—the way poetic work might help us glimpse a different way of working. I want to say something about the future this project envisions for work, which involves neither the “anti-work politics” nor the “postwork imaginaries” set out by Weeks and a host of other Marxist, post-Marxist, and anarchist thinkers. Switching

literary hats for a moment and writing as a practicing poet: I do not wish to imagine a future without work any more than I can accept that poetic work is absolutely outside the conditions of “work.” What I propose, ultimately, is a version of “creativity” that might point towards the transformation of work in its own image, a “horizon of utopian potential” (Weeks, 29), while still grappling with the problems of and pressures on creativity itself at present. Even as it acknowledges the crucial sphere of literary difference, this version of literary creativity blurs the boundaries between creative work and labor more generally. This blurring does not mean that creative work is compromised, cheapened, or further utilized by capital. Instead, it requires (as is the case with some versions of reproductive labor) that we admit new similarities between creative work and activities often thought to contain little or no creative potential. This version of creativity diverges from any “pure” sort of creativity championed as “outside” labor—which is also the sort of creativity that is simultaneously valued by contemporary capitalism in the form of a “model” innovative and original form of work. Creativity comes about in and through labor, not outside of it; it reveals itself not as a trait, a set of innovations, or a particular originality, but as a paradox. Without declaring itself as an autonomous good, or ignoring its own complicity with the forces of capital, creativity in the work of poets such as Boyer takes the form of a useful self-awareness, or a performative contradiction, neither disavowing the work that it does for capital, nor acquiescing to this work, nor abandoning the project of *poiesis* entirely.

*

The form of *paralipsis* by which Boyer helps us work out these questions of work and creativity is above all a figure for paradox. Paradox was once celebrated by New

Critics such as Cleanth Brooks as “the language of poetry” (3) for its power as part of a totalizing and unified aesthetic system. The meaning of the poem, for Brooks and others, *is* its paradox, which cannot be expressed any other way. Yet *paralipsis* in Boyer’s work is not so much self-evident or self-referential as it is expansive: it needs to be thought and explained in terms of the contradictions it evokes, which have to do with writing, performance and labor. In *Garments Against Women*, the figure occurs most explicitly in two long prose poems, “Not Writing” and “What is Not Writing.” The titles of both of these paraliptic poems already suggest that there is more to an act of refusal (“not writing”) than a surface-level refusal of whatever activity. “Not Writing” opens with a catalog of all the things that the poet is not writing, linking poetry both into a history of literary production and non-production (“Hawthorne’s unwritten stories”), and into a broader sphere of cultural production that includes a range of genres and media:

I am not writing Facebook status updates. I am not writing thank-you notes or apologies. I am not writing conference papers. I am not writing book reviews. I am not writing blurbs.

I am not writing about contemporary art. I am not writing accounts of my travels. I am not writing reviews for *The New Inquiry* and not writing pieces for *Triple Canopy* and not writing anything for *Fence*. [...] I am not writing stories based on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s unwritten story ideas. I am not writing online dating profiles. I am not writing anonymous communiqués. I am not writing textbooks. (42)

“What Is Not Writing,” on the other hand, gives an enormous list of all the things that do in fact take place while one is not writing: working, loving, driving, worrying, caretaking, seeing friends, and everything else.

We might read this part of Boyer’s project as an exercise in avoiding poetry, or as a sort of negative approach to poetry, making poetry only out of descriptions of what poetry is *not*. Indeed, across the collection Boyer continues to speculate on all the things the book might have been, which are not necessarily poetry (a memoir, a “long sad book called *A Woman Shopping*,” “a novel called *Nero* about the world’s richest art star in space,” etc.). Yet the peculiar motion of doing / not doing is itself an instance of *paralipsis*. Unlike understatement (*litotes*) or insinuation, in which the fact of “doing” the rhetorical work is uncomplicated and the trickiness has to do with the content, or what is being said or left unsaid, *paralipsis* hinges on the fact that to write is to *do* something. Again: the poet can’t write about what she won’t write about without writing it.

What is most remarkable about these two particular poems is how squarely and how sincerely they inhabit this contradiction, the paradoxical space of “writing-not-writing.” In each example, there’s a similar paraliptic move: “I am not writing” becomes, by the end, indisputably *writing*. In the case of “Not Writing,” if the first two paragraphs are straightforward enough—none of the things “not written” is what we are reading—the end of this section flips into a different mode: “I am not writing a history of these times or of past times or of any future times and not even the history of these visions which are with me all day and all of the night” (43). From a catalog of genres that are not poetry—and that put poetry in its necessary proximity to other forms of writing—Boyer shifts breathtakingly into a lyrical and visionary tone, assuming the position of the vatic poet,

gifted with an expanded historical vista (past and present and future), haunted by visions whose content, whatever it is, is the subject of poetic revelation. And in the case of “What is Not Writing,” a catalog of negative thoughts about writing gives way to something else:

It is easy to imagine not writing, both accidentally and intentionally. It is easy because there have been years and months and days I have thought [...] “writing steals from my life and gives me nothing but pain and worry and what I can’t have” or “writing steals from my already empty bank account” or “writing gives me ideas I do not need or want” or “writing is the manufacture of impossible desire” or writing is like literature is like the world of monsters is the production of culture is I hate culture is the world of wealthy women and of men. (46)

In the final “or” clause, what follows is not another record of a negative thought about writing, set off by quotation marks, but a negative thought *in* writing. This ending marks the emergence of an “I” in oppositional relation to the world at hand, a figure of strong subjective preference set against the domains of wealth and cultural production of which writing—even poetic writing, such as the ending of this poem—is undeniably a part.

It is crucial to emphasize that the particular subject / worker / writer who emerges in Boyer’s work is a historical, social, and gendered one. I address the poetic function of making visible different strains of gendered reproductive labor in Chapter 2; here, Boyer’s work gets at three further aspects of this labor. First is its historical nature: gendered reproductive and domestic labor has (falsely) not been seen to vary historically as waged labor does. On most standard accounts, if the twentieth century is arguably marked by a broad shift from Fordist and “material” to white-collar, intellectual, and “immaterial” labor, the status of the housewife undergoes no such drastic change. Except for a few technological innovations that never seem to make work any easier, it appears to remain fairly constant in quantity and quality even as more women enter the (waged)

workplace. But second, and not unrelated, reproductive or domestic labor has never seemed to have entailed the same degree of creativity or mental energy now characteristic of paradigmatic contemporary information-based work.⁵ And finally, disobedience today is as at least as if not more impossible for reproductive labor—“uncreative” work—as it is for creative waged labor. Social reproduction, as thinkers from Marx onwards have pointed out, is the condition for the continuation of human life. If capital renders disobedience impossible for creativity-based work by using it, it has rendered disobedience impossible in advance for this other sort of work.

Boyer’s work, then, takes place at the intersection of these three dilemmas—of history, creativity, and resistance—weaving, as it were, a complex web of intertwined questions of gendered subjectivity, creative work, historicity and geography, and creative resistance to work. Opening a first question about the nature of gender, the book’s epigraph is a passage from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria: Or, the Wrongs of Woman* in which the writer underscores her project to instruct and protect her daughter. This epigraph draws attention to the title’s term “women.” If the book’s subject is a woman, however, this subject is not necessarily concerned with what it feels like to “be a woman,” or with the experience of a pre-determined gender. Almost as if to define the most universal possible subject, Boyer writes in “The Innocent Question”:

I think mostly about clothes, sex, food, and seasonal variations. I have done so much to be ordinary and made a record of this: first I was born, next I was a child, then I learned things and did things and loved and had those who loved me and often felt alone. My body was sometimes well, then sometimes unwell. I got nearer to death, as did you. (15)

Another poem, “At least two types of people,” sounds like it might be concerned with a gender binary but instead seems, at least at first read, to be about a binary economic system along the lines of “haves” and “have-nots,” as one of these two types is those “for whom the salaries and weddings and garages do not come” (23).

This proximity of gender and class in fact gives one indication of how the category “women” functions in Boyer’s poetry: as in several of Sandra Simonds’s sonnets, gender comes about most forcefully in conjunction with—not outside of—labor. The second prose section of “Sewing” begins:

Every morning I wake up with a renewed commitment to learning to be what I am not. This is the day in which I will sew a straight seam [...] every morning here is that sting of self-doubt, the chances of a wearable garment slim. (26)

Here, Boyer’s work is explicit about the creation of subjectivity by and through labor. The mastery of a skill means “learning to be what I am not,” while the failure to complete the task—the making of the garment—would mean the failure of the self. And yet by the end of this poem, subjectivity and labor seem again separate:

I’m okay with subjectivity. It’s silky wovens that mess me up. I put everything back in its place, thinking I ought to be sewing less and writing more. Everyday I have a list called “everyday.” (33)

Boyer’s tone here is tricky, but the motion from a troubled realization of the intertwined nature of work and subjectivity to an acceptance of what *seems like* their separation (the subject is fine, subjectivity is fine, even if work is going wrong) as a condition of the “everyday” is noteworthy. Through this progression, Boyer reveals this “everyday” as an

ideology, a state in which the complex and dialectical interrelation of self and work acknowledged earlier in the poem appears to have disappeared. Following the work of Shulamith Firestone, we might contend that what emerges here is a “dialectic” of sex, or a “materialist view” (286) of gender construction, by which some version of biological difference is intertwined with forms of labor to produce different sorts of gendered subjects, even if this construction is in fact obscured. Reading back to the previous poem in which the differences between two sorts of people seemed at first primarily economic, Boyer’s portrayal of economic class relations in terms that hint at gender binary (two sorts of people) in fact contains that binary. Boyer’s work negotiates the production and formation of the working subject—a gendered subject, a woman, generated though and shaped by labor, just as that labor contains forces that act upon or even against that subject in the plural (“garments against women”). Gender and labor are inextricable; the garments that are “against” women also, at least in part, represent what has created the category “women.”

Joining “labor” and “gender,” a third site of exploration here is the production of text—a type of work already evoked in our discussion of garment production, if we remember the etymology of the word “text” in the Latin for “to weave.” Here again we return to the figure of *paralipsis* as a way to characterize the complex relationship between textual and non-textual work: “Having given up literature, it was easy to become fixed on the idea of a single shirt,” Boyer writes, again in “Sewing” (25). The statement carries with it the funny false ring characteristic of written *paralipsis*: we read that the poet has “given up literature” at the moment of the poem’s commencement and know this statement to be false because we are reading it. As we embark into a long and literary

description of the details of craft, similarities to the literature it is alleged to have replaced also begin to emerge, as the material details of needlework take on, through their poetic description, an aesthetic dimension of their own. There is more to the metaphor of reproductive work being like poetic work, in other words, than surface resemblance—it's not that "sewing" replaces "poetry writing" as a similar and maybe interchangeable activity, but that poetic production, despite claims of its replacement by sewing, is still present and in fact reveals important facets of this second activity.

In this instance, Boyer's use of *paralipsis* emphasizes the dynamic of doubleness and potential incompatibility between types of work necessitated by a standard division of labor. Boyer's insistence that she has "given up" writing for sewing evokes a real historical and still irresolvable problem of labor for women and care-givers: the fact that, as Tillie Olson, Virginia Woolf, and innumerable others have either written about or attested to by their literary silence, it is in many cases simply not possible to write and sew at the same time, or to pursue a literary career while taking care of a family.⁶ Bracketing the paralipitic slipperiness of the text momentarily, the trade-off scenario here points towards a concrete problem of the intersection of poetic and gendered reproductive labor. Yet the use of *paralipsis*, by which both stated (sewing) and actually carried-out (writing) work manage to be present, suggests a second and equally real problem for women workers or reproductive laborers: namely, that the unrecognizability of unwaged work such as sewing (or cooking or cleaning or bearing and raising children) means that it often does happen simultaneously with other waged or market-mediated labor. The performance of two sorts of labor at a time, a supposed "impossibility," is anything but impossible for women and sometimes men who are also caretakers in a domestic sphere.

And it also goes without saying that domestic labor and literary work have happened and do happen at the same time. *Paralipsis* signals both problems at once: the necessary trade-off of one type of labor for another, or what has been a sacrifice for many workers, *as well as* the failure of that trade-off and the resulting persistence of multiple types of work, even if this is “supposed to be” impossible.

In addition to signaling the simultaneous presence of multiple types of work, Boyer’s work also suggests the multiple overdeterminations at the heart of reproductive labor itself, as a category that spans the domestic and the global, as well as the categories of productive and reproductive, waged and unwaged: the “historical of sewing” (29), in Boyer’s words, accessed through the conjunction of writing and domestic work. But the knitting-together of domestic, poetic, and reproductive labor on an expanded scale is anything but seamless. On the contrary, these co-presences and overlappings must be also be thought in terms of differences and inequalities. The title *Garments Against Women* lets us imagine a broad picture of gendered labor on a global scale, one of an alienation so extreme that the products (“garments”) produced by a certain category of workers (“women”) are used in some manner of harm or another, “against” them. Certainly this picture is not false, as garment workers are and continue to be among capital’s most exploited laborers, subjects of attention primarily through catastrophes such as the Rana Plaza collapse, in Bangladesh in 2013, which killed over 1000 people, most of whom were workers in the building’s garment factories that continued to operate despite concerns about the building’s structural integrity, and over half of whom were women. Today, although global statistics vary, between 60 and 75 million people are employed in the garment industry worldwide.⁷ Many of these workers are concentrated in the

developing world, especially in Latin America and in southeast Asia. Around three-fourths of these are women, and according to one recent statistic, “global average wages in the textile and clothing industries are respectively 24 per cent and 35 per cent lower than the manufacturing industry average wage” (Holdcroft, 96).

But Boyer’s book gives no concrete details of this sort. Instead, the particular garment-worker in this book is an entirely different one: presumably American, private, domestic, family-centered, making the clothes she will wear herself and mending a daughter’s knitwear, engaged in acts of personal economizing and stylizing as much as aesthetic expression. In a poem called “Sewing,” Boyer contextualizes this activity:

Now I give the hours of my life I don’t sell to my employers to the garments [...] I save money like this. The fabric still contains the hours of the lives, those of the farmers and shepherds and chemists and factory workers and truckers and salespeople and the first purchasers, the givers-away, who were probably women who sewed. (29)

Sewing is situated in an explicitly private and domestic economy: it is what fills the hours “not sold” to an employer. Literally a part of “home economy,” a way to save money in that sphere, the act of sewing Boyer foregrounds occurs in the context of non-productive labor, outside of the time and remuneration of the employment with which it co-exists. Simultaneously, however, Boyer acknowledges that this activity is deeply interwoven into the fabric of its “other” economic activity, and that the very materials with which she works have been produced by other workers, both male and female. While the clause “who were probably women who sewed” presumably refers to the “first purchasers” of the secondhand clothes purchased and re-made by the poem’s sewer, the phrase contains

an important ambiguity: we do not in fact know whether their sewing occurred inside or outside the home, was paid or unpaid, alienated or intended for their own use. Similarly, the “factory workers” slipped quietly into the catalog of laborers here might also be garment workers themselves.

At one level, this configuration of workers points towards one conceptual knot that emerges in much thinking about gendered labor: the fact that the same activity—in this case, the production of garments—can happen both inside and outside the home, and is differently valenced depending on this context, crossing and re-crossing the Marxist categories of “productive” (that is, market-mediated and directly generative of profit for capital) and “reproductive” (outside of the market, productive only of labor-power) labor.⁸ But beyond this, we must still reckon with the deep discrepancy between the foregrounded poet / sewer, whose work is present and linked to aesthetic production via the poems, and the vaguer presence of the vast majority of garment workers in the contemporary global economy. In contrast to the figure of “Louise Jones,” a woman whose name has been sewn with a “fashioned by” (28) label into the back of a dress the speaker purchases secondhand, and the odor of whose body (the speaker reports) is still present in the dress, these workers are neither named, seen, nor sensed. Instead, they are abstracted into the price of the garments produced as calculus within a set of economic pressures: “I make anywhere from 10 to 15 dollars an hour at any of my three jobs. A garment from Target or Forever 21 costs 10 to 30 dollars [...] a garment from a department store costs 30 to 500 dollars,” Boyer writes. These workers appear to her as they do to a majority of Western consumers, almost invisible and made so by the allure of cheap (or just affordable) clothing. “[E]ach garment holds in it hours of a garment

worker's life," Boyer reports having read on a sewing blog (29): these lives and workers are acknowledged as present, but distant and mediated though the internet, through literature, and through multiple steps of backwards mathematical calculation.

This dynamic between present and less-present work raises problems of distance and knowledge that are at the heart of much thinking about contemporary configurations of space and of labor. Anthony Giddens's 1990 characterization of globalization as "link[ing] distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (64), complicated by the elements of "geographical expansion, spatial reorganization, and uneven geographical development" that David Harvey points out are necessary to capital's function, means that relations between people and workers across these distances are anything but evident. Harvey's call for a better understanding of the "global historical geography of [uneven] capital accumulation" (23) is picked up by Jameson and, following him, Lesjak, for whom—in an alternative to Robbins's Kantian "sublime"—the figure of the spatial dialectic is one way to approach the difficult conjunction of a "here" and an "elsewhere" of places and workers. As Lesjak writes, "the particular challenge of a spatial dialectic is to hold together the visceral, affective, and local textures of experience and the global, virtual, derivative-driven flows of capital" (264)—or, before this, to think, together, different "visceral, affective, and local textures" differently impacted by these global flows.⁹ For Lesjak and Jameson, as well as for Robbins, the dilemma globalization presents is thus also an epistemological one: the dialectic serves as a way of "deal[ing] with the fact of distinct and autonomous realities that seem to offer no contact with each other" (*Valences*, 24).

This problem of epistemology, and of the holding-together of apparently incompatible elements, brings us again back to *paralipsis*. The early Latin handbook of rhetoric, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, points out that the form is especially useful when employed in situations of epistemological difficulty, when the speaker would like to mention something that he or she could not easily verify or support—such as the reality of a different worker’s life, elsewhere (36 – 37).¹⁰ In a sort of expanded and dialectical *paralipsis*, *Garments Against Women* is *not* the story of millions of garment workers worldwide, exploited, overworked, underpaid—and yet it does contain the story of their exploitation and obfuscation within it, hidden behind the closer-to-hand figure of the sewer. In this, it gives the lie to visions of reproductive and especially garment work as ahistorical, opening instead onto a dilemma of the contemporary moment. Coupled with the persistence of older or ahistorical models for reproductive labor is the colossal challenge of knowing the global dimensions of even the same activity, sewing.¹¹ The difficulty of collecting statistics for a type of work that occurs in and outside formal workplace boundaries, changes rapidly, is often undocumented, and is above all rendered invisible by the workings of the global supply chain—the complex interactions between consumers, multi-national corporations, local corporations, factory owners, and individual workers—raises contemporary problems of both consumption and solidarity under conditions of abstraction, uncertainty, and distance.¹² Rather than emphasizing the global connection of workers, Boyer’s work underscores the absence of what it is not, paralipitically recognizing a global population of workers and acknowledging the (necessary, even productive) difficulty of thinking about that population.

In his discussion of the figure of anagnorisis—a term for recognition or discovery in the context of epic—Jameson turns from a discussion of global surplus populations to the demands of the “wages for housework” movement in order to emphasize the real importance of conceptual work: in this case, the recognition and re-configuration of labor categories. Like Jameson’s anagnorisis, Boyer’s *paralipsis* is an “act of theoretical production, in which new characters are produced for our collective and political discovery and recognition” (*Valences*, 582)—even if this production also means the recognition of difficulty.¹³ But finally, *paralipsis* here is more than a conceptual move. Similarly, reproductive labor for Marxist-Feminists—and reproductive workers—is more than a conceptual problem; it is also a practical one. Of the different strategies put forth for work described as dull, if not deadening, most involve its abolition. This is achieved generally from two different and opposing directions; first, there are those like Angela Davis who call for the reorganization of this work, pointing towards models of its industrialization, communization / socialization, or automation through technology. And second, there are those who, recognizing its intractability—the fact that neither technological innovation, existing models of collectivization, or integration into the market economy have significantly reduced what continues to seem like an unequally shared and unrewarding burden—call for flat-out refusal, rejection that would lead to a total transformation of work and society. Boyer’s formula differs from both of these. Rather, it involves something more like Silvia Federici’s notion of the “double character” of reproductive labor (see Chapter 2) or Susan Fraiman’s “awareness of domesticity’s doubleness” (19). Moving beyond conceptions of the nuclear family and the housewife that have both defined and limited white Bourgeois feminism, it involves the recognition

that reproductive labor is arduous, inescapable, and yet, as bell hooks writes, has been a “radically subversive political gesture” for some (42).¹⁴

Thus in a certain way, *paralipsis* contains conceptualization and action rolled into one. In the face of the dilemma not of refusal but of the refusal to refuse, the figure points towards a mode of working that would contain both resistance and work. This would be a way of expressing resistance to capital’s terms for labor while nevertheless performing labor—a performance that would be necessary and valuable on its own terms. In the case of literary work, the motion of stated refusal (“I am not writing”), of strong preference, and of simultaneous labor is not a mode of deception or feigning; it is not pretending not to do something but doing that thing anyway. In the space of the literary figure it is, instead, genuinely refusing and yet still genuinely doing. Boyer writes, “And how could it be literature if it is not coyly against literature, but sincerely against it, as it is also against ourselves?” (48). In Boyer’s formulation, “not coy but sincere” refers to literature’s turning against itself, or the act of refusal, the refusal of the literary, a sincere refusal. But Boyer’s work is valuable for its sincerity on both sides: as sincere as its refusal to be literature is its refusal to refuse literature, a sincere refusal to refuse. Thus Boyer’s work gives a new way of thinking the capacities of literary language. Situated in a social and historical context that includes multiple labor types, this literary paradox points towards a potential re-configuration of labor. Impossible to carry out, but impossible to stop, this labor would be carried out sincerely anyway, ultimately transformed through that performance. If this is an optimistic reading, it is not out of step with the book’s concluding dedication: “I also thank my daughter, Hazel, who has allowed me the possibility of a literature that is not against us and to whom I dedicate this book.” The

performance of work carries the germ of the transformation of work. For Boyer, any alternative future comes about through the joint and mutually illuminating performance of poetic and reproductive labor.

And yet there's more to be said about the affective charge of working paralytically, the pinch of fully inhabiting a contradiction or a paradoxical form. There is the question of whether the charge of working while working against work is even bearable, for whom, or for how long, as well as the problem of what, if anything, expressed resistance means in a non-literary context when work is still carried out: for many forms of work, it doesn't much matter what you say or think about the work you do, as long as you still do it. The literary strategy of *paralipsis* is perhaps not so much a strategy as simply the mode of operation in other contexts, for many kinds of work. Thus at the moment of seeming closest to other types of labor, literary work again separates itself. This reckoning with the fact that literary work must be set back apart from other types of labor is at the heart of the paradox of literary *paralipsis*, in the form of its anxious self-renunciation: this sort of *poiesis* expresses the wish to be something else, performing its own desire not to be marked out as poetry, separate from other forms of work. Nevertheless, literary work does occur, and with a difference: the possible simultaneity of work and the resistance that might transform work—a promissory space in which both refusal and performance are given equal weight—is made visible, at least for the present, only through specifically literary form.

¹ As Reed shows, in particular, *paralipsis* functions differently in the context of black literature than it does in the context of other gendered and racialized pressures for work. Reed points explicitly to *paralipsis* as a mode of black aesthetic production, a response to a demand or a pressure on the artist or aesthetic maker to tell or fit a predetermined narrative or category. Reed finds *paralipsis* in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, in his paraliptic answer to the question posed to him about race that also, in its asking, limits his answer: “how does it feel to be a problem” (16). He also notes its presence in the work of contemporary poet M. NourbeSe Philip; in her book *Zong!*, Reed writes, by “beginning with the assumption of something unspoken and unspeakable within testimony, the poem extends the structure of *paralipsis*—saying by claiming not to say—positing not only the right to non-response but explicit counterinterrogation” (57).

² This view is usually linked back to two passages, the first from volume 1 of *Capital*:

“Labor is, in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and nature. [...] By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway. We are not now dealing with those primitive instinctive forms of labor that remind us of the mere animal. An immeasurable interval of time separates the state of things in which man brings his labor power to market for sale as a commodity, from that state in which human labor was in its first instinctive stage. We presuppose labor in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labor process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the laborer at its commencement” (197 – 98).

and the second from *German Ideology*:

“For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic” (22).

³ Writing of these passages in which Marx “attaches a sense not only of creativity but also of nobility to the labor process,” and in which human imaginative work is deemed capable of transforming both selves and worlds, Harvey writes that “Marx was undoubtedly influenced by early-nineteenth century Romanticism” (115). Harvey notes the “abundant opportunities to dispute” this position but maintains its importance: “you

have to come to terms here with some understanding of what Marx is saying, see that this is how he positions himself, that this is his vision of what the potentiality for creativity labor and changing the world is really all about” (116).

⁴ For William Morris, the pleasure derived from work is one of several criteria separating “useful work” from “useless toil.” This pleasure stems from the exercise of the imagination and the experience of creation: “But a man at work, making some thing which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body. Memory and imagination help him as he works. Not only his own thoughts, but the thoughts of the men of past ages guide his hands; and, as a part of the human race, he creates” (36 – 37).

⁵ See Susan Fraiman for a study of “the tension between, on the one hand, asserting the value of domestic cultures and women’s creative shaping of them and, on the other, acknowledging the evils of domestic ideology as well as the unredeemable aspects of domestic labor” (16). Fraiman’s work provides a range of literary examples of the value and creative potential inherent in domestic work, as well as expansively acknowledging the differences in this work as it is performed under different conditions (by immigrants, the homeless and others in precarious states of domesticity, as well as more standard versions of “the housewife”).

⁶ See my discussion of Tillie Olsen in Chapter 2.

⁷ These figures are drawn from Linda Stotz and Gillian Kane’s “Global Garment Industry Factsheet.” Global statistics are difficult to come by; the web source cited here uses data drawn from the International Labour Organization (ILO), as well as an NGO called “Women Working Worldwide.”

⁸ See “The Logic of Gender” for a detailed explanation of the overlappings of these spheres, and the shifting place of reproductive labor among them.

⁹ According to Jameson: “Globalization has above all meant the association of space and spatial distance in production itself, whether in terms of outsourcing, of the uneven development of producing and consuming nations, or the migration of labor, as well as the black holes of unemployment, famine, and unspeakable violence into which whole surfaces of the globe suddenly fall” (*Valences of the Dialectic*, 66).

¹⁰ The power of *paralipsis* is in part linked to quasi-ethical questions of knowledge and certainty: “This figure is useful if employed in a matter which it is not pertinent to call specifically to the attention of others, because there is advantage in making only an indirect reference to it, or because the direct reference would be tedious or undignified, or can easily be refuted. As a result it is of greater advantage to create a suspicion by Paralipsis than to insist directly on a statement that is refutable” (321).

¹¹ As Beth English points out, “normative standards of labor” hinder efforts by activists, policymakers and others to regulate and improve conditions in the garment sector: these include ideas about garment work as a first step out of the home or an agricultural society into the industrial workplace for women (68).

¹² Although already dated, a statistic from the ILO indicates the pace of such transformation: “In the twenty years from 1970 to 1990,” according to a 1996 report, “the number of TCF [textile, clothing, and footwear] workers increased by 597 percent in Malaysia; 416 percent in Bangladesh; 385 percent in Sri Lanka; 334 percent in Indonesia; 271 percent in the Philippines; and 137 percent in Korea.”

¹³ Jameson is writing about the re-classification of surplus populations not as “the unemployable” but as those “abandoned by capital in its *fuite en avant*”: this conceptual shift “allows us to reconceptualize, and cognitively map [...] structural positions within the world system, and to re-create actants, agents, narrative characters, in a far more inclusive narrative about late capitalism, or globalization” (582).

¹⁴ For hooks, “homeplace” is the result of a choice by black women to work to create a space for resistance to racist domination. For hooks, defining domestic labor as women’s natural work not only obscures the work being done but also erases the political choice by black women to create “homeplace” as “a site of resistance [...] defined less by whether or not black women and men were conforming to sexist behavior norms and more by our struggle [...] to resist racist domination and oppression” (47).

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