Other Than a Citizen: Vernacular Poetics in Postwar America

by

Jonathan Peter Moore

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

___________________________
Priscilla Wald, Co-supervisor

___________________________
Frederick Moten, Co-supervisor

___________________________
Joseph Donahue

___________________________
Nathaniel Mackey

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2016
ABSTRACT

Other Than a Citizen: Vernacular Poetics in Postwar America

by

Jonathan Peter Moore

Department of English
Duke University

Date:____________________
Approved:

___________________________
Priscilla Wald, Co-supervisor

___________________________
Frederick Moten, Co-supervisor

___________________________
Joseph Donahue

___________________________
Nathaniel Mackey

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2016
Abstract

Few symbols of 1950s-1960s America remain as central to our contemporary conception of Cold War culture as the iconic ranch-style suburban home. While the house took center stage in the Nixon/Khrushchev kitchen debates as a symbol of modern efficiency and capitalist values, its popularity depended largely upon its obvious appropriation of vernacular architecture from the 19th century, those California haciendas and Texas dogtrots that dotted the American west. Contractors like William Levitt modernized the historical common houses, hermetically sealing their porous construction, all while using the ranch-style roots of the dwelling to galvanize a myth of an indigenous American culture. At a moment of intense occupational bureaucracy, political uncertainty and atomized social life, the rancher gave a white consumer public reason to believe they could master their own plot in the expansive frontier. Only one example of America’s mid-century love affair with commodified vernacular forms, the ranch-style home represents a broad effort on the part of corporate and governmental interest groups to transform the vernacular into a style that expresses a distinctly homogenous vision of American culture. “Other than a Citizen” begins with an anatomy of that transformation, and then turns to the work of four poets who sought to reclaim the vernacular from that process of standardization and use it to countermand the containment-era strategies of Cold War America.

In four chapters, I trace references to common speech and verbal expressivity in the poetry and poetic theory of Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and Gwendolyn Brooks, against the historical backdrop of the Free-Speech Movement and the rise of mass-culture. When poets frame nonliterary speech within the literary page, they encounter
the inability of writing to capture the vital ephemerality of verbal expression. Rather than treat this limitation as an impediment, the writers in my study use the poem to dramatize the fugitivity of speech, emphasizing it as a disruptive counterpoint to the technologies of textual capture. Where critics such as Houston Baker interpret the vernacular strictly in terms of resistance, I take a cue from the poets and argue that the vernacular, rooted etymologically at the intersection of domestic security and enslaved margin, represents a gestalt form, capable at once of establishing centralized power and sparking minor protest. My argument also expands upon Michael North’s exploration of the influence of minstrelsy and regionalism on the development of modernist literary technique in *The Dialect of Modernism*. As he focuses on writers from the early 20th century, I account for the next generation, whose America represented unprecedented imperial power, replete with economic, political and artistic dominance. Instead of settling for an essentially American idiom, the poets in my study saw in the vernacular not phonetic misspellings, slang terminology and fragmented syntax, but the potential to provoke and thereby frame a more ethical mode of social life, straining against the regimentation of citizenship.
Dedication

For my mother and father, the first vernacular speakers I ever met.
# Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ iv

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................... x

1. Home-born Exiles: The Doublespeak of Vernacular Poetics .................................................. 1
   1.1 In the American Veneer ......................................................................................................... 1
   1.2 Ranch-Style Renovations .................................................................................................... 17
   1.3 Subversive Intonation: The Vernacular of Fluidity ................................................................. 11
   1.4 Swayed in America: The Vernacular of Fixity ....................................................................... 25
   1.5 The Vernacular Basement of the Speech-Based House Un-American ................................. 38

2. It Ain’t Easy, Bro: Charles Olson and the Vernacular of Obstruction ..................................... 50
   2.1 One Speech Makes Many: The Critical Reception of Olson’s Speech-Based Poetics ............... 54
   2.2 Least Song: the Measure of Vernacular Obstruction ............................................................. 64
   2.3 By ear, he sd: The Vernacular Countermand to Commercial Language ............................... 75
      2.3.1 The Vernacular of Mu-sick ............................................................................................. 80
      2.3.2 The Vernacular of Difficulty ......................................................................................... 85
   2.4 The Usefulness of Place: The Regional Particularity of Olson’s Vernacular ......................... 88
   2.5 The Secrets Objects Share: Vernacular Materialism in Olson’s Poetics ............................ 98

3. Beyond the Reality of the Incomparable: Robert Duncan and the Vernacular of Preliteracy .......................................................... 111
   3.1 All Speech is Poetry ............................................................................................................. 112
   3.2 Domestic Dispute ............................................................................................................... 117
### 3.2.1 The Vernacular of Illiteracy ................................................................. 119
### 3.2.2 The Vernacular of Preliteracy ............................................................ 125
### 3.3 Phonetic Correspondence ..................................................................... 136
### 3.4 To Do Something Big For America ...................................................... 145
### 3.5 Free Speech .......................................................................................... 151
### 3.6 The Insubordinate Child ....................................................................... 159

### 4. Mute Inglorious Minions: LeRoi Jones and the Vernacular of Silence .......... 160
#### 4.1 From “How You Sound” to Holding Our Tongue ................................... 164
#### 4.2 Dead Lecturer, Silent Poet .................................................................... 174
#### 4.3 The Silence of Unspeakable Tragedy .................................................... 183
#### 4.4 The Silence of Suppressive Canons ...................................................... 188
#### 4.5 The Silence of Racial Send Up .............................................................. 195
#### 4.6 Echoes of Silence ................................................................................. 205

### 5. How Shall the Law Allow for Littleness: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Vernacular of Uncertainty ................................................................. 207
#### 5.1 In the Guise of Certainty: Mastery and Deformation ............................. 211
#### 5.2 Call Them Common Things: Vernacular in the Restricted Sense ........... 221
#### 5.3 Strangest Place in Chicago ..................................................................... 225
#### 5.4 Domestic Disturbance .......................................................................... 233
#### 5.5 Let the Fair Fables Fall ......................................................................... 239
#### 5.6 Gwendolyn Brooks and the Vernacular Counter-Anthem ...................... 249

Works Cited ...................................................................................................... 239
Acknowledgements

When I began this project, my primary concern was whether or not I would be able to finish it. Now that I am fortunate enough to be on the other side, looking back, a new concern has emerged: will I be able to un-finish it? By this I mean, will I be able to extend this endeavor beyond its current form and find in its archive the potential for future conversations. What began as an intellectual hurdle meant to credential my academic performance has become what I hope is an opportunity to recognize that my education does not stop with a degree. Interpreting the idea of acknowledgment against the grain, I am using this space to acknowledge the simple truth that the dissertation is only as important as its destination. Rather than place this work on the shelf, I hope to locate it in the world. To care for its argument by continuing to write it into my daily practices is my ultimate goal.

Yet, in keeping with the conventional sense of acknowledgement as back-patting appreciation, I would also like to use this space to express my gratitude for those teachers, friends and family members who have been instrumental in my development as a reader. To my dissertation committee co-chairs, Fred Moten and Priscilla Wald, you were the first people in academia to make me feel like something other than a spy. In letting your life guide your scholarship, you have provided me with a model for producing creative scholarship, while surrounded by the often-compromising demands of institutional bureaucracy. To my other committee members, Nathaniel Mackey and Joseph Donahue, there is a special term reserved for the two of you that Miles Davis uses conspicuously throughout his autobiography, a term meant to indicate individuals who possess immense power and exhibit auspicious control over their craft. An urban approximation of the old Oedipal Complex, Davis’s honorific comes to mind whenever I
get the pleasure of witnessing the two of you work. It’s a beautiful thing. Together the four of you have allowed me a space for woodshedding ideas until a clear path to writing presents itself.

But my committee extends beyond the names listed on the title page of this dissertation. It also includes two friends, who have given me more happiness and support than I could ever repay. In the grit and grind of graduate school, I found two co-workers who have provided me with serious shelter. Ken Taylor and Allison Cursseen, you have helped me to understand the importance of being good for poetry instead of simply being good at it.

While writing this dissertation, I have been fortunate enough to be a participant of three life-changing communities. The Duke Poetry Working Group, The Monday/Wednesday/Friday Pickup Basketball Scene at Brodie Gym and the congregation at Cornerstone Community Church. The first two showed me that one only succeeds in life by building up your people, by cheering them on, by asking them for help, by defending the rites of mutual support. The last one showed me that what I depart from is not the way. When I was recovering from chronic medical issues, it was Rev. Dr. Maurice Wallace and his congregation, who intervened to heal my bruised body, repair my broken spirit and remind me that I am the beloved of God.

In such a long laborious process, one needs continual reminders that it’s not a sin to be glad you’re alive. Not only was I given ample encouragement that everything would be okay from my sweetheart, Ashley Rose Young, I was also reminded by her that feeling predicts intelligence.

If goodwill is the groundwork for the vernacular, as Roger Abrahams argues, then my family’s name should be etched on the cornerstone. From my preliterate years, I
understood that voice was my inheritance, my tradition. One could say that this project represents an attempt to come to terms with these advantages.
1. Home-born Exiles: The Doublespeak of Vernacular Poetics

1.1 In the American Veneer

At the end of the brief essay that William Carlos Williams contributed to the *Black Mountain Review* in 1957, he tells the story of spending a day in 1939 with his close friend, British novelist Ford Maddox Ford. Before leaving New York for what would be his final jaunt to the south of France, Ford accompanies Williams on a leisurely Sunday drive through the serene New Jersey countryside, where the two pass a handful of local farmers, tending their truck gardens, preparing their harvest for market. Williams recounts the “incongruous” scene: Ford, the quintessential distinguished gentleman in his “typically English clothes of a country squire” walked the carrot rows with the rustic American planter, “deep in conversation with his host over the merits of the various types of soil fertilizers, dung or chemical and how many plantings a season could be made profitably in this region.” According to Williams, the two men were mutually enthralled, to such an extent that the discussion of the land distracted them from the actual land, as both totally disregarded the nesting skype that deposited an egg on the ground directly before them. As he tells us in the piece, this is Williams’ last memory of Ford. While the piece warrants consideration as a belated eulogy for the writer who had admired Williams enough to launch The Society of the Friends of William Carlos Williams, there is something else at play in Williams’ concise recollection, something that extends beyond the conventions of posthumous tribute.

---

For the vast majority of Williams’s writing life, he defined his modernist experimentation as a means of overthrowing the influence of English culture over American letters. His hatred of so-called aristocratic verse forms and tyrannical sophistication gave rise to the most widely discussed element in his poetic repertoire: his embrace of the American idiom. Where British writers had the King’s English to fortify their claim to aesthetic dominance, the American writer, according to Williams, following Walt Whitman, possessed unparalleled access to the low, jagged language spoken by the common lot. The incongruity that Williams identifies between Ford and the farmer is one that bears direct implications for the Paterson poet’s aesthetics of the unrefined utterance. At no point in the essay does he fail to acknowledge Ford’s nationality—he “represented the best of England”—or the farmer’s homespun localism—he was “President of the farm-bank of the neighborhood.” By contrasting these two men, Williams sets up his departed friend as a democratic, fair-minded man of the earth. But given the longstanding nationalist implications of Williams’s poetry and poetics, the encounter, between the American farmer and the British aesthete, stages the question of common speech as a parable. It would have been apparent to any reader of the Black Mountain Review—a journal established on the precepts of speech-based writing as set forth by Williams—that the poet’s account of Ford’s preoccupation with the American Gothic represented a development in Williams’s thinking about American vernacular language. No longer was the vernacular strictly the language of the lowly. Instead the anecdote encourages readers to see the vernacular traverse cultural

---

thresholds, as Williams dramatizes the ironic circumstance in which the urbane society seeks out genuine contact with the ordinary and unrefined.

When Williams was a student at the University of Pennsylvania, professors who deigned to speak about such preposterous trivialities as “American literature” would have at least been aware, if not in favor, of John Fiske’s theory of the “transit of civilizations.” Any semblance of culture in the United States, the theory insists, arrives by means of European “carriers”—workers in the arts who migrated to the New World or natives who were fortunate enough to study abroad and unfortunate enough to return with their heightened sensibilities. American culture then represents at best an extension of European mastery and at worst a democratic debasement of the aristocratic ideal. For Williams, the distinctiveness of the American vernacular depended upon its relative deficiency. The transit of civilization theory informed Williams’s interest in the slack-jawed speech of devil-may-care men. It established the inferiority of American folk culture, which in turn inspired Williams to regard it as the fertile marl for an anti-literary nationalist aesthetic.

In his story about Ford, however, Williams recognizes a change in his beloved vernacular. No longer is the American argot stigmatized. Ford does not perform the expected role of the disapproving oxford don, forced to suffer gladly the shattered speech of the smallholder. Instead Williams presents him as unselfconsciously preoccupied with the broken localisms of the farmer, here represented as pure vernacular product. Although Williams does not directly address the cultural implications of this interaction, the populist ethos of the narrative romanticizes the

---

unlettered speech of the lower classes, championing it as a corrective to the stilted
poverty of European forms. But this is not a defense of the lowly in general; rather
Williams’s essay stages the vernacular idiom in conspicuously nationalist terms. When
he shows Ford championing the form, he is not simply staging the coronation of an
unmarked peasant tradition. He uses the emergent value of the vernacular to comment
upon America’s postwar ascendance to the throne of cultural superiority. As John
Kenneth Galbraith’s The Affluent Society contends, after the victory of the Second World
War, America had stepped out from the shadows of European dominance and was
prepared to assume its role as political, economic and cultural sovereign. Reversing the
“transit of civilizations” theory, Williams presents the European master, with his
“distinguished ancestry and education,” as having traveled to the New World in order
to soak up the exotic authenticity of the unwashed masses:

As he reflects on the possible outcomes of relegating America, and its vernacular
culture, to a position of perceived superiority, Williams concludes his essay on a
troubling note. “That was a scant ten years ago,” he writes. “Neither Ford the farmer or I
could have foretold that within a decade the whole region would be over-run with what
they call in this region Texas Ranch houses.”

The abrupt shift in Williams’s narrative from the bucolic countryside to the zero
lot lines of suburbia makes it seem as if the prefabricated homes had sprouted out of
those original truck garden seedbeds. In claiming they “overrun” the landscape,
Williams likens the uniform dwellings not to the weeds he valorizes in “On the Road to
the Contagious Hospital,” but rather to the earthly excrement he bemoans in “To Elsie.”

7 John A. Kouwenhoven, Made in America: The Arts in Modern Civilization (Garden City, NY: Doubleday,
1948), 1.
8 Williams, “Two Pieces,” 168.
These pods, cribbed from the pages of the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, blanket the horizon, each an advancement in what Williams saw as the suppression of authentic peasant tradition. Here the racket of atomized social life has displaced the indigenous harmony of man and nature. The aberrant and ever evolving has been replaced by the mass-produced and uniform. The wry humor of Williams’s final quip points to the ridiculousness of a structure being referred to as a Texas house in New Jersey. But it also points out that the name “Ranch-style” suggests the vernacular of the mid-century period, whether linguistic or architectural, would involve reducing the local and lowly into a style that denies both. With the name of the house style evoking the untamed wilds, the biopolitical regimentation of communal life carries over to the linguistic realm, the last vestige of William’s idea of authentic American-ness. Although Williams maintained his commitment to the American idiom, the political and economic shifts in the post-war world had led him by the mid 1950s to realize that the nonstandard and the idea of the distinctly “American” were being used against themselves to usher in a new standard of imperial hegemony. The prefabricated ranch-style home was simply the mark of such a standard.

In four chapters, I trace how this standardization of the vernacular impacted the writers in the generation after Williams. I examine references to common speech and vernacular culture in the poetry and poetic theory of Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and Gwendolyn Brooks, against the historical backdrop of the Free-Speech Movement and the rise of mass-culture. Each writes from an awareness of the limitations of the literary page, as they consistently thematize the inability of writing to capture the vital ephemerality of verbal expression. Yet, rather than treat this limitation as an impediment, the writers in my study use the limitations of the literary frame to dramatize the fugitivity of speech, emphasizing it as a disruptive counterpoint
to the technologies of textual capture. Instead of settling for an essentially American idiom, these poets saw in the vernacular not phonetic misspellings, slang terminology and fragmented syntax, but the potential to provoke and thereby frame a more ethical mode of social life, straining against the regimentation of citizenship.

1.2 Ranch-Style Renovations

Few symbols of the America of the 1950s and 60s remain as central to our contemporary conception of cold war culture as the iconic ranch-style suburban home, with its attached garage and rectangular floor plan. As the primary house type from a period of unprecedented American expansion, the suburban dwelling conjures images of nuclear domesticity, climate-controlled efficiency and postwar affluence. In the famous Nixon/Khrushchev kitchen debates, the modern American home took center stage in the ideological conflict with communism, as it effortlessly exuded the comforts of liberal democracy. To understand the appeal of this structure, one must follow Williams’s sardonic quip and look past the board and batten siding and dovecotes shingles, past the sliding glass doors and prefabricated frame, and reflect on the appropriative strategies that called such an edifice into existence. One must trace its nominal connection to the vernacular architecture of 19th-century America. As the name suggests, the ranch-style design harkens back to the modest shelters built by anonymous American pioneers, out of local materials: the California hacienda, Texas dogtrot and Montana log cabin. While contractors modernized the historical common houses, hermetically sealing their porous construction, the ranch-style roots of the dwelling played an important role in the fantasy lives of middle-class Americans. Against a backdrop of occupational bureaucracy, political uncertainty and disintegrated social life, the modular home galvanized the myth of an indigenous American culture, giving citizens reason to believe they could master their own plot in the expansive frontier.
Like many of the iconic postwar cultural developments, the evolution of ranch-style tract housing depends largely upon the emergence of the American military-industrial complex. “One of the most-talked about and least understood productions of the twentieth-century technology—along with the atom bomb is the prefabricated house,” wrote the 1947 authors of *The Prefabricated House: A Practical Guide for the Prospective Buyer*. On the covers of magazines like *Life* and *Time*, the image of the billowing mushroom cloud came to represent the blood-stained gate through which America walked into the Atomic Age. Four years after *Time* featured a cover portrait of Einstein with the disorderly commotion of nuclear explosion in the background, the magazine presented a similar image of William J. Levitt, mastermind behind the modern planned community, with orderly rows of uniform houses dotting the horizon behind him. The incredible number of soldiers returning home flush with government housing loans produced a market for builders like Levitt. To fulfill the demand for affordable housing, these builders implemented the same industrialized, prefabricated designs developed by the Department of Defense during the war. They contracted modernist architectural giants like William Wurster, Richard Neutra and Hugh Stubbins, Jr. to design prefabricated homes that could be built off-site and constructed on-site with minimal skilled labor. The combination of technological advancement, available resources and emergent demand produced the perfect circumstances for the postwar housing boom.

While I am primarily interested in the ideological and cultural forces that spurred the ranch-style craze, these factors were less a consideration for the contractors,

---

who embraced the rancher for its economical advantages. High-art architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright might have been attracted to the minimalist transparency of the Spanish mission and the subsequent secular ranches, but merchant builders like Levitt prized the ranch design for its receptiveness to assembly-line methods. The simplicity of the original rancher carried over into the celebrated open floor plan of its successor, which allowed contractors to cut costs on building materials. Also the minimalism of the nineteenth-century rancher gave rise to a modern structure that could be easily individualized with the slightest of variations. The style allowed contractors to utilize both U and L shaped designs, as well as different roof tilts and landscaping options, in order to safe-guard neighborhoods from seeming like the mass-produced barracks that they were. Furthermore, the uniform modularity of the efficient homes made it easier for developers to integrate them into the newest trend of the postwar era: the planned community. Inseparable from the all-inclusive vision of cul-de-sac containment, the rancher made possible the construction of what advertisers referred to as “desirable neighborhoods”: serene enclaves of whiteness protected by the racist lending practices of Federal Housing Administration.«

In 1948, the FHA concluded that low-cost housing had “reached a saturation point.”» (161). Levitt, the builder and developer of Levittown, one of the largest middle class housing communities, funded his own market research in order to determine the best strategy for growing the already thriving market. The research reported that the developers had been incorrect in trying to design homes that would appeal to women, based upon the assumption that conventional domestic roles afforded women more

---

decision-making power in domestic matters. Rather than appeal to women by
emphasizing the convenience of the suburbs, Levitt and his hugely successful housing
company, shifted their attention to men. Their studies revealed that men cared little
about convenience, but were racked with fears of bureaucratic emasculation. With social
scientists and novelists attending to this fear in such works as William Whyte’s The
Organization Man (1956) and Sloan Wilson’s Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1956), builders
like Levitt sought to capitalize on the anxiety of corporate life by offering middle class
white men an institutionalized escape from institutionalization.

Although Levitt funded the market research that influenced the entire industry
of postwar merchant architecture, his success in depicting Levittown as a man’s rightful
paradise depended largely upon the work of another central figure in the history of the
rancher, Cliff May. Levitt, referred to as the father of the suburbs, drew upon the
marketing concepts of May, whom many regard as the idea man behind the midcentury
architectural romance with Western lifestyle. In the late 1920s, May, never a licensed
architect, began his design career by building modern reinterpretations of mission-style
furniture. The success of the furniture led him to finance the construction of a mission-
style hacienda of his own design, which he modeled after the modest, cross-ventilated
structures he encountered in his youth spending summers on part of the Las Flores
Ranch, the largest parcel of the Santa Margarita y Las Flores Ranch in northern San
Diego. His designs quickly garnered the attention of elite California Tycoons, like
entrepreneur John A. Smith, who yearned to possess some part of the untapped
wilderness their prosperity was actively destroying.13 Initially May’s building philosophy

13 Jocelyn Gibbs and Nicholas Olsberg, Carefree California: Cliff May and the Romance of the Ranch House (New
centered on customizing the job to the client, while incorporating a distinctively California sensibility. His early homes have become classic examples of the “play between indoors and out,” “the shadowy ambiance of adobe walls and archways” and the “deliberate impression that came about from not quite caring” about the standardizing details of modern code-bound architecture. May went so far as to tear down walls that were too straight or smooth, only to rebuild them with a more warped contour. These crooked walls were an essential part of what May was selling, never a building, always a lifestyle, as he claims in his oral biography: “The ranch house was a way of living, the Old California way, [a] way of living out of doors.”

Mays’s “Don’t Fence Me In” attitude quickly became little more than ad copy as the California dreamer’s custom adobe dwellings spawned prefabricated realities. The little imperfections were traded in on Honeywell central heat and air, which Barbara Allen considers to be the central technological break-through responsible for the expansion of the ranch house to eastern markets. Rather than feeling the pressure to prove the United States’ superiority in the fine arts, builders turned to the power of nationalism in order to appeal to the rampant patriotism of postwar consumers, a spirit they helped engineer. Inspired by May, developers like Levitt understood that the success of the suburban revolution lie in catering to the fantasy of a vernacular heritage.

If we return to his essay, we see that Williams presents three important aspects of vernacularity. First, it gives ample, though tacit, evidence of the wide variety of objects and phenomena to which the term vernacular can be applied, from local speech to indigenous gardening practices and kitschy homes. Secondly, it offers a flashpoint from

---

15 Gibbs and Olsberg, Ibid, 11.
which to examine the mania surrounding the idea of the vernacular during the postwar era. At the center of this moment stands the vernacular. It inspires the artist. It placates the masses. It registers a nationalist imperative that came to define the mass-culture milieu of the postwar era.

Finally, and most importantly, Williams’s essay draws a serviceable distinction between two different kinds of vernacular. On the one hand, he attends to the speech and lifestyle of working class Americans, who exemplify an authentic identity set apart from the glossy slickness of Madison Avenue. On the other hand, he closes with a consideration of the mass-produced version of the vernacula. In this latter form, he sees the ridiculousness of branded localism, as the prefabricated home represents the commodification of the cultural specific for the sake of securing a generic American style. In the narrative, the ranch house displaces the truck gardener, thereby analogizing the ability of the commodified vernacular to usurp the ostensibly authentic. The market, here exemplified in terms of real estate, identifies its other in the 19th-century vernacular homes of the American West, and recognizes it as an element that must be incorporated into the totalizing schema of modern industrial life. It then absorbs this other by appropriating select aspects of its particularity, which it can then manipulate to ends that are agreeable for the market. In offering two different versions of the vernacular, Williams’s essay prompts a more in-depth examination of both forms, which will remain the defining poles of this study.

1.3 Subversive Intonation: The Vernacular of Fluidity

An all but limitless number of intellectual disciplines make use of the term vernacular to distinguish a specific sub-branch of their field. For instance, in the arts, the vernacular indicates a work that has been produced either by untrained, nonprofessional artists or by formally trained artists interested in approximating the
stylistic flourishes commonly associated with so-called outsiders. Similarly in religion, the term typically indicates the presence of lay or unsanctioned material practices of a spiritual nature. While religious historians such as Marion Bowman take a more nuanced approach to vernacular religion, defining it as “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand and interpret it,” more hackneyed examinations narrow the frame to include only such populist outpourings as the appearance of Jesus Christ in a well-done slice of cheese toast or homemade religious altars dotting the deathly passes of public interstates. In social scientific fields such as cultural anthropology, the term vernacular does not distinguish a specific sub-field, but rather the central subject of analysis. This includes a vast range of do-it-yourself activities carried out with little regard for professionalism or compensation, such as home gardening, book clubs and family movies. Even in the hard sciences, vernacular finds currency, where in the field of biology it corresponds to the common names given to plants and animals, which differ from one region to another. “Of varying importance across a variety of fields” writes Larry Scanlon, “the term [vernacular] belongs to no one of them in particular and possesses no consistent definition.” While the vernacular poses what Scanlon regards as an untenable impediment to the systematic accounting of disciplinary definition, a confluence of concerns emerges when one considers the basic ideology underpinning these unwieldy engagements with the nonstandard.

All of these different permutations of the vernacular share a concern over the relationship between hierarchy and differentiation. Collectively they frame the

vernacular as an object or set of practices that diverges from dominant, hierarchical methods and conventions. These manifestations of the vernacular in turn bear the evidence of this divergence at the most apparent level of form. In the cases of art and religion, the placement of vernacular in front of the disciplinary title announces the divided nature of said discipline. It proclaims that there is a palpable difference between trained and untrained approaches, and it asserts that the elevated significance of work produced by trained and credentialed practitioners depends upon the practitioners’ ability to maintain this difference.

But as many of the fields that lay claim to the vernacular profess, the lowly offers an unparalleled position from which to orchestrate a subversive attack on dominant ideology. If differentiation and stratification are the instruments of the vernacular, then subversion is the vernacular’s most popular melody. Even when institutional disciplines license vernacular sub-disciplines, thereby absorbing them into a systematic logic, they place subversiveness under the sign of legible power structures. Scanlon, in his essay “Poets Laureate and the Language of Slaves: Petrarch, Chaucer, and Langston Hughes,” offers insight into this dynamic, claiming the “vernacular seems to make a place where disciplines allow themselves to become a bit less than systematic, less than disciplined, where they aspire to speak of what lies beyond them.” Implicit in Scanlon’s claim is an insistence that power remains the possession of the systematic, which can afford to “allow” itself a less than systematic sub-discipline.

No field has mobilized a greater effort in defining and thereby activating the vernacular as a radical force of linguistic and cultural subversion than African American

---

19 Scanlon, “Poet Laureate,” 220.
literary criticism. In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Houston Baker elaborates on the trope of orality as it appears in the writing of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison; he establishes his approach to the question of the vernacular, however, by focusing not on primary works of literature but on the critical attempts that have shaped African American literary discourse. In his second chapter, he divides the field of African American literary study into three periods of development, or “generational shifts”: the integrative period, the nationalist or black aesthetic period, and the most recent reconstructionist period. Each of the trends differs sharply from its predecessor, yet the architects of each trend return to the same subject, black vernacular culture, to plot their critical paradigm shift."

Ironically the first efforts to discuss African American literary practice as a significant subset of the broader American literary scene came by way of an appeal to actually supersede its claim to cultural particularity. Tracing the concerted study of African American literature to the postwar era, Baker refers to the critical arguments of Richard Wright and Arthur P. Davis as exemplifying an integrationist poetics. The integrationist imperative for Baker can be traced back to the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* trial, which he argues supplied African American writers and literati with a trenchant belief in the possibility of an Adamic America, characterized by black and white unity the land over. In his essay “The Literature of the Negro in the United States,” Wright at once announces the emergence of African American literature as a bounded field and notifies his reader that its days are numbered. Prefiguring Kenneth Warren’s query about “the end(s) of African American Literature,” Wright explains that

---

the recent victories in Civil Rights have led him to believe that the writing of African Americans may soon be indistinguishable from the “mainstream” currents of white arts and letters. From an aesthetic standpoint, Wright claims that the only impediment restricting the complete absorption of black literary practice into white institutionality is the obdurate presence of vernacular expressivity. Famously referring to the folk products of Negro culture—blues, work songs, hollers, folktale, boasts, toasts and dozens—as “Forms of Things Unknown,” Wright positions the vernacular on the outskirts of normal American discourse. Its alienation is the alienation of black citizenship. Glossing Wright’s position, Fahamisha Patricia Brown claims, “To the degree that African Americans identify themselves or are identified as a separate and distinct people and culture, African American vernacular language is a cultural marker.” While the vernacular has hence become a positive marker of shared cultural property, for Wright American egalitarianism can only be achieved after the forms of things unknown have dissolved completely. For the integrationists, then, the vernacular plays an essential role in the project of African American literary study. It represents a kernel of cultural specificity, which must be omitted, according to Wright, if the goal of integration into the American democratic ideal is to be achieved.

In direct opposition to the universalizing endeavors of the integrationists, Baker presents the next stage in the development of African American literary study as one that developed out of a concerted effort to acknowledge and mobilize the cultural specificity of black life in America. Where the integrationists oriented themselves around a utopian vision of a unified America, the founders of the black aesthetic—LeRoi

---

Jones, Larry Neal and Stephen Henderson—concerned themselves primarily with the current racist structures facing and forging black community, especially during the 1960s and 70s. An extension of the political ideology known widely under the aegis of Black Power, the black aesthetic endorsed a vision of racial solidarity and self-definition, which viewed the black community as a politically sovereign revolutionary nation, forced to exist within the regressive malaise of a larger American nation-state. Instead of bracketing the subversive character of the vernacular, like their integrationist forebears, black aestheticians like Jones undertook extensive intellectual recovery projects aimed at documenting the flagrant sociality of nonstandard forms of black folk culture. Similarly, Henderson, in his introduction to *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, adopts Wright’s phrase “The Form of Things Unknown” to call attention to the vital complexity suffusing these so-called primitive productions. Thus, understanding the new black poetry requires tracing its innovative tenor back to the broad spectrum of black speech and music. Henderson resists pigeonholing black expressivity into a single register of oral language and instead insists that the scope of black speech is as diverse as the black community. While he refrains from isolating a definitional standard for black speech, he does not shirk from the materialist implications of espousing an aesthetic that converts a sociological experience of race into a verifiable manifestation of textual difference. Henderson’s embrace of vernacularity develops out of an essential belief that there is “such a commodity as blackness.” The ontological and epistemological contours of that notion leads Baker to conclude that the substantive commodity form of blackness obtains in the cultural specificity and semantic subversion of black vernacularity.

---

By the 1980s, however, the embrace of vernacular subversiveness gave way to an integrationist revival, which Baker refers to as the reconstructionist school of thought. Focusing specifically on the work of Robert Stepto and Henry Louis Gates, Jr; Baker defines the movement as an apologetic effort to discipline and professionalize the theoretical imperatives of the black aesthetic. For the preceding generation, the subversiveness of the vernacular are evident in the interdisciplinary, or better yet anti-disciplinary, approach to the concept, which treated the black literary object as part of a larger expressive continuum. This continuum included everything from folklore handed down through generations to musical interpretations of the most current street slang. In contrast to this view, the reconstructionists pursued a strictly literary conception of the vernacular, which rejected the sociological and political basis of black revolutionary thought. For Baker, this misguided operation derived from Gates, who complied with critical paradigms that regarded everyday language as categorically distinct from the poetic act of freighted expression. Baker insists that Gates disregards the vernacular as an extra-literary concern. The subtler point remains that the reconstructionists were not denouncing the vernacular. They were redefining it, making it over in the image of a “closed circuit” of literary consciousness. Expanding upon the integrationist’s desire to abolish racialized literary enclaves, the reconstructionists, in Baker’s account, “assumed that cultural identity was not at issue, suggesting that an advanced, theoretical vocabulary for the study of human expression was both transcultural and constitutive.”

In the reconstructionist agenda, the work of the literary critic should be to move beyond the confines of racial politics and treat the literary object as an autonomous production of the self-disciplining artistic intention. Hence, the subversiveness of the vernacular

---

becomes the object of rapt attention. The reconstructionist trend emerges as a means of disciplining the vernacular with conventional scholarly terminology and sanctioned theoretical frameworks.

The status of the vernacular in the history of African American literary criticism shifts from being an element the writer must overcome in the pursuit of an integrated America, to being a source of seditious upheaval and revolutionary self-definition, before coming to rest as a strictly literary phenomenon, easily absorbed within the apolitical structure of institutional critique. Whether or not the critical reader aims to advocate or ameliorate the subversiveness of the vernacular, their arguments treat the disruptive, rebellious nature of the vernacular as a given, an irreducible pith that one must accept either through ambivalence, embrace or adulteration.

Baker leaves no question as to the nature of his intervention. Not only does he adamantly criticize the professionalism of Gates and the reconstructionists, he mounts this takedown in accordance with the black aesthetic emphasis on cultural specificity, as it relates to their willingness to harness the vernacular as an instrument of radical black solidarity. Rather than perpetuate the shrinking of the literary domain to the finite ground of literary textuality, Baker finds in Jones, Neal and Henderson a reminder that the most critical work lies in coming to terms with the complicated relationship between pre-literary African American vernacular art forms and their contemporary aesthetic derivatives. For him, the critic attuned to the matrix of vernacular creativity will pursue an inclusive field, spanning various media and genre, which he refers to as expressive culture.

At the center of this field sits a definition of the vernacular that Baker presents at the close of *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* in the form of a poetic image: the iconic American railroad crossing sign. For Baker, the cross-hatched sign symbolizes the
restless transience of vernacular expressivity. In this view, subversion is not simply a reactionary challenge to a specific centralization of power in the form of convention. Rather it represents an essential antipode to the centralization of power in general. Baker describes this dynamic by associating the vernacular with an irreducible force of fluidity, and posing it in opposition to the cultivation of literary conventions, which he regards as an agent of fixity.

Fixity is a function of power. Those who maintain place, who decide what takes place and dictate what has taken place, are power brokers of the tradition. The “placeless,” by contrast, are translators of the nontraditional. Rather than fixed in the order of cunning Grecian urns, their lineage is fluid, nomadic, transitional. Their appropriate mark is a crossing sign at the junction.²⁶

Like the poetry of the black aestheticians, Baker’s example of the crossing sign performs the saturated semantics that Henderson identifies as the calling card of the black writing. At the level of content, the image of the crossing sign conveys a restless transitional challenge to the rigors of incorporation and institutionality. At the level of form, it resonates with the ubiquitous figure of the train that appears so often in the off-kilter blues chanteys that Baker casts as the pre-generic genesis of African American literary origins. While Baker turns to the train sign to emblematize vernacular fluidity, he uses the etymology of the term itself as a means of demonstrating the historical connection between vernacular culture and chattel slavery.

A derivative of the Latin vernaculus, vernacular emerged in ancient Rome as a term meant to denote things pertaining to “home-born slaves.” As in the modern slave societies of Brazil, the Caribbean and the United States, the slave in Roman antiquity was utterly disempowered, stripped of all human rights including the right to own

property and assert legally sanctioned familial bonds. Since at least as early as 100 BC, the term had been generalized to mean “a common town-based person” (Bradley 14). By this time, Marcus Terentius Varro had applied the adjective to language not directly related to slave speech. For him, the *lingua vernacula* denoted “an average Latin spoken by local townspeople” (15). Thus even before Dante’s *De Vulgaria Eloquentia*, the vernacular had lost its slave connotations; Baker, however, opens his study with an epigraph that pushes against this generalizing tendency:

*Vernacular, adj.: Of a slave: That is born on his master’s estate; home-born
Of arts, or features of these: Native or peculiar to a particular country or locality*

With the epigraph, Baker makes clear that the applicability of the vernacular to African American culture extends beyond the broad sense of cultural specificity, localism and hierarchical stratification. Framed within the context of African American culture, the term returns the notion of a marked culture to its original slave context. This act of etymological re-alignment serves Baker’s argument in two ways. It establishes his allegiance to the black aesthetic movement, with its interest in theorizing the site of irreducible cultural distinction, as manifest in the vernacular commodity of blackness. Secondly, it maintains that the basis of this difference derives from the brutal inequities of consolidated power. The work awaiting African American literary critics lies in understanding the extent to which black expressive culture, in so far as it announces its divergence from the standard, always already indexes the logic of slavery. The fluid subversion that Baker sees in the vernacular emerges out of the essential paradox of a slave culture: the vernacular is the shared possession of a class that had been denied the

right to exercise possession. It is thus a possession of the dispossessed and its subversiveness is a product of that irreconcilable conflict.

Nevertheless, Baker’s stirring account of the slave-based history of the vernacular omits one important aspect. The subversive property of the vernacular is only one side of its wager with difference and particularity. Returning to the context of ancient Rome, another dimension of the vernacular, one at odds with subversion, comes into view.

The slave system of ancient Greece and Rome distinguished between the general slave referred to as servus and the home-born or domestic slave, referred to as the verna. While the general slave was acquired either through trade or conquest, the domestic slave was procured through instrumentalized reproduction. Born within the master’s household and trained from adolescence to fulfill the master’s desire, the vernae were distinguished from the general slave population on the grounds of their reputation for docility and their perceived capacity for refined labor. This labor included shopping, gathering water, raising children, answering visitors, preparing food and carrying messages. However the status extended to the verna, in distinction from the general slave population, could not be limited simply to their training and occupation. Rather, the preferential treatment they received corresponded to the unique position they occupied within the imperial household. While slaves were legally reducible to nonentities, domestic slaves were not “complete outsiders” nor were they fully integrated into the mainstream of community life. They inhabited a strange liminal
position, at once central to the conservation of the domestic sphere yet peripheral to its conscribed politics. ∗

Baker’s emphasis on subversion and fluidity adequately accounts for the marginality of vernacular culture. But his work leaves unexplored the centralizing, domesticating force of the concept. In focusing strictly on the slave’s exclusion from society, Baker lets pass the role slaves played, against their will, in the consolidation of domestic power structures. Imagining the vernacular strictly in terms of subversion overlooks the fact that the term arose out of circumstances that transcended the bounded parameters of a single class or caste. While the vernacular may have famously emerged from the ancient slave quarters, it quickly became a significant marker of that culture which is common to the general body of Roman citizens. As much as the vernacular carries an implicit counter to power, power defines itself through absorbing this variation and arresting it under the sign of nationalist identity. Both the verna and the vernacular “embodied a household’s imbrication with Rome’s imperial might.” ∗ To this extent, the vernacular in both its ancient and modern context cannot be understood solely as a fluid resistance to fixity. Rather, it stands as a gestalt image on the order of Wittgenstein’s Duck-Rabbit. From one angle, it reflects the fluidity of a disenfranchised people. From a different perspective, it presents the fixity of established ideals. Calling attention to this conflict at the heart of the etymology of vernacular, Scanlon writes, “The vernae […] embodies at once a local household’s imperial power of appropriation and its continuing dependence on the foreign.” ∗ While there exists an immense historical and

---

29 Scanlon, Poet Laureate, 226.
30 Scanlon, Ibid, 226.
material chasm between the imperial Roman household and the middleclass American rancher, both nations testify to the power of the state, as Scanlon puts it, to appropriate the culture of the lowly and thereby perpetuate political reign over the foreign and unassimilated. Hence the two nations offer a strikingly similar heuristic for understanding the contradictory tendencies at the heart of the vernacular, which in turn produces a single concept with contested meanings.

Even Baker’s example of the railroad crossing sign bears evidence of the conflicted nature of the vernacular. The railway, without question a symbol of movement, represents transience and in many cases civic and racial progress. In so far as it signifies exchange, process and flux, the railroad registers a fundamental animosity towards fixed destination, which Baker associates with the establishment of linguistic and cultural standards. But the blues lyrics that build out of this processional mobility carries an unmistakable quality of strain and lament, often figured through ironic understatement. One might read this forlorn, lonesome sound as a feature of the fixed world of established power, the world from which the transient, vernacular bluesman escapes by rail. Yet, the mournful aspect of the song insists that some element of the escape route, some aspect internal to the fugitive rails, has inspired the melancholic yawp. Trains are vehicles of passage, migration and fluidity, but the iron tracks that direct their every movement represent one continuous site of fixed investment. As much as the train follows a fluid motion, the tracks upon which the train runs, follow a fixed direction, an established, unalterable course. Similarly, the vernacular may contradict the fashioning of standards and protocols, but it also inspires appropriative efforts by forces that seek to secure these very pursuits. Thus the train is a means of training, a departure that never fully departs.
How a writer defines the native language is a question that leads back to the contradiction that lies at the heart of the ancient *verna*. In the same way that the verna straddled the mutually exclusive fields of insider and outsider, the vernacular straddles two conflicted ideas of the common. For a writer like Dante, the vernacular is common to the degree that it is the universal language learned first, or naturally, by the child from his nursemaid and not the language of the elite, acquired later in life through formal schooling. However, for a writer like Paul Laurence Dunbar, the vernacular depends upon a more derisive meaning of common, not as the universally shared language but rather the distinctively vulgar and unsophisticated tongue. It is easy enough to understand how these divergent notions of common speech can apply to the vernacular, given the etymological root of the concept. While it was common in the first sense for Roman senators to indenture slaves in the service of raising their children, the language those children learned, as Tacitus protests, was depraved, or common in the second sense. The idea of the native that underpins the vernacular is at once a function of centralized power, as in one’s claim to citizenship, and a position of disempowered resistance to such power, as in one’s hostility to hierarchical rule.

In ancient Rome, the citizen’s home symbolized imperial power. The vernae fulfilled the master’s claim to property while existing on the margins of the home, unable to own property and claim the rights of personhood. When defining the vernacular from the perspective power, the experience of the vernae, the experience of being internally exiled, will always remain secondary and incidental to the narrative of progress. Although the public relations experts behind the midcentury ranch house’s Western appeal based their designs on a notion of the vernacular, these same engineers of consensus disavowed any connection to the kind of structural violence that undergirds the concept of the vernacular. The beauty of the house relied upon
disregarding the role the hacienda and mission played in the brutal colonization of Native Americans.

In witnessing the farmland fill with tract housing, Williams is in effect witnessing a transition in the American vernacular from a position of subordinance to one of primacy. This is one of the consequences of defining the vernacular, as Williams does, through recourse to the national. For him, the American idiom amounts to the unincorporated speech of a peasant class with no peasant tradition to speak of. By the end of his career, America was no longer considered the only population to go from barbarism to decadence without being civilized in the meantime. And the vernacular played an essential part in this civilizing mission. The cultural front of the Cold War depended upon the construction of a distinctive American heritage, which did not conflict with the propagandistic vision of the country as folksy subject turned benevolent master. The vernacular became a catch all term for anything that signified a national style, from the canned slang of Madison Avenue advertising campaigns to the vibrant gestures of Abstract Expressionism.

1.4 Swayed in America: The Vernacular of Fixity

On October 19, 1945, two weeks after the atomic detonations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, famed novelist and advocate of democratic socialism George Orwell contributed to the London Tribune an essay concerned with the political and social implications of living in the shadow of mass destruction, entitled “You and the Atomic Bomb.” In it he argues that the nuclear explosions not only announced the emergence of a new brand of warfare, but the dawning of a new political climate unlike any in history. While he punctuates his arguments with an alarmist’s candor, his ultimate prognosis is
not that the nuclear age will plunge human civilization into a “general breakdown.” Rather he considers it ushering in an “epoch as horribly stable as the slave empires of antiquity.” The cause of this sliding retrograde is not simply the bombs themselves, according to Orwell, but the aggressive conservation of national sovereignty and the development of “highly-centralized police state(s).” At the end, Orwell complains that the amount of writing about the technological aspects of the atomic bomb has essentially obscured any opportunity for engaging with the social implications of such an event. For him, the question is not how such a weapon works, or whether or not the Soviets have discovered a means of unleashing the atom’s destructive properties. The true matter of importance lies in understanding what will happen to human culture when the state has become the most powerful structure on the planet. These states are at once “unconquerable and in a permanent state of cold war with their neighbors.” In this, reportedly the first usage of the term cold war, we find a remarkably accurate prediction of the ideology that would come to define the 1950s and early 1960s. As his comments suggest, there will be no victors in the cold war. The citizens of the powerful nations will be subjected to the same anxiety and invasive violations of human rights as their enemies. Following the comparison Orwell draws between the slave societies of the antebellum era and the cold war communities of the postwar era, the slave in the latter example takes the form of the unconscious citizen. It is the citizen-slave class that has handed over their identity to the ownership of state, handed over their voice to the vicissitudes of corporate power, all of this in exchange for the kind of security that only containment can bring.

31 George Orwell, Fifty Orwell Essays (New York: Benediction Classics, 2010), 397.
32 Orwell, Ibid.
33 Orwell, Ibid.
Within a year of the article, George Kennan would fulfill Orwell’s forecast by writing what many consider to be the inaugural document of the cold war, the so-called “long-telegram” to President Dwight Eisenhower. In it, Kennan, an American diplomat in Moscow, responds to the US Treasury’s request for an explanation of the Soviet’s refusal to participate in the World Bank and International Money Fund. Rather than answer the question directly, Kennan uses the telegram as a platform to air his long-held views about Russian psychology, views that American policy makers had repeatedly ignored. With grandstanding rhetorical force, Kennan characterizes the Soviets as “impervious to [the] logic of reason” and “highly sensitive to [the] logic of force,” a “neurotic” people, who are guided by an “instinctive sense of insecurity.” Referring to world communism as a “malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue,” Kennan outlines a plan for action that centers on improving the “self confidence, discipline, morale and community spirit of our own people.” Within the year, Kennan would revise his secret telegram into an open article for *Foreign Affairs*, entitled “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.” Giving birth to the language of containment, Kennan makes clear in his well-received article “that the main element of any United States policy towards the Soviet Union must be that of a long term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” Alan Nadel summarizes the logic of Kennan’s argument, as a “rigid major premise that the world was divided into two monolithic camps, one dedicated to promoting the inextricable combination of

---

capitalism, democracy and (Judeo-Christian) religion and one seeking to destroy that ideological amalgamation by any means.”

Kennan’s call for containment inspired a vast propaganda campaign that sought to engender the kind of “self confidence” in liberal capitalism that he considered a vital weapon against communism. This campaign took a variety of forms, none of which has received more scrutiny than the covert efforts of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a secret program operated by the CIA from 1950 until 1967. In *The Cultural Cold War*, Frances Saunders brings together a vast array of sources to tell a story that traces various dimensions of government involvement in the spread of a distinctly American set of aesthetic ideals throughout postwar Western Europe. The book traces events following the distribution of NSC-68, a 1950 policy paper inspired by Kennan’s telegram, which conceived of the Soviet Union as a corrupt government structure determined to wrest power from the democratic states of Western Europe and finally challenge the continued prosperity of America. Saunders’ interest lies in showing the extent to which the CIA perpetrated acts of cultural propaganda by enlisting the world of arts and letters in the fight for global sovereignty. Those programs included, at the forefront, the publication of the journal *Encounters* and several government-funded international exhibitions of abstract expressionist art. The basic idea behind the CIA’s interest in abstract expressionism can be summed up by its apparent departure from the aesthetics and politics of social realism. Rather than produce works that sought to represent the ills of the world, of which there are many at the time, the abstract expressionist work, in the hand of critics such as Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg, became a totem to the

---

very idea of American individualism. Just as the work, in its arcing trajectories and unconventional flares, performs the non-figurative and politically silent, its apolitical stance lends the viewer what has been referred to as an anti-communist ideology, “the ideology of freedom, or free enterprise.”

The direct involvement of the CIA in the construction of an American aesthetic is but one salient example of a larger trend. During the cold war era, public relations experts, public intellectuals and political pundits all worked in concert to establish what Wendy Wall refers to as “The American Way.” For Wall, “The American Way” is the ideological apparatus behind the “usually deep and well grounded [sense of] national unity” that has come to define the scholarly and popular depiction of the postwar years.

The widely held suspicion during the postwar era that America possessed no essential indigenous culture spurred this effort to prove to Americans that they possessed an inalienable claim to the “shared heritage and values” of an exceptional national culture. The transit of civilizations theory posed an obstacle to the containment era ideology. Before one can contain a sense of superior nationalism, one must first cultivate a distinctive way of life. And this requires identifying a set of values that are at once readily present in the daily practices of citizens, and capable of inspiring erudite alternatives to mass culture.

In these years, a general imperative arose not only to identify the unique features of American arts and letters but also to insist upon cultural superiority. A case in point of this imperative, John Kouwenhoven’s Made in America: the Arts in Modern Civilization,

---

published in 1948 by Doubleday & Company, begins with a confession that openly courts John Fiske’s “transit of civilizations” theory. “As a people,” Kouwenhoven writes, “we have been proud of American civilization and of its political and social institutions, but we have been less confident about our performance in the arts.” The lack of confidence that Kouwenhoven attributes to postwar American cultural consciousness stems from what he believes to be a fraudulent misstep at the basis of the American conception of the arts. Instead of valuing the indigenous domestic arts of the early American pioneers, American tastemakers have continued to adopt a primarily European set of assumptions, which has led them to focus strictly on the development of the fine arts in America. According to Kowenhouven this eurocentrism is responsible for the status of the arts in America, which is “more strikingly unrepresentative of national life than in the countries of Europe.” Considering his book a corrective to this national inferiority complex, Kouwenhoven challenges Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s claim that Americans were merely the “English under a different sky.” Instead he celebrates the modest and unsophisticated practices of a population he claims “did not know anything about art.” According to him, not knowing anything about art freed the first American generations to “deal with the materials of a new and unprecedented environment” in ways that “contributed directly to the evolution of new forms of artistic expression.” He refers to this unpretentious material, which defines true American creativity, as the vernacular.

40 Kouwenhoven, Made in America, 1.
41 Kouwenhoven, Ibid, 8.
42 Kouwenhoven, Ibid, 7.
43 Kouwenhoven, Ibid, 8.
44 Kouwenhoven, Ibid, 3.
In his chapter “What is the Vernacular?” Kouwenhoven not only argues that American art is essentially vernacular, he also proposes a definition of the concept that undermines its historical connection to the natural world. Referring to it as a “unique kind of folk art, created under conditions that had never existed before,” Kouwenhoven deems the American vernacular an offspring of a people that turned to machines and mechanization in order to tame the wilds of an unfamiliar land. The peculiarity of this folk culture could not be absorbed into conventional notions of European peasant traditions nor the elevated ideals of the aristocratic masters. Kouwenhoven makes clear that the folk culture he is interested in has little to do with the hackneyed vision of an oral agrarian culture, untouched by the mechanization of the modern world. “It has nothing in common,” he writes, “with the balladry of the Kentucky mountaineers or the decorative crafts of the Pennsylvania Dutch.” His principal claim is that critical appraisals of American artistic history have overlooked the development of what he calls a “democratic technological vernacular”: “In their purest form, these patterns comprise the folk arts of the first people in history who, disinherited of a great cultural tradition, found themselves living under democratic institutions in an expanding machine economy.” This vernacular is most readily apparent in the “tools, machines, buildings and other objects” that early Americans created “for use in the routine of daily life.” Considering these essentially American tools Kouwenhoven concludes that the mechanical vernacular exemplified a set of recognizable characteristics that included “economy, simplicity and flexibility.” Although he insists that these features emerge out

---

4 Kouwenhoven, Ibid, 15.
4 Kouwenhoven, Ibid.
4 Kouwenhoven, Ibid.
4 Kouwenhoven, Ibid.
4 Kouwenhoven, Ibid, 16.
of the American system of industrial production, he spends the bulk of his study showing how they influenced American literature, painting and architecture. From the ax to the skyscraper, and from Melville’s journalistic voice to Hudson River School realism, Kouwenhoven argues “whatever was built or made in the vernacular was likely to be marked by constraint and simplicity.”

In redefining the vernacular, Kouwenhoven not only posits a resolute vision of a distinctly American culture, he also constructs a national heritage sensitive to the economic interests of the free market economy. His technological notion of the vernacular effectively collapses the boundary between the fine arts of literature and painting and the industrial arts of steam engineering and dye making. This expansive sense of the vernacular brings to bear a democratic leveling that cannot be separated from a claim to propose the arts in America covalent with the culture of daily work and financial exchange. Historically the arts, even the vernacular folk arts, occupied a position external to the market. From the modern era forward, artwork could be sold, but the selling of the object was not considered its designed purpose. By basing his conception of the vernacular in the mass-produced commodity, Kouwenhoven dissolves the division between fine art and kitsch. While this approach opens up new ways of celebrating the vocational labors of early Americans, it invalidates the transgressive insularity of the fine arts. In championing the populace as the ultimate arbitrators of taste and value, Kouwenhoven insists that the true and appropriate platform for aesthetic appreciation is the free-market economy. Not only does his vision of the vernacular construct and maintain an irreducible aesthetic of American essence, it also uses this aesthetic to defend and justify the political and economic systems of the nation-

---

49 Kouwenhoven, Ibid, 28.
state. His view of the vernacular corresponds to that category of civilizing engagement postwar American leftist intellectuals derisively dubbed “mass culture.”

In the 1957 essay collection Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, Dwight Macdonald defines mass culture as anything “manufactured wholesale for the market,” which exists strictly for “mass consumption.” The history of mass culture for Macdonald is a familiar story that centers on the division between two cultures, the high and the low, which have been forced into contact with the rise of the Industrial Revolution. With the American virtues of democratic education and representational politics the conditions that had up until the 1800s guaranteed a clear and incontrovertible gap between the European aristocrat and peasant was beginning to crumble. According to Macdonald, “Business enterprise found a profitable market in the cultural demands of the newly awakened masses and the advance of technology made possible the cheap production of books, periodicals, pictures, music and furniture, in sufficient quantities to satisfy the market.” Macdonald agrees fundamentally with Kouwenhoven that mass culture is “to some extent a continuation of the old folk art,” but he disagrees about the implications of redefining the vernacular to accommodate the rise of industrial practices. For Macdonald the vernacular and the folk are ideas that cannot be applied to the assembly line and its automated offspring. Folk, as a term, applies only to the “autochthonous” local products that the lower classes develop without any intervention from cultural authorities. The moment mechanization emerges in the domain of the uneducated and disempowered, so too emerges an apparatus that ensures the alienation

---

31 Macdonald, Ibid.
32 Macdonald, Ibid, 60.
of lower classes. Mass culture then for Macdonald names the manipulative intervention of elites into the non-elite. It is a compromised, diluted version of high culture meant to appease, entertain and discipline the masses. Its principal purpose involves displacing the authentic history of folk culture with a commodified version of folk culture, through which the lower classes are fully integrated into capitalist structures of control.

Macdonald offers two important insights about the vernacular. First, he reminds us that advertising copywriters and conservative historians can utilize the vernacular to consolidate a public of docile citizens. To this end, his argument reveals the importance of appropriation for constructing a nationalist vernacular, fit to serve the ideology of a finite body politic. Second, he identifies the split nature of the vernacular. On the one hand, there is the vernacular of mass culture, the jingle, the Hollywood film and the political speech. On the other hand, there is the vernacular that precedes the mass-production of Americana kitsch, which represents an instance of authentic interaction between the lower classes and their unsanctioned patterns of social engagement.

In his landmark 1958 essay “The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature,” Leo Marx combines the nationalist ideology of Kouwenhoven with the mass-culture critique of Macdonald, to call attention to the fractured state of the vernacular in American culture. Advancing Kouwenhoven’s position, Marx argues that the vernacular provides the basis of a distinctly American style of literature. His argument centers on the work of Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, two writers he feels exemplify the distinction between American and European culture. In “Song of Myself” and Huckleberry Finn, Whitman and Twain,” according to Marx, “establish once and for all,
the literary usefulness of the native idiom.”- Twain and Whitman, he argues, “resorted to the old device of the personal—first person narrator,” in order to inject their prose and poetry with a level of immediacy.- Although Marx points out that this vernacular style is not entirely consistent with the “spoken language of [their] time,” it comes close enough to create “the illusion that a certain kind of man is speaking.”- At the base of his interest in the “immense vitality” of the vernacular, Marx reveals a nationalist imperative that closely resembles Kouwenhoven’s argument. He insists that with the native idiom, “they fashioned a vernacular mode or, if you will, a national style.”- When such claims are taken into consideration alongside the fact that Marx first publishes his article in Die Neueren Sprachen, a German publication established as a means of spreading American sentiment across Western Europe, one can see the propagandistic function of Marx championing the vernacular as a major difference in the comparative evaluation of English and American literature.

But his essay also presents a salient critique of postwar American values. For Marx, the authentic vernacular of Whitman and Twain “is not simply a style, but a style with a politics in view.” It is not only an attempt to approximate speech, it is rather a “vehicle for the affirmation of an egalitarian faith.”- (8). Marx sees the political valence of the vernacular in Whitman’s and Twain’s willingness to use their experimental works to engage with the controversial role of slavery in America. “Like Whitman’s hero,” writes Marx, “Huck is a rebellious, democratic barbarian. He lies, he steals, he prefers

54 Marx, Ibid.
55 Marx, Ibid.
56 Marx, Ibid.
57 Marx, Ibid, 8.
magic to religion, he identifies his interests with those of escaped slaves, and above all he speaks the vernacular.” The politics of the vernacular from this perspective entails a compulsion to defy tradition, thwart convention and overturn decorum, all of which are implicated in the vernacular speaker’s embrace of the lowly, as exemplified in the nonstandard speech of the chattel slave.

Nevertheless, Marx’s view of the vernacular finds resonance in Macdonald’s negative assessment of mass culture. While he argues that the vernacular operates as the marker of American political idealism, he counters this praise by insisting that the 19th-century idea of the vernacular is “so radical that we can scarcely credit it today.” America has undergone a drastic transition, from a republic dedicated to revolution and social democracy, to a nation committed to the status quo and conditioned consent. Marx closes his argument by summarizing this transition and its impact on the political efficacy of American vernacularity:

From the beginning the vernacular was more than a literary technique—it was a view of experience. When the style first emerged it was nourished by a political faith that we can scarcely imagine nowadays. Since that time the history of the vernacular has been a history of its fragmentation. The technique has been separated from the belief it originally was designed to affirm. But that is another story.”

This other story, the story of how the vernacular has been separated from its radical roots, is the story that appears in the pages of The Partisan Review.

One cogent example is James Agee’s “Pseudo Folk,” a brief essay in which he argues instead of an authentic vernacular, or folk, tradition, the mid-century American could only access a concocted pseudo folk. The pseudo valence of this mass-produced vernacular form represents the extent to which the concept can be applied in the service

58 Marx, Ibid, 15.
59 Marx, Ibid, 17.
of strengthening the claims of conformity culture. Agee defines the pseudo folk in reference to jazz music. Referring to Raymond Scott, the popular composer of such hit parade darlings as “Powerhouse,” as a “nasty tricky little midget,” Agee complains that Scott represents a wide scale attempt at “sophisticating’ this extremely unsophisticated art (jazz) out of all relation to its source.” Other examples of pseudo folk artists include the singer Hazel Scott and the entire production crew responsible for the Broadway musical Oklahoma, which Agee refers to as a “white disease” that exudes a “certain pseudo-folk charm.” Like the ranch-style home, the pseudo folk demonstrated the shattered state of vernacular aesthetics in the postwar era. In the place of the nonstandard and counter-national, the pseudo folk artists sought to install an ideological apparatus of control through making a claim on common speech.

An imperative of this nature pairs easily with the idea of fixity as proposed by Baker. Taken from his perspective, these nationalist attempts at founding an essential American aesthetic can only be understood as the construction of an official narrative of civic belonging, which excludes minorities and opposes the fluid disruptive force of the vernacular. But Baker’s perspective cannot account for the appropriative force of postwar power structures. It leaves unexamined the extent to which these engineers of consent standardized a version of the vernacular, capable of carrying out their containment strategies. At this critical moment, when walls are literally being constructed to segregate the United States from the Soviet Union, it is not a notion of the aristocratic and well reasoned that the country turns to in order to shore up its sense of

---

60 James Agee, “Pseudo Folk” in James Agee: Film Writing and Selected Journalism (New York: Library of America, 2005), 460.
61 Agee, Ibid, 461.
national heritage. Instead it is the vernacular that carries the burden of aestheticizing the unassailable authority of free-market capitalism and liberal democracy.

1.5 The Vernacular Basement of the Speech-Based House Un-American

In 1950, amid the mania of McCarthyism, the looming threat of nuclear war and the rumblings of the movement towards black liberation, the poet Charles Olson faced his typewriter and hammered out two still-unpublished lines: “to be other than a citizen / it ain’t easy, bro.” In order to conceive of an escape from state-based models of civic belonging, Olson felt he must move his line from the formal into the colloquial, echoing a specifically black expression that articulates the difficulty of life when citizenship is barred. Not only did Olson employ a speakerly tone in his poetry and prose, he also centered his most influential text, the manifesto “Projective Verse,” on the necessity of bringing the breath of the writer to bear on the typewritten poem. In opening up the literary text to the performative dynamics of the poet’s breath, the projective poem also, according to Olson, allows “all of the speech force of language back in” (244). In Olson’s haptic prose, the poets of the midcentury generation found a serviceable guide for overturning the literary conventions of New Criticism, which instructed them to use the typewriter to score the poem in a manner that exhibits an operative embrace of orality.

Likewise critics of postwar American poetry consistently turn to Olson’s “Projective Verse” as the definitive statement of the avant-garde coteries canonized in Donald Allen’s outlaw classic anthology The New American Poets: 1945-1960. In looking at “Projective Verse” as the origin point of this new generation of midcentury poets, critical consensus typically characterizes the movement in terms of a “speech-based aesthetic.” Although no poet of the 1950s and 60s refers explicitly to his and her work in
these terms, critics use the “speech-based” as a shorthand for the poetics of immediacy that shaped the underground literary communities after the Second World War. A case in point of this critical consensus comes in Seth Forrest’s essay “Aurality and Literacy: The New American Poets and the Age of Technological Reproduction.” After stating that the New American tradition is an “oral poetics as is so often asserted,” Forrest offers what one would expect to be a clarifying footnote. 62 Instead of tracing the major strands of discourse underlying his assertion, the footnote simply reads, “Readers will have to forgive me for not including citations here of such analysis. I hope my point can be granted without listing what would be a very large number of book chapters and articles.” Hence Forrest’s footnote does something greater than itemizing the references to the speech-based aesthetic. It could have referred the reader to Alan Golding’s discussion of the little poetry magazine Origin, which he argues “represented not just poets but a whole poetics […] the speech-based poetics[…] that Olson had proposed in ‘Projective Verse.’” 63 Or he could have mentioned Marjorie Perloff’s use of T.S. Eliot’s well-known dictum—“Every revolution in poetry is apt to be and sometimes to announce itself to be, a return to common speech”—to explain the “self-declared revolution of the New-American Poetry.” 64 Finally, he could have directed the reader to Ghostlier Demarcations, where Michael Davidson opens his discussion of orality and the avant-garde with a consideration of the “oral imperative [of] Olson’s essay ‘Projective Verse.’” 65

Instead Forrest’s footnote proves that the concept has become so commonplace that it can be accepted in an academic argument without evidence.

While there is some disagreement about what these poets actually mean by speech, most interpret it as the individual vocal habits of the singular poet. The clearest articulation comes by way of Perloff, who argues, “We might note, to begin with, that for the open-field poetics of the fifties, the speech base is no longer that of ‘common speech’ as it was for Yeats and Eliot and for Wordsworth before them, but the very personal utterance of the individual poet.” In defining the speech base as idiolect instead of dialect, Perloff establishes the groundwork for most engagements with the topic. Rather than read the gesture to speech as a form of populism, readers typically regard it as an inquiry into philosophical, phenomenological and biological concerns. Readers regard the invocation of speech as an attempt to collapse the division between the literary and reality. Rather than consider reality a product of social realism, constructed by Marxist materialism, the New America poets, according to critics such as Davidson, invested the individual agent’s perceptive faculties as the ground of reality. Thus the meaning of speech in the so-called speech-based aesthetic is typically understood as including the poet’s “romantic” voice, his or her own vocal tics (as represented in writing), and finally the poet’s physical presence, as a matrix of biological and perceptual awareness.

If we return however to Olson’s unpublished lyric about the necessity of pressing against the conventions of citizenship, we see that his line presents a depiction of the voice in excess of the idiolectal. Indeed the line presents colloquial language, or vernacular, as a vital resistance to postwar nationalism. “Other than a Citizen” seeks to

---

*Perloff, Radical Artifice, 34.*
expand this body of criticism by returning to the question of the base of speech-based aesthetics. It is true that many of the poets referred to under the New American heading make frequent use of the term “speech” to define their poetics. However, two of the central figures of this movement, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, specify in published and unpublished work that their notion of speech is based largely upon their own interests in the concept of the vernacular, a term they apply to the authentic social basis of nonstandard language.

The question of the vernacular has a long history that stretches back to slavery in ancient Rome, where the term indicates a “domestic, native, indigenous” culture, “pertaining to home-born slaves.” My introduction draws a comparison between the imperial ideology of midcentury America and classical Greece and Rome, paying close attention to the role vernacularity plays in these civilizing efforts. Olson offers an unparalleled example of a writer uniquely qualified to realign the concept of vernacularity; he served in Roosevelt’s Office of War Information, studied in the American Civilization program at Harvard, and used the ancient Greek rhetorician Maximus of Tyre as the persona of his outsized poetic epic. My first chapter, “The Secrets Objects Share: Vernacular Materialism in Charles Olson,” examines how Olson historicizes the term vernacular in order to develop a theory of language sensitive to contemporary anxieties about genocide and dehumanization. I argue that the poet’s insistence upon a speech-based aesthetic corresponds to his interest in the domestic slave, as he aspires to write a poetry internal to the language of non-elite groups. For him, the vernacular names the speech of those contemporary and historical individuals, black and poor white, who have been relegated to the status of object in order to consolidate a vision of American empire.
Vernacularity originates in antiquity, but it is not until the medieval period that writers like Dante Alighieri begin to write formal literature in the common language of the day. In his thirteenth-century treatise, De Vulgari Eloquuntia, Dante reinterprets the idea of common language away from the commonness of the uncouth and ill bred and towards a commonness of universal comprehension. My second chapter, “Beyond the Reality of the Incomparable: Robert Duncan and the Vernacular of Preliteracy,” examines Olson’s close colleague, Robert Duncan, and his use of Dante to theorize the vernacular as a language that unifies human experience across time and space. In creating this universal language, Duncan’s interest extends beyond the field of the literary and leads him to the discipline of modern linguistics. Where Olson frustrates the institutionalized vision of American vernacular by accounting for the outsider trapped within the nation, Duncan enlists the vernacular as a means of contesting literary nationalism, as he conceives of the poem as a holistic symposium that traverses the boundaries of the modern nation state. In particular, this chapter shows how Duncan draws upon the formal study of phonology in order to carry out the poetics of Dante and Olson, which entails treating the poem as a site of decentralized participation where each phonic element acts according to its own volition.

Looking at Olson and Duncan’s work as a vernacular-based aesthetic brings two important insights into view. First in observing their claim to the vernacular, we gain a better perspective of the cultural and political implications of the speech-based revolution. As Olson typed the unpublished lyric, corporate and governmental interest groups were laying claim to the vernacular. From the institutionalization of structural linguistics to suburban homes based on the modest layouts of frontier settlements, public relations experts transformed the vernacular into a standard style meant to achieve the exact containment and fixity that Olson’s invocation of the nonstandard
meant to explode. “Other than a Citizen” investigates this tension between the vernacular as a radical disrupting mode and the vernacular as a fixed national style. One might assume that the speech-based, or vernacular-based, aesthetic defines itself in contradiction to standard dictionary locution. Here, the idea of speech stands at odds with the notion of writing, in so far as speech corresponds to the informal and incorrect, whereas writing corresponds to the formal and grammatically correct. However, the postwar invocation of speech does not stand in direct confrontation with the construction of standard English. It opposes the institutionalization of a homogenous anti-standard. Thus, the vernacular, as an operative term for speech, brings with it a different object of contention. The critical body confirms that the major prerogatives of the avant-garde were to return poetry and expressive culture to the complex vitality of speech. I argue, however, that speech had never left literary or popular culture. The concept of the vernacular provided the forces of corporate liberalism with a means of consecrating a unique vision of indigenous American culture. By designing their speech-based aesthetics as an intervention into the vernacular, Olson and Duncan were less concerned with opposing standardized grammar, than they were in restoring to the vernacular a sense of authenticity, defined in contradiction to the trends of the market. For them, the vernacular was not the opposite of dictionary eloquence it was the antithesis of commercial speech, the antipode of the standardized national vernacular of fixity.

The second benefit of reading Duncan and Olson as vernacular poets is that such a discussion brings their voiced experiments into conversation with the history of African American literary production. In calling their work vernacular, I mean to position them within the same field of discourse that has for better or worse defined the speakerly text as the primary trope of the black aesthetic. Although Olson and Duncan
did not define the vernacular strictly in terms of black speech or racial masquerade, both of them understand that the concept carries overt racial connotations, and, more importantly, both use the history of blackness in America as a touchstone for their excursions into the nonstandard.

For instance, Olson’s belief that the vernacular names the language of an unincorporated people connects directly with a population that was denied access to the privileged status of citizen. In the 1947 poem “Willie Francis and the Electric Chair” he uses the conventions of the dialect ballad to tell the story of a young African American man who was executed twice by the state of Louisiana on account of faulty equipment. Duncan’s association of the vernacular as a universal language demands that he confronts the history of realism that had developed around the concept. According to him, the vernacular could not be reduced to the language of an exclusive group. In the 1944 essay “The Homosexual in Society,” Duncan compares the oppression of homosexuals to the structural inequality facing black Americans and insists that both groups serve as staging grounds for a universal inclusivity. Thus the vernacular is not the exclusionary linguistic habits of a closed speech community. Rather it becomes the aspect of that community that carries beyond the confines of the small group.

Beyond focusing strictly on the work of Olson and Duncan, one objective of the current project is to demonstrate the importance of the vernacular to the movement they initiated under the aegis of Black Mountain poetics. I aim to show how the central principles of the Black Mountain aesthetic—open form, projective orality and immanent particularism—relate to the question of accommodating nonliterary material in the space of the literary page. For Olson, these ideals recur consistently in his treatment of the local, whereas for Duncan they point back to his career-spanning interest in images of preliterate childishness. The vernacular not only underlies both of these concerns, it
also inspires an entire generations of writers to regard “speech” as the essential criteria of avant-garde literary practice. Such an impact can not be limited strictly to those poets represented in Donald Allen’s anthology. Literary critics including Nathaniel Mackey, Aldon Nielsen, James Smethurst and Evie Shockley have made great strides in articulating the experimental and avant-garde tradition of African American letters. Many of them explicitly reference the influence of Black Mountain poetic theory on the development of the Black Arts Movement. Responding to manifesto regarding black aesthetics from the black avant-gardist Haki Madhubuti, Smethurst writes,

> These sorts of arguments were not unique to the Black Arts movement but sound remarkably similar to oppositions of process versus product, open forms versus closed forms, the “cooked” versus the “raw,” the “New American poets” versus the “Academic poets” that critics and artists associated with [...] the Black Mountain school [...] posited in the 1950s and 1960s.

As Smethurst recounts, numerous similarities hold Black Mountain and Black Arts together in conceptual proximity, from the emphasis on the social aspect of creation to the fostering of small independent presses. While a book-length volume could be dedicated to drawing out the implications of each of these connections, my study aims to examine the role theories of vernacular language plays in the alignment of these two counter-cultural institutions.

Given his close personal and professional ties with Olson and Duncan, LeRoi Jones has long been considered the essential bridge between the postwar avant-garde and the black nationalism of the 1960s and 70s. But the relevance of the projective for the political aesthetics of black radicalism are not limited to those writers like Jones, who had extensive contact with the early postmodernists. Instead the most remarkable

---

overlaps between the two movements occur as a result of unconnected moments of unconscious affiliation. In look at the work of Gwendolyn Brooks, this unintended alliance comes into view. In Brooks’s poetry one fins an unparalleled example of a writer coming to terms with the experience of straining against mainstream nationalist ideology from a position within the oppressive structures of the status quo. While she does not correspond in the literal sense with Olson and Duncan, her poetry does correspond figuratively with the their efforts to understand the vernacular as a method for challenging political hegemony. Along with Olson and Duncan, LeRoi Jones and Gwendolyn Brooks view the vernacular not as a set of lexical devices or textual cues, meant to gesture to a conventional understanding of informal speech. Instead, for them the vernacular served as the staging ground for a particularly productive aesthetic dilemma. How is one to write in a way that engages with the spirit of vibrant communal exchange, without ossifying that spirit into a finite set of rigid standards?

For the white avant-garde, speech at its most general level signaled a willful resistance to the elevated visions of literary culture. As readers from Baker and Gates to Henderson and Wright declare, such a position speaks to a privileged set of options not commonly available for African American writers throughout history. Sensing the disproportionate number of arguments that treat the speakerly as the definitive basis of African American literature, Harryette Mullen in “African Signs and Spirit Writing” argues that in addition to the orality of African diasporic works, there is also a tradition of texts that insist upon an irreducible embrace of the sign. This argument carries significance for a number of African American poets during the postwar era, who base their literary experiments around the graphic or visual representation of the text. While

---

the visual aspect of the poem carries less importance for Jones and Brooks, their work during this period converges with Mullen’s argument in at least one important way. As much as her argument lays out an alternative to the idea of a speakerly text in the form of a writerly one, her essay represents an attempt to move beyond the tyranny that the voice imposes upon discussions of black aesthetics. Similarly, both Jones and Brooks seek to depose the conventional idea of the vernacular, but for them the most effective means of executing this challenge to the monolithic idea of black speakerly aesthetics is to remain within the domain of the oral/aural. Rather than write poems that profess to capture the finite particularity of communal speech, both Jones and Brooks base their idea of the vernacular around expressive tendencies that cannot be fully accounted for on the page by design.

In my third chapter, “Mute Inglorious Minions: LeRoi Jones and the Vernacular of Silence,” I argue that while Jones centers his idea of the vernacular on the concept of the nation, he draws upon the ephemerality of speech to forge a fluid counter-nationalist nationalism. Rather than play into denigrating stereotypes regarding black speech and slang, Jones uses his 1964 book *The Dead Lecturer* to posit silence as the principle component of black expressivity. In addition to reading Jones’ embrace of silence in relation to the theme of the unspeakable as it appears in the African-American literary theory of Toni Morrison and Saidya Hartman, I compare it to other contemporary investigations into vernacularity and soundlessness, including William Labov’s sociolinguistic essays and John Cage’s musical compositions.

Each of my chapters argues a similar point: the ideological work of the vernacular depends upon the definition one chooses. Where public relations experts define it in terms of fixity and the three previous poets characterize it as a force of fluidity, Gwendolyn Brooks associates the vernacular with the uncertainty that arises
from being divided between these poles. My fourth chapter, “How Shall the Law Allow for Littleness: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Vernacular of Uncertainty,” shifts from the conspicuously experimental writers of the postwar era to focus on Brooks, a Pulitzer Prize winner whose poetry embodies the conflict that I argue exists at the heart of vernacularity. Where Jones reconstructs the vernacular by redefining it as a form of semantic silence, Brooks focuses primarily on the structures responsible for not only distinguishing the vernacular but also employing it to certain ideological ends. Where Jones will press for silence as the last vestige of authentic black speech, Brooks is less committed to proposing an alternative to the caricatured commoditized speech of minstrelsy. For Brooks, the question of restoring the vernacular requires an interrogation of the literary methods used to frame certain forms of writing as informed by nonstandard speech. While the etymology of the vernacular points to a system of slavery distinct from the racialized brutality of the New World, Brooks foregrounds a connection between the Roman domestic slave and the modern black domestic laborer. In her 1968 epic In the Mecca, Brooks uses vernacular speech to tell the story of Mrs. Sallie Smith, who subsists between the big house of her employer and her own apartment in the outsized, dilapidated Mecca building. Adopting the persona of the domestic worker, Brooks speaks to the conflict of existing both within the house of literary prestige and on the outskirts of American civic life.

By considering the architectural sites most important to these four poets, one can get a sense of their rebuttal to the standardizing vernacular of suburban tract housing. For Olson, who defines his poetic around recovering the marginalized voices of American history, the destruction of the Solomon Davis house in Gloucester Massachusetts represents the unsustainable national lending practices, which endorse the building of new homes where unmarked landmarks once stood. In his poem “Nel
Mezzo Del Cammin Di Nostra Vita,” Duncan holds up Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers as a modern exemplar of Dante’s eloquence in the vernacular. In his poem, the Watts Towers represent the porous communalism that American nationalism seeks to seal off in fear of communist and intellectual threats. Baraka’s famous poem from 1967, “A contract. For the destruction and rebuilding of Paterson,” documents the substandard housing conditions to which the discriminatory Federal Housing Association had relegated African Americans. In explicitly architectural terms, Jones proposes the tearing down of conventional ideas of black vernacularity, based in caricature, and constructs in their stead a space where silence constitutes the intimate speech of blues people. And finally Gwendolyn Brooks uses her 1968 long poem In the Mecca to record the oral history of the outsized Mecca Tenements, which were built as an architectural wonder for the 1903 World’s Fair but was eventually bulldozed in the early 1950s to make room for Miës Van der Rohe’s famous Studies Building at the Illinois Institute of Technology. In Brook’s epic long poem the destabilization of the one-time showplace turned slum housing represents an opportunity to envision the vernacular not as a certified culture of the nation or the confirmed resistance to the standard but rather a generative site of political and aesthetic uncertainty.

Not unlike today, the popular rhetoric of the cold war insists that to be a citizen involves defending one’s status as a rightful member of an exclusive nation. To be other than a citizen, as the poets in my study make clear, begins with eschewing the false certainty that accompanies categorical nominalization. In promoting a model of mutually dependent participation, these poets lay the groundwork for an alternative model of civic belonging, where volition and reciprocity replace compliance and self-sufficiency. In reading their lines, we become all the more aware of the cracks that run the length of our load-bearing walls.
2. It Ain’t Easy, Bro: Charles Olson and the Vernacular of Obstruction

In 1931, the student literary magazine of Wesleyan University, *The Cardinal*, published a one-act play, written by a tall, gangly undergraduate, who possessed an uncommon talent for debate and went by the name Charles Olson. Entitled “The Fish Weir,” Olson’s first literary publication tells the story of Dave, the son of a fisherman, who betrays his literary aspirations in order to follow in his father’s footsteps. Adapting the play-within-a-play convention, the young Olson has his main character read J. M. Synge’s play *Riders to the Sea*, which leads him to drift from his familial bonds and stare aimlessly at the weather, paranoid about the perils of the sea. When he fails to notice the fishing net wrapped around his leg while aboard the fishing vessel, Dave’s despondency ultimately leads to his death. Like many first fruits of the writer’s pen, the play figures as thinly veiled autobiography. Olson, the first-generation college student and offspring of immigrants, finds in the character of Dave a means of dramatizing his own feelings of alienation caused by his potentially alienating intellectualism. Unlike Dave, Olson’s father was not a fisherman, but instead a postal worker. Nevertheless, Olson knew first hand that pressures that accompany working under the patriarchal influence, as he had briefly found employment in the post office alongside his father in Gloucester, Massachusetts. This points to another complicated instance of similarity, which appears at the level of setting. While Olson did not grow up in a New England fishing community, he did spend many of his summers traveling to the coast from his hometown of Worcester, Massachusetts, only to spend the bulk of his writing life documenting the particulars of the New England fishing industry. Dave, a Gloucester native, comes to stand as a cipher for the poet’s formative desire to represent Cape Ann as only a long-time resident can. Taken together these instances in which Olson turns
personal experience into literary expression adhere to the poet’s definitive commitment to documenting the contingent itineraries of his own life through art.

To this extent the play foreshadows many of the major developments in the poet’s oeuvre. “The Fish Weir” corresponds to the poet’s career-spanning epic *The Maximus Poems*, in that it not only takes place in Gloucester, it also renders the city as main character, worthy of lengthy characterization. Similarly, the consistent appeal in Olson’s work to attend to the radical particularity of experience, as outlined in such essays as “Human Universe,” emerges in the play as the pervasive moral. The play presents a distinction between the real world of maritime labor and the unreal world of literary escapism. In turning away from the pertinent features of life and retreating into the abstract realm of Synge’s play, Dave’s death is a result of his retreat from the real world at hand. While Olson will remain a voracious reader throughout his life, the play gives insight into his vexed relationship with textual research. Olson treats Dave as a cautionary tale of what happens when books become anything other than an instrument for appraising the material reality of the current moment. It reminds us that for Olson, even at an early age, the book must remain a tool to aid in the arduous work of carving out a critical awareness and not a shelter from the storm, as it were.

Almost every aspect of the play gains significance when read against the body of work Olson would go on to produce. But one trait in particular relates to the poet’s theoretical investigation into the formal dimension of poetic language. In keeping with Synge’s celebrated depiction of the Irish brogue, Olson uses his play to register the regional distinctiveness of Gloucester speech. Like Synge, Olson signifies this

---

nonstandard quality by transcribing the speech of his characters with the help of eye-
dialect conventions of phonetic misspelling. The most frequent examples are the poet’s choice of substituting “yer” and “fer” for “your” and “for.” This embrace of the colloquial appears throughout Olson’s poetic work, where he commonly foregrounds regional pronunciation in place of grammatical regularity. Speech also appears as central subject in his numerous prose statements that spell out an approach to the question of avant-garde poetics. From his seminal manifesto “Projective Verse” to his essay on Elizabethan aesthetics “Quantity in Verse and Shakespeare’s Late Plays,” speech resounds as an elemental fixture in the poet’s impulse to expand the work of poetry beyond the reified convention of received verse tradition. Olson’s most dedicated readers have offered up a number of possible meanings for Olson’s recurring interest in the dynamics of speech. Some read it as a gesture to the physicality of language, others read it as a sign of his interest in the idiolectal speech of the individual. And still others interpret it as part of an effort to construct a spontaneous and improvisational basis for poetic composition.

But the early play suggests a different definition of speech, one that establishes what Olson will later theorize as a poetics of vernacular obstruction. On the surface the play features conventional representations of literary dialect, ones that evoke the social realist conventions that were in fashion when Olson wrote the play. Yet, in considering the play through the lens of the poet’s thinking about vernacularity, a different exemplary case emerges. Throughout the play, Olson complements the nonstandard

\[\text{Marjorie Perloff, Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in an Age of Media (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 33.}\]
speech of the fishing family with a confusing set of jargon terms, referring to both the weather and the work of bringing in the catch. The title of the play is a prime example. A weir, as the author tells us in a footnote, refers to the regional name for a fishing net. The footnote represents a gesture to render the opaque term accessible to a reader unfamiliar with the specifics of Gloucester life. The term in turn represents the particular evidence of that life. As much as the footnote attempts to explain the term, its presence in the title gestures to the writer’s compulsion to punctuate literary expression with conspicuously difficult phrases picked up in native places. While Olson’s usage of dialect in the play demonstrates his interest in representing the language varieties that correspond to certain speech communities, his interest in the often-disorienting jargon enables us to see a larger meaning for the concept of the vernacular.

For every reason that a writer lays claim to the vernacular a new definition for the term emerges. In the case of Olson, the vernacular serves to insulate language from the corrosive affects of mass-culture and corporate co-optation. Like the title of the early play, Olson’s poetry stages the vernacular as a mode of expression that challenges the reader with disorienting material that conspicuously signal the presence of the non-literary. In what follows I give an account of Olson’s poetic theory of speech. I survey the major critical arguments regarding this aspect of his work and then build upon this discourse by considering the poet’s posthumously published writings on the vernacular. By focusing on the poet’s suppressed sequel to “Projective Verse,” where he defines the vernacular as “that which does not have grammar until it does,” I argue that the poet’s interest in the vernacular functions as an intervention into America’s postwar conformity culture. At a moment in which advertisers were laying claim to the vernacular to symbolize an essential American identity, Olson constructs an ideology of speech dedicated to obstructing the culture of consumerism. Olson achieves his
obstructive objective by dedicating attention to those unincorporated, disenfranchised individuals who represent the source of nonstandard expressivity. In applying Olson’s idea of the vernacular to his own work, I focus on the first two installments of the *The Maximus Poems* as well as a posthumously published poem, entitled “Willie Francis and the Electric Chair.” Not only do both of these works present the typical depiction of vernacular language—phonetic misspelling, slang usage and elliptical syntax—they also impel us to consider the vernacular as something that is not limited to these textual devices. They insist upon a notion of the vernacular that voices the limits of voiceless exclusion.

### 2.1 One Speech Makes Many: The Critical Reception of Olson’s Speech-Based Poetics

Olson develops his poetics of the spoken word throughout his expansive body of theoretical writings on the subject of poetry and poetics. In these works, orality figures as one of the more durable touchstones of Olson’s characteristically erratic attention. One finds brief references to speech in Olson’s readings of Shakespeare’s late plays, his examination of Melville’s novelistic realism, as well as the numerous reading lists that he composed for the young writers of his day. In his “A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn,” Olson includes Edward Sapir’s landmark work of the modern linguistics, *Language*, a text that Olson heavily underlined searching for an anthropological and scientific groundwork for his concept of poetic speech. These are but a handful of examples. Any focused survey of Olson’s prose will turn up countless more. As Stephen Fredman has argued, a poet’s prose on the laws of poetic creativity will often turn on the

---

question of language, its nature and its most effective usage. When Olson addresses such matters, he holds speech up as the essential quality of language that matters most to progressive poets, poets dedicated to expanding the boundaries of what constitutes verse practice. Although references to speech punctuate his prose, one never finds Olson dedicating an entire essay to the task of systematically explaining what he means by the term speech. The closest thing one finds to an overall explanation comes in Olson’s two most well-discussed works of theoretical prose: “Human Universe” and “Projective Verse.”

Published first in 1951 in the little magazine Origin, “Human Universe,” Olson develops his notion of speech against what he sees as the prevailing impulse in classical philosophy and Western metaphysics to define language in terms of logical discourse, instead of the physical materiality of articulation. For Olson, poetry reigns as a framework for discovery and not simply the recording of previous discoveries. “The difficulty of discovery,” according to him, “is that definition is as much a part of the act as is sensation itself.” In this model, the language that registers sensory perception (discovery) bears as much significance for the poetic act as the sensation itself. Treating language as a “prime matter” in his effort to reconsider the phenomenological basis of Western culture, Olson insists upon drawing attention to the dual nature of language. He refers to this as its “double sense of discrimination (Logos) and of shout (tongue).”

On the one hand, discrimination or logos represents the classical Greek ideals of reason and disembodied discourse. Olson criticizes Socrates, Plato and Aristotle for putting

---

3 Olson, Ibid, 155.
forth a vision of language that centers on generalization over particularization. He identifies the “readiness to generalize” in the preponderance of idealism in ancient philosophy, which he holds responsible for the dominating presence of “logic and classification” in Western principles of thought. Summing up the dangers of classical idealism, Olson writes, “We have lived long in a generalizing time, at least since 450 B.C. And it has had its effects on the best of men, on the best of things. Logos, or discourse, for example, in that time, so worked its abstractions into our concept and use of language that language’s other function, speech, seems so in need of restoration.” In distinguishing speech from logos, Olson declares that the cure to the generalizing epoch lies in fostering a new understanding of language centered not in ideas and abstraction but in the physical particularities of verbal communication. As a corrective to generalization by idealism, speech in “Human Universe” signifies the individual agent’s ability to perceive the particularity of reality “as it is,” without resorting to the preconceived orders that characterize the conventions of discourse.

The literary implications of this restoration of speech that Olson discusses in “Human Universe” influence his most famous essay on poetics, “Projective Verse.” Published in 1950 in the small relatively conservative magazine Poetry New York, Olson’s essay would get the attention of numerous other small-press publishers who would make the distribution of the essay their principal crusade. In a notable instance, LeRoi Jones published the influential essay as a stand-alone chapbook edition, through his Totem press. Channeling Ezra Pound’s polemical zeal, Olson opens the manifesto in terms that help to explain the underground enthusiasm that the text inspired. “Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it to be of essential use, must, I take it, catch up and put

---

*Olson*, *Ibid*, 156.
into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath.” With the expansion of consumerism, the institutionalization of literary convention and the co-optation of speech by war-drenched leaders of American imperialism, Olson sees language to be in a state of insular deadness. Writing directly to the “younger poets,” emergent writers of the postwar era inspired to rededicate poetry to the vital, though obscured, experiences of the contemporary moment, Olson advocates a return to the performative dynamics of oral poetry. Breath becomes the watchword of this counter-literary revolution. For Olson, the goal was to inspire the impressionable young poets of America to no longer compose for the printed page and the silent offices of gentile reading circles, but rather to return poetry to its history as a spoken medium. The projective poem will register the poet’s breathing patterns and in so doing focus on the individual phrasal units of the poet’s colloquial, unconscious speech. While Olson opens with breath, he reveals by the essay’s end that the importance of breath lies in its association with speech. Breath becomes vital for Olson “because [it] allows all the speech force of language back in.”

Olson’s explanation of what he means by speech-force in “Projective Verse” is not apparently clear and this confusion has led his principal critics to posit a variety of meanings for the concept. Throughout “Projective Verse” the poet refers to speech as if it were a self-evident concept that bears a single obvious denotation. Yet in practice the poet tacitly associates the term with different meanings in the space of the single essay. In surveying the work of these readers, one finds three divergent claims about the character of Olson’s invocation of speech.

9 Olson, “Projective Verse,” 244.
One popular response involves critics defining Olson’s idea of speech in terms of his contempt for the closed confines of the textual frame. “What we have suffered from,” according to Olson, “is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice.” Print, or manuscript as Olson calls it, not only succeeds in rendering poetry silent. It achieves this end through ripping the poem from the context of its creation, reproduction and reception. In Olson’s mind, the poem is an expressive act at all stages, as he explains how poets might be able to reclaim the theatrical and dramaturgical scope that oral poetry possessed in ancient society. In claiming “a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it […] by way of the poem itself […] all the way over to, the reader,” Olson imagines the poetic rite as a vibrant set of interpersonal exchanges, and not simply a well-worked disembodied artifact to be placed in some handsome edition. Thomas Merrill reads Olson’s projective dispute with print as evidence of the poet’s deep affection for what he refers to as “talk.” In proposing talk as a more specific and accurate corrective to the ambiguity of speech, Merrill reads “Projective Verse” as a performance of Olson’s grammar of talk, as he claims, “‘Projective Verse’ is Olson talking—talking rapid-fire, urgently, and with more concern for the act of his own engagement with his material than with his comprehensibility to a general audience.” Merrill’s insistence upon reading talk as the operative term over speech connects with Olson’s ultimate defense of the typewriter. While mechanical reproduction has removed poetry from the live and direct speech of the performing poet, the typewriter in particular has provided the poet with increased

10 Olson, Ibid, 245.
11 Olson, Ibid, 240.
13 Merrill, Charles Olson, 47.
control over the physical manifestation of the poetic expression. The poet’s talk unlike the printed poem is an “activity, a process, an event.” But the typewriter makes it possible to notate talk on a printed page. Thus the projective poem for Merrill consists of all the typographical irregularities that result when spontaneity—in the form of “Olson’s intensified stammering, juxtaposing, indirect guesses”—takes precedence over the a priori customs of proper printing and textual layout. “Its shifts, its false starts, its indecisions, its non sequitor” writes Merrill, “these are the participatory events that rise to Art.”

Other readers define Olson’s idea of speech in terms that take into account his recurring emphasis on the concrete particularity of physical presence. As I have stated, Olson’s argument bears an ironic relationship with textuality. The typewriter with its “rigidity and its space precisions” makes it possible for the poet to “indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of the syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends.” In making it possible for the poet to physically register the heightened intensity of spontaneous expression in print, the typewritten poem paradoxically opposes “that verse which print bred.” This emphasis on the typewriter aligns with Olson’s argument for treating speech as an irreducibly physical element of imminent reality, as opposed to the generalizing abstractions of classical aesthetic thought. In “Projective Verse” he writes, “speech is the ‘solid’ of verse, is the secret of the poem’s energy.” The solidity that Olson associates with speech implies the attention to physicality that he emphasizes in “Human Universe,” where he claims language is in

14 Merrill, Charles Olson, 57.
15 Olson, “Projective Verse,” 245.
16 Olson, Ibid, 239.
17 Olson, Ibid, 244.
such need of restoration that “several of us [poets] go back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms to right the balance.”

Nathaniel Mackey’s reading of Olson’s projective preoccupation with the physical substrate of speech is helpful in understanding what Olson means when he claims, “a poem has, by speech, solidity, everything in it can now be treated as solids, objects, things.” According to Mackey, “speech means something more than the act of speaking” for Olson. But, Mackey follows, by arguing that in focusing on the act of speech, Olson comes to grips with the fact that verbal activity unfolds in time. This bounded temporality of the speech act allows Olson to insist “upon language’s beingness […] or phenomenonality, upon the fact that language indeed exists in the world.” Mackey understands Olson’s emphasis on typewritten speech as part of a long tradition of American writers who employ a materialist approach to language, “repeatedly trying to close the gap between the said and the seen.” The phenomenal finitude of the oral expression makes it the performative twin of the graven image, the hieroglyph, the ideogram. All of these attempts share an imperative to disregard the modern linguistic assumption of the arbitrary connection between sign and signified. For Olson, speech bears a material trace of the object under consideration. It is in this way that readers like Mackey define his notion of the spoken as a direct attack on the Platonic division between the physical domain and the realm of eternal ideas.

Where some readers, such as Mackey, use Olson’s invocation of speech to stress his hostility towards Western metaphysics, others remain content to explain his interest

18 Olson, “Human Universe,” 156.
19 Olson, “Projective Verse,” 244.
in speech as a means of overthrowing the universal idea of poetic diction and grammatical standardization. Almost every critic of Olson’s addresses what Merrill refers to as the poet’s proposed “grammar of illiteracy,” an attempt to devise a structural appreciation of that speech which is conventionally viewed as unstructured and ungrammatical. Such an inclusive vision of grammar became the academic norm in the early twentieth century with the turn to structural linguistics, which held that all languages from the Queen’s English to tribal languages of the Hoppi adhere to its own distinctly complex grammatical structure.

While many of Olson’s readers stress his interest in the nonstandard culture of illiterate speakers, few are as cogent in their analysis as Robert von Hallberg. Von Hallberg sets the stage for his engagement with Olson by insisting that one of the recurring features of poetry in the modern era is a shift in the “poet’s attention away from the diction of written English toward the spoken language.” The stakes of such a shift extend far beyond the realm of the aesthetic, as von Hallberg goes on to argue that speech-based initiatives are “motivated by moral and political […] principles.” Speech presents a self-evident apparent critique of the established order of linguistic correctness “recorded in the dictionaries by authority.” Speech-inflected poets such as William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams invoke the oral as part of what von Hallberg calls the “rhetorical insistence on the genuine.” The qualities of the authentic and the genuine for Olson come to reside squarely in the political power of working-class people. Von Hallberg writes, “The written language is associated, in

---

21 Merrill, Olson, 38.
23 von Hallberg, Olson, 177.
Olson’s mind, with European class society, whereas spoken language belongs to the people. His discussion of breath is meant to give to poetic language all the actuality and power of the working people.”

Contradictions however abound in von Hallberg’s alignment of Olson’s invocation of speech with populist aesthetics.

Despite momentarily gesturing to Olson’s interest in the oral culture of hard-scrabble fishermen and laboring domestics, von Hallberg goes on to support the mainline interpretation that defines Olson’s notion of speech not in terms of the common speech of the working class, but rather the individual speech of the particular poet. Von Hallberg follows the poet’s interest in breath and innovative prosody into the concession that the speech Olson is most interested in is his own. “Olson’s discussion of breath is based on the premise that each poet’s particular breath, the pace of his voice, is distinct; the line should pause, hammer, and end where the particular poet feels a hesitation or completion, an emphasis, or a conclusion to his statement.” In fulfilling the about-face argument, von Hallberg goes so far as to declare, “Olson’s discussion of voice and of breath prosody is so profoundly individualistic that there is no room for common concerns.”

This individualism that Olson espouses, according to critics, licenses an entire generation of poets to turn away from the reified tropes of American realism, which provided conventional means of registering regional dialects. According to this version of intellectual history, no longer would poets write in the elevated tones of baroque poetic diction nor would they approximate the linguistic cues of a specific disenfranchised speech-community. Rather, as Marjorie Perloff has written, critics have

---

24 von Hallberg, Olson, 178.
25 von Hallberg, Olson, 179.
been poised to view the open-field poetics of the fifties as a movement centered not on “common speech,” but instead on “the very personal utterance of the individual poet.”

In what follows, I argue against this dominant trend that has regarded Olson’s notion of speech as principally the idiolectal musings of a single individual. While Olson clearly encourages writers to take up the language that was closest to their personal sense of the world, he was pointedly aware of the socio-political forces that shape the idiolectal language of immediacy. My argument extends upon von Hallberg’s reading of Olson’s interest in the unofficial culture of working class peoples, as I present a case for his understanding of speech which revolves around one single feature of the individual voice, namely it’s power to instantiate alternative histories. There are of course countless aesthetic implications to Olson’s speech-based turn but my interest lies in examining the overwhelming political stakes of his decision. In turning to speech, Olson is not simply rejecting one line of poetic tradition for another. He is not simply reinstating the ancient bardic roots of the poetic act. He is also devising a system of prosody that will allow for the re-writing of history. For Olson, the speech-based poem constitutes something more than simply a work that favors one kind of language over another; rather it aims to counter some unquestioned virtue of culture writ large. In his work there exists no better example of this unexamined ideal than the civilizing project of American nationalism. Thus for Olson, speech comes to stand as a formal cipher through which the poet can find his own individual voice in connection to the voices of the voiceless, the stories of the marginalized few, whose exclusion makes possible the consolidation and maintenance of the American empire. To take this shift seriously and account for its formal and ethical imperatives, one must realize that Olson’s use of the word “speech”

---

26 Perloff, Radical Artifice, 34.
in “Projective Verse” constituted a rough version that he would revise later in life. In the years after its publication he went to great lengths to reframe his poetics, not from the vantage of “speech,” but instead through recourse to the conceptual field of the vernacular.

2.2 Least Song: the Measure of Vernacular Obstruction

Every publication of “Projective Verse” from 1959 onward includes a brief addendum, entitled simply “Letter to Elaine Feinstein.” Feinstein, a young British writer at the beginning of her career, had written to Olson to inquire about his understanding of two central aspects of poetic form: the poetic image and speech rhythms. On the topic of speech rhythms, Olson writes:

The only advantage of speech rhythms (to take your 2nd question 1st) is illiteracy: the non-literary, exactly in Dante’s sense of the value of the vernacular over grammar—that speech as a communicator is prior to the individual and is picked up as soon as and with ma’s milk…he said nurse’s tit.\(^2\)

When pressed on the issue of what constitutes the oral aesthetic, Olson here clarifies by changing the operative term from speech to the vernacular. Where speech carries numerous implications from the biological presence of the speaker to the ideolec of the given poet as many of Olson’s readers have claimed, Olson specifies that his interest in the oral reside in those aspects that most directly relate to vernacularity. For Olson, these vernacular aspects of language emerge primarily in the form of two common features.

First, the vernacular poet has access to a broader range of experience, all of which Olson catalogues under the heading of the non-literate. In this way, the poem becomes a means of engaging with the substance of the world, which seems incompatible with the

conventions of literary decorum. Olson uses the vernacular as a general platform from which to issue a call for an ever-expanding concept of the poem.

While he insists that this idea is exactly consistent with a set of ideas forwarded in the 14th century by Dante Alligheri, a close-analysis reveals that his inclusion of Dante brings with it another benefit that one gains by turning from speech to vernacular. In De Vulgari Eloquentia, Dante famously argued that there was no nobler language available for the medieval poet than the speech he learned first from the domestic workers who charged with raising him. According to him, this inborn speech, referred to as the vernacular, was more natural and thus more universal, than the learned artificial grammar of Latin. Olson’s paraphrase of Dante upholds his early point that the vernacular enables the poet to cultivate an anti-literary ideology, but it also presents another reason for his use of the term vernacular.

Where speech had led many readers to understand Olson as interested specifically in the uniqueness of a given poet’s “voice,” the vernacular provides him with a concept that insists upon a linguistic basis for orality that prefigures the individual. The universality that Dante ascribes to the child’s act of language acquisition comes through boldly in Olson’s paraphrase, “that speech as a communicator is prior to the individual.” Olson’s claim undercuts the strong individualist implications of “Projective Verse.” To consider this in relation to Perloff’s point, we can see that with the vernacular Olson finds a concept that allows him to position his idea of speech at the intersection of the individual and the common. While his notion of speech may not be as straightforwardly dialectal as social-realist renditions of group speech, Olson maintains that the vernacular is a shared property.

One reason for his advocacy of the vernacular lies in the multivalence of the concept. Unlike more conventional understandings of the poetic voice, which rely upon
a received sense of originality, authenticity and subjectivity, Olson’s view of speech
pivots on the hinge that swings between the one and many. The vernacular is an entirely
unique set of vocal habits that emerge from an impersonal collective setting. In his letter
to Feinstein, Olson stresses that the vernacular allows the writer to circumvent the old
divide between the poet and the people. When the poet has represented the peculiarity
of her vernacular voice, she has at the same time in Olson’s opinion, after Dante, taken a
step toward integration with the speech community from which her voice springs.

But Olson’s interest in the vernacular is not limited to questions of craft and
effective technique. Rather he saw in the vernacular a broader historical dimension,
which connected his contemporary moment with the aesthetics of Renaissance England.
In his unpublished book on Shakespeare from 1954, Olson declares the problem facing
writers of his day involves understanding what constitutes the poem proper. The act of
“doing one” writes Olson “is quite changed from what it has been for a very long time.”
This change so claims the poet is a result of the re-emergence of the vernacular as a
viable mode for poetic production. “I am working with this idea, that the change has to
do with a very strong reassertion of the vernacular in English, due to America.” Olson is
careful to specify that the reassertion of the vernacular in America “has nothing to do
with nationalism,” but rather pertains specifically to a since of time, the utter
belatedness of the American experiment. As the “last first” people, Americans have the
advantage, according to Olson, of coming into existence as a civilization long after the
overwhelming influence of the West, “from the Greeks to Swinburne.” After
unsuccessfully groping after a classical tradition, Americans by the twentieth century
were coming to grips with the challenge of manifesting their own organic principles of
aesthetics. Olson draws a connection between circumstances that gave rise to the
experimental impetus of American midcentury arts and those that ushered in
Shakespeare’s revolution of the word. According to him, “either you see all these changes as renaissances, or none at all.” In these moments of great upheaval, the writer must return to the imminent properties of daily culture and cast aside the lofty abstractions of an inherited canon. Such an act exemplifies what Olson regards as the essential truth of Dante’s advocacy of the vernacular. Disregarding the artifice of learned models, the renaissance poet, be it in 1600 or 1950, must engage with “that first speech employed by the human race,” that ungrammatical language ultimately responsible for opening up “the forms possible for verse now.” In outlining the aesthetic modes that emerge out of this return to the imminent particular, Olson connects the lute music of the Elizabethan era with the jazz music of the American postwar period.

Say it was the lute made the change, circum 1600. What has it been for us, 1920 and after, but a like single voice, jazz? And what have we done with it, that those Elizabethans did, and didn’t do, with their “Ayres”? Like Creeley says: “But never did a country use such ears, and such a goddamn language, to such little goddamn purpose as the U.S. And ignore what music they have: viz Miles Davis etc al."

As belated eras, the seventeenth and twentieth century compelled artists to reconsider the tradition they had inherited. Where the change for the Elizabethans followed the introduction of the lute, the innovative rush in America followed the improvisatory poetics of Miles Davis.

In both the “Letter to Elaine Feinstein” and the unpublished manuscript on Shakespeare, Olson looks to the vernacular as a force of negation. In the former, Olson uses the vernacular to negate the conventions of the literary as a rigidly conceived fiefdom. In the latter, he uses it as a historical marker of periods constituted by the

28 Charles Olson, Shakespeare Chapter 9: The Poem Unlimited, 1954, 35, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
negation of what had gone before. But negation is only part of Olson’s vernacular poetics. Or perhaps another way of saying this is that Olson understands negation as possessing its own observable principles of composition, hence its own ratified aesthetics of presence. As a positive manifestation of negation, the vernacular represents for Olson a reverence for the obstructive distinctiveness of experience.

In 1958, Olson undertook a series of attempts at writing what he conceived to be the follow-up to his most famous essay, entitled “Projective Verse II.” Unpublished during his lifetime, the essay languished under the poet’s judgment that the text relied too heavily on the philosophical ideas of Alfred North Whitehead. While Joshua Hoeynck, the editor of the recent chapbook edition of The Principle of Measure in Composition by Field: Projective Verse II, argues for the work as Olson’s principle attempt at applying Whiteheadean process philosophy to the question of verse aesthetics, such estimation overlooks the prime attention Olson pays in the collection to the vernacular as the elemental concept for his reconceived picture of the projective. Olson does at the end of the essay confess that he has “completely appropriated words and means of stating them” from Alfred North Whitehead. But he then goes on to assert that it was only Dante, who has written a treatise on language that can rival the appeal of Whitehead’s. Thus Dante, Olson’s figurehead for the vernacular, represents the poet’s interest in rooting his system of thought on language in “common sense.”

In order to characterize the aesthetics of obstruction that Olson associates with the vernacular he begins by foregrounding a set of propositions regarding the purpose of the poem. “The poem’s job” writes Olson “is to be able to attend, and to get attention

---

to the variety of order in creation.” Olson’s vision of the poem depends upon a rejection of the conventional division between chaos and order. He views creation as constitutive of a broad variety of forms, each of them orderly in their own manner. By undermining the assumption that there is one ideal model of natural order, based largely upon classical conceptions of symmetry, Olson redefines the chaotic as constitutive of its own rules. Along these lines, the function of the poem is not to accept the reigning conventions of what constitutes order or even what amounts to a legible experience. Rather the poem’s job is to treat all material as an embodiment of its own peculiar set of principles.

It is here on the topic of the imminent basis of formal order that Olson makes his most cogent claim for the vital connection between vernacular language and his conception of the poetic act. He writes, “A poem is ‘heard’ before it is written, and until it ends. So its prosody is a dictum: there is no form until the poem creates its own.” Olson aligns the poem with the oral in order to emphasize the originality of the poetic act. The authentic poem in this regard is the one creates its own sense of form, as an organic extension of its content, a principle he inherited from “one R. Creeley.” But Olson takes one more step in associating the self-evident formal dimension of poetry with the contingent improvisational nature of expressive speech. After defining the poem as possessing no form until it creates its own, he defines the vernacular in remarkable similar terms. According to Olson, the “Vernacular is what does not possess grammar until it does.” Olson defines the poem as the vehicle through which the poet engages with “whatever turns up in one’s hands,” while defining the vernacular as that

__________________________

30 Olson, Ibid, 15.
31 Olson, Ibid, 17.
32 Olson, “Projective Verse,” 240.
peculiar phenomenon (the whatever) that cannot be adequately evaluated through any rubric other than the poem. Thus the vernacular and the poetic represent categories of linguistic production that embrace and accentuate the uncommonness of common experience.

The poem that attends to the variety of order in creation achieves this end by preserving that one aspect of creation that Olson regards as the basis of the vernacular: obstruction. The authentic act of creation confronts the senses with an experience that cannot be easily absorbed by the mind into standard categories of thought and perception. After insisting that all acts of creation are at their core obstructive, he goes on to characterize obstruction as that which is not deemed of immediate value. According to Olson, the work of art all too often exists “to put an end” to the obstructive dimension of the world, by rendering the difficult material of experience lucid and comprehensible. Standing in contrast to this tradition, he maintains the poem must use its powers of lucidity, its expressive capability, to register and record the ungainly aspect of the world without romanticizing the details. According to him “Obstruction is the business of sticking the poem’s nose into (the poet’s) keeping its neck bent into the places of its own coming from.” As a vernacular form, the obstructive poem disregards any antecedent models for the proper composition of the poem, the proper representation of its subject. In clarifying obstruction and the vernacular, Olson distinguishes the concept from those literary and thematic devices that readers commonly associate with the avant-garde, devices that critics often trace back to Olson’s influence over the mid-century generation of young writers. In his view, obstruction has

33 Olson, Projective Verse II, 20.
34 Olson, Ibid, 15.
35 Olson, Ibid, 16.
little to do with serial poetics, with literary realism or with the personal biography of the individual writer. Rather Olson is clear in proclaiming that obstruction means crafting an artifact that reflects the radical content of its unconventional context.

Although Olson makes it clear that his understanding of the vernacular has little to do with conventional literary depictions of regional speech, he does take into account what he refers to as the environmental factors of obstructive expression. The vernacular poem has only one law, writes Olson, “it has to occur. And to occur it has to retain and create its own environment.” While Olson states that the vernacular need only appear within the bounded space of the aesthetic frame in order to carry out its principal function, he goes on to specify that occurrence means the vernacular must take place. In taking place, the vernacular fulfills its principal function by remaining true to the particularity of its origin, while translating this particularity into the realm of the page. The particularity of the vernacular is merely a reflection of the particularity of the local. The vernacular contradicts received grammar by observing the authentic order of its original source. While the written page exists independent of social context, the vernacular evokes the abandoned social scene and relaxes the boundaries of the text to gesture towards the non-literary world that surrounds it.

In explaining what he envisions as an example of the vernacular he dwells on the matter of content, stressing what he refers to as “crass” material.


36 Olson, Ibid, 19
37 Olson, Ibid, 18.
The uniqueness of the environment, which the poet aims to reflect in language, can only be achieved in Olson’s opinion by including its coarse and vulgar features. The dirty implies all sorts of material deemed unsuitable for general consumption. It can range from the language of the lowly to the subject matter of the tawdry and unrefined. But as Olson nods to William Carlos Williams, the pure and simple dirtiness of the vernacular need not be limited strictly to the realm of the boorish and rude. Rather it can include a range of textual strategies intended to register some semblance of the raw. In the context of William’s long poem, the vernacular is not simply the language of polish grandmothers, but the documentary material that the poet includes within the aesthetic frame of his work, including personal letters, archival records and inconsequential notations.

While crassness provides the conceptual basis for Olson’s understanding of poetic content, the form of his vernacular poetics turns on a concept of prosodic obstruction that he refers to as “least-song.” After defining the principle of measure as commitment to “least action,” Olson circuitously defines least as an answer to the problem that occurs when unsystematic material meets the systematic realm of scripted verse.

Technically, ‘least’ works out this way. A poem is a ‘line’ between any two points in creation (the poem’s beginning, and its end). In its passage it includes—in the meaning here it passes through—the material of itself. Such a material is the ‘field,’ and in verse has the function of an integral which shall be call ‘impetus.’ the problem of the poem, therefore, is that the impetus of the material (the differential element of) and the systematic length (the poem from beginning to end) shall constitute a successful composition.”

---

In referring to the poem as a line stretched between the poet’s environment and the reader’s reception, Olson returns to the kinetic model of poetic composition that marked his earlier essay on the projective. There he famously declared a poem is “energy transferred from where the poet got it [...] by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader.” For Olson, the poem becomes the path of least resistance from source to reception. The aim of the poem is to provide the reader with a surrogate for the real that allows for vicarious engagement with the milieu from which the poem emerges. While the postwar avant-garde represented itself as a movement based upon improvisation and spontaneous composition, Olson associates immediacy with restraint, rather than spontaneous overflow. As he insists, the problem of the poem arises when the poet must pack the “variety of order in creation” into the uniform receptacle of the poem. This conflict forces the writers to cultivate a relationship to the modes of representation that do not overly interfere with the transmission of the impetus. On the one hand “least action” implies a process wherein the writer refrains from manipulating the material at hand in order to fulfill the conventions of the poem. From prosodic regularity to refined notions of poetic diction, the resolute techniques of poetry only embellish and therein diminish the potency of the poetic impetus. On the other hand, “least action” also admits that the vernacular poem is not a totalizing enterprise. One can only achieve a lesser action and not a total reduction. The writer cannot fully assuage the presence of artifice. The systematic frame of language becomes a constant that the vernacular writer must strain against.

The clearest analogue of Olson’s innovative prosody comes in the early socio-linguistic writing of William Labov. In his landmark 1966 work The Social Stratification of

---

39 Olson, “Projective Verse,” 240.
“English in New York City,” Labov defines the vernacular as the style of language in which “the least amount of attention is paid to speech.” For Labov, the point of linguistic research was to gain access to the native speakers’ natural process of authentic expression. Only through circumventing the sterile artificiality of the interview setting could Labov record the language that most effectively marks an informant’s affiliation with a given speech community. When a speaker loses track of his or her speech, when he or she becomes more fully absorbed in the ideas being relayed than the method of relaying them, the linguist can begin to evaluate the social dynamics of their language variety. Labov is predisposed to believe the unconscious language of immediate action presents the most about the conditioning factors affecting language at a given moment. Likewise, Olson’s prosody of least song identifies the vernacular as that which exists beyond the hypercorrection of grammar and systemic standardization. In order to faithfully document this vernacular material, the poet must become both Labov and this informant, which is to say the poem must become the space where the poet suspends his or her own reflexive relationship with language. It must become the space where access is granted to the ungainly semiotic substance that first impelled the expression. Where Labov must conceive of methods to disarm his informants, projective poets must attend to those segments of language that disarm them, phrases or passages that emerge unconcerned with the lucidity of elegant expression.

Olson’s turn to the vernacular from speech represents his interest in defining the poetic act as an engagement with the obstructive dimension of daily experience. For him the vernacular is that material that interrupts the routine procedures of composition and

---

reception. It serves as a broad catchall term for all components of poetic creativity that cannot be absorbed within the preconceived strictures of literacy. On the topic of “what prompted [Olson] to try his hand at poetry,” George Butterick, the poet’s primary archivist writes, “All he ever said was that it was overhearing the talk of Gloucester fishermen as a boy, on summer evenings, that made him a poet.” Hence the vernacular includes the jargon-rich speech of the fisherman that he encountered in his youth as well as the arcane historical evidence of the American colonies that he plants in his poetry with minimal explanation or augmentation. As vernacular literature seldom signals a style removed from a moral or political agenda, Olson’s embrace of the vernacular follows two ideological motivations, deeply rooted in his apprehension of American nationalism in the postwar era. The vernacular provided him with a concept for countering the homogenous culture of superficial regionalism and consumerism that marked the mid-century moment. At the same time the vernacular also existed as a method for altering the official culture and history of the ascendant American empire. The vernacular became for Olson not only a way of speaking out against the regimentation of civic life, but also a backdrop upon which to develop a poetics dedicated to those disenfranchised individuals, deemed “least” important to the project of polis.

2.3 By ear, he sd: The Vernacular Countermand to Commercial Language

If, as Olson claims in Projective Verse II, the vernacular represents obstruction, then defining the vernacular for him becomes a matter on understanding the action it

---

means to obstruct. One general idea of vernacular poetry directs the obstructive power of nonstandard language towards contradicting the dominating forces of grammatical standards. These standards range from the uniform school curricula and the impersonal eloquence of professional language to the contrived correctness of dictionary pronunciation. A key example of this dynamic can be found in Edouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relations*, a text that presents Martinican creole as a vernacular countermand to the universal ideal of hegemonic French linguistic models. For Olson, however, the midcentury period marked a moment in which the linguistic manifestation of national uniformity was not the firm and elite standard, as spelled out in official grammar guides. Rather the standard behind the myth of an essential American identity had become the culture of the common, the speech of the everyday American. In this way, the force that Olson’s vernacular must obstruct is the abstract, uniform idea of an ordinary life, inflected with the imperatives of cold war nationalism. No single institution stands more responsible for the perpetuation of this false culture in Olson’s mind than the advertising agencies of Madison Avenue.

In the opening sequence of the poet’s landmark epic *The Maximus Poems*, Olson finds his voice in the act of denouncing the publicity engine of American consumerism. In the second and subsequent editions of the poem, Olson opens by distinguishing himself as an authority figure on the matter of his principle subject, the harbor city of Gloucester, Massachusetts. “Off shore, by islands hidden in the blood / jewels & miracles, I, Maximus […] tell you / who obeys the figures of the present dance.” This concern for the agency of the individual has led many critics to conclude the central

---

concern of the long poem is “the practice of self,” or cultivation of a colossal ego as organizing principle.44 However, in the first edition of the poem sequence, published in 1953 by Jargon Press, Olson opens with a different passage, which shifts the emphasis away from the role of the self in the poem and towards the toll advertising takes on the poet’s city.

By ear, he sd.

But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last where shall you find it, my people, how, where shall you listen when all is become billboard, when all, even silence, is when even the gulls, my roofs, when even you, when sound itself

Stated here, the aim of the poem is a curatorial one of instructing a people to find beauty and meaning in the regional particularity of their daily existence. But as important as this durable material is for Olson, its absence is more important for his poem. While Olson opens by invoking Ezra Pound, and his famous dictum to avoid metronomical regularity in favor of subjective audition, the muse of the poem is actually the bemused Gloucester citizen who has lost all connection to the richness of indigenous culture. To borrow a phrase from Olson’s earlier poem “The Kingfishers,” the speaker here must “hunt among [the] stones” of billboard ad campaigns to find some semblance of autochthonous reality.45 In the later edition, Olson changes the above passage by completing the elliptical sentence fragment, “when all, even silence, is” with the phrase “spray-gunned.” The marketing forces behind America’s rampant consumerism had smothered silence, the ground of all expression. “Sound itself” in this world of hype and

44 Merrill, Olson, 176.
huckstering has been “neoned in.” The only recourse for Olson is to advise his fellow Gloucesterians to “kill, kill, kill, kill, kill/ those / who advertise you / out” (8).

Unlike the leftist intellectuals of the postwar era who described mass culture for its adulteration of high culture forms, Olson’s enmity towards advertising had little to do with its low-brow superficiality. Rather Olson’s primary concern with product promotion was that it relied upon the perpetuation of a mythic American domestic life, which departed drastically from what he understood as the particularities of a given place. Local culture, both speech and silence alike, have been usurped by corporate liberal forces, bent on leveling discrepant regional difference with an appeal to a uniform American identity. Thus for Olson it is not that advertising is constantly trying to sell you something, rather it is trying to sell you something it had stolen from you in the first place, something it had manipulated to serve consumptive ends. Advertising in Olson’s mind had seized upon the concept of the vernacular and had standardized it to reflect the vision of postwar American affluence. No longer was the local a specific place in time, rather it had become a conceptual matrix, forged by advertising companies to provide citizens with the dream of independence, free choice and authentic commune with a simulated frontier.

To this end, it would be misguided to limit the influence of vernacularity on Olson to his usage of phonetic misspellings, syntactical elisions and slang terminology. The standard he means his vernacular to obstruct had by this time already commandeered each of these lexical strategies. National advertising campaigns in the 1950s, like those hawking Pillsbury’s famous cake mix—“Nothing says lovin’ like

---

something from the oven”—enlisted conspicuous oral elements into their taglines. Even the quickest of cursory glances at Olson’s poetry and prose will reveal the poet’s affection for a variety of common vernacular devices, including phonetic misspellings. In LeRoi Jones’s prose contribution to Donald Allen’s outlaw classic anthology The New American Poetry, he quotes Olson as saying, “who knows what a poem is until it’s thar.” Here the misspelled word signifies a much larger argument about the vitality of particularity over preconceived concession. The misspelling keys the reader into the subject of the vernacular. Once Olson has cued the concept of the vernacular, he then uses the rest of the statement to carve out his poetics of the vernacular. Instead of limiting it strictly to the textual indexing of oral speech, the statement that Jones quotes positions the vernacular as an entirely presentist engagement with experience. From the materiality of the objects in a given field of perception arises the authentic and unbidden poem. The significance of these objects for Olson is directly tied to their ability to obstruct our conventional assumptions and project the minimalist particularity of their own existence. Thus rather than looking to his poetry to find evidence of his interest in the spoken word, it is more fitting his theories to look for the vernacular in those moments when Olson rebels against the institutional disregard for the imminent particular.

In Sherman Paul’s in-depth account of the first sequence of poems in Olson’s Maximus epic, the critic argues the thematic structure of the poems follows a set of binary oppositions. In the ten poems, Olson deplores the land in praise of the sea. He opposes the occupations of finance capitalism and praises the organic work of the

---

fisherman and poet. He chastises the fascist conformity of America, which he calls “perjoracracy” after Pound, and repeatedly lobbies for the democratic polis. To follow Paul’s reasoning, the topic of the vernacular leads Olson to establish yet another set of binary oppositions. On the one hand there is the Vernacular of Difficulty. When Olson implores his fellow citizens of Gloucester to find “that which matters, that which insists, that which will last,” he is encouraging them to take stock of the current scene and find something that is not imported from absentee owners, something that is as obstructive as it is durable. A symptom of obstruction, difficulty becomes the dominant criteria for authentic vernacular culture. On the other hand, there is the Vernacular of Mu-sick. This version exists in Olson’s poetics as a corrupted version of that first authentic conception. It is the sound of neon advertisements and the sight of outsized billboards that supplants the organic culture of the heterogeneous fishing town.

2.3.1 The Vernacular of Mu-sick

In the above examples, Olson clearly expresses his rage over the commercialization of local life, but throughout the opening sequence Olson sees the ideology of advertising present in other forms of cultural engagement. His opening lament against the sonic aspect of advertising culture develops into a focused attack on the midcentury trend of equipping streetcars with public address speakers.

...how shall you know,
New England, now
that perjoracracy is here, now
that street-cars, o Oregon, twitter
in the afternoon,

---

51 Olson, Maximus, 7.
Focusing specifically on the streetcar named after the thirty-third state, Olson holds the public conveyance accountable for the false testimony he sees perpetrated across the country. The twittering racket of the piped in orchestral music distracts the passenger from the particular noises of their unique setting. The musical accompaniment, intended to improve the daily lives of Americans, has obscured the silence that was once the ground upon which one could appreciate the obstructive sounds of chatting neighbors, rickety tracks and crying gulls. Neither home nor office, the streetcar represented one of the last vestiges of a shared public realm. By piping in uniform music, the uniqueness of a given public space becomes yet another construction of American sameness. The nauseatingly sweet nature of this musical disease leads Olson to refer to all forms of conventional mass-culture as “mu-sick.”

how shall you strike,
swordfisherman, the blue-red back
when, last night, your aim
was mu-sick, mu-sick, mu-sick
and not the cribbage game

Here Olson presents his poetic hero, the local fisherman, as depleted and corrupted by this infectious media. Incapable of carrying out his characteristic function, the weakened fisherman has only himself to blame. The corruption begins with the choice of leisure time activities. Cribbage represents a local entertainment, suitable for engaged exchange and purposeful thought. Mu-sick, be it television, movies or advertisements, takes the place of cribbage as the common anesthetizing entertainment of the day. The major problem that this switch brings is the diminishment of variety.

As the people of the earth are now, Gloucester is the heterogeneous, and so can know polis not as localism, not that mu-sick (the trick of corporations, newspapers, slick magazines, movie houses,

\[52\] Olson, *ibid*, 3.
Olson’s commitment to Gloucester lies in the city’s ability to live out the richness of its diverse population. The vernacular of mu-sick contrives a version of the local that Olson derisively views as localism, which represents the sentimentalization of the environment. The movies and the magazines stand in Olson’s mind as manipulative enterprises that make it impossible for the Gloucester resident to recognize their heterogeneity. Instead of drawing attention to the differences that constitute the American experience, Olson sees the mu-sick makers as strictly interested in perpetuating a notion of homogenous nationalism.

In the same way that he zealously derides the work of public relations, Olson finds great fault in the literary work that participates in what he views as the corruption of the local. In “Letter 5,” he takes aim at Vincent Ferrini, a local Gloucester poet who has published a literary magazine in Gloucester that does not “have a place […] in a city where highliners breed.” The magazine fails because its stories are not “as good as any of us are /stories.” Again, Olson turns to the collective to dismantle Ferrini’s venture, stating that even in their utilitarian relationship to literacy, each of the characters of the place have lived a story more compelling than any featured in the magazine. He also insists, that a magazine “must be good as fish is,” implying that the magazine must find its bearing in the material conditions of the local economy in order to rightfully credential itself as a voice of the people, a spirit of the place.☆ Using the particularity of the place to attack Ferrini, Olson states “I use the local as a stick to beat you.”☆ But it is not only the fact that Ferrini has lost his connection to place that bothers Olson. It is his

---

☆ Olson, Ibid, 14.
☆☆ Olson, Ibid, 23.
☆☆☆ Olson, Ibid, 24.
insistence upon framing his efforts as an authentic rendition of local culture. Olson amity for *Four Winds*, Ferrini’s foray into publishing, centers on what he sees as its attempt to side with advertising ideology and use the local as a manufactured, rhetorical category, without tangibly considering the most apparent facts of the specific locale.

This leads Olson to compare Ferrini, and by extension the work of advertisers, with the dishonest C & R construction company.

That day was a sign, Ferrini.
The C & R Construction Company had hired us Gloucester help because the contract read “local”

and fired us, after 12 hours, had tricked the city’s lawyers, had covered, by one day’s cash, the letter of the law."

Olson refers to a moment during 1930 when he and several other Gloucester men were hired by C & R Construction Company to help clear land for the building of the Babson Reservoir. Ironically, the reservoir shares a name with the principal historian of the sea-city, John Babson, a figure Olson returns to throughout the long poem. Where Olson draws upon Babson to gather the details of Gloucester’s first inhabitants, he turns to the C & R Construction Company as a “sign” of a different kind of history. In the long poem, Olson finds numerous opportunities to lambast individuals, like Vincent Ferrini, he considers responsible for placing the local in the hands of corporate institutions. In recalling the details of his brief tenure with C & R, Olson presents the memory as a significant first. By no means does the company as the originators of commodified localism. But rather they signify the first moment the poet became aware of the local as a site of ideological conflict. In placing the word “local” in quotation marks, Olson

\[\text{---}\]

gestures to its evacuated meaning. Instead of hiring men who belong to the particular
district in question, the company fulfills only the minimum requirement of the law. In
addition to signaling American greed and malicious intent, the anecdote represents an
early moment in the poet’s life when he witnessed a word lose all of its denotative
power. But this is not simply any word, it is one that exists as the anchor of Olson’s
poetics. After all, the vernacular is the local world projecting its obstructive reality into
the space of the page. C & R transfer the local from an embodied experience of the
present, in the form of local workers, to a disembodied shell of the thing, a concept now
open for interpretation and gross manipulation. These two versions of the local (local
workers and “local” workers) correspond to the two versions of the vernacular: one
invested in whatever abstract idea will best suit corporate greed, and the other rooted in
the particular limits of a given place.

For Olson, any activity meant to supplant the heterogeneity of place with a
contrived uniform vision falls under the category of mu-sick. The mu-sick makers have
confiscated the common art of song and have used it to perpetuate an image of ideal
American nationalism, centering in unconcerned consumption. But Olson does not
abdicate song to the false localism of sentimental ad campaigns. Rather he imagines the
conflict over the vernacular as a conflict over the song. At a later point in the long poem,
Olson compares the advertising jingle, “the music racket of all ownership” to the sirens
song in the Odyssey. There the speaker responds to the cacophony of commercial
interests by caulking his ears. But in the fourth poem of Maximus 1-10, Olson takes a
more proactive approach. After asking “what can we do when even the public
conveyances sing,” Olson counters by calling attention to the disparity between a
scripted vernacular of contrived sentiment and a radical vernacular of obstructive integrity."

2.3.2 The Vernacular of Difficulty

Titling this suite of poems “Songs of Maximus,” Olson dramatizes the conflict over musicality and sets up a division between the bad song of commercial racket and the good song of projective encounter. While Olson finds song to be of vital importance in restoring the vernacular to its rightful position, his poem opens by addressing the negative dimension of commoditized musicality. Thus the occasion for the poem emerges not from the Olson’s embrace of song but rather his disapproval of the ends to which it has been used. The poem picks up on the poet’s earlier criticism of the trolley, but expands this critical approach to include print material. Just as a possible redemptive model of song, the printed ad campaigns signals the dilution of local life. “Colored pictures,” writes Olson “of all things to eat,” countenancing a commodified image of foodstuffs, which represents not only the fanciful adulteration of natural products but also a disregard of local growing seasons. In calling these advertisements dirty postcards, Olson sets them up as messages sent from outside the city. The advertising campaign comes to stand as an external source of abstraction. Focusing on those products that aim to impose a concocted vision of American domestic bliss, Olson turns his attention from the over-mediated song of the frozen foods to the postwar laminate floor brand Congoleum. Linoleum flooring appeals to a consumer interested in making the home as easy as possible to care for. In broader terms, it represents the replacement of natural building materials with a synthetic surrogate that essentially

\[\text{Olson, Ibid, 17.}\]
sterilizes the home. A sense of this meaning abounds in LeRoi Jones poem from the early 1960s, “In Memory of Radio,” where Jones sardonically quips, “It is better to have loved and lost/Than to put linoleum in your living rooms?” Frozen foods and the synthetic flooring represent efforts to make domestic life effortless and uncomplicated. In contrast to this slick vision of the common vernacular world, Olson celebrates the dysfunctional aspects of the modern home. In orchestrating his own version of the kitchen debates, he identifies a song capable of decentralizing the myth of domestic consolation in the musical dimension of his own American domestic space.

A leaky faucet and a broken toilet animate a song of Maximus dedicated to recognizing the imminent particulars of daily life. According to Olson, the leaky faucet drips in the basin, making of the “sink time.” Not only does the broken faucet mimic the regular sweep of the second hand around the clock’s face, it also makes available a more accurate historical sense of time. Instead of the standardized 24-hour timescale, the dripping faucet allows Olson an opportunity to construct his own personal sense of temporality. This alternative rubric of time entails the poet nostalgically recalling his father setting the family’s Seth Thomas at the first of every month: “the Seth Thomas/in the old kitchen/my father stood in his drawers to wind.” The faucet “makes” a time signature that is rooted to the particulars of the given moment. Such a particular reminds Olson of his father’s end of the month ritual, which reminds Olson of his own monthly rite of trying to forget the past-due rent.

Similarly, the broken toilet, another dysfunctional domestic element, becomes a blessing in Olson’s eyes.

---

59 Olson, Ibid, 13.
That it doesn’t work
this I like, have even used paper clips
as well as string to hold the ball up

In failing to function properly, the toilet forces the poet to become resourceful. An emblem of obstruction, the busted fixture demands the poet develop a complicated relationship to the standard rubric of order. Rather than simply being “out of order,” the toilet invites him to recognize the particularities of its own unique order. This divergent sense of order involves the poet returning not to a sense of process, one involving the use of paper clips, string and even his own hand. In the modern argot, the vernacular of difficulty, as exemplified in the broken toilet, inspires a do-it-yourself attitude that circumvents the pressure to assimilate and incorporate oneself in the American white middle-class. “In the land of plenty” writes Olson “have nothing to do with it.” Defying the logic of mindless consumption begins with the obstructive chanticler of the leaky faucet. But it ends with a restoration of song to its rightful place. Instead of the deracinated sound of local life reduced to its lowest homogenous basis, Olson here finds a revitalized song of place in the pitter-patter of water on the sink basin and in the leaking trickle of the warped flushing ball. Returning to song, Olson imagines it to be the most viable countermand to the deadened jingles of commodified life. To live in the vernacular of obstruction is to “go contrary, go sing.”

“The Songs of Maximus” prove that Olson associates the vitality of the vernacular with its contradictory nature. He closes the poem, “You sing, who also wants,” a line that emphasizes the potential for the concept of native language to be appropriated by commercialism. Taking desire as the crucible of song, Olson presents song as susceptible to both progressive politics and degenerate conformity. Song may

---

© Olson, Ibid, 14.
lead to the vernacular of mu-sick, a consumerist desire engineered by Madison Avenue. Or it may lead to the vernacular of difficulty, a radical desire to confront the status quo. Whatever the direction one takes desire, song remains at the heart of the concept.

But the line “You sing, who also wants” also establishes another important feature of Olson’s thinking about the vernacular. Not only does it reflect the different and antagonistic ends to which song can be applied, it also draws these divergent ends into relation with one another. Olson throughout the opening sequence gives us evidence of the ability of corporate power to appropriate the language of the local and turn song into an instrument of consumerism. But here he subtly gestures to the prospect of using the methods of corporate power against itself. Both the positive and the negative aspects of song share desire, or want, as a basis. If the vernacular song of ownership can appropriate the desire for commune with the local, then the vernacular song of difficulty can appropriate the desire for consumerist conformity. In holding both forms of the vernacular in suspension, Olson identifies the ways in which the songs of ownership might actually be used to restore “the blessing/that difficulties are once more.”

2.4 The Usefulness of Place: The Regional Particularity of Olson’s Vernacular

As the opening sequence of The Maximus Poems 1-10 attests, Olson’s primary approach to the vernacular of mu-sick is one defined by adamant disdain and stringent critique. Typically advertising represents that mode of cultural engagement most at odds with his vision of the poetic. Yet, the poem “Letter 15” written in 1953 and published in 1956, forwards a different view of mass marketing. Michael Davidson has

---

61 Olson, Ibid, 13.
claimed that beat writers like Allen Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac and even Amiri Baraka, offered an alternative to the mainstream culture of postwar America, by appropriating elements from mass-culture to serve the politics and ethics of their marginal position. In contrast Davidson typifies a mainline of readers who contend that Olson’s response to commercialism was limited to utter divestment. In comparing Olson’s poetics to that of his Black Mountain acolyte Ed Dorn, Davidson writes of Dorn’s Gunslinger, “The poem is made out of the very fabric of commercial life that Olson attacked.” While on the whole I agree with readers like Davidson, that Olson understanding of place grows out of his aggression of advertising culture, I don’t want to underestimate the value advertising culture provides the poet as the condition of possibility for his poetics of vernacular resistance.

In “Letter 15” Olson challenges a particular ad, as opposed to advertising in general, by way of calling attention to a historical process whereby the generic iconography of advertising supplants the particularity of local culture. By drawing out the implications of the famous Coca-Cola ad campaign “The Pause that Refreshes” Olson claims that advertising does not simply represent the collapse of local culture by a foreign element that presents itself as an external inorganic element. Rather, advertising culture in Olson’s view corrodes the local from the inside out. It encases the material reality of historical existence with slick and shiny fantasies that conventionalize the domestic into compliance with nationalist sumptuary values. At the same time, the tagline, with its emphasis on pausing, breaking and interruption, provides an opportunity to consider the poet’s prose statements regarding the place of breath in the

production of poetic speech. If advertising could steal the local away from polis, then poetry could become a mode of advertising in order to steal it back.

While the poem shifts rapidly from one topic to another, providing an example of what Stephen Fredman refers to as Olson’s poetics of immediate perception, each of the topics relate implicitly to his thinking about the fraudulent work of public relations. With Olson having already established advertising as a form of musick, or false speech, the poem begins with an imperative to ground the local in a factual account of historical matters. Such an imperative requires Olson correct himself when he falls victim to the advertiser’s folly of printing the legend when faced with the facts. In an earlier poem, he had drawn upon a popular story, regarding the famed 19th-century navigator Nathaniel Bowditch. In “Letter 15” he corrects the popular story, insisting that the common narrative features erroneous material, such as the name of the ship and the time of day that the fabled sailor arrived in Gloucester. A seemingly trivial difference, Olson’s intervention shows the ends to which he will go to make the poem a documentary venture, committed to correcting sentimental assumptions. More than simply an attempt to valorize objective truth or evidentiary certainty, Olson’s act of self-redaction reveals the writer’s embrace of difficulty as a mode of engagement. Where in “The Songs of Maximus,” the poet gives thanks for the “blessing that difficulties are once more,” here the difficulty of acknowledging his own mistake becomes the blessing that allows him to pursue a notion of the local unmarred by conventional misconceptions.

While the poem features numerous attacks on advertising, in the final section he develops his aggression into a cursory treatise on the degradation of the vernacular and

---

with it the particularity of the local world. According to Olson, three individuals of note coincide in their shared affection for the concept of the vernacular, though each has a different idea of what constitutes such a concept.

Three men, coincide:
you will find Villon
in Fra Diavolo,
Elberthubbardsville,
N.Y.
And the prose
is Raymond’s, Boston, or
Brer Fox,
Rapallo,
Quattrocento-by-the-Beach-

The first is Francois Villon, the medieval French poet, who Ezra Pound in *The Spirit of Romance* characterizes as one who “walked the gutters of Paris” and wrote an unambitious poetry of “unvarnished speech.” Pound goes to great length in the essay to define Villon’s speech not as a style per se but as a style with a political stance towards radical realism, committed only to transcribing the actual particularity of unflattering experience. Pound regards Villon as preferable to another notorious vernacular bard, Walt Whitman, who Pound satirizes for using speech cheaply as means of advancing the superfluous ideals of democratic universalism. The second figure is Elbert Hubbard, the early 19th century American writer, who Olson refers to as Fra Diavolo, a term commonly used to refer either to a legendary Neapolitan general, Michele Pezza, or a spicy Italian sauce, served with shellfish. Here Olson uses the term to signify Hubbard’s work with the magazine he published, entitled *The Fra*, which led Hubbard to dub himself Fra Elbertus. In the pages of *Fra*, Hubbard espoused a series of folksy manifestos that

---

64 Olson, *Ibid*, 75.
compelled readers to overthrow the new-fangled system of mass-production and return to the idealized beauty of rural life. The false idiomatic style went hand in hand with what Olson holds up as an equally contrived sense of local life. With the phrase “Elberthubbardsville, N.Y.” Olson ridicules the designed down-homey culture of the Roycroft artisan community in East Aurora, New York, which Hubbard helped found. As Diavolo, or devil, Hubbard appears to Olson as a manipulator, who engineers consent with his “gamey” American idiom. The final figure is Pound himself, who Olson consistently regards in his poetry and prose as the poet who abandoned the strict regularity of the metronome in favor of melodic composition by ear. Meeting with Pound, three years previous to the writing of “Letter 15,” Olson receives a manuscript copy of the first installment of Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*, with the instruction to deliver the collection to James Laughlin at New Directions. Copying down portions of the draft into his own notebooks, Olson would have noticed Pound’s recurring interest throughout the poem in the nonstandard speech of the black soldiers guarding his cell in southern Italy. Pound’s scattered collage renders the speech of the black soldiers in a conspicuous eye-dialect style, reminiscent of 19th-century blackface minstrelsy. Olson hints at this tendency in Pound to conventionalize speech by referring to him as Brer Fox, the nickname he used in his correspondence, which he adopted from the pages of Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus Stories*.

In stringing together these three men, Olson maps the development of the vernacular from a language of authentic particularity to the cant of commercial promotion. According to “Letter 15” the vernacular begins in Villon as a transmission of

---

daily life unconcerned with literary conceits. It reappears in Olson’s trajectory 500 years later in Hubbard’s America as a romanticized affectation of quaint realism and feigned naturalism. In holding up a false vernacular based upon a nostalgic vision of America’s non-existent peasant traditions, Hubbard demeans Villon’s vernacular. He translates the particular anti-literary aesthetic into the sort of cartoonish dialect that postwar readers would expect to see in the buffoonish advertisements for Raymond’s department store in Boston. A typical newspaper page-length spread from Raymond’s would hawk garments with the help of their imaginary straight-talking spokesperson Uncle Eph, a bearded backwoods cousin of Mr. Magoo. The ads for blowout sales would feature brief snippets of folk wisdom from Uncle Eph, who of course spoke in a trumped up regional Southern accent, marked by eye-dialect spelling. While Hubbard wrote articles descrying the expansion of American advertising, he used a quaint version of canned idiom to carry out his attacks. For Olson, Hubbard’s general sense of the vernacular adheres to the conventional provincialism of ads like those of Raymond’s department story. This progression in the vernacular towards exaggeration was the product of advertisers like Bruce Barton. While Olson does not allude to any ads produced by the successful firm Batten, Barton, Durstin and Osborn, he does, lampoon their name as “Barton, Barton, Barton and Barton.” More importantly, he links the founding of their company with the beginning of an “American epos,” characterized by the neglect of local life in pursuit of stolen riches.

Elsewhere, Olson borrows Pound’s neologism perjoracracy to describe the deceitful greed of the American epos. However, in “Letter 15” Olson includes Pound as part of the perjorocratic problem.

-o Statue,
-o Republic, o
-Tell-A-Vision, the best
is soap. The true troubadours are CBS."

While these lines do not explicitly address Pound, they do call upon the poet’s defining interest in the troubadour poets. Moreover, the poem follows Pound’s example from *Spirit of Romance*, where he satirizes Whitman as a fallacious voice of the people.

Ventriloquizing Whitman, Pound writes “Lo Behold, I eat water melons. When I eat mater melons / the world eats water melons through me.”* With the ironic emphatic apostrophe, Olson mocks the poet’s thoughtless praise of the publicity machine. To claim the Columbia Broadcasting System represents the true vernacular raises Pound’s praise of advertising to hyperbolic levels in order to prove the error in his judgment.

However, Olson insists that Pound’s crimes against the vernacular are not limited to his appreciation of radio commercials. Rather the real problem is the poetic theory that Pound uses to champion both the denuded lyrics of Villon and the one-dimensional cant of the copywriters. Melopoeia, Olson writes, “is for Cokes by Cokes out of Pause.”* One of the three types of poetry that Pound characterizes in *The ABC of Reading*, he defines melopoeia as “verse made to sing, to chant or intone; and to speak.”* It is the mode of poetry that Pound associates with both the medieval poetry written in common speech and the mid-century jingles written in a standard American colloquial style. It offends Olson on account of its ambitions to render the vernacular simply an aesthetic concern, devoid of political or ethical ambitions. For Olson, melopoeia symbolizes a strategy for falsifying the flatness of speech, making it more musical and thus mnemonic. By placing such emphasis on melody and musical phrasing, Pound

---

* Olson, *Maximus Poems*, 75.
* Olson, *Maximus Poems*, 75.
instrumentalizes the vernacular to strictly aesthetic ends. Nothing about his notion of musical speech occludes the work of advertising executives. To the contrary, Olson holds melopoeia responsible for endorsing, as it were, the commercialization of speech, the deadening of local particularity. It is this false compulsion towards musical order that leads Olson to regard the afflicted speech of his day as a groping towards musick. For Pound, the vernacular represents a convention that can be artfully absorbed into a range of aesthetic media to pleasing, melodic and even expected ends. The poem in this perspective exercises its superiority over the vernacular by incorporating its particularity and transforming it into a legible sign of accepted difference.

In selecting Coke as the corporate sponsor of choice, Olson makes apparent the ease with which melopoeia can be manipulated to imperialist ends. In the May 15th, 1950 issue of Time Magazine, readers would find one of its most controversial covers, featuring a personified Coca-Cola logo satisfying the thirst of the globe. In 1960, Billy Wilder would direct One, Two, Three, a precursor to Dr. Strangelove, which tells the farcical story of a Coke executive trying to expand the brand into the Soviet Union. At one point, the protagonist, played by James Cagney, declares, “All this virgin territory—300 million thirsty comrades […] panting for the pause that refreshes.” And this brings me to the most important point. Olson’s interest in Coke as the epitome of devalued vernacular is not just a result of its status as one of the world’s most recognizable brands. Rather Olson’s choice of Coke follows from his particular interest in the company’s ad campaign. For in it, he finds evidence of the ideology that enables a corporation like Coca-Cola to confiscate the local and commandeer vernacularity.

In 1923, aspiring novelist-turned copy writer, Arthur (Archie) Lee wrote the phrase “Pause and Refresh Yourself” beneath an artist’s rendering of the trademarked Coca-Cola contour bottle. The rough caption read “Our Nation is the busiest on Earth from Breakfast to Dinner, there’s no end to work.” Afraid that the concept drew too heavily upon the “hurry, hurry worry, worry” ad campaigns of the turn of the century, Lee set the idea aside. Picking it up again in 1929, he would tweak his dream of a carefree reprieve from the workaday world into a more nuanced formulation. Coca-Cola The Pause that Refreshes. The original line presses upon the viewers with an authoritarian voice, commanding them to step away from the assembly line and consume the life-affirming elixir. The later version adopts a less confrontational tone that makes Coke seem the metonymic stand-in for the very idea of pausing. This shift goes from presenting Coke as the cure to industrial exhaustion to presenting Coke as consistent with the very idea of relaxation itself. Like sleep or water, Coke becomes a necessary good. No longer a product per se, Coke in Lee’s words becomes the very ground upon which other nonessential products could be enjoyed. 

Although the ad does not feature explicit dialectal fragments or conspicuous nonstandard speech acts, it does frame its message around an idea of the vernacular. As the various “Pause That Refreshes” campaigns suggest, the break that came in the middle of an arduous day was the zone of vernacularity. The break from work represented a small moment of unstructured time situated as a small respite in the middle of the otherwise regimented day. In schools across America, young children are scolded for their incorrect English, their broken syntax and slang. During recess

---

however, the mother tongue fills the air in the form of playground games. In laying claim to the break, Coke co-opts the very idea of the counter-productive realm that exists at the margins of civic life. It defines itself as the original secret formula of social control. It usurps the very idea of the common, the very notion of the fugitive and sells it back to the consumer with advertising meant to credential its theft as an act of authentic localism. The original secret formula of social control, the ad makes the idea of opting out a further entrenched episode of opting in. It’s this very idea of a false local and false vernacular that Olson rails against in the early Maxims Poems. What better example of “silence being spray-gunned in” than an advertisement that tries to sell Americans the very notion of absence, and unstructured suspension. One could read Olson’s use of the coke ad as yet another instance of his discontent with advertising and his growing complaint of Pound. The “Melopoeia is cokes by cokes and out of pause” line invites us to consider Pound’s literary concept as merely an outcropping of (as in out of) the same stylized convention that gave rise to Lee’s widely successful copy.

However, Olson’s own theory of the vernacular affords us another way of reading the line. Instead of construing the prepositional phrase “out of” to mean emerging from, we can interpret the phrase to mean devoid of, as in I just walked to the coke machine only to discover it is out of Dr. Pepper. In this reading, Pound and Coke remain the culprits. To say that their work is out of pause implies that that their vision of the common is missing the obstructive quality that Olson considers the essential element of vernacularity. Their notion of the nonstandard gives no one reason to pause. Instead it submits the unfamiliar element, the stop in the middle of the day, the inelegant phrase, to the unrelenting rubric of conventional discourse. For Olson, the pause represents a rupture in the standard operating procedure. In lacking pause, Pound’s theory and the Coke ad fail to take into consideration the local forces that work a sense
of particularity into the speech varieties of the huddled masses. For evidence of such a pause in Olson’s own poetry, one need only consider the blank spaces that fill the page of the projective poem. As these measured bursts of semantic silence score the poem to reflect the particularity of the individual poet’s speech rhythms, these rhythms in turn reflect the unincorporated environs from which they arise.

2.5 The Secrets Objects Share: Vernacular Materialism in Olson’s Poetics

While obstruction or pause fulfills one end of Olson’s idea of vernacularity, it also lays the groundwork for the second feature: giving voice to the voiceless. Not only does the vernacular obstruct the methods of advertising culture. In obstructing this conventional view, the vernacular makes available a space for unfiltered expression. For Olson, this primarily manifests as an attempt to express the historical reality of those marginalized peoples who have been denied access to the official narrative of national history.

In “Projective Verse” Olson forwards his theory of objectism, which undermines the primary distinction upon which much of Western epistemology hangs. There he claims that man is an object, no more important than any other physical material that occupies space in a given field. Olson’s notion of objectism corresponds to an entire phenomenological reading of modern philosophy, while also bearing direct implications on Olson’s notion of history. In a standard cosmological perspective, humans exist as the primary protagonists of history whereas objects are marginal, existing on the outskirts of the official history. Excised from the teleological empty time of national history, the excluded human commonly becomes objectified and instrumentalized to fulfill the
needs of the dominant class. In claiming that all men are objects, Olson’s theory applies the sign of the object to the entire body of creation.  

Olson’s vernacular challenges the convention of literary style and grammatical standards in order to feature the stories of those who have been relegated to the domain of the object. In Olson’s poem “There Was a Young Lad Named Thomas Granger,” the poet exercises “least action” by directly transposing the story in period language of the first execution carried out in the American colonies. The poem tells the story of America by focusing on Grainger’s death. It was for the crime of bestiality that the youth was put to death. Thus the first act of capital punishment arose as a means of reinforcing the line between the human and its others. Olson continues to focus on the unincorporated others throughout his poetry, but no example surpasses that of his unpublished poem, “The Ballad of Willie Francis,” which centers on another instance of American execution.

In May 1947, Charles Olson writes “Willie Francis and the Electric Chair,” a traditional folk ballad composed in black dialect, which tells the story of the eponymous young man, who after being sentenced to die for murder, managed to survive execution on account of an equipment malfunction—before being returned one year later to die in the chair. Though largely overlooked in critical accounts, due in part because the poem was never published during Olson’s life, “Willie Francis and the Electric Chair” proposes an alternative history for some of the most pervading concepts in Olson’s poetics. Namely, it allows us to understand the centrality of vernacular speech to Olson’s theory of objectism, and to see that Olson articulates his vision of the vernacular against the long history of black experience in the Americas.

73 Olson, “Projective Verse,” 247.
74 Olson, Collected Poems, 43.
75 Olson, Collected Poems, 63.
Touted by news reporters in 1946 as “The Lad Who Cheated Death,” Francis was hailed as the first inmate to ever survive a lethal intensity of current, as administered by the state through the modern electric chair. Despite being depicted as the lucky wretch in American folk songs and editorials, his popularity did not deter the Supreme Court from rejecting his appeal for clemency in 1947, which returned Francis to the chair to suffer a second 2,500 volts of electricity and ultimately die in the process. Following his failed execution, little to nothing would be printed about his original case, or the role structural racism played in his unlawful conviction and unmerciful execution. Instead the reporters, who filtered into the small parish in southwestern Louisiana plied him with human-interest questions meant to capture some digestible semblance of his experience in the chair.

Francis’s description of the brutal scene warrants quoting at length.

They walked me into the room and I saw the chair […] I knowed it was a bad chair. I didn’t think about my whole life like at the picture show. Just ‘Willie, you goin outa this world in this bad chair. They began to strap me in the chair, and everything begun to look dazey. It was like the white folks watching was in a big swing, and they’d swing away and back and then right up close to me where I could hear them breathing. Sometimes I thought so loud it hurt my head […] The electric man could have been putting me on a bus for New Orleans the way he said good-bye […] And I tried to say good-bye but my tongue got stuck and I felt a burnin’ in my head and I jumped against the straps […] I tell you that chair isn’t made of feathers.

Answering the question, What was it like to taste death, Willie responded, “like you got a mouth of cold peanut butter” and then added that it looked like “little blue and pink and green speckles, like shines in a rooster’s tail.”

---

77 King, Execution, 8-34.
78 King, Ibid, 32.
79 Olson, Ibid, 31.
In his regular column for *The Chicago Defender*, Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, responded to Francis’s interview in the *New York Daily News* by stating “What a miracle that a virtually illiterate (but far from ignorant or untalented) boy should think in imagery as deeply moving and beautiful as any contemporary poet.” White not only praises what he sees to be the poetic sensibility of Francis’s language, he makes the case that Francis should be spared from a second trip to the chair on account of his immense, uncultivated talent for poetic expression. To help ensure his point, White appends to his column a poem written by an unnamed friend, not Charles Olson. The anonymous newspaper lyric, “Willie Knowed it Was a Bad Chair” draws its language strictly from the interview. Slightly reminiscent of Sterling Brown’s *Southern Road*, the language reflects a terse quality indicative of work song, complete with vernacular phrasing that carefully walks the line between homage and caricature. Words are for the most part spelled according to orthographic standards, while the paratactic, almost staccato, syntax works conspicuously in contrast to grammatical norms, by way of displaying some sense of human voice. Although the poem is quite clear in expressing its directive, as the final line reads, “God didn’t want him to die;” we find a more subtle and pervasive argument by further attending to the poem’s form. Rather than draw attention to the writer’s ability to manipulate the found language from Francis, the poem runs relatively free of poetic devices, emphasizing that the anonymous author is not responsible for the piece, and is instead a mere channel for Francis, who serves as a nonce “il miglior fabbro.” Such transparent channeling supports White’s attempt in the article to garner support for Francis’s case by making pronouncements on the value of
his literary talent: “If we are able to save Willie Francis’ life, would it not be a gift to him but to America if we could develop his unvalued gifts.”

Before getting to Olson’s rendering of the event, it is important to understand his sense of objectism, in contrast to these views, and its relationship to the physical particularities of language. Consistently defined in critical accounts of Olson’s poetics, objectism amounts to a renunciation of “the special status accorded to humanity in Judeo Christian tradition and its secular counterpart, liberal humanism.” Understood practically, the concept amounts to a privileging of spontaneous composition and a return to oral expressivity represented as concrete materiality in the space of the poem proper. However since no part of Olson’s poetics applies only to the poem proper, one cannot ignore the fact that at its core, objectism bears the more controversial imperative of consigning the human to object status. As Olson writes, “man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use.” Olson advocates a vision of language inextricable from its physical environment. Hence, he challenges historical precedent to emphasize a version of speech that does not confirm the autonomous human individuality of the speaker, rather it denotes the reconstitution of immanent social bonds, through which the human becomes aware of his status not as a user of speech or a user of objects, but as one useful object in relation to many.

It is the vernacular that one immediately notices when reading Olson’s “Willie Francis and the Electric Chair.” Given the history of cross-racial representation in

---

81 Olson, “Projective Verse,” 247.
American literature it is easy to assume from the outset that Olson’s delivery of racialized dialect reprises the old performance of difference, where difference becomes a charming gloss on deficiency. To this end one notices when comparing Olson’s poem with the anonymous ballad from *The Chicago Defender* the more pronounced appearance of a narrating speaker in Olson’s version. In the newspaper lyric, the poet begins “In Iberia Louisiana/Willie Francis says,” which quickly establishes Francis as both the hero of the ballad and its genuine author. In contrast Olson opens with the line “Now the preacher told Willie when he said his last prayer / You’re a lucky fella, Willie to be goin’ to the chair.” In Olson’s case the poem begins with the heavy-handed rhetorical figure of the emphatic “Now,” which poses the poem to be more than an unobtrusive objectification of raw materials, but rather a structured narrative, plotted out with certain a priori principles in mind.

In advancing a reading of these guiding principles, it does help to get a sense of Olson’s racial politics as they emerge in his other work. One sign of his liberalism manifests in his approach to cross-racial representation, epitomized in his belief that “No man can attack a race and remain useful.” Evidence of such a philosophy appears in the poet’s fanatical investment in historical documents, as Aldon Nielsen suggests when he argues, “It is common practice in *The Maximus Poems* for Olson to make his attack upon racism through the deployment of historical records demonstrating the monstrosity of the slave trade and praising those who opposed it.” Describing this awareness to be part and parcel of Olson’s interest in American maritime culture, Nielsen claims the trajectories of diaspora remain “an aspect of history which the

Taking Nielson at his word, it would seem likely that Olson’s marked usage of slavery-era literary methods intends to do something other than treat the black speaker as an aestheticized object in contrast to the superior human beholder. Despite the marked usage of dialect, Olson’s depiction of Francis is not compromised by explicit fantasies of racial vitality. Nonetheless, given the knowledge that white representations of black speech are not representations of speech but signifiers of otherness manifesting in art, one has to ask the question to what extent does Olson’s representation of black speech mark the otherness of a human object.

A sense of what this otherness might entail appears in the poem “Glyph,” which Olson wrote following an excursion he took into the town of Black Mountain, North Carolina, accompanied by Alvin, the young African American nephew of a woman who worked at the college where Olson served as rector. It opens with a set of miscues surrounding the multiple meanings of the word race, as in footrace or race relations. He writes, “Like a race, the Negro boy said / And I wasn’t sure I heard, what / Race, he said it clear.” The two stumble upon a building where an auction is taking place. Attending to the previous reference to race, Olson shows how the act of Alvin crossing the threshold into the auction in progress twins the runner’s passing the finish line. He writes “his foot / the instant it crossed the threshold / (as his voice) drawing / the whites’ eyes off the silver set New Yorker.” Daniel Belgrad notes in his reading of the poem the way in which the traversal of the doorway by Alvin draws him “into equation with the commodity [the auctioneers] are bidding on.” The result, he states is an “echo of the slave auction,” linking the white viewer’s bias of attention “encouraged by commodification with objectification and the loss of human value.” The poem states that

---

84 Nielsen, Ibid, 146.
it is not Alvin’s skin color that attracts the auctioneer’s attention, instead it is “his voice [that] draws the white’s eyes,” and hence his voice that triggers Olson’s awareness of the historical feedback loop that orients blackness in relation with objects.

Along these lines, we can see the development of a narrating speaker in the Willie Francis poem as indicative of Olson’s search for ways to interpret not only black speech, but also its significance as an object of cultural value, constructed and consumed along already conscribed lines of white expectation. It cannot be overstated that almost the entirety of Olson’s poem, though manipulated through a conspicuous speaker function, is lifted from the newspaper interview. The dialectal spellings are in most cases not Olson’s invention, but the historical product of reporters transcribing Francis’s speech in accordance with their own perception of phonetic conventions. Just as the Defender poem broke from classic models of light verse and ballad to emphasize the unique peculiarity of Francis’s experience, Olson’s poem charts the parallels between Francis and the antebellum black slave, demonstrating the historical continuity of objectified black speech. To take this one step further, Olson’s poem does more than draw a relationship between the incarceral present suffered by African Americans in great numbers and the obvious antecedent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

In contrast to what typically comes to mind as a speech-based poem in the projective grain, this ballad demonstrates a vernacular that eschews ideas of immediacy in favor of documenting the era’s imperative to consolidate and maintain the roots of an authentic American folk tradition in the face of mass-culture mu-sick. Although the vernacular stands as a vital concept for Olson’s idea of the historical epic, as he claims

“the muse of the vernacular poem is history,” what we have in “Willie Francis and the Electric Chair” is an exaggerated version, meant to comment on the way in which social realism and folk recovery are premised upon an objectified belief in the authentic black speaker. Part of this artifice of authenticity is the creation of a corn-pone speaker, which Olson deploys throughout the piece as the organizing agent, who absorbs the material from Francis’s interview and repurposes it in a form consistent with the fetishized aura of pre-industrial mnemonic rhyme.

The most significant difference separating Olson’s poem from the anonymous ballad from The Chicago Defender is the date of his composition. I raise the point of date, because the motivation for writing changes depending upon the stage of events that draws the writer’s attention. Rather than commemorating the equipment failure that spared Francis’s charmed life, Olson writes his poem likely after reading about the details of the Supreme Court trial that sought to determine if he should return to the chair. Near the end of the poem, Olson remarks upon the circumstances surrounding Francis’s appeal hearing.

They cut Willie free, they took him to court
Th’ electric man said the current was short
And now they’ve gone to the big, big bench
To decide if the preacher saw Willie blanch

Bertrand DeBlanc, Francis’s attorney had tried to argue that sending his client to the electric chair would go against the procedural defense of double jeopardy and the constitutional law prohibiting cruel and unusual punishment. As Olson’s poem reflects the double jeopardy defense was the less successful of the two. The appeal to cruel and unusual punishment, however, would force the justices to take the case more seriously,

86 Olson, Collected, 63.
as DeBlanc made a rousing argument, seeking pathos through showing a photograph of Francis sitting in the electric chair awaiting death. He claimed “look at him strapped to the chair of death […] What chance did he think he had of surviving? Look at him, gentlemen, a beaten animal, do you think there was any hope within that brain?”

Emphasizing the brutality inherent in what became known as death by installment, DeBlanc drew the execution into relation with both historic and recent agents of atrocity, stating, “What is this going to be? An experiment in electricity, an experiment in modern forms of torture an experiment in cruelty? Is the State of Louisiana trying to outdo the Caesars, the Hitlers, the Tojos, the Nazis, the Gestapo in torture? How long does the State of Louisiana take to kill a man?”

The pressure DeBlanc placed upon the psychological trauma experienced by Francis inspired one of the justices to begin the process of filing a dissent. The aim would be to return the case to local courts in order to determine whether or not Francis had suffered psychologically but also physically from the current that coursed through his veins without stopping his heart.

Although the dissent was eventually overturned, it seemed as if the question of whether or not Francis had experienced severe pain from the execution would determine if he would be killed. It is this aspect that Olson considers at length in the poem. In the above stanza, he portrays the trial as to hang on whether or not a member of the religious order, can refute his own fantasy of the boy’s peaceful death in order to declare that he did witness the brutal torture. This is significant because the function of the preacher does not serve a prominent role in the records of the appeal case. Olson is intervening and using the preacher as an emissary of abstract general ideology in

---

87 King, *Execution*, 163.
88 King, *Execution*, 164.
confrontation with the physical facts of the matter. Although Olson is interested in staging this conflict that will recur throughout his work, one can be sure that his true concern is directed toward the conditions that make possible the question in the first place. Olson’s attraction to Francis is not conferred through a performance of racial fantasy but instead around the brutality of racial empiricism. For the preacher to be able to witness Willie’s pain, the speech of the victim to that degree must be treated as untenable to the court. In other words, we can assume that Francis no longer stands in Olson’s eyes as a subject, but instead as an object, one that is mute and unable to counter the courts with his own language. Instead of treating the young man as a witness to his own experience, the courts transform his body into the forensic evidence that experts must speak for.

No line in the poem supports my reading of blackness as an anticipatory objectism like the final refrain “O Willie didn’t die, O Willie didn’t die / He’s alive to hear and say “Goodbye!”” On a literal level, the lines denote the attention that Willie himself underscored in the interview when he remarked about the casual nature in which the execution captain wished him goodbye, as if placing him on a bus to the city. In the recorded accounts of the failed execution, two statements are attributed to Francis, one expressing that he could not breathe, and the second, that he was not dying. Olson’s insertion here of erroneous details shows him to be staging some kind of interpretation of the events.

Taken in association with his burgeoning ideas of objectism, what he is pointing to in having the young man reply with a goodbye, rather than the assumed hello, is his willing rejection of whatever world would allow its politics to privilege an idea of the

---

89 Olson, Collected, 63.
human while electrocuting an actual one. To claim a place among the living with the word “hello,” or “I’m not dying” would portray him to be invested in upholding the notion of a superior human, that he as a black speaker, an object from the outset, would not be able to achieve in racially segregated postwar America. Resonant with Olson’s poem “Glyph,” his ballad for Willie Francis not only features the passage into object status, it also, like Glyph, displays the passage to emanate from the voice. Rather than announcing one’s indivisible ability for self-possession and autonomous subjectivity, Francis’s vernacular speech announces his belonging to another class, one that Olson describes in the unpublished fragment written June 8th, 1950

The necessity to be other than a citizen
to stay a member of that other state, other than
the one they’ve let death eat
it ain’t easy, bro

In this four-line composition, Olson characterizes the state, the governing body that adjudicates the limits of civic life, as an biopolitical body dedicated to regulating the death of its members. Thinking the fragment in relation to Willie Francis and Thomas Granger, the reference to death clearly connotes capital punishment. Such an interpretation presents the state-enforced execution as instrument of civic exclusion. But this death can also apply to efforts of the state to standardize and thus deaden the scene of communal exchange. While the poem never explicitly calls attention to the role language plays in the containment model of state politics, it does suggest as much by setting up the vernacular in the final line as a defense mechanism. As much as the final line declares that language is a site of evading the mandates of state control, it also

---

90 Charles Olson, The necessity to be other than a citizen, 1950, 21:925, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
insists that the deadening grip is a grammatical one. It insinuates that the policing of language into a credentialed vision of the American idiom robs the vernacular of its heterogeneous origins. In this formulation, the state and its liberal corporate extensions distill the cacophonous noise of neighbors speaking into a stable, consumable idea of local speech.

The deadening grip is a grammatical one, but it is not without leaks. In a language commonly regarded as black speech, the line “it ain't easy, bro” calls upon the culture workers of the black community. The line resonates with Olson’s multivalent engagement with the vernacular, as it builds a more ethical vision of relationality around the improvisational movements of the black social field. The poem frames the black voice as an escape route. But the line also reiterates Olson’s interest in associating authenticity with difficulty and obstruction. It imagines non-state space as an arduous endeavor in the present and not a utopian future. It insists that with strained concentration comes kinship.
3. Beyond the Reality of the Incomparable: Robert Duncan and the Vernacular of Preliteracy

Introducing Charles Olson before his keynote lecture at the 1965 University of California Poetry Conference at Berkeley, Robert Duncan declares that “For all of the poets who matter to me in my generation Charles Olson has been a Big Fire Source.” Duncan’s promethean interest in Olson cannot be limited to a singular point, as he articulates the sprawling basis of Olson’s significance nine years earlier in an essay he contributed to the Black Mountain Review. In “Notes on Poetics regarding Olson’s Maximus,” Duncan lights upon the original opening of Olson’s epic, “By ear, he sd,” interpreting it as a meta-textual “reference to the exercise of poetry.” Duncan claims the poem begins as the expression of a larger commitment in Olson’s work to the “discrimination of speech,” which he regards as part of the Gloucester poet’s strategy to restore a sense of physicality to the disembodied nature of discourse, or in his words “the muscular realization of language.” In the muscular, Duncan finds terminology to address the obstructive dimension of Olson’s interest in the obstructive particularity of the real. Olson’s drive to get back to the physical origins of tactile experience, where speech possesses a firmer hold on signification, leads Duncan to a different origin point for the notion of vernacular culture. Duncan deviates from Olson’s historical idea of the vernacular as the language of industrial fishermen to instead find his model of the vernacular in the small child’s experience of “gaining, first, breath, and then tongue.”

---

1 Stephen Fredman, *Grounding*, 70.
Where Olson sees in Dante’s *De Vulgari Eloquentia* evidence of a poetry centered in the particular anti-grammar of local expression, Duncan latches onto a different aspect of the medieval poet’s theory. For Duncan Dante’s description of the vernacular as “that language which we acquire from our nurses” implies a literal connection to the practice of language acquisition. Dante’s preference for Italian over Latin in Duncan’s mind represents a preference for first languages, the natural speech that serves as the threshold of human relation. While Italian is far from a universal language, Duncan sees in Dante’s theory a privileging not of Italian per se, but of the child’s first language, and this according to Duncan names an irreducibly universal phenomenon.

Connecting Duncan and Olson’s theory of the vernacular is the insistence that the concept does not define itself in contradiction to dictionary versions of Standard English. Rather both poets recognize the fraught nature of the term, the way in which it underpins and undermines definitional structure, and both use their writing to defend it against what they understand as misinterpretations. Where Olson defines it in contrast to the commercial speech of Madison Avenue, Duncan attempts to liberate it from the anti-poetic masculinity of his forebears, the literary modernists.

### 3.1 All Speech is Poetry

About Robert Duncan’s *Domestic Scenes*, William Carlos Williams was right. The poems, “heavy with the reminiscence of older manners,” contained no sign of American language. When Duncan sent the unpublished manuscript to Williams, which he titled *Domestic Scenes* on account of their incorporation of “things around like buses and paraphernalia of the contemporary world,” the elder poet saw through the embrace of

---

material culture and challenged the young poet at the level of diction and tone. In recalling the incident in an interview, Duncan explains that Williams “blasted” him for not writing in the American idiom. Responding to what Williams saw as the dominance of European verse tradition, he exclaimed his work grew out of the marl of American inferiority, steeped in the jagged pattern of local expression. Affirming Williams’s allegation, Duncan boasts in the interview, “Of course I have never written in American Language, nor did I ever in my whole life.” Where Williams had acquired a reputation among the writers of Duncan’s generation as a plain-spoken poet of colloquial zeal, Duncan holds rank in the same company as the haughty rhetorical poet, committed to Gnostic mysticism and arcane abstractions. Duncan acknowledges this consensus in his essay “The Truth and Life of Myth,” where he writes, “Erudite, I have been called by some, and even, by others, pretentious, for my studious mythologies.” The story of Duncan reaching out to Williams only to be vehemently rebuffed fulfills all the requirements of literary legend. It offers an account of personal conflict, and the conflict itself indicates a larger disagreement that clarifies the distinctiveness of Williams’s and Duncan’s poetic projects. But like any legend, certain aspects of the story have fallen to the wayside in order to secure a coherent narrative that reinforces previously held assumptions regarding literary history. While biographers have taken the episode into account, none have considered the circumstances out which the correspondence began.

After reading in Joseph Henry Jackson’s column in The San Francisco Chronicle that William Carlos Williams would be traveling West to attend a writer’s conference in Washington, Duncan writes to the author of Paterson to ask if it is all possible for him to

---

5 Robert Duncan, Fictive Certainties (New York: New Directions, 1985), 32.
extend his trip to include a brief stopover in Berkeley, stating “This would mean that all
the poets would be able to talk with you and hear your work.” Beyond the requisite
niceties entailed in inviting a prestigious writer to an upstart series, Duncan gets to the
heart of his interest in having Williams visit, when he states, “The young poets out
here—including myself—need to hear and to bring into active concern this whole
question of the new vernacular.” Although Duncan possessed little interest in speaking
American, this telling detail confirms he was nonetheless interested in the promise of a
new vernacular. It also implies that Duncan’s disavowal of the American idiom did not
represent his discontent with vernacular speech in general. In fact, quite the opposite is
ture. Like Olson, speech has remained a dominant trope in Duncan’s work, often
appearing in the poems as a self-reflexive invocation of compositional practice. In his
1966 study Conception of Reality in Modern American Poetry, L.S. Dembo associated speech
in Duncan’s work with a “mode of crystallizing the nameless, invisible world in the
human consciousness.” And Nathaniel Mackey has claimed, “One of the cornerstones of
Duncan’s poetics is the idea of language, both written and spoken, as a communal,
community-making act.” Yet one cannot overlook the swiftness with which the poet
shifts from seeking tutelage in the new vernacular to recoiling at the thought of
American language. While Duncan would go on to redefine speech in line with his own
poetics; at the time of his writing to Williams, he was unable to conclude that he and his
elder possessed radically different understandings of speech. Instead their fraught

---

Collection, The State University of New York at Buffalo.
7 L.S. Dembo, Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry (Berkeley: University of California Press,
1966), 214.
8 Nathaniel Mackey, Discrepant Engagement, 93.
exchange testifies to Duncan’s early uncertainty about the implications of framing non-literary language within the literary frame.

Taking this uncertainty as the occasion for poetry, Duncan pens an unpublished lyric in 1952 that attends to his conflicted interest in the concept of common speech. The bulk of the untitled poem recalls a recent reading given by Kenneth Rexroth in which the audience complains each to each under their breath about the mundane terseness of Rexroth’s prosaic verse. In turn, Duncan fills his draft with the unpoetic chatter of those “hostile hearers,” who would not “allow / Rexroth’s casual talk / to teach them a music / of plain speech.” In the disgruntled gossip of the audience, Duncan identifies a view of the poet incompatible with his own. Where the others hold Rexroth accountable to the Eliotic task of purifying the dialect of the tribe, Duncan envisions the role of the poet to be centered on a more inclusive operation. Instead of establishing a coherent voice through negating unseemly details, Duncan charges that the poet need only compel the listener “to hear / a music that is everywhere / denied.” Simply by including the audience’s language into the poem, Duncan exploits their argument to antithetical ends. One female audience member mutters, “don’t repeat it / but I thot [his poetry] dreadful / no more than prose.” One might not immediately recognize the vernacular quality of this trivial quibbling, on account of its diction (“dreadful”) and its familiarity with literary conventions (“no more than prose”). Nevertheless, Duncan ties the woman’s speech to the vernacular by revealing it to be obscene, in the sense that Jonathan Williams’ uses the term in Jammin’ the Greek Scene. “Ob scena; therefore, for off-stage purposes.”. Whispered as to not distract from the reading at hand, the unnamed

---

10 Jonathan Williams, Jammin’ the Greek Scene (Karlsruhe, Germany: Jargon Press, 1956), 1.
woman’s speech exists at the literal margins of the poetry scene. By eschewing generic consolidation in favor of including a range of expression, the draft adheres to Duncan’s opening pronouncement, “All speech is poetry.”

Yet the poem ends on a decidedly different note. In spite of the lengthy apologia for common speech, Duncan cannot reconcile his commitment to inclusivity with his preference for sophistication. The poem concludes with his contradictory confession, “I too am deaf to meager words, / prefer the riches of the mind / in baroque splendor to a plain / long drawn out description of a train.” Here Duncan cites Rexroth’s unembellished commentary about a passenger train, which appears in his long poem “The Dragon and the Unicorn.” Duncan’s preference for the “richness of the mind” over the self-evident inanities of the modern world reflects the poet’s well-documented erudition, while also aligning him with the “hostile hearers” who uphold a distinction between poetry and speech. But the audience’s response to Rexroth’s reading is not consistent with the larger trends affecting poetry during the postwar era, and Duncan knows this. When Duncan criticizes the plainness of Rexroth’s “long drawn out description of a train,” he compromises his affiliation with the emergent group of poets, who were looking to Williams and, to a lesser degree, Rexroth as models for a plain-spoken poetry. The poem ends, “what spiritual fame will I claim / in men’s eyes / with praises of what they all despise?” The reference to “men” in the penultimate line gestures to that incipient cast of poets who will in eight years provide the contents of Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry 1945-1960*. At the time of this writing, Duncan had already met Olson, read “Projective Verse,” and begun to understand its argument as entailing more than simply an emphasis on live readings. He had also noticed the mounting affinity for the Williams line of speech-based poetics present in the poets collected in early issues of *Origin*. With all of this awareness, the poem portrays the
proverbial crisis of being stuck between a rock and hard place: the rock of elitist literary convention and the hard place of elitist anti-literary conventions. One can then see in the poem’s closing sentiment how Duncan would be more disturbed by the social implications of being labeled erudite than by any essential shortcoming associated with ornate decoration. In realizing the poem’s stake in community formation, one can also see how it is not simply a poem divided between the poles of accepting speech and rejecting it. Rather it reveals a consistent argument about the centrality of speech in connecting the aesthetics of sociality with the politics of belonging.

One question that I seek to answer in this chapter: how can a writer who exhibits an elevated rhetorical style, and an explicit sense of erudition, base his model of poetics in a notion of speech, which had theretofore been associated with the colloquial and the prosaic? In order to distinguish between Duncan’s reconsideration of the vernacular and the model he criticizes in Williams and Pound, I refer to theirs as a vernacular of illiteracy, and his as a vernacular of preliteracy. In the second half I show how the idea of a vernacular poetics stands as the connective tissue between Duncan’s long abiding interest in structural linguistics and his utopian drive to understand the poem as an immanent act of political economy. My aim is to think about the vernacular as it influences Duncan’s sense of measure, and in the process understand how his drive to develop a new measure, attuned to the vernacular, mobilizes a more ethical model of communal engagement, centered around his ideas of participatory volition.

3.2 Domestic Dispute

To understand Duncan’s interest in vernacular language, one must begin by accounting for his dispute with Williams and Pound over the actual meaning of the term, which requires returning to the theoretical text underpinning their respective views.
“The main drive of the Imagists,” writes Duncan in *The H.D. Book*, “away from the specially ‘poetic’ dictions of the nineteenth century toward the syntax and rhythms of common daily speech was that of Dante in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia.*” Composed in 1302, Dante’s treatise on the vernacular provided an argument for his decision to depart from convention and craft his masterwork, *The Divine Comedy*, in the unofficial, transient language of the peasant class, a Tuscan dialect of Italian, as opposed to the rarified, durable structure of Latin grammar. In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante famously defines the vernacular as “that language we acquire without any rule, by imitating our nurses.” Taking the nurse’s speech as the model of the vernacular, Dante divides language into the natural forms of first permission and the artificial modes of trained precision. For him, grammatical language presents an inferior substitute to vernacular language on account that it is acquired through the artificial means of formal schooling. Whereas the vernacular represents a natural alternative, natural in the sense it preserves the language “originally used by the human race,” and because “the whole world employs it.”

Although Dante’s concept of the vernacular is historically and geographically specific, writers in various contexts have long looked to it as the dominant theory of literature sourced in the speech of the common man. Major transformations occur when in the modern era the division between vernacular and grammatical languages diminishes. In Dante’s context, the two represented completely different language systems, referred to commonly as Latin and Italian. In the modern context, the vernacular writer is tasked with the challenge of accentuating a difference through attending to hierarchical

---

competency levels and not simply language type. Hence, the concept of a modern vernacular entails no shortage of interpretive intervention on the part of the literary practitioner.

Duncan addresses this interpretive leeway in his earlier comments, when he calls attention to the fact that Pound and Williams were validating their own theories of language by misinterpreting Dante’s treatise. According to Duncan, the two modernists treat the “specifically ‘poetic’ dictions of the nineteenth century” as the modern equivalent of an artificial language. The self-consciously baroque stylings of Victorian poets supplant the classic Latin grammar as the opposite of vernacular eloquence. Citing Dante’s theory of poetic language, Pound and Williams eschew the high-brow aestheticism of hearthside poetry, finding in its sentimentality the trace of a contrived standard. In place of the medieval vernacular Pound and Williams forge a variant form, based largely on the dream of a structurally disadvantaged speaker, who spills forth the twiggy stuff of nonstandard speech. Taking this fondness for the slang speech of street urchins and blackface minstrels into account, I proffer the term vernacular of illiteracy to describe the Williams’s and Pound’s interpretation of Dante’s De Vulgari.

3.2.1 The Vernacular of Illiteracy

The vernacular of illiteracy represents the typical errand of dialect writing, to imitate the speech of persons characterized by their ignorance of letters. Poetry written in the vernacular of illiteracy emphasizes the variety of possible pronunciations of a

---

14 Duncan, H.D., 367.
15 The institutional definition of illiteracy is a topic of continuous debate. My interest in the term pertains to its general denotation as the status of one who is unable to read or write. I use the term loosely, because Pound and Williams are little concerned with illiteracy in the strictest of senses. They are not applying rigorous metrics in order transcribe the speech patterns favored by individuals who cannot identify, comprehend or create printed matter at any level.
given word. For instance, the definite article “the” can be spelled incorrectly in order to
gesture towards other, more indexical articulations, such as “thu,” “tha,” “de,” and
“da.” These spellings are indexical to the extent that denote a semantic definition while
indexing the particular verbal patters of a given speech community. Occasionally, the
misspelling convention allows a standard word, like the personal pronomial “I,” to
convey a double meaning, when spelled in a manner that corresponds to another word,
such as “aye” or “eye.” But more importantly, the vernacular of illiteracy understands
that social identities are largely constructed by particular stances and acts that take
linguistic form. In misspelling words, the vernacular poet of illiteracy chooses to reflect
the speech habits of an uneducated speaker. In Pound’s and Williams’s case, the
vernacular of illiteracy indexes the political and aesthetic value of an imaginary speech
community, who exist strictly as the indecorous antipode to the sophisticated reader of
19th-century sentimental verse.

For Duncan, the decision to treat the vernacular as a countermand to linguistic
convention and literary sensibility carries a divisive affect that runs antithetical to his
interpretation of Dante’s vernacular. He writes, “He-man bravado or working-class
lingo was [Williams’ and Pound’s] affectation of the vernacular, meant to cut thru the
genteel affectation of devotion or culture with which the middle-class poetry lover
read.”- Rather than consider their idiomatic innovations as instances of Dante’s
vernacular, Duncan stresses that they are merely practicing an affectation of the
vernacular, a simulacra that misrepresents Dante’s theme of universal competency. He
calls their concept of the vernacular an instance of “the anti-poetic voice,” which he
claims they instrumentalize in their aggressive attack on the feminine conventions of

---

16 Duncan, H.D., 58.
literary appreciation. In describing their embrace of an indexical representation of illiteracy, Duncan suggests their “working class” style actually becomes “a show of sophistication to the pretension of the cultured.” Interrogating their “jargon of the low,” Duncan levels a complaint against the two modernists that corresponds to Matei Calinescu’s description of the ironic conventionality of the avant-garde. “The most prominent students of the avant-garde” writes Calinescu “tend to agree that its appearance is historically connected with the moment when some socially ‘alienated’ artists felt the need to disrupt and completely overthrow the whole bourgeois system of values, with all its philistine pretensions to universality.” According to Duncan, the two relied primarily upon a vision of Dante that upheld the divide between the literary mainstream and their own avant-garde anti-literary imperative. Taking exception to their emphasis on the exceptional, Duncan compares the “the low-life specialty” to the “learned grammatical speech of upper classes” in the sense that both “convey a class consciousness set apart from our common humanity.”

Similarly, as Duncan argues, one cannot overlook the emphasis on the empirical “thing” underlying the Imagist conception of the vernacular. Pound builds the theory of imagism upon a rejection of the symbolist poet’s decision to “start with a mental awareness or inner perception” and then move “outward to the realm of objects.” Instead he advocates that the new poetry must begin with an “awareness of the objective reality” before withdrawing into the metaphysical space of subjective thought. Applying this view to the idea of poetic speech and voice, Pound’s axiom in favor of “direct

---

treatment of thing” supports his less notable declaration, “the image is itself speech.” To make speech into an image entails pointing to the objective reality of language production. It means overlooking the inner perceptions that shape a particular expression and instead underscoring the role of social forces play in clarifying the distinctiveness of one’s speech habits. Through linking certain linguistic cues with physical stances and acts, the objectification of speech through writing attempts to pose an alliance between the text and an external solid reality, independent of the writing itself.

In the Domestic Scenes that Duncan sent to Williams, the young poet wrestles with the empirical operation at the heart of the new vernacular. In “Matches,” he writes,

Friend, friend. What if my voice at times betrays elaborations of a cloudy mind, of Túneresque and rosy cumulus? We smoke our vernacular peace-pipes, cigarettes of various brands, and inhabit, uneasily, the vulgar honesty of dailiness.

Opening with direct address, the poem sets out on that social ground most common to vernacular literatures, as he stresses a sense of civic dialogue rather than transcendent transmission. Yet he quickly tempers his enthusiasm for the vernacular by confessing that his voice, grand instrument of the vernacular, breaks faith with the assumed materialist aspect of nonstandard language. In emphasizing the cloudy abstraction of the English landscape painter J. M.W. Turner, Duncan finds an objective correlative for the passionate throws of feeling that he locates in the mind. At the outset, the poem

contends that the powers of Turneresque abstraction emanate from the mind, whereas the work of the vernacular issues from the capacities of the physical body. But by the end of the stanza, Duncan uses the liminal case of speech to frustrate such clear segregation of the body and mind. In referring to cigarettes of various brands in terms of vernacular peace pipes, Duncan suggests he is uncomfortable in surrendering the inclusive richness of language and thought to the “vulgar honesty of [corporeal] dailiness.”

To this end, Duncan reiterates a point made by William Anderson in his discussion of Dante’s vernacular: “Language combines the two sides of man’s nature: it is based on the senses, because it makes use of sound, and it is based on reason, because it communicates meaning.”

Pound’s and Williams’s disregard for abstraction leads them to not only to idealize the concreteness of working-class speech, but also the perceived liberatory power of racialized dialect.

In Domestic Scenes, Duncan understands the question of representing the real to involve an implicit gesture to race. By the final poem “Piano,” Duncan crescendos into his most direct pronouncement on the divide between the ideal and the real, stating “I know the nigger-pink seduction of the real / I know the purplish lust of the ideal.”

Appearing in two other places in the book, the phrase “nigger-pink” serves a marked dual function. It evokes the popular practice during the early twentieth century of adding “nigger” to a color, in order to indicate a certain diluted or faded quality. When attached to the tropical brightness of a color like pink, the phrase connotes a noticeably gaudy aesthetic. It serves as the corresponding hue to the equally offensive term, nigger

25 Duncan, Early, 178.
rich, which was applied to individuals during the same period who spent their money unwisely on conspicuously extravagant goods and services. Nigger pink then implied an inexpensive color used to distract from poor construction.

Duncan’s reference to the phrase calls attention to the ways in which colloquial speech reinscribes the dominant ideology of the ruling class. But it also suggests a ground for interrogating the common affiliation between the conventions of social realism and the ideology of racial denigration. Critics like Michael North have examined in great detail the racial politics involved in Pound’s and Williams’ interest in African American dialect. “Anglo-American modernism is dangerous in its very relevance to the Harlem Renaissance,” writes North, “because its strategies of linguistic rebellion depended so heavily on a kind of language that writers like [James Weldon] Johnson rejects.” Considering Johnson’s misgivings about dialect poetry alongside Williams and Pound’s attraction to the vernacular reveals the implicit contradiction in their imperative to treat experience objectively, especially as it pertains to their own fantasies of racial difference. In poems like “An African Elegy,” Duncan presents himself as complicit in the modernist trend of projecting onto blackness a mythic link to tribal vitality, exemplified by Vachel Lindsay’s “The Congo.” But in Domestic Scenes, with the poem “Piano,” Duncan disavows the treatment of black subjects as one in a series of stand-ins for the liberatory seduction of the real.

According to Duncan, the racist ideology of realism results from Williams’s and Pound’s compulsion to interpret Dante’s vernacular speaking nurse as a coherent symbol of the disenfranchised and dispirited subject. In De Vulgari Eloquentia, Dante

---

cites the nurse as the source of the child’s exposure to language. For Williams and Pound, the nurse becomes not only the source of the vernacular but also the sign of socio-economic difference. The assumption that the nurse hails from an impoverished family justifies their hierarchical conception of the vernacular and the language of the lowly. A clear vision of Williams’s interpretation of the nurse appears in his well-known anti-ode to his housekeeper, To Elsie. The good doctor builds upon Dante’s mentioning of the nurse by writing the poem about a “young slattern” “sent out at fifteen to work in/some hard-pressed/house in the suburbs”.[27] Rejecting this association, Duncan returns to Dante’s formulation of the vernacular to stress that “these our nurses,” he writes, “were not, it should be clear in Dante, the hired help of a middle-class well-to-do household.”[28] In addressing their interpretation of the nurse as “hired help,” Duncan makes plain his critique of Pound and Williams’ desire to identify their vernacular with the physicality of the laborer. But the indictment also provides Duncan with the opportunity to correct the misinterpretation and offer a definition of the vernacular compatible with his own embrace of Turneresque abstraction.

3.2.2 The Vernacular of Preliteracy

In contrast to the exclusionary logic of illiteracy, Duncan finds in preliteracy a view of language inclined toward a universal vision of human collectivity. As a subdivision of humankind, the group of illiterate adults represents a marked position, those incapable of recognizing and using graphic letters. Alternatively, preliteracy signifies a developmental stage experienced by a more inclusive range of speakers,

regardless of whether or not they eventually acquire the ability to read and write. This
inclusionary ethic informs Duncan’s vision of the poet in the “All Speech is Poetry”
draft, where the lyricist’s primary objective involves imagining the communal nature of
all experience.

In the same year in which he wrote and revised “All Speech is Poetry,” he filled
the same notebook with pages proclaiming the value of international humanism. “To see
the city in which we live not in the terms of civic pride, not in the terms of American
culture,” he writes, “But to see it in the terms of our humanity, this quickens the
imagination!” Eschewing the categories of nation and municipality, Duncan’s image of
the city resonates with his treatment of speech. “True vulgar eloquence was speaking
one’s own language, beyond class, beyond nationality, without affect,” he insists, “as if
it were the common language of all men in their humanity.” The nobility of the
vernacular for Duncan derives from Dante’s insistence that “the whole world employs
it.” The universal proficiency that Duncan sees in Dante’s De Vulgari Eloquentia provides
the basis for his own desire to write poems in a language that is comprehensible to a

group whose borders are concomitant with the bounds of the human condition.

Psychology, 24, 2 (2009), 183. Preliteracy, as a term, appears most frequently in the social sciences, where it
denotes an individual, social group, or culture having no written language as a result of existing previous to
the introduction of writing systems. In addition to referring to the language of ancient cultures, the term
also finds currency in discussions of tribal cultures persisting outside the industrial pressures of the Global
West. Yet, it is the less common meaning that most directly applies to Duncan’s usage, the meaning that
accrues in the context of childhood psychology. Duncan’s concept of the vernacular stands in stark contrast
to the assumption that speech reveals itself strictly as the property of a specific group. The vernacular of
illiteracy distinguishes between speech and writing by composing a version of speech that indexes the
speech habits of specific community of nonstandard speakers. It imagines that only by donning the speech
of the imagined lower classes can the poet arrogate a spoken style. to write in a speakerly style codifies the
static logic of identity categories, it also amounts to a practice of speaking on the behalf of said identity
category.

30 Robert Duncan, A Note to City Lights, 1952, Notebook 11, The Robert Duncan Collection at The Poetry
Collection, The State University of New York at Buffalo.
As the illiterate vernacular corresponds to Dante’s image of the nurse, the preliterate pairs with the other figure implied in Dante’s definition, the child tended to by nurses. If the nurse represents the language of despoiled speech communities, then the child’s speech corresponds to a romantic vision of language previous to an awareness of social stratification. Pound and Williams utilize the nurse to associate the unruilness of the vernacular to a speaker who is deficient as a result of structural inequality. Duncan, however, uses the child in order to associate the disruptive nature of the vernacular with a developmental stage. Where the speech of the nurse is stigmatized and set apart from society, the child’s speech, a reflection of the nurse’s wayward tongue, serves as the very threshold to society. In gaining speech, the child enters into linguistic relation with the world of speakers. But the child’s speech registers the stigmatized language of the nurse, in so far as the child learns speech from the nurse. While both the child and the nurse express themselves in a nonstandard form, Dante depicts the child’s speech as the site of universality and the nurse’s as the result of divisive deficiencies.

In the same way that the nurse serves a much larger function in Williams and Pound, providing an example of their shared idealization of the peasant, the child hints at a much larger set of concerns for Duncan. “Child’s play,” writes Devin Johnston, “proves central to Duncan’s poetry.” Both he and his partner Jess shared an outspoken love for children’s books and classic fairy tales, which ultimately led the couple to write and illustrate the children’s book *The Cat and the Blackbird*. Another collaboration between the two came in the form of the cover Jess designed for Duncan’s *The Opening of

---

the Field, which featured a group of children engaged in the preliterate ritual of “Ring Around the Rosie.” Yet the central significance the child posses for Duncan relates directly to his lived experience as an adopted child, separated from his impoverished mother and father and raised in the affluent home of Edwin and Minnehaha Symmes, where he was first exposed to the mystical teachings of theosophy.

From “A Sequence of Poems for H.D.’s Birthday” to “My Mother Would Be a Falconress,” Duncan uses his poetry less as a physic treatise on the innocence of childhood and more as the vexed musings of one, who is at once estranged and searching for guardianship. This mythology of the child certainly grew out of the prophetic aura Duncan possessed in his childhood home. Before deciding to adopt, Edwin and Minnehaha consulted a numerological guide, which informed them that an exceptional child would be born on a certain date, at a certain time. With these instructions, the couple took custody of the infant Duncan under the auspices that he was a direct spiritual descendant of the race that populated the late, great continent of Atlantis.

Drawing the personal search for parents into relation with the poetic search for voice, Duncan revisits his childhood experience of language acquisition numerous times in his childhood. Duncan describes the recurring anecdote as constitutive of his “preliterate age,” a gesture meant to conflate the historical notion of oral tradition with his personal experience of language acquisition. Taken together these anecdotes depict the child’s initiation into a larger social field through presenting an image of a young Duncan hearing the speech of a caretaker, be it the domestic chatter of his

34 Duncan, Collected Essays, 292,
grandmother’s house or the reading voice of his adopted parents. It is not surprising that Duncan’s most explicit accounting of this utopian commons, this universal human collective, emerges in close proximity to one of his more extended meditations on the preliterate child.

If, as I am arguing, the preliterate child provides the symbol of a vernacular sourced in the desire for universal belongingness, then it is necessary to first explicate Duncan’s thoughts on what constitutes this vocal utopia. At the opening of the celebrated “Rites of Participation” chapter of The H.D. Book, Duncan enters a series of paragraphs so central to the poet’s developing sense of an integrated world order they are frequently excerpted and referred to independently as “The Symposium of the Whole.” The phrase itself appears in the section, where it indicates a conceptual alternative to the Symposium of Plato, which symbolizes for Duncan an effort in favor of cordonning off experience into incomparable categories. “The Symposium of Plato was restricted to a community of Athenians,” he writes, “gathered in the common creation of an arete, an aristocracy of spirit, inspired by the homo Eros, taking its stand against lower or foreign orders, not only of men but of nature itself”

Recalling Williams and Pound, the divisive aim that Duncan ascribes here to Plato can easily be said to apply to the modernists’ restricted sense of the vernacular. In rejecting the exclusionary politics of Plato’s Symposium, Duncan plots an arête at odds with the concerted forces of hierarchical reason and rationality. For Duncan, relation becomes more important than reason, as he claims, “our aretē, our ideal of vital being, rises not in our identification in a hierarchy of higher forms but in our identification with the universe.” At the base of this modern cosmological treatise, the poet establishes his awareness of the all-inclusive

---

whole of human experience not on the mythic movements of the star but the overlapping trends of emergent intellectual disciplines. These overarching approaches to structuring knowledge and experience testify to an emergent reality of empathic relation. In building his argument he cites Karl Marx’s comparative analysis of economic structures, Charles Darwin’s comparative analysis of evolutionary schema, James George Frazier’s comparative analysis of world myth and sacred ritual, and Edward Sapir’s comparative analysis of language practices. However, the accumulative embrace of modern science and social-science does not mean that the poet has attempted to recuperate the values of Platonic reason. Instead Duncan conceives of this whole in conjunction with the dual imperative to include the “old excluded orders” in this instantiation of a universal totality, and to also portray such an inclusion as counter to the rationalist roots of Enlightenment ideology. Hence, Duncan understands the establishment of a larger common to take place outside of the guarded citadel walls of the Platonic Republic. In locating his arête in the exiled countryside, beyond the walls of the Republic, Duncan enters into the “company of imagined like minds,” a company characterized by its “phantasy,[…] madness, irrationality, irresponsibility, despised humanity [and] childishness.”

When one realizes that the consummation of such a commons relies upon the poet’s image of speech, then the importance of the preliterate child comes into bolder relief. Contextualizing the child within the irrational occultism that characterizes the exilic commons, Duncan writes,

Every baby is surrounded by elders of a mystery. The first words, the "da-da" and "ma-ma", are keys given in a repeated ritual by parental priest and priestess to a locus for the child in his chaotic babbling, whereby from the oceanic and elemental psychic medium—warmth and cold, calm

36 Duncan, Ibid, 148.
and storm, the moodiness previous to being—persons, Daddy and Mama, appear.

Rather than root the acquisition of language within a framework of the subject, where the term implies an individual’s capability to take possession of the self, Duncan insists that the child’s introduction to language carries a more dispersed splay of identity relations. As the child divides the parents’ identify with a new role as guardian, the parents role is to usher the child into language, which essentially becomes their introduction to their own split identity. The child is no longer an isolated individual, where knowledge of self can be assumed strictly from phenomenological data of particular experience. Instead, the child is both an individual subject and a general participant in the communal idea of childhood. Through this activity of learning language, the child becomes less capable of possessing experience through language and more capable of being possessed by the linguistic generality of categories. Here is where Duncan departs most drastically from Olson. Instead of basing his redemptive vision of the human in the physical particulars of existence, as Olson does, Duncan abstracts from the discrete particular in order to foster a vision of the general, which continues Olson’s interrogation of Western culture.

In showing how this interplay between the particular and the general relates to the acquisition of language, Duncan’s interest in the Zoharic traditions of childrearing belies. The proper Platonic childhood entails treating the nursery not as a site of play but as one of training, where the child is inculcated into the politics of conformist domesticity: “government, business, philosophy or war”^38^ Alternatively, in the Zohar, the child is forbidden from playing with dolls, but hastily given over to the system of

---

language, and the imaginative fictions of the poet. In Duncan’s consideration of the
Zoharic custom, he states, the “child plays with the letters of an alphabet and Logos is
the creator of the world. Man is to take his reality from, to express his unity in, the letter.
But this letter is, like the doll, alive to the mind.” This specter of an ideal alphabet of
divine origins occupies Duncan’s mind during the writing of Letters: Poems 1953-1956,
another text that features a prominent restaging of the child’s acquisition of language.

In the poem “At the End of a Period,” from Letters, the anecdote of childhood
becomes more autobiographical, though veiled, without foreclosing the availability of an
ideal preliterate commons. In contrast to the child acquiring a language marked
according to racial and economic stratification, Duncan depicts the scene in the light of a
timeless renewal of social bonds. “When who was small,” writes Duncan, “indeed he slept
at his grandma’s house on a glassd in porch where were there stars there were
plants growing out of the cold earth into the dark.” The conspicuous usage of “who,”
instead of the personal pronominal form, renders the speaker anonymous at the moment
in which he enters into the confines of the speaking world. Following a description of
the stars and plants, Duncan recalls the aural quality of tides crashing in the distance,
and uses the image of water to summons the voices that emanated throughout the
house, “there were incoming waves of talk far away.” As a way of emphasizing the
cyclical logic involved in associating human speech with an order of natural experience,
Duncan depicts the initiatory utterance overheard as an “eternal monoton[y].”
Enchanting his heart with the promise of a larger whole, the speech sounds harmonize
with the atmospheric din, as each circles the next with the ordered regularity of the
metronome. In valuing the eternal monotony of speech, the poet inhabits the interiority

39 Duncan, Early, 657.
of an impersonal paradigm, while motioning to the broader perceptions verbal language makes available. Rather than associate speech with the restricted areté of avant-garde anti-historicism, Duncan sees in it the claim for timeless immanence and the potential for pronomial enlargement.

Having written the “All Speech is Poetry” draft only months before he began work on *Letters*, Duncan uses the latter collection to work through the questions about poetic diction posed by the former. The preface to *Letters* presents perhaps the most direct answer to the conflict represented at the end of the “All Speech is Poetry” draft. In the later text, Duncan refuses to relinquish his interest in speech, on account of its assumed status as a “jargon of the low.” Instead, he declares, “These poems are evidence of the desire for speech.” In the brief time that passed between the “All Speech is Poetry” draft and the preface to *Letters*, Duncan had come to the realization that speech had become synonymous with a limited view. In order to challenge the limiting assumption that the vernacular must index the real language of illiterate speakers, Duncan expands the concept of the vernacular to include the child’s process of first acquiring speech.

An especially important reference to the poet’s preliterate era appears in the essay he contributes to a special issue of the magazine *Maps*, which editor John Taggart dedicated to the poet’s work. Entitled “From Notes on the Structure of Rime,” the essay wavers between offering an etymological deconstruction of the concept of rhyme and positing a discursive overview of the origins of Duncan’s long poem *Structure of Rime*. In the third section, entitled “Notes 1973: A Psycho-Physiognomy,” Duncan digresses from his primary interest in the rhapsodic rituals associated with oral cultures only to restage

---

40 Duncan, *Early*, 635.
his childhood anecdote of language acquisition, his own preliterate culture. This reference indicates a correspondence between Duncan’s reappraisal of vernacular language, and the formal matters of poetic participation.

As children, we, my sister and I, gathering eagerly to attend the telling and retelling of old family tales or the reading aloud of fairy tales, felt every departure from the order of the telling as a departure from the story itself, as telling it “wrong.” Having it wrong or telling it wrong meant not changing the characters or the plot but changing the way the words went. The true story was the very order of the telling. Every departure from the set of words in their phrasings, any change in the lilt of the telling, we felt as the story sounding false. It does not sound like what it says, Jess remarks of some poetries. In the preliterate there is essential to the Art a tuning of the sense and sound. 41

Like in “At the End of a Period,” this version of the story of language acquisition accompanies a pointed challenge to the concept of the individuated authorial voice.

Here instead of grounding this challenge in an overt description of the timeless dynamics of nature, Duncan bases his vision of enlargement on the ritual aspect of bedtime stories. In this version of the narrative, the parent does not determine the arc of the narrative; rather they are responsible for relaying the story so that it resembles the young listener’s memory of its sounding. The most significant difference, however, comes in the increased attention paid to the means by which speech becomes translated into a purely phonic structure for the children. As Duncan points out, the process entails the children privileging the order of speech sounds over semantic meaning production. For them, the story fails, not when the characters depart from a pre-ordained plot or fate, but when the words used to portray the original narrative depart from their pre-ordained phonetic register. With the reference to contemporary poem at the end of the quote, Duncan demonstrates his understanding that the idea of pre-ordained form

41 Duncan, Collected Essays, 293.
represents another example of false speech, consistent with the parent’s specious performance of the bedtime story. As the preliterate child knows the story in a strictly ritualistic way, the literate poet knows verse as a received form, which prompts him to let “more important matters take over the sounding of the poem.”

In this instance, Duncan’s version of the anecdote of language acquisition portrays the child’s appreciation of speech to be premised upon dividing the spoken chain into individual units of sound. Aligning this view of preliterate audition with Dante’s definition of the vernacular, he states elsewhere:

Dante in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* writes: ‘what we call the vernacular speech is that which children are accustomed by those who are about them when they first begin to distinguish words…’ In search of the makings of poetry we are going to turn back to the very seeds of language, back to that first beginning to distinguish words which is a beginning of new distinguishing the world.

With this passage in mind, we can see how Duncan’s anecdote presents an image of the child attuned to “the very seeds of language.” Citing Dante as progenitor of the preliterate vernacular, Duncan distills an image of childhood, wherein the individual orients himself in word and world through stripping the bedtime narrative down to its phonetic material, disregarding the strictures of plot. Duncan claims the makings of poetry depend upon an engagement with language that approximates the defamiliarization he associates with language acquisition. In returning to the ground of preliteracy, the poet should follow the Olson’s edict to get rid of the lyrical interference—a priori assumptions of form and ego—and instead attend to the atomization of sound, “the king and pin of versification.” For Duncan, the atomization of speech elements authorizes sound as both material and motive of composition.

---

43 Olson, *Collected Essays*, 241.
language that resonates with Olson’s denunciation of bottled insight, —“Against Wisdom as Such”—he claims that this atomization provides an alternative to letting “the mind out of its wisdom or its diversions or out of its deep convictions [direct] the poem.” Yet to understand the methodological rigor Duncan applies to this atomization of sound, one has to acknowledge that his insight on the child’s appreciation of phonetic elements draw heavily from another source. What Duncan imagines as the process of stripping words to their very seeds could be otherwise explained through reviewing his career-spanning exploration into structural linguistics. Taking into account Duncan’s stance that scientists serve as the primary mythmakers of our times, it only reasons that his myth of a utopian speech community finds its roots in the scientific study of language and its structure.

3.3 Phonetic Correspondence

As much as the vernacular offers Duncan a conceptual mythos for the act of composition, the term also bears relevance for his thinking about the technical aspects of craft and form. In a journal entry from January 7-1955, Duncan reflects on the limits affecting traditional notions of measure and meter. The entry responds to comments made by William Carlos Williams, scolding Duncan’s generation for neglecting the importance of measure. Rather than counter William’s argument with counter examples of metrical poetry written by postwar avant-gardists, Duncan interrogates Williams’ definition of meter. “At worst I fear the old doctor might be saying that consciousness of measure is measure itself;” writes Duncan, “that wherever he can not find measure—and he does say we lack it—the inability lies not with his perception but with the

44 Olson, Ibid, 260.
object.” In Duncan’s view, Williams has made the mistake of establishing his idea of meter on a fallacious evidentiary bias. He understands Williams’ insistence on meter in terms of a demand for objective traits. In reading the measured poem, the reader, according to Williams, should be confronted with clear proof that the writer knew the metrical implications of his or her poetic line at the moment of writing it. In Duncan’s mind, Williams has ceded the space of poetic intuition to the dominant ideology of knowledge, the ominous faculty that Plato uses to structure his exclusive commons of the rational subject. As with their discussion of the vernacular, Duncan and Williams both agree on the importance of measure, but they diverge on the matter of its definition. For Duncan, knowledge of measure on the part of the poet or the reader is not a sufficient means of determining its presence. Duncan finds measure to operate outside of the reigns of evidence. In place of knowledge, he proposes feeling, or sensation, to be the proper faculty to pair with measure. “Between the what and the how, the observation of a thing and the feel of a thing,” writes Duncan “It’s the feel that is all necessary a poem is the product of feeling one’s way thru [sic] an invented time by means of language [sic]. However the feel is gaind [sic].” Following after Dante, Duncan insists that the tactile feeling one must gain in order to write a measured line of verse is a universal sensibility. It is not the artificial matter of counting syllables and forcing phrases to fit iambic routines. Rather it is the experience of coming to grips with language at its most finite level. It entails returning to the site of childhood with a commitment to break words down into their phonemic fragments. In searching for a science of feeling the word’s resonant edges, Duncan turns to structural linguistics.

Beginning in 1954 and ending with his death in 1988, Duncan routinely uses his personal notebooks to meticulously work through a virtually endless number of exercises from textbooks on structural linguistics. Revealing the poet’s autodidactic compulsions, the notes feature a wide-range of linguistic material, from phonetic transcription to anatomical representations of phonetic production. Before one can understand the way in which structural linguistics avails Duncan a means of understanding speech as a universal cognate of the human condition, one has to begin with the contextual question of how does he become aware of the availability of linguistics for poetic production. Considering the individuals responsible for Duncan’s exposure to linguistics provides insight into how he utilizes it.

In an interview with Bob Callahan, Duncan credits Jaime De’Angulo and Jack Spicer with introducing him to the American tradition of formal linguistics. In 1945, he befriends Jack Spicer, the poet he referred to in letters as “il miglior fabbro,” when Spicer transferred to the University of California, Berkeley. In addition to his work on the Linguistic Atlas of California, Spicer’s career as a professional linguist culminated with the 1952 publication of an influential paper, co-authored with his advisor, entitled “Correlation Methods of Comparing Idiolects in Transition Area.” Spicer became Duncan’s primary source for up-to-date linguistics reading recommendations, including the Trager and Smith textbook. However, the two differed on the question of applying linguistics to poetry. Where Duncan imagined the discipline to constitute a kind of poetry in and of itself, Spicer held reservations about the compatibility of the two. In one letter, Spicer argues that poets should use phonetics to develop a color wheel for sounds, account for...
only to later distinguish between speech and poetry, claiming “poetry should be read with different stress patterns than speech.” In dividing “the stress patterns of the spoken language [from] the patterns of any poem in it,” Spicer discredits the applicability of linguistics to poetic utterance, and opposes one of the major influences behind the speech-based aesthetics of the postwar era: William Carlos Williams’s celebration of the American idiom.*

In contrast to Spicer’s fierce professionalism, Jaime de Angulo, the eccentric raconteur referred to by Pound as “The American Ovid,” hires Duncan as his secretary in the summer of 1949, to help with the preparation of a textbook on linguistics, entitled *What is Language.* Describing himself as a “professional linguist, an amateur anthropologist and a general philosopher,” de Angulo exemplified interdisciplinary methods to such a degree that university professors found his work too disorganized to publish in the field’s major journals. Focusing on the languages of the Hopi Indians, de Angulo’s *What is Language* ultimately fails to find a publisher, largely due to the writer’s insistence upon capturing the humanity of his informants at the expense of rendering their language according to the standards of scientific objectivity.* For de Angulo studying the speech forms of a given people involves extensive mapping of the cultural foundations apparent in the formal structure of their particular language. De’Angulo’s most explicit appearance in Duncan’s poetry comes in “An Essay at War,” where the poet uses the metaphor of the old man’s bout with cancer to describe the devastation

---

51 Jaime de Angulo, *Jaime de Angulo Reader* edited by Bob Callahan (San Francisco: Turtle Island Foundation, 1979), back cover.
caused by American troops during the Korean War. Though his greatest influence on Duncan was not simply the tragic specter of his death. Rather Duncan regards him as a source for knowledge about the underlying systematic features of speech. Where Spicer initiates Duncan into the discipline, de Angulo inspires him to experiment freely with linguistic methodology and uncover the imbedded cultural dimension of language.

For Duncan, de Angulo provided not only reading recommendations, he also showed that linguistics itself was an art, premised not upon the demonstration of knowledge but the unsettling of a certain sensitivity. In contrast, Spicer’s professionalism presents an imposition of hierarchical difference, a dogma premised upon the assumed incompatibility and elitism of the linguist’s picture of speech.

Taking cues from de Angulo, we see Duncan, in “From Notes on the Structure of Rime,” exercising his knowledge of “professional” linguistics in ways that overrun the boundaries of disciplinary thinking. Not only does he utilizes the jargon of linguistics in his accounting of poetics, dropping terms like “linguo-alveolar” and “fricative,” he also visualizes his sense of patterned sound through incorporating the quadrilateral vowel chart, characteristic of post-Saussurian linguistics. Using the vowel chart, Duncan maps the gliding diphthong motion of the /a-I/ sound as presented in the dictionary pronunciation of “tile.” This mapping entails tracking the tongues movement from the lower central area of the mouth to the high frontal region. Considering the poetic merit of this physiological approach to pronunciation, Duncan references William Empson’s Seven Types of Ambiguity, where he remembers reading a speculation that “in the sound of the poem this physical pleasure in the dance of the instrumental tongue, mouth, and

---

53 Duncan, Early, 381.
54 Duncan, Collected Essays, 290.
55 Duncan, Ibid, 291.
lips, was as essential as the music.” The idea of phonemic analysis allows Duncan to imagine the physicality of the tongue to guide the poem away from the regulatory functions of the brain, with its monomania for semantic meaning. Yet no reference to linguistics in the essay is as authoritative as his statement, “You can see, once you outline from any handbook of American linguistics (the best description I’ve found is in Trager and Smith) how much a poet has all his life to do, if he is to come to grips with rime as something more than a crude conventional makeshift.”

Using linguistics Duncan forges a new definition of rime, one attuned to a more complete range of sound patterning as compared to “the makeshift or […] subconscious intuitional operation.” The subarea of structural linguistics primarily responsible for the field’s scientific orientation is phonology. As such, phonology occupies the center of Trager and Smith’s An Outline of English Structure, Duncan’s textbook of choice. Defined as “the study of sound patterning,” phonology pertains to the representation of sounds and sound patterns in a speaker’s mental grammar, as well as the study of the sound patterns in a language. Instead of focusing on the semantic paradigm of the word, phonology’s metric is the phoneme, the smallest unit of meaning. While phonology deals with the system of relationships that distinguish one perceptually distinct unit of sound from another, a related branch, phonetics, studies the physical and articulatory properties of speech sounds. The unstressed schwa vowel sound, pronounced at the beginning and end of the word America, is the most common phoneme. Like other phonemes, the pure form of the schwa vowel sound exists only in the mental lexicon of a

56 Duncan, Ibid, 293.
57 Duncan, Ibid, 292.
58 Duncan, Ibid, 290.
speaker. Each performance of the schwa vowel, referred to as the phone or speech sound, differs ever so slightly from the ideal form of the phoneme, while remaining close enough to be properly identified. Phonology relates to psychological operations, and phonetics applies to the physical performance of those psychological operations, but both uphold the arbitrariness of the scientific orientation by divorcing linguistic form from semantic meaning. They provided a means of treating language as an autonomous system, disconnected from political and cultural reality, ultimately allowing linguists to claim linguistics as an objective, scientific field of study. Both phonology and phonetics feature prominently in Duncan’s personal notebooks, where in seventeen different entries, the poet works through texts like Trager and Smith’s Outline, copying down theoretical pronouncements, answering student exercises and tracing articulatory diagrams.

In pursuing a poetics sensitive to “the actual sounds of words as the linguists had begun to describe them,” Duncan, nevertheless, dramatically departs from the principles underlying structural linguistics. According to the conventions of the discipline, phonology renders language an autonomous structure, isolating it from socio-cultural forces. In Duncan’s hands, however, phonology offers a means through which to uncover the cultural and political structures implicit in language. Using phonology, he assigns meaning to the supposedly arbitrary sign and highlights the humanist dimension of the allegedly self-contained system. Duncan’s antagonism towards the ideology behind linguistics does not indicate an attempt to undermine structural linguists’ claim to science. Instead he reveres modern science as a fertile

---

* Duncan, “de Angulo,” 233.
ground for humanist imagination and not simply the cultivation of objectivity. In calling
attention to the place of scientific thought in Duncan’s poetics, Nathaniel Mackey refers
to his poetry as an “inclusionist alchemy [in which] scientific theory, aboriginal belief,
religious myth, children’s lore and so forth are all melted down [into] one ongoing
dream.” As Mackey suggests, Duncan does not simply see science and myth as
compatible systems. Rather the two become one and the same, as he explains to Howard
Mesch, “I think science is contemporary mythmaking […] I read science as myth.”

In building up a science and myth of the preliterate child, Duncan merges
Sausurean phonology with Dantean vernacularity in order to conceive of a poetic
measure that delimits sound into semantic particles. Informed by the principles of
structuralism, Duncan’s definition of the vernacular eschews the divisive politics of
dialectal representation as well as the indexical methods, which gesture to an exterior,
material reality. Rather in phonology, with its manifestation of an international phonetic
alphabet, Duncan finds a kind of universal set of symbols that allows him to characterize
speech generally. Likewise he finds a countermand to hierarchical order and
standardization in the vision of an abstract and universal childhood, where the
preliterate child, serves as the ideal representation of the nonstandard speaker.

Seeking to impart this awareness to his early students, Duncan, as early as 1954,
incorporates formal linguistics into his poetry workshops. Frustrated with his student’s

——

62 Mackey, Discrepant Engagement, 79.
63 Mackey, Ibid, 93. As an untrained enthusiast, Duncan covered many of the major and minor publications
that shaped structural linguistic. His reading list in linguistics is no doubt impressive, as it includes Claude
Kantner and Robert West’s Phonetics, Albert Markwardt’s An Introduction to the English Language, George
Trager and Henry Smith’s The Structure of English, as well as discipline-defining surveys from Edward Sapir,
Benjamin Whorf, Otto Jespersen and Leonard Bloomfield. Even more remarkable, Duncan’s phonological
approach to poetic measure prefigures the Slavic-born linguist Roman Jakobson, whose work on poetics
Duncan would not encounter until the early 1960s.
myopic interest in discovering whether or not their submissions were “any good,” Duncan suggested a more generative model, whereby their meetings would be dedicated to a specific topic, which they would attempt to countenance through their poems. To this effect, Duncan proposes that the workshop should henceforth be dedicated to the matter of metrics, as that field relates to the central value of movement and motion in language. Notable in this approach is Duncan’s view that the task for the student should entail “exploring not only what other poets have thought about motion in language [as, for instance, Dante in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*] […] but also what linguists have to say about motion in language.” If we return to the anecdote of the child from the *Maps* essay, we see the poet stressing the importance of not letting other matters take precedence over the sounding of the poem. The proposed workshop allows him to focus entirely on formal matters, while acknowledging that formal matters pertain not simply to the laws of literary tradition but more directly to those indicative of the human body.

If linguistics provides Duncan with a framework in which to establish a theory of a universal vernacular, it also influences him to understand the vernacular as constitutive of a poetic measure attuned to feeling rather than fact. Given Duncan’s distrust of evidentiary ideas of measure, his vision of a preliterate vernacular is difficult to identify at the level of textual devices. Instead of calling upon the classic techniques of dialect writing—phonetic misspellings, slang usage and fragmented syntax—Duncan represents the vernacular through a poetics sensitive to the atomistic elements of language. When a word is broken into its basic units of sound it no longer privileges semantic meaning over sense perception. Where the poets of illiteracy draw upon the

---

unruliness of the vernacular to challenge the conventions of literary culture, Duncan uses it to liberate language from the expectation for rational discourse and semantic meaning. With this said, a number of examples exist in which Duncan explicitly gestures to phonemic structure. In the performance piece “Passages 15 Spelling” Duncan presents the reader with what he describes to Denise Levertov “as a demonstration and a directory of my spelling.” In “Structure of Rime X,” he replaces the Latin e character in the word the with the phonetic symbol for the stressed schwa vowel, in order to distinguished between pronunciations of the (with a long e) and tha. Rather than elaborate upon these poems which make clear Duncan’s interest in linguistics, I want to consider a poem that makes no overt reference to linguistics but evokes at the level of form and content Duncan’s idea of constructing poetry out of fragmented units of phonetic material.

3.4 To Do Something Big For America

In the 1959 poem “Nel Mezzo Del Cammin Di Nostra Vita,” Duncan finds a subject so implicated in the discussion of the vernacular that it allows him to demonstrate the specificity of his own sense of the concept. The extended lyric focuses on the network of latticed towers erected in the Watts District of Los Angeles by Simon Rodia, a formally uneducated Italian immigrant, trained as a mason and tile-setter. Of the towers, Duncan writes,

```
three spires
rising 104 feet, bejewelld with glass,
shells, fragments of tile, scavenged
from the city dump, from sea-wrack
```
As he informs the reader, Duncan’s interest in the concrete and steel structures grows out of Rodia’s notorious battle with the city government, who “initiated condemnation hearings / against [the] masterpiece.” Throughout the poem, Duncan returns repeatedly to what he regards as Rodia’s crowning achievement, the construction of a secular temple. He lauds it as an act of “Art dedicated to itself” which overshadows the steeple of neighboring churches. In the middle section, Duncan borrows language from Olson’s essay “Against Wisdom as Such,” which the projective poet originally composed as a letter to Duncan, criticizing his overreliance upon authoritative ideals of cultural value. “Resurrected against the rules,” the towers symbolize for the poet “an ecstasy / of broken bottles / and colored dishes thrown up against whatever / piety.” Rodia in this way becomes representative of individual workmanship, leveled against the hierarchical ideology of governmental and religious dogma. Rodia’s relevance for the concept of the vernacular appears from the outset in the form of the title, which quotes the famous opening line of Dante’s Divine Comedy. At the level of content, the Italian expression points to Dante’s age when he wrote the epic poem, “midway through the journey,” which is roughly the same age as Rodia when he began his tower, 42, and the same age as Duncan when he began the poem. At the level of form, Duncan’s decision to preserve the original Italian emphasizes the common linguistic bond that Dante and Rodia share, as two native Italian speakers. By emphasizing Rodia’s linguistic link to Dante, Duncan situates the craftsman in relation to that mother tongue which serves as the exemplary basis for Dante’s treatise on vulgar eloquence.

---

*Duncan, Ibid, 118.*
Although Duncan opens by drawing attention to the vernacular language that Rodia and Dante share, he makes clear that his relevance for the concept of vernacularity extends beyond his speech habits. In 1957, UCLA film student William Hale produced and directed a short documentary film entitled *The Towers*, which depicts Rodia’s relationship to his community. In the film, Hale prominently features Rodia’s voice as well as the voices of his neighbors. After the narrator describes “the little community of Watts” as “a scattered collection of shacks, trailers and weather-beaten bungalows,” we hear anonymous speakers report their impressions of the immense sculpture in language that conspicuously occupies a space of nonstandard eloquence. The narrator’s description of the community combined with images of urban plight are supported by the kinds of speech Hale chooses to include, fusing the two into a bond that poses the Watts dwellers to be an extension of their environment. When the director includes audio of Rodia speaking, the tile-setter’s broken English carries a similar sociolinguistic mark. Compared to the standardized sound of the narrator’s broadcast elocution, Rodia’s language, as recorded, affirms Hale’s description of the man as an untrained immigrant. When reporters represent his language on the page, many emphasize his dialect through employing phonetic misspellings and ungrammatical syntax, Calvin Trillin’s celebrated *New Yorker* article, “I Know I Want to Do Something,” represents a case in point. With the journalists and documentarians taking such an interest in Rodia’s “uneducated” speech, it is all the more telling that Duncan makes no attempt to caricature his language variation. When he quotes from Rodia, it is simply to enter the declaration: “I wanted to do something big for America.” The line features a terse and a

---

stunted quality, but does not include any linguistic sign to suggest the speaker is a disenfranchised, Italian immigrant.

Instead of accentuating Rodia’s nonstandard speech habits, Duncan views the towers themselves as speech surrogates, which exemplify the vernacular. Unrelated to his speech habits, discussions of Rodia’s sculptures often involve the term vernacular, as it relates to the field of architecture. Vernacular architecture emerged as a label in the early twentieth century indicating the distinctiveness of common buildings, constructed according to indigenous methods, out of indigenous materials, by anonymous builders. However, the usage of the term in more recent scholarship shows a commitment to challenging the “classist, elitist, and ethnocentric conception that vernacular architecture is created by economically, culturally, or chronologically isolated groups, while legitimate architecture is produced by trained and licensed practitioners.” This debate over the meaning of vernacular architecture relates directly to the applicability of term for the Watts Towers. “Aficionados of idiosyncratic architectural assemblages argue that [Rodia’s] structures qualify, as [he utilized] common construction methods, are inspired by traditional forms, and are formally unschooled in architecture.” In contrast to this view, more current detractors contend that Rodia’s work is not an apt example of architectural vernacular because it does not qualify as a sanctioned product of the anonymous commons. The spires, though “exquisite artistic statements,” are not “representative of a larger class of structures.” They “embody a single individual’s

---

72 Wertkin, Ibid, 10.
73 Wertkin, Ibid, 9.
74 Wertkin, Ibid, 75.
personal vision rather than the culture processes of an identifiable group of people."

Although Duncan does not address the debates regarding the Rodia’s status as a vernacular architect, one could assume that he would insist that the debate proceeds by way of a false distinction. For him, there is nothing more common than the idea of individual personal vision. The towers, as Trillin states, were intended to imitate the ships he saw as a child that would set sail with great fanfare on holidays. The commonness then of the structure is partially the product of its emergence from the childhood of the creator. The commonness that Duncan might identify in the structure is the commonness of the imagination, the universal place of human intuition and nostalgic creativity.

The prime connection between Duncan’s vernacular poetics and Rodia’s sculpture appears in the extent to which the latter makes tangible the methodological imperatives of the former. After Rodia erects the steel structure, he covers it with cement and then embeds individual fragments of salvaged glass and porcelain. In the Hale film, Rodia surveys the ballast at a local train yard for materials and the narrator informs us that local children also bring pieces of refuse to him. The complexity and charm of the work derives from the intricate steel crowns that gird the vertical pillar, as well as the mosaic tile work that covers the entire structure. Likewise, Duncan orients his intervention into vernacular in relation to those nesting fragments that exist within a given morpheme at the microlinguistic level. For him, a poetics of preliteracy entails erecting rhapsodic bodies out of phonetic fragments. As the tile-setter ruts around the rail yard for shattered chunks of discarded ceramics, the poet shifts through the possible consonant and vowel phones testing each against the others to see how they might

---

75 Werkin, Ibid, 76.
maximize participation. Thus, Rodia’s activity of building ornate structures out of the common materials resembles Duncan’s proclivity for constructing baroque crowns of language out of the universal fragments of sound.

In drawing this conclusion, there is the temptation to argue that an awareness of linguistics becomes the magical decoder ring that reveals the actual order of Duncan’s poem. One can be reasonably sure that Duncan saw the first line, “at 42, Simon Rodilla, tile-setter” as follows: æt/ /forti/ /tu/ /Səmən/ /Rodilə/ /təl-sətər/, but this does not mean that his awareness of the phonemic vowels and consonants carries with it a received a priori strategy as to how best to incorporate the material.² In his comments on Williams and measure, he states that meter exists for the poet to find a means of feeling their way through language in time. In addition to the fact that Rodia’s practice involves a physical act of taking grasp of material, it is also organized through an immanent arrangement of particulars. Each fragment finds its place in the spire according to its agreement with the piece before. As well, the material he utilizes does not consist of objects that have significance in and of themselves. A mug becomes a circle of porcelain, a handle and shards. Each has been shattered and reduced to constitutive components. But in the congregation of individual subdivisions a secular order emerges, a resurrection that points to the etymological interplay between salvage and salvation.

The Watts Towers not only stands as a methodological parallel for Duncan’s poetic practice, it also reveals the extent to which this view of poetics lays the groundwork for progressive politics as well. To this end the poem is not political simply

² Duncan, Later, 117.
due to its confrontations with civic politics and religious decorum. Rather it demonstrates a mode of sociality that resonates with Duncan’s “symposium of the whole.” Each fragment participates with its neighbor in order to fulfill the structural promise of the collective. For him participation in the symposium of the whole requires an act of volition on the part of the distinct particular, no matter if that particular is the individual phone in a word, the individual shard of tile in a towering spire, or the individual protestors standing on the steps of Sproul Hall, listening to Mario Savio throw his body on the gears of the machine.

### 3.5 Free Speech

In gesturing to Savio, I have saved the most difficult question for last. How does Duncan’s poetics of the preliterate operate within a political context if it eschews the concept of social difference?

As I have shown, Duncan refuses to codify subject positions, by refusing to draw an analogy between speech forms and social status. In many ways, such a process could be construed as an apolitical gesture. When compared to Williams’s idea of the American idiomatic, Duncan’s theory of the vernacular makes a much less apparent intervention into the politics of standard English. In dramatizing the resistant dynamic of vernacular language practices, Williams’s work foregrounds a stance on language that anticipates the radical anti-establishment ideals of post-colonial Caribbean literature. In the Caribbean context, the Martinican students of Aimé Césaire initiated the Creolité movement, in order to express the poetic genius of the people’s language. As with others in the Anglophone tradition, like Kamau Braithwaite, the solution for decolonizing the mind, lay in taking up the linguistic strains that resulted from the brutal hybridity of the colonial project. Of course the American context is quite different from that of the Caribbean. Yet, what connects Whitman to Patrick Chamoiseau and
Williams to Braithwaite is a commitment to validating the indigenous speech habits against a foreign hegemonic standard. The solution has more often than not resulted in a mimetic reproduction of anti-grammatical speech meant to establish critical independence from the pressures of global capitalism. As acts of illiterate vernacular, poetry in this lineage assumes that political efficacy lies in realist depictions of linguistic difference. This tangible mimetic function is missing from Duncan’s writing, which raises suspicion that his universal preliteracy is just another name for aristocratic indifference.

In Duncan, the decision to imitate the speech habits of dispirited social groups obstructs the true value of language. In preserving the general utility of language against the onset of insular factions, Duncan’s poetic propensity renders speech a participatory rite, renewing the bonds of social life. His aesthetics mounts a tacit critique of Williams and others who usurp authority in order to articulate a unitary alternative to the standard. In arrogating a voice that becomes the voice of the people, writers of illiterate vernacular risk reinscribing the centripetal logic of standardization. In opposition to this, Duncan credits his universal concept of the vernacular with the potential to instantiate a social commons sourced in the dynamics of a voluntary state. This state of willing participation draws its membership from a democratic array of individual heterogeneous parts. For Duncan the poem manifests an intervention into the politics of language, not simply because it affects the public vocabulary available to the masses. Rather the poem’s form represents a collective assemblage of sounds, which in
Duncan’s mind constitutes a bounded political field, where meaning production is as much a matter of ethics as it is semantics.  

In “From Notes on the Structure of Rime,” Duncan elaborates on this stance. According to him, “Poetics, like politics, is an art of the intensification of what we take to be the principle of individuality in the realization of its identity and unity (or fulfillment) as essential part of a society.” The poem in this way relates to the political state in that it provides the ground upon which certain linguistic elements can assert themselves, so as to simultaneously achieve a sui generis identity in the process of contributing to a social unity. As his debate with Denise Levertov will attest, Duncan understands the politics of poetry to not entail the “social attitudes” that the poet protests. Instead “the politics of our poetries” is “to be read […] in the actual society of events that that given poetry presents.” In posing the poem as an analogue to the body politic—a corporeal structure peopled with constitutive elements—he turns to a variety of sources to express the essential significance of individual volition and its structural correlative the volunteer state.

The primary source for Duncan’s thinking about volunteerism, as it relates to the social body, comes from his readings of Bartholomew Vanzetti’s letters and public addresses. As Duncan states in “From Notes on the Structure of Rime,” Vanzetti’s “propoposition of a voluntary State,” presents “a social order utterly arising from just that social action that each autonomous [member] volunteers.” Volunteerism, as outlined by the executed anarchist (yet another Italian inheritor of Dante’s vernacular tongue), offers

78 Duncan, Collected Essays, 294.
79 Duncan, Ibid, 295.
80 Duncan, Ibid, 297.
Duncan a theory to articulate the political economy of poetic text. Where volunteerism, involves a radical mode of social relation that depends upon the willingness of the individual participant, the poem in Duncan’s hand represents a collective body of individual elements. Relating this to thoughts elsewhere on the figure of the world-poem and the all-encompassing symposium of human experience, he states, “What has happened is that the volition has become the principle […] of the whole.” In order to elucidate the political economy of the poem, Duncan requires an example of a system dedicated to non-hierarchical social relation. While Duncan bases his thinking about volunteerism on Vanzetti’s, he finds evidence of the concept in fields far removed from political philosophy.

Instead of drawing out a comparison between the poem and a specific body politic, Duncan foregrounds the political dimension of poetry by relating it to the body microscopic. He finds a more adequate model for poetics in comparing Vanzetti’s premise with Charles Sherrington’s 1940 text, *Man on His Nature*. The book presents a biological overview of the human blood cell that underscores the integrative dynamic of organic structures. In building his philosophy of the human network of mutual co-operation, Sherrington insists, “The cell is a polyphasic chemico-physical system which is integratively organized.” In Sherrington’s model of the integratively organized cell, Duncan recognizes the familiar traits of anarchic order that characterize Vanzetti’s treatise on volunteerism. After quoting Sherrington—“in every cell a visible kernel call the nucleus [exists as a] directive, a nest of ferments”—Duncan appends his own Whitmanian expression of declarative approval, “Revelatory, an apocalyptic

---

individuality.” In Duncan’s view, the phone, that smallest unit of the poem, becomes the literary equivalent of Sherrington’s anarchic cell. The volunteerism that links the poem and cell compels the poet to celebrate the individual phone’s capacity for self-determination within the larger structure of the sounded poem. The individual phone, according to Duncan, “entirely focuses, centers, and presents, the poem in its own sounding.” Investing the phone with the power to possess its own sounding, Duncan initiates a view of the voluntary fulfillment of the phone in the body of the poem. The politics of Duncan’s poetic form lies in the preliterate commune of vernacular language, where the idea of the nonstandard runs tantamount to a disavowal of the poet’s dominance over the poem in favor of insisting “The sound intends.”

The clearest instance of the connection between Duncan’s politics and his conception of preliterate vernacular occurs in his 1965 poem “The Multiversity Passages 21.” The poem presents the question of speech through the highly politicized lens of The Free Speech Movement. The poem argues that the student protests were not simply a response to an isolated incident in which the University of California at Berkeley decided to prohibit on-campus political protest. Rather the poem assumes that the protests were directed toward a much larger culture of corporate control and authoritarian rule. Duncan’s evaluation of the university as an institution dedicated to suppressing voluntary expression can be traced to a letter that he wrote but never sent to

---

Clark Kerr, the school’s controversial president. In the letter, Duncan responds to Kerr’s invitation to serve as the judge for the Shelley Memorial Poetry Prize. Endowed by the estate of Mary P Sears, the award honors a living poet, selected by a jury of three poets, each appointed by either the president of Radcliffe College, the University of California-Berkley or the Poetry Society of America. Rather than accepting or rejecting the invitation outright, Duncan identifies a single appalling event that represents his animosity toward Kerr and the institution he represents: “That a student has been expelled from the university for reading aloud sexual passages from D.H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover is a tired affront to those writers Joyce, Lawrence, Pound who have given us the use of the verb fuck in lyric poetry” ("Letter Draft to Kerr" Notebook 35). Duncan concedes, “That there are men who consider the word and the meaning fuck to be obscene or unimportant or vulgar I know.” But for him, fuck represents an essential aspect of life, one that marks erotic pleasure as a concerted affront to hegemony. Endorsing the word fuck, Duncan proclaims, “the modern authoritarian type (whether it be the administrator of the University of California, of the United States or of the Soviet Union) will always be an enemy of Eros.” The paragon of unrefined utterance, fuck qualifies as part of a traditional vernacular lexicon. Yet beyond this, the defense of fuck represents the poet’s commitment to preserving the radical potential of individual speech acts, which corresponds to his vision of the inclusionary commons of complete volition. In rejecting certain words, Kerr renders the university a false commons, one defined by the exclusion of certain linguistic behaviors. Duncan identifies fuck as more than a crass term that must be recuperated if the voluntary commons is to be protected.

Rather he reads it as a sign of love. Not only does the word offend Kerr’s sense of propriety, its message, of erotic union and tumultuous adoration, stands at odds with his institutional efforts to discipline the student population.

Throughout “The Multiversity,” Duncan depicts Kerr as the corrupting influence, against which he can define the value of verbal expressivity. Despite rendering Kerr in the image of the mythic many-headed hydra of medieval literature, Duncan regards the university president in historical terms, comparing his vision of the multiversity to Hitler and Mussolini’s ambitions for a fascist state. Kerr represents evil personified in Duncan’s poem, but Duncan uses the poem to forge a definition of evil that corresponds to the poet’s condemnation of hierarchical rule. In recalling the etymological definition of evil, Duncan writes, “evil ‘‘referrd to the root of up, over.’”

According to Duncan, Kerr is evil not because he carries out malevolent acts. Instead his evilness resides in his willingness to place external gains above his own sense of goodness and justice. The promise of wealth and fame has clouded his judgment and silenced his “inner law.”- Duncan uses the term “officized,” a portmanteau coupling office and ossify, to describe Kerr and the stagnating affect of his purely occupational ambitions.- In a similar attack on Kerr, socialist activist Hal Draper interrogates Kerr’s insistence upon defining the new university around a metaphor of the mechanism as opposed to the image of the organism, which structured pre-twentieth century ideas about the academy. Unlike the organism, Kerr claims that the university is a “series of processes producing a series of results—a mechanism held together by administrative

---

89 Duncan, Later, 357.
90 Duncan, Ibid, 356.
91 Duncan, Ibid, 357.
rules and powered by money.” Criticizing this stance, Draper states that the multiversity resembles a mechanism for other reasons, namely “that a mechanism is always controlled by a superior power outside.” Like Duncan, Draper criticizes Kerr for his complicity in privatizing higher education and placing it under the control of corporate liberal forces.

Duncan’s linguistic conception of speech provides him with a formal analogue for the counter-university established by picketing students on the outskirts of the corporate campus. In the poem, he connects the politics of the phone’s fulfillment in the poem to the problem of activating individuality within the voluntary commons.

where there is no commune, the individual volition has no ground.
where there is no individual freedom, the commune is falsified.

Against the pressures of governmental and market influence, Duncan articulates a mode of resistance based in the efficacious community of an all-inclusive whole. While his reference to the commune in these lines pertains literally to the Berkeley students, the poet prompts us to consider the commune in terms of a literary body that makes possible the phone’s individual freedom. Conflating the politics of Free Speech with his poetics of preliteracy, he describes a chain of “vowels sung in a field in mid-morning/awakening the heart from its oppressions.”

---

93 Draper, Ibid, 67.
94 Duncan, Later, 358.
95 Duncan, Later, 359.
3.6 The Insubordinate Child

After wrenching open the clenched jaws of a young child suspected of carrying diphtheria, the protagonist of William’s story “The Use of Force” reflects on the fate of his vanquished patient, “she had fought valiantly to keep me from knowing her secret.” The story makes indirect allusions to the rape of Persephone, but my sense of its mythic value lies not in the Doctor’s hellacious use of the silver spoon, but in the language Williams ascribes to the child’s mouth. By laying the groundwork for considering the speech organ as a hidden cavity, or occulted space, in the center of the most visibly apparent part of her body, we begin to understand Duncan’s fascination with linguistics. His inclination is not to nail down speech through recourse to phonetics, rather his recourse to phonetics serves to further mystify speech by treating it as a precarious function in the face of descriptive analysis. For Duncan, linguistics offers one more means of revealing not the definitive truth, but the shadowy story of our shared mouth—that occulted space that lies outside the ritualized cults, outside the normal, where its has roots, if not branches, in Williams’s insubordinate child.

4. Mute Inglorious Minions: LeRoi Jones and the Vernacular of Silence

In the 1960s, American avant-garde poets like Charles Olson and Robert Duncan were revolutionizing their discipline by experimenting with ideas of common speech. Outside of the field of literary production, speech was spurring similar advancements. During the first half of the twentieth century, structural linguistics had risen to national prominence on the grounds that the discipline provided an objective science for studying language as an autonomous entity, separated from social forces. Following the example of Ferdinand de Saussure, structural linguists had maintained that language could only be scientifically evaluated by focusing on the idealization of homogeneous linguistic structure (*langue*), abstracted away from the heterogeneity of actual speech habits of individuals (*parole*). With the 1952 publication of Haver Currie’s “A Project of Socio-Linguistics: The Relationship of Speech to Social Status,” the second half of the century saw the emergence and refinement of a new approach to language, centered on the systematic examination of observed speech performance. While early socio-linguists agreed with Saussure and Leonard Bloomfield that speech was fundamentally heterogeneous, they dedicated themselves to demonstrating the orderly structure underlying that heterogeneity. Through developing a systematic procedure for appraising linguistic variation, the sociolinguists of the 1960s revolutionized the study of language by reorienting the field around the particularities of everyday speech.

The vernacular subcategory of African-American Vernacular English took center stage in the growth of sociolinguistics, as the path-breaking sociolinguist William Labov laid the groundwork for the new discipline, while providing the first comprehensive

---

linguistic study of *Language in the Inner City*. Funded by the New York City Office of Education, the study began as an investigation into the causes behind “the painfully obvious” low literacy rates among black children in urban metropolises but quickly developed into a polemical denouncement of the verbal deprivation theory. Posited by leading educational psychologists, the theory of verbal deprivation insists “black children from the ghetto area […] receive little verbal stimulation, […] hear very little-well-formed language, and as a result are impoverished in their means of verbal expression.” Labov’s virulent responses maintains that the educational psychologists responsible for the first examinations of young black speakers knew little about the dynamics of spoken language and even less about black children. According to his research, low-achieving black children actually “receive a great deal of verbal stimulation, hear more well-formed sentences than middle-class children, and participate fully in a highly verbal culture.” In order to prove his point about the intellectual richness of black speech, which he defines as “the relatively uniform dialect spoken by black youth in most parts of the United States today,” hecatalogues the common features shared by black speech communities and argues that the regularity of these features demonstrate an alternative grammar. He argues that this alternative grammar structuring inner city language is no less logical than the standard speech of college educated Americans. In revealing the grammatical logic of nonstandard English, Labov sought to isolate and catalogue what he viewed as its major features, including copula deletions, lexical manipulations and invariant “be” constructions. However, the

---

careful reader of Labov’s most well known essay from the larger work on inner city
speech, “The Logic of Nonstandard Speech,” notices that there is an element that escapes
the sociolinguist’s totalizing view.

In the work of the defamed educational psychologists, Labov points out the
erroneous assumptions that lead them to consider the black child’s silence as a marker of
verbal incapacity. Labov transcribes a section of their field interviews, which features
the black subject answering a white authority figure with terse incomplete sentences,
punctuated by silences that span anywhere from six to twenty seconds. Between the
monosyllabic answers and the uneven ratio of silence to speech, the researchers use
interviews such as this one to uphold the assumption that “lower-class black children
have no language at all.” For the educational psychologists the few utterances that break
the awkward silence of the interview are nothing more than “incidental emotional
accompaniment.”

According to Labov, they regard the silence not as the mark of
thoughtful careful articulation, a pause to think before speaking, but as the evidence that
“the language of culturally deprived children […] is not merely an underdeveloped
version of standard English, but is a basically nonstandard mode of expressive
behavior.”

In contrast to the conclusion that silence marks the absence of expressive content,
Labov gestures briefly to a reading of silence as its own order of expressivity.

We have here […] defensive, monosyllabic behavior […] What is the
situation that produces it? The child is in an asymmetrical situation
where anything he says can literally be held against him. He had learned
a number of devices to avoid saying in the in this situation, and he works
very hard to achieve this end. One may observe […] intonation patterns
[...] which black children often use when they are asked a question to

7 Labov, Ibid, 203.
which the answer is obvious. The answer may be read as: Will this satisfy you?

Instead of assuming that the child cannot elaborate on the object in front of him, Labov considers that the reluctance to respond signifies a defensive position. Translated into the speech of the interviewer, one might imagine the silence as a nuanced abstraction, something on the order of I can’t exactly be sure of the reason you want me to describe the apparent situation for you, but I am assuming that it has something to do with your professional desire to prove me illogical. Labov also notices that the silence carries a clear awareness on the part of the speaker that anything that he says will be used to diagnose him. While silence in this instance leads the interviewer to determine the child to be deficient, in another context the silence will allow the child to avoid negative attention and punishment. When he classifies it as a “learned device,” Labov insinuates that silence carries rhetorical power. The child has determined his conventional language to be a hazard in this case and is using silence to address the “asymmetrical situation.” While it is important that he points out the child’s suspicion by associating it with a shift in intonation, his assessment of silence as a “learned device” makes plain the fact that the child has expressed similar discontent through the more occluded medium of silence.

But then a question remains: why does Labov not include silence as one of the essential elements of black vernacular English? Though seemingly obvious, the answer bears strong implications on the ideology underlying his study. From a sociolinguistic standpoint, silence constitutes an untenable phenomenon. Its grammar is a matter of choreography, its syntax theater. While some silences freight immense performative

---

significance, there are no linguistic means for distinguishing these select moments of framed silence from the unintended swath of soundlessness. For Labov, who builds his logic of nonstandard English around a positivist paradigm, silence exists as the volatile underside of language, unverifiable as the utter negation of utterance, the evidentiary displacement of evidence. In order to produce a coherent list of black linguistic variables, Labov must only consider those linguistic patterns that render up a regular pattern of verifiable elements. Silence is the semantic ocean that slips through the fine trawl of Labov’s linguistic net. While Labov excludes silence from his study on the grounds that it cannot be systematically analyzed, one poet during the same period turned to silence as the last vestige of black vernacularity, for this very reason.

In the critical work surrounding the writing of LeRoi Jones, one frequently notices readers drawing attention to the poet’s numerous invocations of orality. For a career defined by transition, it is important to note that Jones never relinquishes his commitment to writing poetry that engages with some constantly evolving sense of orality. In contrast to the hackneyed assumption that speech depends upon sound, Jones composes *The Dead Lecturer* as a means of thinking through the relationship of speech to silence. In other words, instead of participating in the degraded forms of dialect poetry, which depend upon derogatory caricatures of blackness, Jones redefines the vernacular as a communal act of expressive silence. Taking these two points together, silence allows Jones to write a poetry that translates the mute expressivity of collective black experience.

**4.1 From “How You Sound” to Holding Our Tongue**

In the introduction to the first edition of *Blues People*, Jones insists that his entrance into the world of ethnomusicology “should be taken as a strictly theoretical
endeavor.” In explaining what he means by “theoretical,” Jones states that his objective is not to posit an authoritative history of black music in America, but to provide a more speculative inquiry into the “essential nature” of the “Negro experience” in white America. At the heart of Jones’s theory of black authenticity is an image upon which the entirety of his theory hangs. While he pays careful attention to the musical compositions of every era, luxuriating in the details of gospel, R&B, big band and bebop; he consistently reads these moments in the light of that mythic first moment, when a new musical form called the blues made it possible for the former African to tell of his plight, and in the process relinquish his identity as a foreigner, becoming instead a native of the new world. In constructing this initiatory topoi, Jones describes a transcendent moment in which “a man looked up in some anonymous field, deciding America [was] important enough […] to be passed on and shouted, ‘Oh, Ahm tired a dis mess, / Oh, yes, Ahm so tired a dis mess.’” The image of the anonymous black slave, lamenting his exhaustive condition, provides Jones a base upon which to establish what he sees as the essential nature of black experiential truth. Emphasizing the dissenting note of the Adamic bluesman’s chantey, the image reinforces Jones’s primary theory about black identity, which is that “The Negro, as he exists in America now, and has always existed in this place (certainly after formal slavery), is a natural nonconformist.”

Picking up on this originary imperative, Kimberly Benston resolves the entirety of Blues People to a single statement, summarizing its principal theory. According to Benston, Jones characterizes the blues as a “ceaseless dialectical movement progressing from a “root” form of black inner life […] through popular debasement to eventual

---

11 Jones, Ibid, xiii.
12 Jones, Ibid, 164.
The statement suggests that Jones’s theory of the blues carries two operations. First, Jones assigns an irreducible authenticity to the blues, describing it as a root form of black inner life. In so far as African American citizenship takes shape in the margins of white America, the blues develop in contradistinction to the dominant culture, encoded with the erstwhile aura of experiential resistance. Secondly, Benston insists that the blues follow a “dialectic movement.” By this he means the art form develops along a trajectory that acquiesces at times to the representational agenda of dominant power structures before returning to the original scene of radicalism, where it proffers a new interpretation of the nonconformist legacy. In the process of becoming absorbed by the privileged leisure class, the blues undergo shifts that compromise the art form’s essential connection to the authentic scene of black aberrant expressivity. This is what Benston refers to as “the popular debasement,” which Jones identifies with various modes of dominant cultural engagement, including blackface minstrelsy, the big band sound of Benny Goodman and the cool jazz of Stan Getz and Dave Brubeck. But the blues spectrum according to Jones cyclically returns to the site of root experience, as performers ranging from Bessie Smith to Ornette Coleman restore the promise of a radical black aesthetic.

According to readers such as Houston Baker and Henry Lois Gates Jr. the blues constitute an original mode of black cultural engagement, which they catalogue under the heading of the vernacular. For them the blues qualify as vernacular material on the grounds that it is an oral art form, which does not follow the general standards of literary acceptability. Yet they contend that the blues belong within the continuum of

---

African American literature due to its status as origin point for black creativity, an expressive instance that bears influence on the long tradition of black writers in America. Similarly, Jones identifies the blues as the first manifestation of a larger continuum that encompasses the representational politics of black expressivity.

Because Jones’s theory of the blues concentrates on the struggles that black Americans face in composing genuine depictions of black social life, it applies to a large range of art forms outside of music. In particular, Jones’s image of the first blues singer, crooning “Oh, Ahm tired a dis mess,” reveals the applicability of his blues theory to the tradition of orality in African American literary history. In the same way that the blues undergo a popular debasement before reappearing as a new form, attuned to an essential collective black experience, the poet compelled to write in the speech of black America will have to find ways to renew the radicalism of “Ahm so tired a dis mess.” For the writer and the musician the task becomes challenging convention in order to expand the previously restricted notion of black linguistic singularity. In this way, Jones’s argument itself falls into a lineage that goes back to James Weldon Johnson, who derided the use of dialect in literature on the grounds that it reduced the scope of black interiority to the extreme conditions of bathos and pathos. In most surveys of Jones’s work, critics agree that speech occupies a central position in his poetics. According to Esther Jackson, “language [provides] the major theme of Jones’s major theoretical works.” Given the theoretical aspect of all of Jones’s writing, Jackson’s comment can be said to apply to Jones’s poetry, prose, drama and fiction. Nevertheless, poetry receives the bulk of the attention from critics, who argue that the principle challenge for Jones

---

lies in striving for “a printed form that directs the poem’s oral expression.” The emphatic embrace of orality, according to Benston, leads the poet to disregard the “poem as written text” and instead regard the graphic representation as merely “a score for performance,” thereby emphasizing the poem as an embodied act of language and not merely a rhetorical document.

If one applies Jones’s theory of the blues to his own poetry, an image emerges of a poet constantly revising his notion of what constitutes vernacular language. Like the avant-garde jazz musician or the gut-bucket singer, Jones’s poetic quest for speech forces him to construct a language that is unmitigated by the conventional forces of literary tradition and consumer culture. It is this dialectical movement that ultimately leads the poet to consider silence as the essential mark of black vernacularity. By applying Jones’s theory of the blues to his own vision of poetic composition, his shifting definition of the vernacular comes into focus. Critical consensus holds that Jones begins with an idea of individual, idiolectal speech and then shifts to a more social, ethnic construction of orality, one grounded in the culture of inner-city black America. In returning to the essays where Jones first speculates on the importance of speech to his poetry, a pattern emerges. Not only does his concept of the vernacular shift towards a communal black language, it also moves in the direction of fluidity. Where he begins with an idea of writing speech, he assents to an idea of silence as the definitive marker of authentic black orality.

Readers typically trace the more personal definition of speech back to Jones’s essay “How You Sound.” The title itself reflects the principle conceit of the short essay.

---

16 Jackson, Ibid, 39.
17 Benston, Imamu, 6.
Instead of writing in accordance with a depersonalized voice of rhetorical finesse, the piece encourages writers to claim their own distinctive patterns of verbalization, a version of what we now refer to as the writer’s voice. In addition to marking a distinction between daily speech and affected literary tone, “How You Sound” gestures to a vernacularization of the concept. As a phrase, the title belongs to spoken discourse, where “sound” becomes an immediate synonym for one’s personal speech, one’s performance of an accent or dialect. It is easy to imagine someone coaching a person to “write how you sound,” which is to say the title confirms the basis of Jones’s early thinking about speech: it is bound up in one’s own way of using language and that it departs from written conventions of eloquence.

In marking the shift in Jones’s concept of speech, one can look at the different linguistic sources that he holds as representative. Early in his career, speech means the spoken-style exemplified in the writing of other poets, like William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg. Along these lines, William Harris proclaims, “Baraka takes William Carlos Williams’s method of writing verse in the American idiom and repeats it.” The idea of repeating the American idiom led critics to define Jones’s early speech as either the particular idiolectal voice of the writer, or the “white colloquial language [of] New Jersey.” Given Jones’s biography, it is easy to see how the personal and the regional can be confused. In contrast to the “white colloquial” or personal definition of speech, Jones develops a different sense of the vernacular after studying the work of another avant-

---

20 Harris, Ibid, 56.
garde poet. Before shifting his speech from a personal basis to communal one, Jones first moves towards a more political understanding of poetic voicing.

The principle intermediary influence is Olson, whose poetics depend upon an embodied orchestration of historical materials. For Olson, speech entails the process by which the individual poet inflects objective sources with an idiosyncratic, biographical order. In “How You Sound,” Jones quotes from Olson, “Who knows what a poem ought to sound like? Until it’s thar.” Further evidence of this dialectic between the individual and the group appears in the remainder of the quote, which Jones does not include. There Olson answers the question about who knows what a poem ought to sound like, by stating “you, and nobody else.” Yet, the poem in Olson’s hand by no means assents to insularity. Rather, “Olson may have been the greatest single influence on the young poet” for his insistence upon treating the poem not as a confessional deliberation on personal experiences, but as an agent of change in the objective world. With the phonetic misspelling of there, the quote from Olson signifies that speech entails language patterns, which have been stigmatized on account of their nonstandard character. In Olson, Jones finds a means of foregrounding the power of nonstandard language to rupture “the semantic rituals of power.” Olson’s orality establishes a model for fashioning a poetic identity out of the depersonalized detritus of the world.

If “How You Sound” represents Jones’s theory of Bohemian speech, then the later essay, “Expressive Language,” from 1963, represents his thinking about black vernacularity. Summing up this shift from unmarked personal speech to racialized communal parlance, Werner Sollors claims “following your ‘own voice,’ [as in the] 21 Jones, New American, 425. 22 Harris, Jazz Aesthetic, 35.
William Carlos Williams’ sense, now comes to mean following Black speech.” In picking up with the question that animated the previous essay, Jones insists that speech directly relates to the question of social order: “Speech is the effective form of culture.” Instead of emphasizing the liberatory function of individual expressivity, Jones here presents speech strictly in terms of societal implications. While the essay does not follow a single thesis, by the end it becomes clear that Jones’s ideas about speech are fundamentally informed by the regulatory forces that police standard English. Rather than maintain a synchronic look at vernacular as it exists in the postwar era, Jones takes a diachronic approach and traces a connection between the enslavement of Africans and the establishment of a dominant language base in the New World. He argues that only after the colonialists deemed the African slaves “heathens” were they able to perpetrate great horrors against the captive population. An extension of racial hegemony, standard English reifies the values that divest former slaves and their descendants of economic and cultural power. In order to succeed in a society, Jones declares that one must master the speech patterns of the powerful and wealthy. Yet he stresses that gaining a fluency in standard English comes at a cost, as the formally educated black speaker risks loosing a connection to the authentic interiority that Jones ascribes to black culture in *Blues People*.

Where Williams, Ginsberg and Olson provided the source of Jones’s earlier theories of speech, in “Expressive Language” he finds a model in the nonstandard speech of the black street singer Reverend Pearly Brown. Quoting him, Jones suggests that his statement, “God don’t never change,” carries a meaning not to be confused with

---

the standard expression “God does not change.” Brown’s version according to Jones is not a simple declaration of worship. Rather its aberration from the norm carries a crucial difference, which Jones refers to as “the final human reference.” The double-negative construction suggests a cultural difference, as it names a specific group’s “passage through the world.” The phrase “passage through the world” implies that Brown’s language is especially poetic because it carries within its form a gesture to context. He clarifies this by stating that a rich white man who declares that God does not change means something entirely different than a poor black man who says the same thing. The former expresses appreciation for his good fortune, while announcing his status as one of the chosen followers. On the other hand, the latter signifies a more existential meaning, one that merges awe with grievous acceptance. In deterring from the standard, Brown’s language not only expresses an idea about the godhead, it also calls attention to the unspoken, or silent context. In addition to conveying his thoughts on divinity, his statement informs the listener that these are the thoughts of a disempowered black man on divinity.

“How You Sound” and “Expressive Language” demonstrate the changing base of Jones’s concept of a speech-based aesthetic, from personal speech to ethnic dialect. But another essay, “Hunting is Not Those Heads on The Wall,” calls attention to a different dynamic of speech, one which reconciles the split between individual speech habits and communal expressive patterns.

Building off of the “silent” contextual cues of Brown’s speech, Jones uses “Hunting” to forge a poetics of vernacular silence. In the essay, he looks back at both of his understandings of speech and focuses attention on the contingent immateriality that

connects the two different ideas of verbal language. For Jones, the page represents the reification of poetry into stilted conventions, the hardening of life into fossil, a cold pastoral museum piece. Speech however corresponds to a more embodied vision of the literary arts, wherein the fullest manifestation of a poem exists in the moment of performance and not in the stabilized text that exists alongside the recitation. In “Hunting” Jones develops this dichotomy between fluidity and permanence by insisting, “Thought is more important than art.” According to Jones, Western ideology had succeeded in divorcing inspiration from articulation. In praising thought, Jones intends to rectify what he calls the “substitution of artifact worship for the lightning awareness of the art process.” The permanence of the art object, be it a canvas or a page-bound poem, allows the art process a foothold from which academics and aesthetic philosophers level their authoritative readings. But this durable form in Jones’s view amounts to nothing more than the remainder of spirit, the shed evidence of a vibrant imagination in action. The inferiority of art to thought lies in Jones’s conclusion that “art is not capable of thought,” implying that art is merely the static leavings of a once dynamic process. Art is not “be-ing” he claims, but “being,” a distinction he carries out by introducing the term “Art-ing.”

Jones’s concept of “Art-ing” carries major implications for his understanding of the relationship of poetry to speech. The desire to ground everything in the material resonates for Jones with what he calls the emphasis upon nouns and nominalization in English, as elaborated upon in his chapter from Blues People, entitled “Swing—From Noun to Verb.” For critics like Sollors, speech is simply another term for the “poet’s

---

26 Jones, Ibid, 173.
28 Jones, Ibid, 175.
notion of ‘art-ing’ in confrontation with the definitions of nouns.”- However such a conclusion leaves out an important step worth stressing in order to get clear on Jones’s vernacular poetics. In “Hunting,” Jones clearly associates speech with art and not ‘art-ing.’ “Art is like speech” he writes, “in that it is at the end, and a shadowy replica, of another operation, thought.”- Jones undermines the connection that Sollors draws between art-ing and speech by reminding us that “art-ing” corresponds to the boundlessness of inspired thinking. In so far as art represents the finite manifestation of art-ing, speech symbolizes the physical articulation of thought. A cue to the reason behind Jones’s treatment of speech as an object comes in the form of his broad disparagement of words in general.

By the mid 1960s, Jones begins to dedicate his writing to the task of recasting the original root of black interiority into poetic form and silence plays a major role in this effort. Rather than attempt to nominalize the fluid performance of black vernacularity into a set of conventions, Jones instead looks to silence as the essential marker of black linguistic culture. How better to represent the authentic nonconformity of black life than by selecting a form that is essentially impossible to epitomize on the page. While Jones theorizes a space for silent speech in “Hunting” he uses his 1965 book *The Dead Lecturer,* to draw attention to the instrumental role silence plays in black expressivity.

### 4.2 Dead Lecturer, Silent Poet

The most apparent evidence of Jones’s engagement with silence in *The Dead Lecturer* comes at the level of content, where it figures as the primary theme that recurs throughout the poems. In forty-one lyrics, spanning seventy pages, the word “silence,”

---

29 Sollors, *Populist Modernism,* 149.
30 Jones, *Home,* 175.
or its adjectival form “silent,” appears twenty-three times, in fifteen different pieces. In
the previous book, 

 Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note, Jones informs the reader that
he has “arranged the book in [a] strict […] chronological order […] for reasons best
known to other young (?) poets.” The implied point is that the chronological
arrangement privileges the organic process of serial composition over the ex post facto
principles of an editorial agenda. In his “Vancouver Lecture 2,” poet Jack Spicer first
addressed the topic of seriality, defining serial poetics as a method in which the writer
relinquishes his or her a priori plans for a poem and proceeds by ways of intuitive,
incremental engagements with a certain idea or subject. It allows for a poetry of
unanticipated development, whereby the poet comes to terms with his subject matter
through repeated attempts, none of which are deemed extraneous to the desultory chain
of events that is the serial poem. The idea of seriality that Jones announces in the early
pages of Preface sets up a paradigm that he continues in Lecturer with his apparent
preoccupation with silence. Taking the book as its unit, the serial poem assumes that
certain subjects demand a larger rhetorical space than that of a single poem. Silence
qualifies as such a subject for Jones, who discovers in the inexhaustible quandary of
quietude a logic that exceeds conventional understanding.

Instead of engaging with silence as the lapse of language or the place where
articulation comes to rest, Jones portrays it as a complicated linguistic wellspring that
defies immediate explanation. “The end of man is his beauty” opens with his clearest
articulation of this fertile complexity:

And silence
 which proves / but

31 LeRoi Jones, Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note (New York: Corinth Books, 1961), i.
University Press, 1987), 49-98.
More than simply the negation of sound, silence represents the essential source of the poet’s fragmented sensibility. In Jones’s aesthetic universe, the true poem operates in service of disorder; it frustrates dominant expectations in ways that uphold Houston Baker’s arguments about African American literature and the “deformation of mastery." According to Baker, the “deformation of mastery” applies to the work of literature that flagrantly flaunts its ties to the anti-literary culture of the blues, finding in the musical form a weapon against the conventions of refined white sensibilities. Jones foregrounds this idea with the title of his poem, which insists that the demise of human culture lies in its apolitical appreciation of work strictly on the grounds of its orderliness and beauty. In calling silence a referent of his disorder, Jones implies that silence serves as the radical force underlying his poetry. But the term “referent” itself carries significance for Jones, as it undermines the common assumption that silence exists as the absence of language, the state of abstaining from speech. In contrast, Jones emphasizes the linguistic character of silence by using the terminology of semiotics to frame it as a denotative referent. This approach allows Jones to replace the typical definition of silence with one that more accurately reflects the semantic complexity of soundlessness."

Jones was of course not alone in thinking about silence in this way; Jones published *The Dead Lecturer* against the backdrop of the composer John Cage’s musical experiments with the limits of sound. Challenging the common conception that silence constitutes a static absence of concordant sound, Cage envisioned silence as the sonic

---

34 The impulse to use the indefinite as opposed to the definite article also suggests that for Jones silence is only one referent of disorder, which indicates the receptiveness in silence to a multiplicity of spoken and unspoken deformative tactics.
vessel through which all unincorporated, unintentional sound was conveyed. Maintaining that there was, as Kyle Gann puts it, *No Such Thing as Silence*, Cage used the conventions of musical performance to prove his point. In the famous 4’33”, he composed a work for piano with three movements, each a different length, in which the only sound the pianist makes with the instrument is the closing and opening of the keyboard lid at the end and beginning of each ostensibly silent movement. Through instrumentalizing concert hall decorum, the controversial composer confronted the listener with the occluded order of atmospheric din. According to Gann, Cage considered the piece an “act of framing, of enclosing environmental and unintended sounds in a moment of attention in order to open the mind to the fact that all sounds are music.”

Like Jones, Cage viewed the disintegration of the silence/sound dichotomy as a step towards relaxing the boundaries of the aesthetic object in order to include a broader sonic range. “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise,” he explained in *Silence*. “When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain.” - Blurring the distinction between silence and the noise that surrounds us, Cage confounds as well the conventional difference “between noise and so-called musical sounds.” - No matter the sound, a running refrigerator, a clicking clock, the beating of one’s own heart, it exists as noise or silence whenever we chose not to listen to it. With 4’33” he invited listeners to actually pay attention to what they assumed was silence. The moment a person elects to listen to that silence, it yields a body of sounds, all of which Cage considers musical. The

point here is that silence not only transmits sound, it also makes us aware of the multiple sources of that sound. Where a symphonic arrangement will feature the music of a set number of players, the silent concert hall will feature the music of an all but endless array of instrumentalists: the coughing audience members, the fidgeting staff and the rickety stage. Thus Cage conceptualizes silence as an opportunity to appreciate music as a discarded sociality of unincorporated sound.

Jones similarly at once associates silence with speech and accentuates its social implications. In “Rhythm & Blues” he describes “The people of my life caressed with a silence that only they understand.” Jones wrote the poem shortly after Robert Williams, the one-time president of the NAACP and advocate of armed self-defense, published his influential work of biography and political theory, *Negroes With Guns* (1962). Dedicating the poem to Williams, who was eventually exiled from the United States on trumped up charges of kidnapping, Jones established the work as an early engagement with the separatist politics of Black Nationalism that would later come to define his corpus. But, although Jones’s politics might tempt us to read an essentialist imperative in the line “the people of my life,” the description in fact suggests the extension of his community beyond a phenotypical assumption of race. The communal bonds that characterize the people of Jones’s life are cultural. Only through submitting to the unifying practices of communal belief systems can the group “understand” silence as the organizing principle behind their shared identity. Silence not only permeates black sociality, it serves as an unspoken, intuitive shibboleth marking the socially constructed boundaries of black communalism. Imagining a silence that caresses such a group, Jones’s line recalls Labov’s claim that inner-city black children are “bathed in verbal stimulation from

---

38 Jones, *Dead*, 45.
morning to night.” And “caress” also suggests a level of intimacy, which corresponds to Labov’s definition of black English vernacular as a “casual, intimate speech.” As a vernacular form, silence signifies an informal, unconventional means of communication, which relies upon the social mores of a specific group for its meaning.

Beyond agreeing with Labov about the social dynamics of black vernacular, Jones prefigures the linguist’s inclination to base his study of expressive sociality in the urban black enclaves of northeastern cities. While Labov regards south central Harlem as the representative site of black speech, Jones turns his attention to Paterson, New Jersey. In “A contract. (for the destruction and rebuilding of Paterson,” Jones returns to the city that inspired William Carlos Williams’s epic historical poem of the same name. In the postwar era, new racially segregated suburban communities like Levittown lured middleclass white families away from inner-city neighborhoods, leaving cities like Paterson to suffer the toll of mass divestment. A representative midcentury black ghetto, Paterson provides Jones, a Newark native, with a vantage from which to document the educational and economic inequalities conditioning black oral culture. With its invocation of Williams, the poem also juxtaposes the contemporary decline of the city against its historical literary significance as a staging ground for Williams’s advocacy of the American idiom. In Williams’s polemic, the language of the American working class countermand the universalized values of European aesthetics and culture. For him, America amounts to the consummate cultural underdog, a depravity he romanticizes as uncouth speech pattern. For Jones, however, Paterson signifies a different kind of America, one characterized by the industrialization of race-based poverty. Where

---

39 Labov, *Inner City*, 212.
Williams identifies speech as the weapon of the weak, Jones dismisses such lofty ideals, asserting instead that even speech corrodes, even the American idiom looses its potency.

At the same moment in which Jones reflects on the disintegration of speech, he also indicates a means of restoring efficacy to the unpurified dialect of the tribe. Following the example of Black Mountain poets like Robert Duncan and Charles Olson, Jones shapes his poem so that it features shifting margins and ample white space, a formal device meant to demonstrate the breathing rhythms of the poet in the act of composition. Since “Projective Verse”, Olson had argued for the poet to treat the typewritten page as a performative score. Where Cage’s “4’33” marks the break with the musical term “Tacet,” Olson recommends leaving space between words to signal the musical equivalent of a rest. While Olson proclaims that the revitalization of poetry lies in eschewing formalism in favor of “speech force,” he leaves the definition of orality open to interpretation. Jones’s contemporaries have used Olson’s endorsement of verbal language to underwrite everything from a commitment to colloquial style to an emphasis on the primacy of public readings. Similarly Jones’s unique engagement with “Projective Verse” reveals the silent basis underlying Olson’s generative notion of “speech force.” According to Olson, blank space signifies not only the writer’s breathing, it also advertizes his or her interest in translating oral material onto the textual page. If we agree with Jones that the typographical blank spaces amount to moments of framed silence, then silence becomes the distinctive mark of the projective poem, the elemental feature of the avant-garde speakerly text.

The statement “Even, speech corrodes” demonstrates Jones’s nuanced reading of Olson at a formal level. Instead of blank space, Jones uses a comma to insert a break, or

41 Olson, *Collected Prose*, 244.
caesura, in the line, and thereby instructs the reader to pause slightly between “Even” and “speech.” The comma in this instance performs no standardized grammatical function; it does not separate clauses nor does it indicate items in a list. Rather it inflects the passage with a sense of vocal speech. Throughout the entire collection, Jones carves up sentences with what would count as comma splices in a freshman composition class. The proliferation of commas works to establish a distinctly human voice fashioned out of frequent hesitations, incomplete thoughts and silent interruptions. This characteristic use of silence leads Nathaniel Mackey to recognize Jones as having a recognizable poetic voice, which he defines as aggressively hesitant, suggesting that Jones prefers a kind of open circumlocutionary form as opposed to a direct statement of the facts. But the silence that separates “Even” from “speech” does more than mark the presence of a unique speaker. Given the content of the line—a declaration about the dissolution of meaningful discourse—it also conceives of silence as a means of revitalizing expressivity and ultimately reversing the corrosive effects of Western culture. “Even” also implies an equal balance or orderly arrangement, which suggests the line could be read as “When speech is rendered even through the process of standardization, it corrodes.” In breaking grammatical rules, the phrase in this context enacts what it proclaims, deforming the evenness of formal language in pursuit of restoring vitality to speech.

Following the serial logic announced in Preface, “A contract. (for the destructions and rebuilding of Paterson,” opens Lecturer by installing silence, and its role in the construction of black social identity, as the subject of the poet’s book-length study. Less a thesis statement than musical theme, “A contract.” puts in play these ideas of silence so that Jones can return to them throughout the book. However the poem does not

42 Mackey, Discrepant Engagement, 38.
forward a simplified romantic idealization of silence. As much as Jones based his idea of poetic silence around the intimate communalism of black social life, he presents it as inextricable from the negative connotations that silence carries in the black community. According to Jones, understanding the linguistic scope of silence, the possible range of its meanings, depends upon accessing the context out of which it emerges. In inner-city settings like postwar Paterson, silence signifies the unspeakable, the suppressed and the meaningless, hardships that Jones esteems as the conditions of possibility of black vernacularity. With its advantages and disadvantages, silence represents for Jones what Benston refers to as “a ‘root’ form of black inner life.”

The poet’s references to silence fall into three categories, each bearing implications for the politics of language and the aesthetics of the inexpressible. The first is the silence of unspeakable tragedy, specifically as it relates to the history of enslavement in the New World and the legacy of racialized dehumanization. The second is the silence of suppressed discourse, as it relates to the systematic attempts to censor the story of black heritage from slavery to the present. The third is the silence of indignant disengagement and mute protest, which Jones proposes as an alternative to the caricatured tropes of commodified black expression, including minstrel dialect and jive talk. For those who have been rendered silent, silence itself, according to Jones, becomes a language through which to pass on the unspeakable, suppressed and all but meaningless story.

4.3 The Silence of Unspeakable Tragedy

“A contract.” not only testifies to the plight of a postwar black urban landscape, it also connects the current scene in Paterson to the historical treatment of Africans in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Jones stages this continuity by referring to the black denizens of Paterson as a differentiated mass of “dark flesh staggered.” “Staggered” denotes both the unsteady movement of an injured body and the arrangement of objects in a discordant pattern. In this case, the polysemy suggests a connection between staggering, as in shiftless movement, and staggered, the act of ordering something incongruently. The African diaspora staggers black bodies across the globe, disrupting linguistic and kinship bonds, and this dispersion results in the impairment of the black subject’s movement. Hence, the history of being staggered makes the black subject stagger. But Jones’s does not use the language of the modern subject, or the autonomous individual, to describe the trans-historical scene unfolding in front of him. Rather he emphasizes the dehumanizing affects of being systematically staggered by referring to the black subject as raw “flesh.” In fact the poem opens on this note, as Jones begins with a line—“Flesh and cars, tar, dug holes beneath stone”—that calls immediate attention to the persistent objectification of black subjects in America.

In figuring the black body as “flesh,” Jones touches upon an issue that Hortense Spillers will later explore in her famous essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Tracing modern gender formulations back to the epistemological currents of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Spillers draws a distinction between body and flesh. The “body” represents a construct produced by social ideology, which imprints upon the “individual” a structuralist dichotomy of gender, as well as

41 Jones, Dead Lecturer, 11.
other normative “grammars” of difference. “Flesh,” on the other hand, corresponds to a conception of materiality that marks the limits of humanist values. Spillers refers to flesh as the “zero degree of social conceptualization” and describes it as a site of “primacy,” which means it occurs previous to the construction of body. Slave traders and masters treated enslaved women as viciously as they did men, thereby nullifying the cultural cues associated with femininity. In Spillers’s view, the unmitigated brutality of slavery reverses the construction of the gendered body and renders the black captive an instantiation of undifferentiated flesh. The legacy of this condition emerges for her in the racist ideology that underpins the 1967 “Moynihan Report on The Negro Family,” which held black matriarchs responsible for the deterioration of the family and subsequently the economic depression of black communities. For Spillers, the idea of female enslavement provides the perspective from which to appraise current African American gender dynamics. And in Jones’s poem, flesh persists into the present moment as an indictment of the continued subjugation of black bodies by a dominant culture. “So complete, their mastery of these / stupid niggers,” writes Jones, insisting that long after emancipation the durable structures of inequality continue to relegate the black body to its fleshy denominator.

Stagger also denotes astonishment and shock, which applies directly to Jones’s concept of speechlessness. Much of the poem centers on a moment in which black individuals witness an act of staggering violence and are left without words to express their complex feelings of vulnerable dismay and boundless rage.

At the backs of crowds, stooped and vulgar

46 Jones, Dead Lecturer, 11.
breathing hate syllables, unintelligible rapes of all that linger in our new world. Killed in white fedora hats, they stand so mute at what whiter slaves did to my fathers. 

Although Jones never explicitly names this as a lynching, he makes clear that the crowd has gathered to watch the public execution of black men. By disregarding the reason for this barbarous demonstration of power, Jones implies that the crimes of the victim are trivial in comparison to the punishment. Instead of concentrating on the lifeless remains on display, Jones levels his gaze on the assembled mob, searching their faces for signs of ideology. Amid the throng of American laborers of European descent, the speaker does not find a group bent upon the extermination of an inferior race. Rather he sees “whiter slaves,” poor whites pitted against their fellow indentured servants by capitalist oligarchs, who understand the subjugation of the lower class depends upon instilling racial contention. While the poem foregrounds direct violence, it maintains that the real culprit is structural, as Jones uses linguistic metaphors to describe the execution scene. The “whiter slaves” breathe “hate syllables,” and conjure “unintelligible rapes.” They are at once agents of violence in the poem and instruments in a larger strategy meant to perpetuate racial conflict through the corruptive manipulation of language.

Jones extends the depiction of linguistic violence to the black bystanders that he inserts in the crowd. Where the “whiter slaves” lash out against an individual suspected of unnamed crimes with “hate syllables,” the blacker slaves have no language for the unfolding scene of dehumanization. “They stand so mute,” writes Jones, impelling the reader to see the toll dehumanization takes on language. For Jones, these acts of racial atrocity transform bodies into flesh, and changing words of outrage into muted tones of inexpressible tragedy.

---

47 Jones, Ibid, 11.
Drawing out the implications of this linguistic incapacity, Saidiya Hartman centers *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in the 19th Century* around a theory of subjectivity that treats slavery as unspeakable burden. “The impossibility of adequately representing the violence of slavery is due not only to the enormity of the degradation and the unwillingness of the reader to believe the extremity or obscenity of violence but also to the fact that by speaking of those crimes the narrator carries the burden of the indecent and the obscene.” The unspeakable obtains both in the painful impotence of language as well as its painful potency. On the one hand, language presents a burden because it fails to accurately register the intricate dehumanizing narrative of enslavement. On the other hand, language carries a burden because it makes available an attempt to communicate some fragmented aspect of the narrative and perpetuate the damage of the catastrophic event. While Hartman claims slavery exists outside of the lexical paradigm, she contends that even despite the deficiency of language, speakers feel compelled to pass some record along, some semblance of the suffering. The unspeakable then encapsulates the fear of disinherit[ing the narrative and of perpetuating the crimes against humanity such a narrative confirms. A simultaneous *cannot say* and *must not say*, the history of slavery in the Americas forecloses the language of response, rendering it both incomplete and over-determined.

In an essay by George Steiner, “Silence and the Poet,” the postwar literary critic discusses two options for writers coming to terms with the kind of unspeakable tragedy that Hartman discusses. One involves the writer taking an aesthetic vow of silence, in order carry out a “suicidal rhetoric.” In this case, the writer ceases writing, a disciplined

---

avoidance that indexes the gravity of the impelling tragedy. Like any act of protest, the writer’s obstinate refusal signals a commitment to divesting from dominant structures of power, which the protestor holds responsible for acts of injustice. In Hartman’s view, such a response not only marks the writer’s reverence for tragedy, it also demonstrates the writer’s fear of perpetuating the problem through language. According to Steiner, this approach to silence confirms the belief that “nothing speaks louder than the unwritten poem.”

The other method involves the writer calling attention to the “precariousness and vulnerability of the communicative act,” a method that Jones employs both in “A contract.” and in The Dead Lecturer as a whole. After he describes the black bystanders as speechless in the shadows of the execution, Jones proposes that they are “so mute” that they are actually capable of expressing themselves through this muteness. “They muster silence” according to Jones, which implies that they engage in a form of silence that requires the exertion of will and effort, and that this exertion arises collectively. Where the poor whites gather in crowds to enact violent fantasies, the black bystanders convene communities that hold silent vigil over the casualties of American racism. In an urban space that bears no trace of meaningful speech, no authentic vernacular of a people striving to live by a code, less callous than gain, Jones lights upon silence as the last remnant of a true vernacular tradition, what Steiner might call the shadow life of black speech.

50 Steiner, Ibid, 57.
51 Jones, Dead Lecturer, 11.
By depicting silence as the response to the “ugly deaths” of structural dehumanization, Jones uses the perilous story of transatlantic modernity to contextualize the role silence plays in grief-stricken speech communities. In the “Crow Jane” sequence, plots his own path through the fraught politics of representation, stating the poet “makes a silence, blankness in every space / flesh thought to be.” The poet’s responsibility lies not only in telling the story but in relaying the silence that results from the relegation of black body to black flesh. In every instance of calling attention to silence, Jones makes a space for the unspeakable history of dehumanized peoples.

4.4 The Silence of Suppressive Canons

The crisis informing black culture, as it is conveyed in The Dead Lecturer, pertains to more than the unspeakable legacy of racial brutality in the New World. It also encompasses the strategic omission of this legacy from the catalogue of Western history. Not only does Jones dwell with the poetic silence of the unspeakable he also directs his poetry towards a consideration of the unspoken, that which must be suppressed in order to perpetuate the homogenous myth of an anglicized America. For Jones, the intellectual crisis is not simply how to give voice to the unspeakable, but figuring out the extent to which the construction of an American canon depends upon the suppression of black voices.

Jones not only addresses the exclusionary politics of canon formation in “A contract.,” he uses the crisis as the catalyst for his vitriol. Present-day Paterson, with its industrialized plight, compels the speaker to break his silence and speak the poem. But Jones explains that his outburst reflects more than his rage over the devaluation of the

---

52 Jones, Ibid, 49.

188
public common. “I came here” Jones writes, “from where I sat boiling in my veins, cold 
fear / at the death of men, the death of learning.” For the reader, the poem begins with 
the street scene, but the speaker insists that it actually originates in an unnamed location. 
He has left one environment for another in hopes of finding some respite from what he 
calls the “death of men, the death of learning.” Hence his negative response to the street 
scene is a product of unmet expectations. The speaker has left this location in search of 
some semblance of life, some trace of vibrant sociality, and the opening salvo of 
discontent derives from his realization that “death” has followed him into the streets, 
turning the civic space into a concrete cemetery. “But what is this place that sends the 
speaker running to the streets in search of human contact?

With the reference to “boiling in my veins,” Jones gestures to the idiomatic 
expression “making my blood boil,” which implies the process of becoming consumed 
with anger, yet unable to act. In addition to being an infuriating place, it is a place 
insulated from his anger, where one must assume a passive position. In describing his 
fear as “cold,” Jones also gives the impression that the alarming aspect of this place is 
not a direct, or immediate, threat, but rather an ideological one. Throughout the book 
the poet connects academia with the death of culture, a connection he foregrounds with 
the title of the work, which instructs us to view the scholarly educator as a doomed 
agent of deathly forces. The ideological dimension of this place pertains specifically to 
learning and its undoing. Taking together the poet’s resistance to the university and his 
description of being infuriated but denied access to speech, it reasons to assume that the 
speaker comes to survey the street scene after spending time in some cloistered corner of 
a library, as the eponymous Dead Lecturer. Stranded among the stacks, the poet views the

---

50 Jones, Dead Lecturer, 11.
library as a place enshrined with empty regard for mythologized dead white men. While Jones opens his poem with a revelation of realist squalor, he comes to this impression after finding the supposed world of learning foreclosed. The library has led him to side with Walter Benjamin, who famously pronounced, “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”

The poet’s association of silence with black disenfranchisement reads as a prescient diagnosis of the intellectual crisis at back of the wide-scale attacks on the Western canon that arose during the 1980s. In one of the more notable comments on the canon war, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Toni Morrison uses 1965, the year after The Dead Lecturer is first published, as a benchmark against which to evaluate the successes of feminism and multiculturalism in broadening the canon. For her, 1965 stands as a relatively distant memory in which the canon amounted to “the protected preserve of the thoughts and works and analytical strategies of whitemen.” It is from this protected preserve that Jones flees at the opening of the poem. What goes unspoken in his account, Morrison spells out with great acuity.

When the topic of third-world culture is raised, unlike the topic of Scandinavian culture, for example, a possible threat to and implicit criticism of the reigning equilibrium is seen to be raised as well. From the seventeenth century to the twentieth, the arguments resisting that incursion have marched in predictable sequence: (1) there is no Afro-American (or third-world) art; (2) it exists but is inferior; (3) it exists and is superior when it measures up to the “universal” criteria of Western art; (4) it is not so much “art” as one—rich ore—that requires a Western or Eurocentric smith to refine it from its “natural” state into an aesthetically complex form.”

Although a consensus emerges between Jones and Morrison when it comes to naming the silencing force of American Eurocentrism, the focus of Morrison’s essay does not allow her to address an aspect of black suppression that occupies a central place in Jones’s volume. In her examination of canon politics, Morrison externalizes the strategies of disenfranchisement, locating them securely in the domain of authoritative whiteness. Jones on the other hand, goes to great lengths to render black Americans complicit in the silencing forces of Western culture.

Near the end of “A contract.” Jones expands his indictment to include middle-class bourgeois blacks. After claiming “they muster silence,” Jones adopts a more critical viewpoint of their muteness, suggesting that it is the result of assimilation. Where the poem opens with a critique of institutional learning, Jones closes with a criticism of black religiosity. “They pray at the steps of abstract prisons, to be kings,” writes Jones, “when all is silence, when all is stone.” In this view, conventional worship assimilates black Americans, offering them a retreat from the conflicted struggles of black liberation in America, in the form of transcendent abstractions. Jones elaborates upon this stance in the essay he writes on “The Myth of Negro Literature,” where he claims the black middle-class exists as a self-depreciating group, ashamed of their variance from mainstream white culture. According to him, the black middle-class congregation repents for their cultural distance from the norm. Rather than vie for communal spaces for authentic speech, the black middle class in Jones’s account suppress their own resentment in order to be conferred the status of probationary citizens.”

Jones, Dead Lecturer, 11.
Later in the book, Jones returns to the idea of an assimilationist silence and gives voice to the inner thoughts of the self-editing bourgeois black subject. In “Short Speech to My Friends” he writes,

A compromise
would be silence. To shut up, even such risk
as the proper placement
of verbs and nouns. To freeze the spit
in mid-air, as it aims itself
at some valiant intellectual’s face."

In order for black individuals to thrive in America they must compromise their ties to black culture and accept silence as their entry point into the logic of integrative inequality. “The proper placement of verbs and nouns” reads as a partial compromise for Jones. He associates nonstandard grammar with authentic expression, but even with proper speech, the black subject can lay claim to language that offends white sensibility, at least in terms of its content. Only silence renders the compromise complete. The speaker fantasizes about spitting on a well-meaning intellectual, but the fantasy accompanies a fear that impedes such action. In order to fulfill external rubrics of propriety and civility, the speaker must settle for the paralyzing fantasy of silence.

This attack on intellectualism also applies to the poet’s own complicated relationship with the poetic avant-garde. In “How You Sound,” Jones makes clear his admiration of the unconventional experimentalism of the Black Mountain, Beat, and New York School poets. As he explains there, speech provides one of the unifying concerns of the avant-garde. But at the time of the writing of The Dead Lecturer, Jones assents to a different conception of orality than that which defied the attempts of his avant-garde colleagues. In the poem “A Guerilla Handbook,” Jones writes “Silent

57 Jones, Ibid, 29.
political rain / against the speech / of friends.” The line confesses his failure to publicly denounce what he sees as the apolitical speech of the avant-garde, as he imagines holding his political tongue to the tune of innocuous silence.

In the poem “Footnote to a Pretentious Book,” Jones reinforces the sense of collusion in the assimilationist’s silence. As the title suggests, the poem names the book itself as a pretentious project, which emerges out of self-depreciation and irony. In it, he writes, “A silence of motives / empties the day of meaning.”- In choosing to not express his motives, Jones finds the day drained of its meaning. Without an expressed political agenda, speech carries no social significance and drains the day of meaning.

What unifies all of these divergent notions of compromised silence is that Jones understands each of them as a retreat from immediate experience. In Blues People, he speaks extensively about the efforts of white culture to align sophistication with abstraction and ultimately deny bodily gratification by associating it with black hedonism. Where the black bourgeois attempt to refine themselves, and black culture writ large, in order to prove their urbanity, blues people disregard abstraction and erudition in favor of making expressive art out of the immediate materials at hand. Likewise, Jones implicitly challenges the assumption held by avant-garde writers that their work emerges out of an authentic link with the perceptual reality of the immediate moment. For Jones, this version of aesthetic immediacy represents yet another level of abstraction, which he identifies in the assumed neutrality of the avant-garde. Where Jones’s definition of speech shifts from personal idiolect to a nationalist dialect, certain poets of the avant-garde maintain a commitment to a notion of speech devoid of identity

---

58 Jones, Ibid, 66.
59 Jones, Ibid, 42.
politics. The attempt to insulate speech from the tropes of ethnic and racial forms strikes Jones as a form of disembodied silencing. If the avant-garde were to remain true to their alleged commitment to the immediate, then their forms of speech would correspond more explicitly with the language variety of a specific community. Instead he sees them as constructing an artifice of immediacy, which conveniently elides the linguistic politics of race and class.

Although Jones associates silence with disembodiment, he also regards it as the means by which to overcome the abstracting ideology of assimilation and political compromise. In the short lyric from The Dead Lecturer “Style,” Jones closes,

to return to
what one felt
what one touched

and their nothing
grown to sounds
the deaf take for music.

The generative “nothing” of musical silence develops out of abandoned conversation. In encouraging the reader “to return to / what one felt/what one touched,” Jones advocates a return to the social speech that has been stifled, while also representing silence as a process of reclaiming authenticity through sense perception. Not only does it become a tactile reminder of the body’s physicality, the absented speech becomes the ground out of which a musical silence emerges. Just as the hearing impaired person uses his or her limitations to understand silence as music, the silenced black speaker has recourse to finding a verbal register in the unspoken. Silence then for Jones is the answer to its own problem. As much as it represents subjugation and disembodiment, it also makes possible an authentic reconnection with physicality particularity, allowing one to

---

*Jones, Ibid, 35.*
imagine a different definition of silence, a different set of interpretive limits for aesthetic experience.

**4.5 The Silence of Racial Send Up**

The final means by which Jones registers the vernacularity of silence comes in the form of an attack on the racial fantasies of American mass culture. When Jones’s speaker from “A contract.” confronts the black individuals who populate the urban scene, he addresses them: “You are no brothers, dirty woogies, dying under dried rinds, in massa’s / droopy tuxedos.” The line features a progression of racialized terminology. It begins with the current, and widely accepted term “brother” then progresses to the racist white term, “dirty woogie,” before finally arriving at the most severe linguistic transgression, the overt reference to minstrelsy. Minstrelsy remains the most offensive because of the extent to which it hides the apparatus of oppression. *Massa* is not a term heaved upon black subjects, meant to deride them. Instead it is a term placed in the mouth of black speakers by anti-black ideology, a self-depreciating act of puppetry. With an echo of Eliot’s dried tubers from *The Waste Land*, Jones uses the modernist’s pessimistic view of industrialized society to evaluate the history of performed racial mimicry. Changing “tuber” to “dried rinds,” Jones’s substitution suggests a tough outer layer, which in this context reads as a poetic rendering of the burnt cork drying into a blackface mask. His reference to the “massa’s droopy tuxedos” reinforces the poet’s pointed attack on forms of racialized caricaturing. In phonetically spelling the dialect version of master, Jones makes plain his gesture to the history of blackface minstrelsy, where the term *massa* became the emblematic expression of black subjugation for the pleasure of white audiences. Just as Eliot posits the death of civilization to be the death of history, as represented by the lifeless tuber, Jones imagines the death of authentic black sociality to lie in the consolidation of blackness into a set of empty symbols.
In a literal sense, minstrelsy is far from silence, as it aims to produce an outlandish depiction of black buffoonish excess. Minstrelsy by definition depends upon the mimicking of expressive forms and not the mime’s silent performance. However, the insistence upon placing certain words in the mouth of the black performer ultimately means the buffoonish speech takes the place of other words. If a black or blackface minstrel utters a line intended to render blackness the brunt of a joke, then he cannot at the same time utter a line meant to advance a vision of personal identity against a backdrop of group dynamics. In this respect, the loud performance of the minstrel amounts to the silencing of self-directed black expressivity.

Like the other instances of black vernacular silence, Jones uses “A contract.” to set up a thematic concern that he carries to further conclusions later in the book. On the topic of minstrel silence, Jones gives his most extensive analysis in the poem sequence “A Poem for Willie Best,” which centers on the eponymous figure, the Hollywood actor, who rose to fame in the 1930s for his performance as the stereotypical black buffoon. Best billed himself in his early roles as a shiftless character, assuming the moniker Sleep n’ Eat. And like Lincoln Perry, better known as Stepin Fetchit, Best used the persona to obscure the line separating art from life, as he projected himself as an innocent country bumpkin, who, according to press releases, was perfectly content humiliating himself on screen in exchange for “three square meals a day and a warm place to sleep.” His arrest in 1942 on charges of possession, coupled with the rising backlash against his stereotypical portrayal of the black buffoon, spelled the end of Best’s film career. Near the end of his life in 1962, Best, reflecting on his notorious career, stated, “Sometimes I
tell the director and he cuts out the real bad parts...But what’s an actor to do? Either you do it or get out”

Providing white lead actors with a foolish comic foil, Best was so heavily typecast that he became indistinguishable from the character of the illiterate black simpleton. In some of his films, the credits obscure the line between performance and reality listing him under the disdainful name, Sleep ‘n Eat, a conspicuous gesture to the tradition of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy. Like in Jones’s earlier work, his examination of the pop icon bears evidence of his desire to find the potential for resistant politics in the conformist products of mass-culture. But Jones does not challenge the negative characteristics of Best’s performance. Instead he emphasizes Best’s abject status by describing him from the perspective of an appalled upwardly mobile spectator: “Lazy / Frightened / Thieving / Very potent sexually [and] generally inferior.” Best becomes the excluded figure that makes possible the consolidation of a coherent culture, constructed in contradistinction to blackness. Jones makes clear that Best’s charismatic performance of suffering encapsulates the institutional violence that black American’s must face in pursuit of revolution.

Jones’s poem contends that Best’s reputation as a shiftless stereotype is “a phony public posture” behind which the actor hides his rage and hatred for America. The antagonism between interior and exterior inspires Jones to write,

A renegade
behind the mask. And even
the mask, a renegade
disguise. Black skin
and hanging lip.

---

62 Jones, ibid, 26.
In carrying out a complex set of reversals, Jones asserts a distinction between West’s performance and his consciousness. While West performs the denigrated role, he possesses a renegade’s disagreement with the dominant culture. In calling attention to West’s use of masks, Jones makes clear the connection between the actor and early twentieth-century black minstrels. Not only does West exist as a conflicted figure, an icon of the divided self, he also reveals the contradictory nature of the buffoonish mask. On the one hand, the mask parodies black expressivity for the entertainment of white audiences. On the other hand, the mask satisfies the audience’s desire to subjugate the black body, while providing the performer with a “renegade/disguise,” which allows him to resist the hegemonic structures of white domination.

In his interview with William Harris, Jones suggests that his embrace of Best follows from the actor’s ability to encapsulate the feeling of estrangement that goes along with being a “black person in a white situation.”

William Best presents the black as the minstrel—the black as the bizarre funny person, yet the black as victim, and this minstrel victim having to come to grips with that, with his victimhood, with his minstrelsy in order to change that.

Jones explicitly aligns Best with the tropes of minstrelsy, while also identifying a source of critical power in the actor’s experience of victimization. Elsewhere in the poem, Jones emphasizes the redemptive force of Best’s suffering by depicting him as a modern, black, commercialized Christ. Many readers have given solid consideration to the importance of Best for Jones. With the many references in the poem to different crossroads, Jones situates Best as a transitional figure, one who survives in a space of racial liminality between white and black cultures. At one point in the poem, Jones

depicts Best as “tired of losing.” The actor confronts an antagonistic farmer and threatens him with violence: “I got ta cut’ cha.” However it is not Best’s rejection of his role of the victim that Jones finds powerful. Rather it is as he tells Harris his ability to come to grips with his role in his own oppression that eventually allows him to overcome his circumstances. The very thing that renders him victim also provides the conditions of possibility to challenge the terms of his subjugation.

This operation mirrors Jones’s turn to silence. Best represents the epitome of disadvantage, his charismatic ability to emphasize his own suffering at the hands of the American system becomes his means of gaining advantage over the system. His damaged veneer provides a cover behind which he can carve out a sense of selfhood insulated from racist conceits. Similarly, Jones identifies silence as the epitome of black suffering, be it in the form of unspeakable tragedy or stifled expressivity. But in so far as silence becomes the site of turmoil, it also becomes the channel through which an authentic sense of black identity can be expressed.

While Jones’s reclamation of Best implicitly parallels his volume-spanning act of reading of silence against the grain, the poem features a number of instances in which the poet directly uses Best to think through his poetics of vernacular silence. The series opens with the eponymous figure caught between the poles of inefficacious expression and unbearable silence.

The face sings, alone
at the top
of the body. All
flesh, all song, aligned. For hell
is silent

The designation flesh signifies the poet’s sense that America has objectified the black body, wrenching it away from the category humane. The face “alone / at the top / of the body” attempts to escape from the heavily regulated space that is the black body. The
importance of the face derives from its distance from the denigrated body. Likewise, the face sings, not because it values song in and of itself, but rather because it allows for him to break free from the oppressive hell that is silence. Here silence equates with hell because it enables a viewing public to project any sort of fantasy or ideology onto the performer. But in baldly asserting that silence equals an existential hell, Jones also implies that the opposite of silence is not an expressive paradise. Song is over-determined by the performer’s apprehension of silence, making it less an escape from soundlessness and more a production of it. Consistent with his depiction of silence as hell, Jones later returns to his theme of death, claiming that for Best silence amounted to a terminal condition. He imagines Best removing the metaphorical mask of the comic buffoon to see his own face rendered “stiff and raw” from the exaggerated performance. Jones has him look squarely into his own vulnerable visage and behold his own mortality, which hides beneath the eternal iconography of the all but inseparable mask. According to Jones, this revelation occurs “without sound, or / movement,” which means silence becomes the cipher through which Best becomes his own horrific memento mori.

In the concluding section of the poem, Jones uses the messianic minstrel figure to revise the poet’s own trepidation over silence. In reassessing his original contention that hell amounts to silence, Jones writes,

```
to provoke
in neon, still useful
in the rain,
to provoke
some meaning, where before
there was only hell. I said
silence, at his huddled blood.
```

65 Jones, ibid, 18.
With the reference to neon, Jones situates us in a landscape defined by the heavy wattage of commodification and advertising. The fluorescent sign becomes a symbol of the unnatural and the inorganic, in so far as it proves impervious to the affects of inclement weather. In restaging the question that structures the entire volume, Jones inserts himself into the poem, where he excavates the symbols of Best’s wretched clownishness, seeking some means of restoring significance to black speech. Where before silence insinuated hell, here Jones finds silence to be the only thing that carries the truth of Best’s representative anguish. But this is not the silence of the unspeakable tragedy or stifled black expression, this is a silence informed by those hardships, but different in that it is not defined via negativa. The poet is not stifled or rendered speechless. Rather he speaks silence, and promotes it as an actual form of expression and not simply the site of foreclosed exchange. Like the comma between “even” and “speech” in “A contract.”, the comma between “silence” and “at” becomes a performative cue for the reader to actually pause and consider the expressive power of wordlessness. Jones instructs the reader to listen to the social history of silence, a gesture with which he closes the poem. The caesura breaks up the pacing of the line and builds a sense of tension, suspense and rupture.

In the next line, this rupture becomes a sexual eruption as Jones refers back to the erotic theme of the poem and guides both the form and content of the piece towards climax. After speaking silence, Jones refers to it as “an obscene invention,” and goes on to describe silence as “a white sticky discharge.” From one bodily fluid to another, silence is no longer the mustered response to Best’s “huddled blood.” Now it is the shimmering product of the sexualized black body. As semen, silence becomes a nuanced

*Jones, ibid, 26.*
symbol of creativity. In his 1991 essay “The ‘Blues Aesthetic’ and the “Black Aesthetic,” Jones addresses the origins of the word jazz and the popular assumption that the term derives from the slang term for male ejaculate. Leaving nothing to the imagination, Jones declares, “So Jazz is Jism, Come music, creating music.” With the last clause Jones reminds us that jazz is not simply the result of white oppression, nor is it solely a means of resisting white cultural supremacy. Rather it becomes a mode of “spiritual presence,” a creative act, an aesthetic experience. It was without question “antagonistically nonconformist” to use Jones’s phrase, but the impact of the music turned the logic of reaction and resistance into an art of social behavior. Jones signifies the process of turning communal resistance into collaborative art when he describes an anonymous figure defacing a public wall by scribbling “Jism” on it with the white discharge which has now taking shape as “white chalk.” The single figure quickly becomes a gang of rogue philosophers. Each member of the posse wears a red jacket, bearing a monogramed image of the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, “staring into space.” The reference to Hobbes presents the gang as a vernacular iteration of the social contract.

But it is not political philosophy that directs the group. Rather they become an aesthetic community. The leader changes the spelling of “jism” to “jasm” and in the process changes himself from gang leader to band leader. Tracking the change, silence goes from being a symbol of sexuality to a symbol of black creativity. But in making jazz the representative form of black creativity, Jones inflects silence with another level of meaning. Not only does it signify the sublimation of sex into aesthetic practice in

---

67 Jones, Home, 106.
68 Jones, Lecturer, 26.
general. It also corresponds to a specific technique and compositional dynamic of jazz music.

It is not incidental that Jones describes the bust of Hobbes as “staring off into space.” Within the context of jazz, critics most often refer to the notion of silent expression in terms of the musician’s ability to manipulate space. Jones makes use of this terminology in his essay on “The Jazz Avant-Garde” crediting tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins’ “use of space” as part of his signature style. According to Jones strategies like silence allowed the jazz avant-gardist to return improvisational black music to its “rhythmic impetuses and away from the attempts at rhythmic regularity and melodic predictability that the 30’s and the 50’s had laid on it.”  

While Cage has been largely seen as the father of experimental music in America, on account of his use of silence, jazz historian George Lewis proposes an entirely different trajectory of silent avant-gardism, which more directly accounts for the contributions of black experimentalists like Muhal Richard Abrams and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians.

It is this black history of experimental silence that Jones calls upon in his eulogy for jazz legend Miles Davis. Although Jones aligns himself most often with the work of free jazz composers like John Coltrane and Cecil Taylor, in the eulogy he lists himself as one of Davis’s many children, confessing that the trumpet player influenced every aspect of his self-image and artistic vision. At a moment in which postwar jazz was largely considered a bebop movement, Davis departed from the fast-playing apocalyptic sounds of Charlie Parker in order to stress an aesthetic of understatement and space. Yet Davis’s silent approach did not aim towards the kind of regularity of theme and

---

variation that characterized the West Coast swing tradition and the white “cool jazz”
stylings of Dave Brubeck, Shorty Rodgers and John Lewis. Instead Davis, heavily
inspired by pianist Ahmad Jamal, used silence to thwart regularity and predictability.
Like negative space in a painting, silence in this context implies that melody does not
exist to overpower and destroy silence, but rather to create an absent shape. Within this
absent shape, Davis compels the listener to imagine the song in terms of its dialectical
opposite, making jazz a meditative retreat into the very idea of unnamed possibility.

Another way that Davis uses silence can be seen in his recorded comments on
Jamal’s heavy usage of substantive rest, “Listen to the way Jamal uses space. He lets it
go so that you can feel the rhythm section, and the rhythm section can feel you. It’s not
crowded.” In achieving meaningful segments of uncrowded silence, all of the musicians
in the band must be of one accord. The aesthetic feel of silence depends upon
foregrounding the social dynamic of the music. No longer is the rhythm section merely a
means of backing the virtuosic solo, rather the solo opens up into broad passages of
silence, allowing the listener to experience the song at the level of its rhythmic
foundations. As Davis notes, silence is the sound of social feeling. It allows the player to
feel one another and the audience to feel the players.

The aesthetic dimension of silence comes to a head in the one-word line that
closes “A Poem For Willie Francis.” Posing a question to both the reader and himself,
the speaker of the poem inquires, “(Hear?” with the open parenthetical, the one-word
line applies Olsonian typographical techniques to signal an unresolved condition. The
line insists that something remains to be said about the tragic specter of modern

71 Paul Maher, Miles on Miles: Interviews and Encounters with Miles Davis (New York: Lawrence Hill Books,
2009), 17.
minstrelsy, and the open parenthesis reinforces the sense that boundaries of the poem are not finite but porous. But “Hear?” does not simply suggest that there is more to be said about Best. Rather it asserts that there is something else already in the process of being spoken. It is the equivalent of asking do you hear that? Placed at the end, the question turns the silence that follows the poem’s completion into part of the poem itself. In a dramatic turn, Jones asks the listener to shift his or her attention away from the language of the poem and concentrate instead on the stillness of the surrounding room. With a gesture that corresponds to Davis’s framed silence, Jones provokes the audience to reconsider the contours of silence, to listen carefully to the black hand side of lyricism and feel the silent sociality of the act.

4.6 Echoes of Silence

In returning to Labov’s treatment of inner-city vernacular English, the linguist’s approach to language foregrounds an ideological difference between linguistic research and literary expression. For Labov, the value of black vernacular lies in its occluded logic, which requires the linguist to identify the most notable traits of the language variety. This means accounting for all of the variables that distinguish black vernacular from the standardized language taught in the New York City schools. While Labov’s efforts proved important for education reform, his taxonomic treatment of the vernacular runs in direct contrast to the writer’s attempt to observe the spirit of the vernacular instead of focusing strictly on its positivist manifestations. Such a conclusion supports the distinction that George Philip Krapp draws between the linguist and the writer. “The linguist,” he writes, “attempts to exhaust all the details of dialect speech which can come under his observation, thus arriving at a finality of some kind”; the writer, on the other hand, ‘utilizes only as much of his material as he thinks he needs for

205
Linguistic finality demands logic, whereas literary expression aspires for fluid provocation. In silence, Jones finds a means of emphasizing the vernacular’s resistance to fixity. The fluidity of silence becomes apparent the moment a writer attempts to record it in print. By associating the vernacular with a form that cannot be iterated, he conceives of a method to simultaneously invoke speech without reducing that spoken form to a fixed convention. Such a formulation attempts to insulate black expressivity from the standardizing forces of cultural ossification.

5. How Shall the Law Allow for Littleness: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Vernacular of Uncertainty

In the preceding chapters I have described the processes by which poets de-reified, or revitalized through contention, the notion of a vernacular poetics. Each recuperates the nonstandard as an efficacious model for expressing a poetic counter-nationalism. I have explored these writers in terms of their shared effort to redefine the vernacular according to their individual poetics. For Charles Olson, the vernacular names the speech of those relegated to the margins of the modern nation-state, whose absence makes possible the imagined community of proper citizenship. For Robert Duncan, the vernacular denotes a language of universal community that coheres through traversing the thresholds of nationalism as presented by William Carlos William’s notion of the American idiom. And finally Leroi Jones challenges the notion of an American vernacular by imposing an alternative nationalist vernacular, one based upon the fugitive economy of silence. By recuperating the idea of the nation, in the form of the blues people, Jones undermines the myth of a white homogenous America. In each attempt at revitalizing the vernacular, the poet assumes that the nationalist vernacular, as presented in advertisements, political rhetoric and conventional poetry, reifies nonstandard language variation into a well-defined standard all its own. In response to the consolidation of a standardized non-standard, the poets counter one notion of the vernacular with another. However the very activity of writing poetry, regardless of the appointed aesthetic, incurs the inexorable act of framing language. The frame in turn reifies the linguistic counter-standard, no matter how durable, into a standard all its own. To see a poet responding to these pressures I want to turn away from the vernacular as it is conceived by coterie poets of the avant garde, and look instead at the work of a poet who enjoyed immense institutional success at the age of
twenty-eight. From this vantage, we find a poet who understands the experiential impact of institutionalization on the representation of difference.

Gwendolyn Brooks differs from these narratives in a number of ways that makes her inclusion within the study a conspicuous peculiarity. While offering a fourth approach to the question of the vernacular, she departs from the existing paradigm in which a writer challenges one totalizing schema of the vernacular with another. For her the question of the vernacular is not a matter of cultivating a viable poetics that offers a coherent disengagement with the conformist verse culture of mainstream literary circles. Rather her vision of the vernacular, as constituted during the years of 1963 to 1967, intimates a position that testifies to the indwelling conflict at the philological heart of vernacular. During this period, Brooks composes a long poem entitled “In the Mecca,” which expresses a transitional poetics that understands the vernacular to be the site of a generative antagonism between literary mastery and counter-literary deformation. In many ways the ambiguous position she holds in this study is not unlike the quality of radical uncertainty she delivers in her poetry. As a poet who shifts styles at the height of her celebrity, Brooks parallels Sallie Smith, the domestic narrator from “In the Mecca”, who represents the conflicted figure, marooned at the intersection of mastery and deformation. The Mecca building provides Brooks with a surrogate for the masterful literary frame, and hence a way of dramatizing what happens when deformative material compromises masterful form.

In a 1971 issue of *Essence* magazine, Ida Lewis, interviewing Gwendolyn Brooks asks the poet, “How did you a Pulitzer Prize winner get turned onto the black
revolution.” Embodying her own distinction between prose and poetry—where “prose endeavors to say very much about a thing” and “poetry is at pains to select”—Brooks plays the poet, fielding the question with a distilled monosyllable: “Fisk.” In referring to the second annual Black Writers Conference, held in 1967, at the historically black college in Nashville, Brooks constructs the narrative of her poetic development in which the conference serves as turning point, demarcating the poet’s public transition. This transition apply to both the poet’s explicit statements about racial politics in her poetry and prose and her understanding of poetic form. It was at Fisk that the fifty-year-old writer, inspired by the black consciousness movement, made the decision to direct her writing more explicitly to a black audience. As Brooks herself claims, her focus after Fisk involves developing a “style that will appeal to black people in taverns, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate.” As she tells it, her aim is “to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones.” Following Fisk, Brooks severed her relationship with the white literary mainstream, opting instead to publish her subsequent work with Haki Madhubuti’s black-owned Third World Press. In the same interview, she insists that while she greatly admires the engaged optimism of the young generation, her “newish voice will not be an imitation of the contemporary young black voice[…] but an extending adoption of today’s Gwendolyn Brooks’ voice.” With the clarity that certainty affords historical accounts, it is no wonder that scholarly writing dedicated to Brooks’s poetry has continued to validate the significance of Fisk, as her critical turning point.

---

1 Ida Lewis, “My People are Black People” in Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks, edited by Gloria Wade Gayles (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 54.
2 Lewis, Ibid.
3 Lewis, Ibid, 56.
4 Lewis, Ibid.
My interest, however, is not in the answer that Brooks gave to Lewis’s question but instead the assumptions advanced by the question itself. The question assumes that there is a qualitative difference between the prizewinning poet laureate and the race-conscious revolutionary. When Brooks describes the shift in her career she does so through recourse to metaphors of speech, describing her new style as a new voice, one that will allow her to converse with black subjects in the colloquial spaces where they congregate. If we keep in mind the long history of black writers’s vexed relationship with a standard literary frame and the prospects of black speech, we might do well to rephrase Lewis’s question as follows: How did you a black poet, go from framing black speech in a way that pleases the white literary establishment to a poet who frames black speech in a way that pleases the aesthetic arm of the Black Power Movement? Such a question assumes not only a dramatic shift but more importantly a conscious will on the part of the writer. It presents a case in which a poet is certain about his or her relationship to the formal and informal pressures of language and that they are capable of instrumentalizing this knowledge to certain ends. My ultimate aim in this chapter is to argue that it is explicitly against this notion of certainty that the vernacular appears in Brooks’s work.

For Brooks, the vernacular is not a direct rebuttal to literary form and sumptuary values. Rather it is the interstitial space between power and resistance. In demonstrating the vernacular as a site of uncertainty in Brooks’s poetry, this chapter follows two moves. First I go back to sketch a picture of how we have thought about Brook’s work and her use of the vernacular. I situate that picture of Brooks within the discourse of literary frames and within Houston Baker’s influential distinction between mastery of form and deformation of mastery. My hope here is to show that the ways used to define Brooks’s career as a split between an early formalism and a later radicalism (think the
Lewis question) ultimately fixes her use of the vernacular within a poetics of certainty. Readers fix her engagement with the vernacular within the frames by which we understand her progression as a writer, which is to say the frame of the Pulitzer Prize winning writer and the frame of the revolutionary writer. My second move is to show how the vernacular appears in Brooks’s “In the Mecca.” I pay particular attention to the ways in which Brooks uses the long sequence to fuse two definitions of the vernacular, both as literary style and as political perspective. In my reading of the poem, I stress that the vernacular emerges as a pointed attempt to interrogate the conventions of framing black speech. Ultimately I illustrate how the poet compromises a masterful frame from within, presenting the vernacular as a site of uncertainty, necessary for the expression of the marginal and excluded figure. In showing how the vernacular becomes a means of unfixing the certainty of frames, I make a case for rethinking where and how the vernacular appears in Brooks’s poetry, which provides its own framework for understanding where and how the vernacular plays out on the larger postwar American scene.

5.1 In the Guise of Certainty: Mastery and Deformation

From her earlier affair with formalism to her later commitment to black radicalism, Brooks’s poetry has largely been discussed within a rubric of certainty. The division of her career into two stages hinges upon the argument that her work mobilizes two different relationships to the politics of standard speech and the work of the literary frame. An overview of the criticism dedicated to Brooks’s poetry reveals the consistent impulse among scholars to chart her development as a movement from a poetics that legitimizes the standard literary frame to one that challenges its orderly agenda. In his succinct comment on “The Literary Frame,” John Frow explains the frame as the material and immaterial border that “surrounds a text and defines its specific fictional
status and the kinds of use to which it can be put.” In a literary context the frame includes the material boundaries of the books’ two covers, the white space encircling the text and even the silence that marks the start of a public reading. But it also includes the immaterial boundaries such as generic expectations and the expectations created by the poem’s date, the author’s name, the work’s title, the publishing house as well as the dedicatory material. But the role of the frame, according to Frow, extends beyond the use of textual devices to secure a specific audience or flatter a particular beloved. Rather its central function lies in separating the poem from everyday life: As much as the frame delimits the category of the literary, it also constructs that other realm that exists beyond the limits of the frame, the domain of the nonliterary. It is precisely this dialectic between the literary and the nonliterary—negotiated by the frame—that conditions the bifurcated view of Brooks’s work. It separates her career into a period in which the poet upholds the standard literary frame and a period in which she dismantles it en route to a self-consciously black radical aesthetic.

In African American literary criticism, this nonliterary expressive material often bears the name vernacular. In addition to denoting the oral language varieties of black speech communities, the term has been used to denote a wide-range of black aesthetic strategies, which originate in those customs and mores that signify the cultural specificity of African American community. Along with the spoken vernacular, these mores and customs include such art forms as the blues, folk tales, spirituals, preachment as well as popular rhetorical games like the dozens. Connecting each of these points in the vernacular continuum is a general assumption that the vernacular points toward a

---

tradition that lies beyond systematic structures and formal disciplines. The inclusion of non-literary material within the literary frame rouses two common interpretations. Either the nonstandard language indexes an illiterate speaker, who is unable to master the protocols of standard language. Or it represents a revolutionary speaker, who uses illiteracy to overthrow the standards of mastery. More often than not this first sort gets reviled as a mode of reductive minstrelsy, whereas the latter gets championed as a rebellious demonstration of cacophonous authenticity.

Such a schismatic imperative prompts Baker in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* to structure his theory of vernacular literature around the categories of “mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery.” In distinguishing between the two strategies, Baker associates mastery with the compliant industrialism of Booker T. Washington and deformation to the confrontational intellectualism of W.E.B. Dubois. Both involve writers negotiating what Baker refers to as the indigenous sound of black vernacularity. Baker explains this indigenous property as a “deep-rooted African sound,” which appears “monstrous and deformed” to the proponents of conventional literary standards. Instead of referring to these two strategies as frames, he calls them masks. But the point is still the same. Just as the frame separates the selected realm of the aesthetic object from the unselected dailyness of the world, the mask orders and conscribes the events that take place within the realm of tribal ritual. Mastery entails the mask of deceit and camouflage, the “human guile” “that grins and lies.” Deformation dons the mask of boisterous immediacy, locked in apparent conflict with external conventions, the “live/words of the hip world live flesh &/coursing blood/Hearts

---

Brains/Souls splintering fire.” He distinguishes between mastery and deformation by attending to their respective methods for framing the indigenous sound of black vernacularity. In the mastery of form, the writer accepts the monstrosity of his or her own speech and disciplines it into compliance with metrical forms and verse conventions. As an integrationist ideology, mastery uses the vernacular to dispel worries that “the Negro is getting ‘out of hand.’” It reinforces the superiority of the dominant frame. In deformation of mastery, the writer recognizes that the indigenous sound is not offensive in and of itself, but that it only offends the European sensibility. As a separatist ideology, deformation uses the vernacular to break affiliation with European itineraries of selfhood and culture.

Aside from sharing a common origin in the indigenous sound of black difference, mastery and deformation also share a common dependence upon authorial certitude. Rather than propose a single frame, which writers can accept or reject, Baker theorizes a set of frames, one wedded to the mastery of form and another disposed to the deformation of mastery. Like Frow, Baker understands these frames as confining gestures meant to give structure and purpose to the indigenous sound of black vernacularity. These framing masks define the ends to which vernacularity can be applied. Although mastery and deformation both emerge from the same fount of indigenous immateriality, Baker carefully distinguishes them from their source. According to him, the indigenous sound is a fluid action that exists under the impress of uncertainty. Alternatively mastery and deformation are the translation of this action into the recognizable events. These legible manifestations channel the immeasurable force of

---

the chaotic world into two finite stations, which instrumentalized this immaterial indigenous material. In Baker’s theory, to instrumentalize is to play the vernacular, to give defining breath and melodic body to its inchoate energy. It means subjecting the uncertain source to the logic of certainty. For instance on the topic of mastery, he claims that Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* amounts to a “speaking manual,” directed to a mass of southern black folk who “sought ways beyond the uncertainty” of their circumstances. It believes with certainty that the advancement of Negro causes depends upon dispelling America’s fear of black nonsense sounds. Skipping nearly seventy years, Baker elaborates upon the certainty involved in deformation by addressing the world of 1980s R&B pop music. He claims, “the deformation of mastery is Morris Day singing “Jungle Love, advertising with certainty, his unabashed badness.” Day, in contrast to Washington, instrumentalizes the vernacular into the confrontational stance of Caliban’s reason. His song protests with certainty that the pursuit of love like the pursuit of justice and equality begins with insisting “Can’t nobody fuck with me.” No matter if it is Washington advertising his aptitude for mastery or Day alerting us to his dangerous penchant for deformation, both do so with certainty.

It is this certainty that is so attractive to literary critics charting Brooks’s trajectory. George Kent writes, “The poet’s turning to a more radical stance during the 1960s added a more concrete experience of liberation to that of revelation. Thus, Brooks’ poetry became far more attentive to blacks as an audience than it had previously.”

---

which Norris B. Clark adds, “The evolution of the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks from an egocentric orientation to an ethnocentric one is directly related to her advocacy of a black aesthetic.”

Approximating Baker’s terms, these readers typically regard Brook’s early work as signifying the formation of mastery, whereas her later aesthetic presents a more deformative strategy.

Indeed Brooks herself confirms such a view of her work. No text by Brooks better represents her own self-reflexivity about her transition from mastery to deformation than her contribution to the 1975 Broadside Press collection, *a capsule course in Black Poetry Writing*. Criticizing her first books, Brooks confesses that she “did a lot of poetic, dramatic, and fictional whining. And a lot of that was addressed to white people.”

Brooks suggests that in writing to a predominately white audience placed her in a consistent subservient position, one in which she had to cry “Up to them.” In complaining to white privilege about black hardship, Brooks argues that the frame of her first books not only codifies and perpetuates American values, but helps maintain the imperialist ideology of the dominant class. In describing her later work, the poet expresses her “impatience with idle embroidery, with what was considered avoidance, avoidance of the gut issue, the blood fact.” In “idle embroidery,” Brooks finds a metaphor that acknowledges the role framing plays in the perpetuation of convention through avoidance. Opposing her early needlepoint verse, Brooks advocates young

---

poets cast off the frame of mastery. “Loosen your rhythm so that it sounds like human talk,” she writes, “Human talk is not exact, is not precise.”

But twenty-five years earlier, in a brief essay in *Phylon*, Brooks offers a different consideration of vernacular language. In the essay, entitled “Poets Who are Negro,” she argues that the long history of American racial slavery and discrimination endows the Negro poet with more material than his white counterpart. Instead of assuming that this aesthetic predisposition proves that “Every Negro poet has ‘something to say,’” Brooks takes this innate advantage as the jumping off point for explaining the “crouching danger” that lies at the “very heart of the superiorities.” The “temptation” is to “let the mere fact of lofty subject, great drive and high emotion suffice; to present them as such fact as requires no embellishment, no interpretation, no subtlety.” She argues, “no real artist is going to be content with offering raw materials.” Brooks uses the same metaphor of cooking to describe the poet’s commitment to revising her speech: “You have got to cook that dough, alter it, until it is unrecognizable.” Here black speech is raw and limitless, which is to say rich but existing in a state of uncertain possibilities. The poem becomes the means of imposing finitude, of cooking, chopping, boiling, baking the raw into one particular dish. In this metaphor Brooks avows that speech must be rendered almost unrecognizable in order for it to adhere to the enclosures of the aesthetic object and uphold the line separating order and disorder. In a move that also aligns her with Robert Lowell who years later would reprise the metaphor of ‘cooked’

---

language, Brooks closes with the declaration “The Negro poet’s most urgent duty, at present, is to polish his technique.”

Taken together, this declaration (and its cry for a mastery of form) and that later advice that students loosen their language (a deformation of mastery) uphold the reigning idea of a bifurcated Brooks. However, I want to call attention to the fact that both of my examples of Brooks’s shift from mastery to deformation come from non-fictive prose statements. Unlike many of the poets of the postwar era, Brooks did not consider the writing of polemics and manifestos to be an essential part of her creative life. It is clear that she understood the work of the poem to be very different from the work of the essay. This disparity between Brooks’s pose and her poetry suggests that despite Brooks’s explicit endorsement of her own bifurcation in these prose text, her poetry, particularly her earlier pieces, works through these ideas in more complex and uncertain ways. The above prose examples offer such perfect illustrations of Baker’s categories because they put forth the kind of uncluttered thesis one seldom finds in Brooks’s poetry. In the extended space of the essay, the poet musters the declarative certainty that is required to exemplify both mastery and deformation. In contrast, her poetry and creative prose rarely resolves its reckoning into a fixed perspective.

This quality of uncertainty leads Hortense Spillers in her essay “Gwendolyn the Terrible” to laud the complex ambiguities that appear throughout the poet’s early masterful and later deformative periods. In Spiller’s view, Brooks’s voice “is one of the most complex on the American scene precisely because [she] refuses to make easy judgments.” In her essay, Spillers cycles through a number of Brooks’s early poems

24 Brooks, Ibid.
including her famous “We Real Cool” and the opening stanzas of the poet’s first long poem “The Anniad.” In the former she finds a poet “deliberately subverting the romance of sociological pathos,” opting instead to present the street youth “in their own words and time.” While the poem offers a tragic picture of “dudes hastening toward their death” it achieves generative uncertainty by rendering such a bleak portrait that could easily be performed as a raucous “drinking/revelry song.” On the latter, she draws attention to the “intensely cultivated language” in the poem, which appear “to rely heavily on the cross-references of dictionaries and thesauri.” The density of the poetic language pulls away from the subject matter and begins to follow an uncertain meta-textual dance. According to Spiller’s the poem is “built on contradictions,” wherein one arcane phrase finds its meaning in compromising the legitimacy of another. Ultimately what I’m suggesting here is that while Brooks’s prose statements confirm in what seem to be no uncertain terms our bifurcated understanding of her use of the vernacular, the complexity of her poetry—as structures built on contradictions—belies these confirmations.

To see how this aesthetics of uncertainty applies to the poet’s long poem “In the Mecca,” one need only consider a mid-1962 letter that Brooks sends Elizabeth Lawrence, her primary editor at Harper’s.

This is my problem, I’m writing now a book-length poem—2,000 lines at least, thick with story and music and sound-and-fury and I hope idea and sense—based on life ‘in the Mecca.’ (I can’t give up the thing; it has a grip on me.)

---

26 Spillers, Ibid, 234.
27 Spillers, Ibid.
28 Spillers, Ibid, 239.
29 Spillers, Ibid, 236.
30 George Kent, A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks (Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1990), 155.
Although “In the Mecca” falls short of the 2,000 line mark, the long poem does uphold Brooks’s intentions of being thickly layered with story, song and sense. The letter relays a sense of the profound uncertainty that accompanied the poem’s thirty-year period of composition. Considering Brooks’s biography, one could say that she began writing the poem in October of 1936, when the Illinois State Employment Service found a position for the nineteen-year old poet as a secretary to Dr. E. N. French, who operated a mystical clinic inside the outsized Mecca building. When her original poetry drafts failed to cohere, Brooks turned to fiction, trying to tell the story of the sprawling tenement in “the hardships of a beleaguered family.” Rather than focus on the circumstances that led the “garishly posh apartments” to become yet another “microcosm of the Negro poor,” the novel would tell the story of Giovanna, an ambitious girl, who cannot accept a scholarship to attend art school in Europe, because of the wage-earning role she plays in the family. In responding to three chapter drafts, Ursula Nordstrom, the famous editor of Harper’s Juvenile Books Department, responsible for bringing Maurice Sendack into print, complained that the “material was presented too obliquely for teenage readers.” Encouraged nonetheless by Nordstrom’s praise for the “rich and fascinating” setting, Brooks continued to rework the project along various formal and thematic lines.

By the time, she writes to Lawrence, she had rewritten the central conceit of the piece to reflect the confounding sense of indecision that marked the long poem’s even longer composition. Early on in the final draft we discover that Mrs. Sallie Smith’s youngest daughter, Pepita, has gone missing, setting in motion a Smith family search party. In scouring the building, the family knocks at numerous doors, asking the

residents if they have any information as to the whereabouts of their sibling. Through organizing the poem around the narrative of a missing child, Brooks foregrounds the experience of uncertainty, making it the definitive quality of life in the Mecca. The search for Pepita not only represents the place of uncertainty in the poem, it also shows how the social space itself depends upon uncertainty to exist. In serving as the absent presence that animates the search, Pepita brings the residents of the Mecca into engagement with one another. Brooks depicts her absence as the constitutive event that makes the poem a social space. In this way, the missing girl represents the uncertainty that animates vernacular expressivity. Moreover, Brooks closes her poem by countenancing the spirit that persists after the family discovers the young girl’s corpse, hidden in one of the apartments. Describing her absence in terms of aurality, Brooks writes, “odd were the little wrigglings / and the chopped chirpings oddly rising.”

Gesturing toward the myth of Philomela, Brooks renders the death of Pepita as continuation of the uncertainty that began the poem, as her spirit becomes the site of unending fluidity and metamorphosis. Even in the revelation of her death, Pepita’s absent presence represents an ineffable oddness, in the form of uncertain wriggling, at the center of Mecca life.

5.2 Call Them Common Things: Vernacular in the Restricted Sense

In her “Community and Voice: Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘In the Mecca,’” Gayl Jones declares speech to be the central concern of the long poem. For Jones, speech pertains to the banality of daily affairs as well as to the concept of plural ownership that defines communal parlance. Hence the significance of speech is its insignificance, making the

vernacular a familiar and ordinary part of everyday eloquence. The principle example of common speech comes from Mrs. Sallie, following her discovery of Pepita’s absence. In bold print, the statement reads, “SUDDENLY COUNTING NOSES, MRS. SALLIE / SEES NO PEPITA, ‘WHERE PEPITA BE’” (13). The phrase “where Pepita be” subtly returns slightly different in a number of places in the poem. In his account of the poem, D.H. Melham argues it is not simply a coincident that Brooks utilizes the anti-grammatical copula at approximately the same time that William Labov is innovating the field of sociolinguistics with his study *Language in the Inner City*. The simultaneity of these two interventions into the vernacular suggests that Brooks and Labov share an overlapping regard for the structural underpinning of supposedly incorrect language varieties. Melham recalls Labov’s argument that Black Vernacular English constitutes “a distinct subsystem within the larger grammar of English,” and one of the central elements in this systematic divergences from English is what Labov refers to as the “invariant be.” It is this “invariant be,” deviating from “the ordinary finite be which alternates with am, is, are, etc” that Melham recognizes in Mrs. Sallie’s “WHERE PEPITA BE.” For Melham, the poet and the linguist align with a belief that Mrs. Sallie’s speech “displays the logical features of a bone fide grammatical structure.”

While Melham and Jones are persuasive in their arguments regarding the centrality of speech for Brooks, their arguments neglect what I am referring to as the tensile uncertainty underlying Brooks’s transitional poem. By arguing for its

---

grammatical cogency, Melham recuperates the vernacular against popular assumptions regarding its deviance. However in binding the vernacular to a sense of grammatical structure, Melham fails to acknowledge the role unrestricted variation plays in Brooks’ s intervention into speech. Likewise, Jones aids us in connecting oral expressivity with the poet’s concern for depicting the social life in the Mecca building, but her notion of the common speech overlooks the extent to which speech names a reserve that cannot be fully translated into standard lexical markings. By confining the formal character of speech to conventional cues, Jones constricts vernacular to mean strictly, “word choice, cadences, and syntactical choices.” As both Jones and Melham argue, the depiction of nonstandard speech elements plays a central role in Brooks’ s long poem. However, the interest that the poem takes in vernacular expressivity cannot be limited to conventional representations of linguistic difference. Through attending to her own uncertainty about literary framing, the poet gains insight into the uncertainty at the heart of vernacular poetics. Rather than assuming that the vernacular applies strictly to a common language shared by members of a group, Brooks identifies it with the precarious conflicts that unite a discordant community.

While Brooks calls attention to the vernacular as a commonplace affair, it is exactly this banal quality that the poet identifies as the condition of possibility for its uncertain ineffability. Her poem “The Artist’s and Model’s Ball” features a distilled meditation on the representation of common objects in which she maintains the “wonders” of the world are not the things that perplex the mind, but rather the “common things.” Wonder recedes into nonchalance through naming: “We call them [common things] / And close the matter

40 Gwendolyn Brooks, Blacks (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987), 381.
there.” Yet the common things defy the reification that occurs through naming: “they accept the names we give / With calm, and keep them […] Well, behind / Our backs they alter. How were we to know.” Speech as a common thing secures the common ground upon which Brooks can articulate her vision of community. Yet it is also the utter familiarity of the idea of speech that prompts the referential meaning of a speech act to change and take on hidden complexity while the speakers have their backs turned. It is this mysterious aspect of the common that Jones overlooks in her treatment. The banalities extend beyond the domain of the known and knowable.

The undetermined quality that Brooks ascribes to common things such as daily speech makes available a different understanding of the concept of the vernacular. A derivative of the Latin *vernaculus*, *vernacular* originally emerged in ancient Rome as a term meant to denote things pertaining to “home-born slaves.” As in the modern slave societies of Brazil, the Caribbean and the United States, the slave in Roman antiquity was utterly disempowered, stripped of all human rights including the right to own property and assert legally sanctioned familial bonds. The central distinction drawn in the slave system of ancient Greece and Rome was between the general slave referred to as *servus* and the home-born or domestic slave, referred to as the *verna*. While the former was acquired either through trade or conquest, the latter was obtained strictly through reproduction. Born within the master’s household and trained from adolescence to fulfill the master’s desire, the vernae were distinguished from the general slave population on the grounds of their reputation for docility and their perceived capacity for refined labor. Their elevated status, in distinction from the general slave population, resulted

---

largely from the unique position they occupied within the imperial household. While all slaves were legally reducible to nonentities, domestic slaves were not “complete outsiders” nor were they fully integrated into the mainstream of community life. They inhabited a strange liminal position, at once central to the conservation of the domestic sphere yet peripheral to its conscribed politics.

In order to articulate this vernacular of exiled inclusion, my reading of the long poem concentrates on three interrelated instances in which the poet presents a conflict between the literary frame and nonliterary material. First I look to the poet’s selection of the Mecca building for the subject of her poem, arguing that the building provides her with a model of the compromised frame, the once-certain structure that becomes an emblem of architectural uncertainty. Next, I explore the poet’s choice of Ms. Sallie as her principle protagonist, which allows her to theorize the domestic worker as an embodiment of vernacular uncertainty. All of this attention to form leads me finally to discuss the ethics of vernacularity as they appear at the level of content. In this closing sequence, I attend to the poet’s commitment to presenting the vernacular as a means of eschewing sovereign ideals of hierarchical transcendence in pursuit of imminent uncertainty.

5.3 Strangest Place in Chicago

The emphasis on framing is perhaps nowhere better countenanced than in Brooks’s selection of the Mecca building as the eponymous subject of her poem. If the matter of framing depends upon the creation of insiders and outsiders, then how better to stage this concept in poetry then by basing the work on an actual brick and mortar structure, designed to ensure the partitioning of exterior and interior. While any enclosed space would suffice as a representation of framing, the Mecca building provides Brooks with an especially salient example of what happens when a given
frame loses its integrity and begins to be defined by forces it was engineered to exclude. In its well-documented decline from white showplace to black slum, the building stands as the architectural evidence of the uncertainty that results when deformative culture and masterful frame collide.

In the same way that critics have told two stories of Gwendolyn Brooks—one committed to mastery, the other deformation—there are likewise two versions of the Mecca building. In 1891, architects Willoughby J. Edbrook and Franklin Pierce Burnham designed a large-scale “multifamily dwelling” for wealthy clientele, in anticipation of the 1893 World’s Columbian Fair. With apartment living still a novel concept, the Burnham architects, who had already developed a number of post offices and federal buildings, found their motivation in demonstrating the comprehensive possibility of tenement living. Spanning the north side of 34th Street from State to Dearborn, the U-shaped Mecca building originally included ninety-eight luxury apartments. The building’s name was not intended as a reference to the holy city of Islam in Saudi Arabia. Rather it was meant to suggest a central gathering place, synonymous with modernist visions of urban utopia. A metropolitan palace, the building included amenities such as plush carpets, open fountains and goldfish aquariums. However, the attribute that solidified the building’s initial reputation as a “splendid palace” was the revolutionary atrium that utilized iron grillwork and glass to fill the primary corridors with broad wells of natural light. It is ironic that the most appealing factor of the Chicago “showplace” was its innovative use of classical methods to bring the outdoors inside. In 1912, after the Burnham company struggled to fill the massive building, they published an announcement in The Chicago Defender, making the magazine’s readers...
aware that The Mecca was now open to African American tenants. It was with this attempt at bringing the outside inside that the second story of The Mecca begins.«

Initially the building attracted affluent members of the African American community, who benefited from early twentieth-century prosperity. But quickly after the initial cast of tenants moved to take up residence in single-occupancy homes throughout Bronzeville, they were replaced by a more itinerant group of migrating southern blacks, seeking job security and education in the North. Well known to traveling musicians as an available source for short-term housing, the Mecca building was memorialized by Jimmy Blyth and Priscilla Stewart with their 1924 song, “Mecca Flat Blues.” In the song, the Mecca flat woman swears to get even with her Mecca flat man for unnamed indiscretions. With the line “Keep foolin’ with me and I’ll cut your jazzer down,” the song documents the violence and instability that had become part of life in the vast building.« Although the early twentieth century saw the tenement transition from showplace to barrelhouse, it was not until the Great Depression that its decline reached the level of uninhabitable squalor. Summing up this progression, Kenny Williams writes, “For those who trace the history of a city through the rise and fall of its buildings, how poignant must have been the degeneration of the Mecca from the stunning showplace for the elite to an overcrowded tenement for thousands of dispossessed blacks.”« The final chapter of the building came at the close of the Second World War when the Illinois Institute of Technology purchased the land where the

---

42 Blustone, Ibid, 386.
Mecca stood and began evicting tenants. With no viable place for the countless residents to move, tenants founded a coalition to fight for the preservation of their homes. But the coalition eventually folded, after IIT agreed to relocate the residents to housing elsewhere in the city, leaving the Mecca vacant for demolition.▼

For Brooks, the social life of the Mecca building in the postwar years leading up to its destruction symbolizes a community defined by an enduring sense of uncertainty. Although Brooks never makes explicit the concern over relocation, the poem signals the volatility of the housing crisis. Each of the testimonies that Brooks incorporates into her epic testifies to a different scheme for either integrating into white residential space or declaring war on its oppressive order. When voicing the discontent of the Smith children, she explains how they “hate sewn suburbs,” on the grounds that they represent an unattainable vision of order, masquerading as the only viable standard for good living.▼ The suburban dream demands everything be “combed and strong,” demands residents have all the conspicuous trappings of American prosperity: “balls, dolls, mittens, and dimity frocks and trains/ and boxing gloves, picture books, bonnets for Easter.”▼ Departing from the compensatory hatred the Smith children harbor for American suburban order, their mother, Sallie, complains that her own house lacks the “sewn” nature of the suburbs. Her “bad, bad” kitchen requires decoration, but then again Smith regards such a paltry gesture as akin to placing “pomade atop a sewage.”▼ Like the ethos undergirding the American conceit of modern progress, Sallie imagines “First comes correctness, then embellishment.”▼ The implication here is that the Mecca is

▼ Brooks, Mecca, 10.
▼ Brooks, Ibid.
▼ Brooks, Ibid.
▼ Brooks, Ibid.
caught in the uncertain space between being too dilapidated for embellishment, but too vital to be destroyed.

The uncertainty that Brooks associates with the architectural frame of the Mecca building corresponds to the most literal border that one encounters when reading the poem, the conspicuous epigraphs that frame the opening of the book. At no point in career does Brooks draw as much attention to her epigraphs as she does in the opening pages of “In the Mecca.” While Brooks uses short prefatory quotations throughout her career, as a means of indicating the theme of a given work, she typically does so without paying attention to the formal implications of framing a text epigraphically. Her earlier writing features epigraphs strictly as paratextual gestures meant to clarify background and context. Never does she wield the device to invoke literary precedence, a trait that distinguishes her from the likes of Eliot and Pound, who treat their poems as if they were merely the coda for their erudite, often Latinate, epigraphs. In preface to her early sonnet sequence “Gay Chaps at the Bar,” Brooks opens with a quotation she culls from a personal correspondence with writer friend, William Couch, who wrote to the poet while overseas serving in the military during the Second World War. In the passage, Couch uses the titular phrase as an ironic appellation for those “young officers, return[ing] from the front, crying and trembling”51. In this case, the epigraph grants us a revelatory frame of reference, clarifying both the postwar context of the title as well as its dark irony. However, by the time she writes “In the Mecca” Brooks understands the epigraph to signify beyond the ends of aiding in reader comprehension. It is also serves as marker, distinguishing the literary from non-literary space. Since the epigraph is neither wholly a part of nor apart from the poem itself, it becomes the poet’s closest

51 Kent, A Life, 45.
equivalent for the framing mechanism that encloses a two-dimensional work of visual art. Where in previous poems, Brooks quietly inserts a single epigraph, in the long poem she opens with no less than four. In addition to providing necessary background for the poem, the array of epigraphs draw attention to the self-conscious act of establishing context and conscribing the space of the poem.

It is not insignificant that the first words of Brooks’ “In the Mecca,” words that ultimately establish the dominant impression of the notorious building, come from a writer who identifies as the consummate outsider to the tenement. While the poem opens with four epigraphs, it is the first, authored by John Bartlow Martin, which most explicitly establishes the framework within which the poet yields her expression. Taken from the December 1950 issue of Harper’s, the passage comes from an article entitled “The Strangest Place in Chicago.” In it Martin tells the first-hand account of his purgatorial tour through the dilapidated multi-family dwelling. For readers unaware of the landmark structure, the Martin quote substantiates the historical specificity of the building, anchoring the poet’s imaginative inhabitation to an actual address where the building once stood. Given the fact that “In the Mecca” marks Brooks’s last book with the mass-market publisher Harper and Row, Martin’s perspective would be the one with which her predominately white readership would most closely identify. He offers a detached account of the “great gray hulk of bricks, four stories high, topped by an ungainly smokestack, ancient and enormous” shot through with moralistic disdain for the dirt courtyard “littered with newspapers, and tin cans, milk cartons and broken
Lacking the Virgilian guide, the journalist wanders through what he calls at one point the “most remarkable Negro slum in the world.”

While Brooks culls the epigraph so as to exclude Martin’s racial voyeurism, she does nonetheless insist that his perspective depends upon the strategies of mastery. In the passage that Brooks selects from Martin’s article, the journalist establishes the narrative of the building, as a fall from mastery: “The Mecca was constructed as an apartment building in 1891, a splendid palace, a showplace of Chicago.” Disregarding the narratives that spill out from the dirt courtyard, Martin, as Brooks represents him, can only understand the current structure in terms of a depreciated shell of previous glory. Assuming the voice of American postwar propriety, Martin stages his article as an attempt to recover the once masterful work of historical architecture from the deformative forces of ungainly black living. Martin’s prose renders the complicated culture of the inner city dwelling legible to individuals who have no familiarity with it. His commentary not only represents a particular frame imposed upon the text, it also stands as the representative voice of masterful framing.

The masterfulness of Martin’s commentary becomes all the more apparent when compared to Brooks’s other three epigraphs. More local in scope, these quotes come from an anonymous Meccan, a member of the South Chicago gang the Blackstone Rangers (Richard “Peanut” Washington) and a well-known voice of urban black consciousness (Russ Meek). In contrast to Martin’s invocation of a masterful past, these voices draw their credibility and authority from the current compromised status of the building. They express no concern over the intended occupancy numbers, only “How

52 Brooks, Mecca, 1.
54 Brooks, Mecca, 1.
many people live here.” In responding to this straightforward question, the anonymous Meccan quips with representative uncertainty, “Two thousand? oh, more than that. There’s 176 apartments and some of ‘em’s got seven rooms and they’re all full.” Such an answer insists that there is no way of knowing precisely how many people make the Mecca their home. Where Martin’s passage rings with certainty: “There are four main entrances, two on Dearborn and two on State Street,” the anonymous Meccan offers up uncertainty as definitive characteristic of the insider’s perspective. This sense of uncertainty appears as well in the third epigraph, which Brooks sets off with ellipses in order to indicate its derivation from speech. Stating “…there’s danger in my neighborhood…” Washington presents the colossal slum in terms of a tight-knit community, while simultaneously gesturing to the violent patterns that imperil the social space. Though he makes plain the threat, he cannot muster the certainty to name it anything other than “danger.” In the fourth epigraph, Meeks opines “There comes a time when what has been can never be again.” In declaring the conclusion of one stage, Meeks refrains from plotting with certainty the next stage to come. Rather he documents a willingness to occupy the inchoate space between what has been and what will be. Where Martin renders the dwelling legible by centering his attention on the practical layout of the building, the other authors complicate the scale of the structure by attesting to its internal affairs, be they the product of overcrowding, urban violence or potential social upheaval.

Brooks, Ibid.
5.4 Domestic Disturbance

Brooks exemplifies the uncertain vernacular of exiled inclusion nowhere as cogently as in those early works of hers that speak from the perspective of the domestic worker, her modern variation on the theme of the Roman domestic slave. In the five books that constitute Brooks’s early mastery of form period, the figure of the domestic worker appears numerous times. From her 1945 debut collection A Street in Bronzeville to “In the Mecca,” Brooks uses the black maidservant as a persona through which to reveal both the unseen injustice of domestic labor and the infrequent amusements of inner-city life. These figures range from Hattie Scott, who speaks defiantly behind her lady’s back in broken English to Mrs. Sallie Smith, who pines against herself for the plush comforts of white privilege.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the economy of Brooks’s hometown of Chicago depended in large part on the low-wage work of domestic maid servant. By 1870, one in five Chicago households employed domestic workers, who accounted for 60 percent of the city’s wage-earning women. While these positions were initially filled from the ranks of lower class European immigrants, the expansion of female clerical work in office buildings across the city provided a pathway to more lucrative and autonomous modes of employment. Such advancements left a void that would be occupied by African American women moving north in the Great Migration. Hoping to escape from a life of cooking and cleaning for someone else’s family, these travelers quickly found themselves saddled with the same responsibilities in the industrial north. Due to the prevalence of slave narratives and sentimental novels, the image of the subservient black nursemaid proceeded the the female workforce. A clear example would be Hattie McDaniel’s 1939 award-winning portrayal of Mammy in Gone With the Wind. It is against this backdrop that Brooks found brief employment in the late 1930s,
working as a domestic in the upper-class neighborhoods east of Chicago’s Drexel Avenue. “The terms of this domestic service,” writes Kent, “too humiliating to talk about at the time, stripped her of a sense of dignity.” In part then what we see in Brooks’s poems is Brooks using characters like Hattie Scott and Mrs. Sallie Smith in order to correct the derogatory myth of the subservient mammy and express her disdain for the sense of subordination that follows domestic service.

But Brooks’s personally charged interest in the domestic servant also comes to inform her thinking about the the historical, political, cultural implications of framing vernacular culture. Brooks uses the figure of the domestic to engage with two different notions of the vernacular, one which is the conventional notion of the vernacular as a literary style and another which is the vernacular as the embodied perspective an alien element inside the domain of mastery. Through fusing these two notions of the vernacular, Brooks finds a symbol in the domestic servant that privileges the politics and aesthetics of uncertainty. In holding open this space of uncertainty, the domestic becomes indicative of a larger strategy to give voice to the voiceless, to engage with the fluid complexity of the vernacular without constraining it into the logic of mastery or deformation.

By using Scott as a means of engaging with black speech, Brooks presents the domestic as internal to her thinking about the politics of language. Just as Scott resides on the margins of the wealthy family, her speech exists beyond the boundaries of standard English. In the poem “the end of the day,” Brooks arrogates the voice of Scott to address the split condition of domestic life.

It’s usually from the insides of the door
that I takes my peek at the sun

---

60 Kent, A Life, 158.
Pullin’ off his clothes and callin’ it a day.
‘Cause I’m getting’ the dishes done
About that time. Not that I couldn’t
Sneak out on the back porch a bit,
But the sun and me’s the same, could be:
Cap the job, then to hell with it.

No lollin’ around the old work-place
But off, spite of somethin to see.
Yes, off, until time when the sun comes back.
Then it’s wearily back for me."

By the second line of the poem, Brooks emphasizes Scott’s nonstandard language variety. The subject-verb disagreement and the variable possessive that produces “I takes my peek” indexes African American vernacular English as spoken by urban black speech communities. Brooks intensifies this conspicuously non-literary speech by unstressed incorporating gerund endings, incorrect personal pronouns, slang terms like “Cap the job.” While Brooks introduces non-literary material into her poem, she also adheres to more than a handful of conventional literary techniques. Throughout the piece, the poem weaves an alternating rhyme scheme (sun, done, bit, it, see, me). But the formal mastery of the poem bears its own deformative gestures. The poem opens with one metrical orientation but by the end of the forth line the poet has broken out of this regularity. While the poem upholds certain ideas of mastery it makes apparent claims on deformation as well. The twelve-line form with a volta turn before the final quatrain signifies a deformation of the classic sonnet structure. But Brooks’s engagement with the politics of literary framing cannot be limited to the reified tropes of literary dialect. This formal uncertainty between mastery and deformation spills over into the content of the poem. Brooks begins by situating us at the threshold where the master’s house meets the deformative street. Hattie’s entire monologue reflects her divided nature. Only in the act

---

57 Brooks, Blacks, 81.
of carrying out her job, greeting her employer at the door, does she get to consider the
something to see beyond the darkened parlor of her domestic days. While midway
through the poem, Brooks issues the pretty thought of Scott not needing the sun because
she and the sun are the same, at least in their work hours, she closes the poem on a more
deflated note, with Scott dreading the next sunrise.

In her 1953 novel *Maud Martha*, Brooks leaves the eye dialect treatment behind
and shifts to a more perspectival inquiry, one that allows her to continue her exploration
of vernacular liminality. In one chapter her titular protagonist takes up maidservant
work at the grand home of the “Burns-Coopers.’” Here Brooks gives the reader a first-
person account of the protagonist’s first day as housekeeper for the excruciatingly
pompous family, which happens to also be her last day. In addition to the difficulty of
the labor (“I disapprove of mops, you can do a better job on your knees”), Maud Martha
must endure the shallow prattle of her “lady,” who boasts about “the time of my debut.
The imported lace on my lingerie. My brother’s rich wife’s Stradivarius. When I was in
Madrid. The charm of the Nile.” Where Maud Martha begins with the consolation “I’ll
smile at Mrs. Burns-Cooper and hate her just some,” she realizes by the end that she
cannot endure being treated like a child, nor can she tolerate the experience of being
held in suspension between her employer’s wealth and her own poverty.

The 1960 book *The Bean Eaters* includes “Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat.” In it,
Brooks narrates in two-sections the hysteria experienced by a wealthy white family
upon hiring their first black maid, who makes the mistake of kissing their small child on
the mouth. In this instance the vernacular speaker is reminded that while she must

---

adore the standard and subjugate herself to it, she must carry out this worship from afar, never fully attempting to wrest control of the prestigious tongue.

The figure of Mrs. Sallie Smith also enables Brooks to return her nuanced reading of the vernacular back to its etymological roots. Brooks’s most significant consideration of the domestic servant appears in *In the Mecca*. When Sallie speaks in a demotic register, punctuating her statements with “aint” and clipped infinitives, her language serves less as an example of vernacularity and more as a reminder that her presence in the poem represents an embodied inquiry into the vernacular. Rather than portraying the maid’s antagonistic feelings toward her employer, Brooks expands upon this sentiment in order to include her covetous feelings for the life of luxury her dispossessed labor helps maintain. “Mrs. Sallie evokes and loves and loathes a pink-lit image of the toy-child.” Envying the privileged life of the toy child, Smith relishes the experience of adorning the girl’s head with “Ribbons. Not Woolworth Cotton comedy, / not rubber band, not string.” The “pink-lit” revelry concludes with Mrs. Sallie assuming guardianship of the child and subsequently finding merit in her new status as the wealthy mother of a privileged white child. In becoming the mother of the child in her fantasy, Mrs. Sallie transforms from servant to master: “And that would be my baby be my baby…/ And I would be my lady I my lady.” For Sallie to explain her dream for independence in terms of becoming her own lady, as opposed to relinquishing mastery altogether, reveals the poet’s own conflicted relationship with the literary frame. Her status as the vernacular speaker derives from her impossible desire for self-possession.

At the base of the argument exists the necessary link between the historical institutionalization of slavery and the postwar institutionalization of racialized domestic

---

labor. In order to make apparent the connection between the domestic laborer and the slave, Brooks includes in her poem the testimony of a former slave, Great Great Gram. In her recollection of life on the plantation, Gram focuses her attention on the shabbily constructed slave cabin of her youth. Uncertainty emerges as the principal feature of Gram’s recollection. The timber walls and earthen floors failed to insulate the cabin from unwanted vermin. Despite her vivid memory of the living conditions, Grams cannot “recollect” what it was that would infiltrate their home and warrant quick extermination. Rather than having a fully legible memory of a rat or roach coming into the slave cabin for her sister to “pop” with her heel, Gram retraces a memory that is sparked and spurned by an absent presence. What is memorable is that uncertain aspect which defies the power of identification. In terms of the poet’s intervention, Gram’s narrative represents an attempt to return the concept of the vernacular to its origins. Such an endeavor would typically signify an interest in returning an ambiguous term to its certain origin point. But even in this case, Brooks not only registers uncertainty in the content of her etymological excavation, she also performs it by emphasizing the incomplete form of Gram’s most distinctive memory. Where Sallie finds herself dreaming of an impossible experience of mastery, Gram is unsuccessful in mastering her own memory of enslavement. Yet Brooks never treats these failings as final impediments. Rather they become obstacles that keep open the contingent fluidity that Brooks regards as the central principal of black vernacular expressivity. The poorly constructed slave cabin resembles the dilapidated Mecca flats and both resound as a metaphorical inquiry into the possibility of compromising a hegemonic structure from within. Instead of representing a closed aesthetic of confirmed counter agency, Sallie,

---

62 Brooks, Mecca, 13.
Gram and the other domestic subjects in Brooks’s early work, suggest a form of antithetical belonging that poses expressivity as the site of uncertain bearings.

5.5 Let the Fair Fables Fall

In addition to using formal methods to gesture to vernacularity, Brooks addresses uncertainty through content, making vernacularity the explicit subject of her long poem. We see evidence of this deliberate staging of uncertainty in the invocation that opens the poem, “Sit where the light corrupts your face/ Mies van der Rohe retires from grace.” At one level the statement makes clear the overt involvement of the narrator, situating the reader at the former site of the Mecca building, where the Illinois Institute of Technology now stands. The reference to the famous architect Mies van der Rohe informs the reader of the passage of time that has exchanged one landmark, the gothic Mecca, for another, the modernist S.R. Crown Hall designed by Rohe. As much as the narrator prompts us to acknowledge the long poem in terms of an act of historical recovery, she also emphasizes that this act of recovery demands the reader recognize the generative potential of distortion. Only through corrupting the conventions of clarity and certainty can the history of the Mecca building come into view. While Brooks never expresses any explicit contempt for Rohe’s design, she does suggest that the minimalist austerity of his edifice makes it easier to overlook the forms of life that once clung to the Mecca buildings sprawling decay. With its exposed cantilever supports and glass facade, the building signals a general disdain for unruly excess. In the poem, Rohe’s design reigns as an altar to the sterling vision of modernity. The ideological amnesia of

---

63 Brooks, Ibid, 2.
modernity comes into resolve with the line Brooks uses to close her opening invocation, “and the fair fables fall.”

The narrator’s directive to let fall the fair fables suggests that the Mecca building produces its own vision of sociality, one at odds with fairness. In this context, fairness denotes a sense of just accordance to rules and standards, as well as a sense of light complexion and a sense of abundant beauty. Hence, the fair fables connote and array of institutional strictures, which aim at assuaging the uncertainty Brooks identifies with communal living. These fair fables recur throughout the poem in the form of pernicious institutions that offer the residents of the building false assuredness. The narrative is filled with characters ordering their lives according to certain transcendent virtues, which provide the downhearted with a fantasy of fairness—a set of homogeneous fables for understanding the self in relation to others. The excessiveness of these overlapping and inconsistent ideologies produces a discordant community in which the sheer accumulation of orientations disorients us as readers. Rather than criticize this confused swarm of sociality, Brooks finds in it a flexible durability worth recording. The lingua franca in this bewildering dystopia becomes the uncertainty that results when no lingua franca otherwise exists. When the fair fable of homogenous modernity falls, a plurality of fables takes their place. In making this point, she criticizes the totalizing premise of three different ideological platforms: organized religion, governmental legality and Western canonical literature.

The first individual Sallie encounters as she “hies home to marvelous rest” is Julia Jones, a woman who performs the role of worshipful Christian. The narrator characterizes her as existing in perpetual prayer, always “rising from amenable knees.”

---

64 Brooks, Ibid, 6.
Although the narrator deems her a saint, this brand of saintliness consists of compliance and docility, as reasonable judgment must be sacrificed for the sake of one’s soul. And with the introduction of Prophet Williams, we see the extent to which blind faith leads Julia to being robbed blind. Williams, a charlatan Christian advisor, peddles charms to the residents of the building, which he advertises by calling attention to the forms of suffering they are meant to ease. Later in the poem, Brooks lists the medicinal potions, including “Pay-check Fluid” and “Running-Around Elixir,” which attest to the good Prophet’s predatory prowess. Williams looms large in Brooks’s concept of the oppressive hierarchies that prey upon the impoverished tenants, largely due to the fact that his character is based upon an actual resident of the Mecca, Dr. French, who employed Brooks’s for a short period. Having the first-hand experience of observing a spiritual figure taking advantage of his followers, Brooks allows her skepticism about the divine to tint her entire depiction of the building. Brooks places the scene with Julia and Williams first, so that she might establish from the outset the poem’s general discontent with systems that engineer consent by imposing hierarchical value systems. Although Brooks interrogates other institutions besides religion in the poem, Julia and Williams are exemplary in exhibiting the church’s potential for dogmatic disengagement.

With religion the disengagement pertains to the believer’s disavowal of his or her immediate, worldly relations. In the context of the law, however, Brooks associates hierarchical disengagement with the police officers who arrive at the building, searching for Pepita. One might assume that Brooks’s critique of the church leads to a more favorable position on its constitutional opposite, the state. Such is not the case. When the

---

police officers appear in the poem, Brooks presents them as anything but members of
the Mecca community. Like Bartlow Martin, the officers come and go as interlopers,
scandalized by the living conditions, which they in turn blame on the residents. Brooks’s
cynical depiction of the police officers reflects the influence of the Watts riots as well as
the numerous other large-scale altercations between the black community and American
police. Unlike every other character in the poem, the police officers receive no individual
appellation or description. Most other characters answer to nicknames that reflect their
assumed identity within the group. The police officers carry the mantle of anonymous
masters, as the poet refers to them monolithically as the Law. When the Law categorizes
Pepita as a “Female of the Negro Race,” Brooks emphasizes the racial bias that reinforces
their apparent disinclination. Her most cogent criticism of the institutionalized
indifference of the police comes in the form of a rhetorical question asked by the
narrator. Summing up the disheartening matter, she inquires, “How shall the Law allow
for littleness.” Just as the “fair fables” connote both Rohe’s specific construction and the
general ideology underpinning it, the law here represents through synecdoche the
specific officers who arrive at the scene of the crime, as well as the expansiveness of the
state’s legal apparatus. Likewise, the littleness figures at once to be the young kidnapped
child and the larger class of marginal characters, consigned to the formidable
passageways of the Mecca. In a broader sense Brooks’s question indicts the national
government for its inability to protect the rights of minority citizens. The reference to the
law suggests the problem is not as simple as amending a single law but rather entails
recognizing disenfranchisement to be the ground upon which the American republic
makes its civic allowances.

* Brooks, Mecca, 8.
In contrast to the untenable sociality afforded by the law, Brooks celebrates street gangs for their allowance of littleness and their subordination of hierarchy. Throughout the book in which the long poem appears, Brooks makes reference to Chicago gang culture, particularly as it relates to the group known as the Blackstone Rangers. In the poem titled after the group, Brooks provides a view of the members “AS SEEN BY DISCIPLINES,” which renders them “Black, raw, ready./Sores in the city/that do not want to heal.” Given the racial cast of the comment, it is reasonable to assume that the reference to “disciplines” in the poem takes into consideration the postwar popularity of social science. It was after all during the time in which Brooks was working on the poems from *In the Mecca* that Daniel Patrick Moynihan published his controversial report “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” In addition to this specific suggestion, the “disciplines” as a term connotes the many hierarchical structures that appear in Brooks’s poem. It also resonates with the writer’s own earlier ideas on writing poetry in compliance with disciplined mastery. In referring to the gang members as “raw,” Brooks points up their deformative imperative, in language that recalls her euphemistic description of vernacular speech in “Poets Who Are Negroes.” While the Rangers do not appear in the titular poem by name, the narrator does reflect upon gang affiliation, through casting Mrs. Sallie’s son, Briggs, as a member of a nameless crew. In the narrator’s account, “a gang is a bunch of ones and a singlicity.” Through recognizing at once the value of individuality and communalism, the gang lives out the creed of liberal democracy, revealing the inconsistencies at the heart of Western civilization.

---

Unlike the church or the state, the gang has no status as credible institution. Brooks elaborates upon this point in two ways. First, she addresses the violent aspects of gang life, which discredits the gang as an ethically sustainable form of communal belonging. When Brooks reports that gang culture poses serious risks for both its members and the surrounding community, she calls attention to the precariousness of gang life. But failing as institution, allows the gang to triumph in Brooks’s depiction, as a model of uncertain, contingent affiliation. She tells the reader to “Please pity Briggs” for reasons we are left to assume relate to the fact that his fate is tied up with the casual brutality of gang life. However, Brooks warns the reader of the problematic underside of pity, which leads to institutional detachment. She writes, “But there is a central height in pity / past which man’s hand and sympathy cannot go.” Not only does Brooks urge the reader to approach pity with caution, she presents the gang as a counter-institution incapable of pity, which, like religion and law enforcement, offers certain escape from the imminent uncertainty of disengagement.

Ironically it is not pity that she considers to be the most flagrant instrument of institutionalization, but art, and by extension poetry. If Mrs. Sallie provides the poem with its structural backbone, its principle point of view; it is Alfred, the failed poet, and uninspiring prep-school teacher, who serves as its cartilage. Where Sallie dwells among the details of daily existence, Alfred lives vicariously through the words of great poets and writers. Alfred appears sporadically throughout the poem as the voice of mock erudition. When we first encounter Alfred, Brooks describes him in terms of his adherence to the strictures of refined culture: the unmitigated awe he holds for the act of

---

Brooks, _Ibid._
creation. “To create! to create!” is the organizing principle of Alfred’s life. And immediately Brooks describes this principle in terms of an exercise in mastering the unwieldy elements of language: “To bend with tight intentness/over […] that rebuking thing, that obstinate and recalcitrant little beast, the phrase!” Rather than surrender to the recalcitrance of the phrase, Alfred approaches it as a form of chaos that literature must marshal. Brooks broadcasts the aspiring writer’s predilection for the works of high-culture, emphasizing his worship of the canon, “reads Shakespeare, Joyce, James, Horace, Huxley, Hemingway” (ibid 7).

Although Alfred’s sense of mastery largely bears the influence of white writers, Brooks complicates the racial scenario by introducing the Negritude poet Leopold Senghor into Alfred’s list of literary luminaries. In characterizing Senghor from Alfred’s perspective, the narrator opines, “the line of Leopold is busy with betrothals or royal rage/and conditional pardon.” Senghor’s African ancestry coupled with his explicit disdain for Eurocentrism leads Alfred to associate his work with the struggles of black life lived in the Mecca. However, Brooks questions Alfred’s inclusion of Senghor on the grounds that his status as royal depends upon an acceptance of hierarchical sovereignty, inconsistent with her view of the radical sociality at play in the Mecca building. When Brooks writes, “Senghor sighs and, ‘negritude’ needing, /speaks for others, for brothers,” we see that his need for Negritude names the need for subordinates who will hand over their voices to his vision. In stating that Senghor speaks for others, Brooks implies that Senghors voice depends upon erecting an elevated stage from which he will speak on the behalf of assumed comrades. Likewise, for Alfred, the meaning of black

---

70 Brooks, Mecca, 7.
experience must be meted out in relation to an overarching ideology, a coherent system of beliefs that bound the particular manifestations of racial experience.

Despite Alfred’s commitment to the ideals of literary mastery, Brooks privileges the power of uncertainty once again by using the long poem to stage his eventual conversion to vernacular aesthetics. Basing Alfred’s development around a sense of uncertainty, Brooks portrays his wisdom to be bound up with the flaws in his character which compromise his consistent desire for ascendant order. Contrary to Alfred’s intentions to rise above the squalor of the tenement building, Brooks’s draws attention to the aesthete’s uncharacteristic dalliances. After reading from the canon, Alfred “goes to bed with Telly Bell / in 309, or with that golden girl.” Hyena initially appears an odd partner for Alfred, with his strong attraction to refinement. In comparison to the Afros of Black Nationalist iconography, Hyena’s artificial hair color symbolizes conformity and weakness. In this regard, a commonality appears. Alfred’s blind acceptance of the Western canon places him at odds with the ideology of self-definition essential to Black Nationalism. Moreover the two share a concern for appearance. Their coupling reminds us of the superficial, cosmetic nature of Alfred’s literary ambitions. Describing his inability to remain true to his virtues and ignore his attraction to Hyena, Brooks writes, “So he is weak, is weak, is no good. Never mind. / It is a decent enough no-goodness.” By “decent enough” Brooks not only implies that Alfred’s behavior causes only minor harm. She also implies that his “spiced weakness” makes possible a tender complexity that redeems him as something other than a self-hating idolizer of conspicuous intellectualism.

---

Alfred’s indiscretions deform his penchant for mastery and thus provide the impetus for his critical transformation at the close of the poem. While Brooks organizes her poem around the dramatic event affecting the Smith household, she reveals the aesthetic dimension of the tragedy through Alfred’s reaching response.

Alfred’s Impression—his Apologie—
his invocation—and his Ecstasie:
“Not Baudelaire, Bob Browning, no Neruda.
Giants over Steeples
are wanted in this Crazy-eyes, this Scar.
A violent reverse.
We part from all we thought we knew of love
and of dismay-with flags-on. What we know
is that there are confusion and conclusion.
Rending
Even the hardest parting is a contribution...
What shall we say?
Farewell. And Hail! Until Farewell again.”

The narrator stages Alfred’s transformation from harboring a blind faith in mastery to contemplating the possibilities of deformation, and ultimately accepting an indeterminate position between the two. His self-conscious desire to inscribe some lasting impression on the matter calls to mind his attraction to the refined forms of aesthetic mastery. As much as he desires to pen a memorable record of the event, he is overwhelmed by the complimentary concern over the literary precedence for such an utterance, be it the apologie, the invocation, or the ecstasie.

Yet the first words out of Alfred’s mouth stand in disagreement with the narrator’s depiction of his anxiety over decorum. He dismisses the masterful examples of literary eloquence, Baudelaire, Browning and Neruda, and in their place he suggests a puzzling alternative, with the phrase “Giants over Steeples.” The abstruse phrase, an invocation to uncertainty, reprises the popular metaphor regarding the increased

---

visibility and insight one acquires when standing on the shoulders of giants, or benefiting from the findings of processors. The image appears in an earlier poem by Brooks aptly titled “pygmies are pygmies still, though percht on Alps.” In “In the Mecca,” however, the pygmy takes on a negative quality, in so far as Brooks implicitly casts Alfred in the role of the diminutive figure, depending upon the accredited platforms of masterful forbears to see the horizon. With her long poem, Brooks shifts her allegiance from the pigmy to the giant, validating the outsized creature’s material stance and self-reliance, over the pygmy’s parasitical flights of affected fancy. In Alfred’s view, the community needs to realize its own status as a “giantshire” to borrow Brooks’ phrase. Such an image presents the utopian vision of each individual possessing the capacity to challenge the subordination of dailyness.

It is Pepita’s death that demands this “violent revers” in Alfred’s value system. Instead of holding up a set of ideals upon which we evaluate and assume a meaning of love and loss, the startling death of the young child prompts Alfred to see the limits involved in the imposition of ideals. Not only do we find this depicted in the content of his statement, we see it once again featured in his performance of form. As Alfred launches into his diatribe, he remains conscious of his status as a writer. In the middle of describing the building as crazy, Alfred stops mid-statement and rejects the phrase, and the narrator leaves it as a telling fragment. Brooks does not reveal what type of crazy object or experience Alfred begins to connect metaphorically with the building. She does however provide us with an explanation for the inappropriateness of the metaphor.

---

24 Brooks, Blacks, 97.
25 Brooks, Mecca, 28.
Alfred rejects the language of insanity and instead roots his understanding of the traumatic scene in terms of the physical body, calling the building a scar.

With the scar metaphor, Alfred shifts the paradigm away from the question of the cerebral, which amounts to a disavowal of external criteria. In their place, the scar represents bodily experience as opposed to intellectual concepts. Yet the true value of the scar image comes in connection to Alfred’s eventual acceptance of uncertainty as a method for engaging with the parameters of black social life. Dealing with Pepita’s death, he adopts a nihilistic resolve assuming that life entails only “confusion and conclusion.” Though in the place of this culminating doubt, Alfred remains committed to the possibility of meaning. When asking himself what is there to say, he does not settle for silence as an expression of capitulation. He musters a goodbye, feeling that even such limited expressions find their merit as initial contributions to the production of meaning, and not authoritative closing statements. To this end, then, the scar names not only Alfred’s conversion to radical perception, it also serves as a clear presentation of a pierced body, which suggests if nothing else a compromised frame. A proxy for Brooks’s own experience of transition, Alfred undergoes a metamorphosis that leads him to find solace in the liminal space between material collapse and ideological construction.

5.6 Gwendolyn Brooks and the Vernacular Counter-Anthem

Of all the poets in this study, Brooks is the only one who does not actively engage with the principles of field poetics, as associated with the Black Mountain School. Where they drew their models from Olson’s “Projective Verse,” she credits

---

Robert Hillyer’s *First Principles of Verse* as her poetry textbook, assigned in conjunction with the first workshops she attended, hosted by Gold Coast socialite Inez Cunningham Stark. Where Olson bases his principles in large part on the typographical layout of Ezra Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*, Hillyer rises to notoriety for his vitriolic criticism of the Bollingen Committee, when they award their annual prize to Pound, the supposed fascist anti-Semite. Where Olson implores young poets to draw their inspiration from “speech force,” Hillyer declares, “The use of slang in verse defeats two important aims: it prevents elevation of the theme, and it limits the possibilities of survival.” Although Brooks does not heed Hillyer’s invectives against slang, she does in her early work adhere to his vision of poetry as a heightened expression, which can only accommodate “slang” if it has been reconditioned according to the stable conceptions of meter and measure. For the other three poets, form exists as an extension of content. For Brooks, following Hillyer’s influence, form exists for the elevation of expression to the status of poetry.

The gender difference between Brooks and the three other poets signifies most strongly with respect to her poetics when we consider the profession she most directly associates with African American womanhood, the domestic servant. Much has been written about the role of masculinity in the fortification of the New American poets and the Black Arts poets, though Brooks never interrogates these narratives directly. Rather she couches a broadly conceived critique of societal-hierarchy in the feminism she associates with the domestic laborer, exemplified throughout her work, from Hattie Scott in *A Street in Bronzeville* to Sallie Smith in *In the Mecca*. Brooks depicts these women as figures of what Malin Pereira calls “negotiation,” in so far as they allow the artist an

---

alternative aesthetic space to question the hegemonic standards of physical and literary or artistic beauty.

Yet the major difference that separates Brooks from the other poets is that she receives national acclaim immediately upon publishing her first work, whereas the others depend upon the small presses and little magazines in order to garner a small but concentrated following. Largely because of their antagonistic relationship with literary convention, the other three poets are never given reason to feel complicit with the structures of conventional literary culture, let alone nationalist politics. This distance permits them to develop a notion of vernacularity that coheres around a stable repudiation of any rhetorical system related to the pernicious ideological platforms of containment culture. During the postwar years none of them achieve prominence comparable to Brooks. The same year that Olson publishes perhaps his most famous document, “Projective Verse,” in the often-overlooked pages of a short-run little magazine *Poetry New York*; Brooks appears in the headlines of local and national news reports, making public her Pulitzer success. Where they are considered part of a poetic school, Brooks is largely regarded as an institution in and of herself. In the hands of the white critical apparatus Brooks’s voice becomes the mouthpiece of a universalist view of humanism, and not as one reviewer calls it, “the accident of color.” The same reviewer, in the pages of *The Nation*, argues Brooks’s literary merit lies in her refusal to “let Negroness limit her humanity.” In 1968, a reporter for Ebony describes Brooks’s ambivalent position with the literary establishment, in a piece about the poet’s confirmation as Poet

---


Laureate of Illinois: “She had been one of the very few of her race to make even a slight imprint on that vaguely defined but all-too-powerful entity called ‘the poetic establishment’ an institution so exclusive and systematically racist that critic Karl Shapiro has referred to poetry as “the most-lily white of the arts.”” As much as Brooks registers an “imprint” on the institution, such is contingent upon the integrationist worldview that critics from the era identify in her poetry and ultimately use to maintain a gradualist status quo with respect to civil rights. Brooks becomes the exemplary minority voice, by way of her well-discussed ability to come to grips with her racial particularity in order to transcend the category of race altogether.

In wide-distribution magazines and journals from the period, white reviewers depict Brooks as an admirable proponent of self-betterment through rigorous submission to pre-existing standards of literary excellence. Such comments render her a symbolic participant in the American dream. In essence, her reputation as an institution is partially a product of the ease with which her work is institutionalized, appropriated into a system that is largely indifferent to any other narrative than the one that venerates its own influence and might. One can see then how her vision of the vernacular might spring from a sense of conflict. Reading her interrogation of the literary frame in terms a counter-nationalist tendency, I conclude by pivoting to a story that takes place during the time in which Brook was composing her long poem, a story that exemplifies the kind of conflict I am associating with her theory of the vernacular. In addition to understanding it in terms of a discord between what she calls “raw” speech and refined poetic form, the story asks us to see the vernacular in terms of the poet’s own complicated relationship to the literary establishment and its nationalist analogue.

Between April 30 and May 4 of 1965—only months after the swearing in of Lyndon Johnson and the assassination of Malcolm X—the Civil War Centennial Commission of Illinois sponsored a five-day celebration, observing the death of yet another fallen American. Falling 100 years after the burial of Abraham Lincoln, the celebration, which included speeches from celebrity politicians and public historians, would conclude with a public reading of a ceremonial poem written especially for the occasion by Gwendolyn Brooks. Although Brooks had not yet been named the Poet Laureate of Illinois, her status as both regional poet of great acclaim and national emblem of racial uplift made her the perfect person to mythologize the slain president. Accepting their invitation, Brooks penned “In the Time of Detachment, in the Time of Cold” a 35-line salute to The Great Emancipator, in which she refers to him as a “coherent counsel,” whose “successful moral” poses the only solution for a “ripped, revolted land.” Despite being built to last, with measured elegance and carefully wrought images, Brooks’s poem almost immediately passed from ceremonial centerpiece to uncirculated afterthought. Never does it appear in any of her discrete volumes nor does it feature in her 1987 collected poems, Blacks. In fact, “In the Time of Detachment, in the Time of Cold” only surfaces in print twice: once as a broadside distributed at the Lincoln festival; and then again in a slim collection produced by the University of Illinois Press, which gathered eight notable presentations from the Lincoln affair under the title A Portion of That Field.

Thirty years later, however, in her 1986 book The Near-Johannesburg Boy and Other Poems, “In the Time Detachment in the Time of Cold” suddenly reappeared under a

---

different title, with a radically different dedicatee. Referred to here as “The Good Man,” this new version of the poem bears no reference to Lincoln or the 1965 ceremonial gala. Instead we find Brooks recycling elements of her original title in the dedication, which reads, “For Haki, In the Time of Detachment, In the Time of Cold.” A poem that had begun as a tribute to the incorruptible symbol of American democracy remerged as a salute to the militant black revolutionary poet Haki Madhubuti. In the late 1960s Brooks met Madhubuti, known then as Don Lee, when he was an outspoken student in the creative writing workshop that she hosted for members of the Chicago street gang The Blackstone Rangers. In the introduction that Brooks wrote for Lee’s 1969 volume, Don’t Cry Scream, she praises him in terms that shed light on her decision to rededicate the Lincoln poem. “Don Lee” she writes, “has no patience with black writers who do not direct their blackness to black audiences.”

One might assume that the poem follows trajectory that runs from mastery of form to the deformation of mastery. The Lincoln poem after all announces her dual faith in an integrative America and a formalist aesthetic, while the second version deploys the revolutionary figure of Madhubuti in order to deform both the masterful dream of a unified America and the prospect of an apolitical aestheticism. Yet one must consider the 1965 version of the poem in relation to public comments the poet made about Lincoln in a review published earlier in the same year.

We remember not only the Lincoln steadiness but also the totterings and peregrination. We remember that he did not endorse black-and-white equality in political power; that he did endorse schemes for colonial settlement of Negroes in Africa and entreated Negro leaders to cooperate.

---

82 Brooks, Blacks, 510.
83 Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Further Pioneer” foreword to Don’t Cry Scream by Don L. Lee (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1975), i.
84 Paul M. Angle, “Where We Stand: Lincoln Scholarship” in A Portion of That Field (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 36.
In claiming the collective voice of black people in America, Brooks reprises the typical vernacular position of speaking of and for the people. But instead of using this rhetorical strategy to entirely deride Lincoln, rather she performs the very tottering and peregrinations she ascribes to the sixteenth president. The we of Brooks’s imagination regards Lincoln as an icon of steadiness, who possessed a faulty sense of justice and equality. She renders the voice of the people in terms that reflect an inability to praise the president or rule him out as a villain. In publicly descrying the president’s record on racial politics weeks before addressing the public forum with a poem championing the slain leader exemplifies the kind of approach that Brooks associates with domestic servants like Hattie Scott. Where Scott curses her lady while polishing the silver at unseemly hours, Brooks criticizes Lincoln while penning a piece befitting national laureateship.

That this poem appears again now as a tribute to black nationalist figure, testifies not only to Brooks’s prowess for manipulating the literary frame to achieve different ends, but more importantly it testifies to her interest in using the frame as a means of calling attention to those experiences that fall outside of the frame’s dominion. Both versions of the poem incorporate a dedicatory frame that insists only one leader can prevail as the eponymous “good man.” One embodies the masterful position by lauding the American president, while the other exhibits a deformative orientation through championing the black radical. In the act of covering over one dedication with another, Brooks undermines the exclusionary logic of dedication. She also positions herself at the intersection of Baker’s typology. While the poem frames itself as masterful ode for Lincoln or a deformative ode to Madhubuti, it instead becomes a mysterious lyric of the excluded middle.
Moreover, it bears the mark of this willingness to interrogate the frame’s exclusionary logic at the level of its content. Midway through, she impels the interchangeable leader to “Require of us our terribly excluded blue.” Depending upon the dedicatee, the blue here could mean anything from the blue of the Democratic Party to the blue of LeRoi Jones’s *Blues People*. Yet regardless of the dedicatee, the line clearly forwards an ethics of inclusion. It requires the reader to imagine the forms of life that must be terribly excluded in order to consolidate cultural power. While Baker’s theory of the vernacular professes fluidity, his categorical approach essentially standardizes the nonstandard. Both mastery and deformation become fixed points, which depend upon mutual exclusion. Unlike Baker’s schismatic perspective, Brooks’s vernacular corresponds, like that of the domestic servants in her earlier work, to the uncertain experience of feeling divided between the two ontological realms that border the frame.

With this in mind, I want to close by offering a reading of the poem’s publication history that calls into question the certainty that each version represents individually. If we think of the poems as two drafts of the same work, instead of two discrete poems, we can imagine the entire process as part of the poet’s performative chronicle of one long act of composition. The period in between the two drafts becomes an articulated silence, which indicates the primacy of process over product. If we think of the poem in terms of a palimpsest, the two versions are equivalent to layers, which fail to totally obscure the material that lies beneath. Such a model prompts us to consider the area of unsuspected overlap between the two forms of nationalism, in this case, the well-documented role masculinity and patriarchy play in the consolidation and maintenance of both imagined communities. In a second sense, more closely related to my focus, the palimpsest points not only to the individual layers but also to the spectral presence of space that stands in between these layers. It prompts us to reconsider the notion that the Fisk conference
constitutes a moment of complete and total conversion for Brooks. My interest is not in challenging the well-established dichotomy between the two periods. Rather my argument for taking serious the space between these two stages represents an attempt to understand the transitional period that separates and connects the poet of condition literature and the poet of unconditional protest.

Both of these ideals come with their own criteria for the constitution of a viable community. The first excludes the particularity of black experience in order to allow for an all-encompassing American communalism, while the second forsakes this unmarked homogeneity and substitutes an imagined black commons. If we focus on the intercessional space, we find that Brooks’s negation of the first version runs tantamount to the poet’s staging of the vernacular as an irresolvable conflict between the literary frame and non-literary material. Instead of representing fugitive speech through the typography of eye dialect, Brooks herself becomes the foreign body lodged in the system of literary establishment. In this way, the space between the layers of the palimpsest approximate the massive U-shaped hallways of the Mecca building, a colossal space out of which comes “always the sound of distant human voices—women talking, men muttering, no words distinguishable.”85 Here under the broken skylight of the historic building, one nationalism cancels out another, and the community coheres in the suspension of sovereignty. To revise Charles Olson’s epigraph for The Maximus Poems and return to the text that opens this study, to those words he overheard from Cornelia Williams, the African American kitchen worker at the Black Mountain campus, one vernacular makes many.

Works Cited


Angle, Paul M. “Where We Stand: Lincoln Scholarship” In A Portion of That Field, 42–49. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.


———. The necessity to be other than a citizen, 1950, 21:925, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.


Shakespeare Chapter 9: The Poem Unlimited, 1954, 35, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.


Biography

Jonathan Peter Moore was born in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1981. He earned his
Bachelors of Arts in English at Rhodes College and his Masters of Fine Art in Poetry at
the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He is the author of *Southern Colortye* (Three Count
Pour, 2012).