BORROWED COUNTRY:
DIGITAL MEDIA, REMEDIATION, AND NORTH AMERICAN POETRY
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A dissertation presented
by

Jim McGrath

to
The Department of English

in partial fulfillment for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of

English

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
August 2015
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

How have our ideas about reading and writing poetry been transformed by digital media? In “Borrowed Country: Digital Media, Remediation, and North American Poetry in the Twenty-First Century,” I discuss five American poets who have variously discussed and made use of particular forms of digital media in their work: John Ashbery, Anne Carson, Kevin Young, Steve Roggenbuck, and Patricia Lockwood. I am interested in these poets because they circulate work via traditional sites and networks of publication – individual volumes and poetry journals in print – while maintaining investments in the ways digital modes of writing and publishing have both changed these conventional sites of transmission and created additional venues in which to circulate poetry: e-books, web sites, social media networks. The work of Ashbery, Carson, Young, Roggenbuck, and Lockwood reminds us in various ways that constant remediation is a condition of our hypermediated lives.

The poets surveyed here all write about cultural objects as they change over time: they demonstrate how works are overshadowed or otherwise obscured by historical imperatives that desire broad strokes and tidy narratives, fragmented or erased by poor care or inattention over the passage of time, reprinted and resituated across various print and digital editions. Their writings document what is ignored, lost, and transformed in the various acts of remediation they survey and participate in, as they make their own decisions to remediate particular texts and figures, transporting older figures to contemporary contexts or highlighting the distance between an earlier historical period and our own. And they are variously interested in forms of digital media: composing work on word processors, scanning
and fragmenting digital images, mimicking digital sampling patterns, and circulating texts and videos on social media networks.
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duty in her efforts as my former dissertation committee chair, and I know how fortunate I was to have her attention and her guidance at important stages in the writing process. I would also like to thank Frank Blessington and Patricia Suzanne Sullivan for helping me think through the questions driving this work at early stages in the exam process. The rest of the English Department has been similarly supportive. Laura Green has been encouraging me in my work since I first came to Northeastern at twenty-one years old back in 2003. Kathy Howlett, Beth Britt, and Susan Wall were particularly supportive instructors during time spent in coursework. Special thanks to the English Department’s amazing staff: Jean Duddy, Linda Collins, and Kelly Gould (and, previously, Jackie Spada, Maureen Underhill, and Cheryl Delaney, among others) for all that they do for graduate students and for the department as a whole. And I don’t have the space here to give Melissa Daigle the credit she deserves for her work on behalf of myself and other graduate students in our department.

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Introduction

In the spring of 2009, I was a teaching assistant in a “Major Figure” course on Robert Frost taught by Guy Rotella at Northeastern University. At some point during the semester, I thought it would be a good idea to create @Robert_Frost, a Twitter account for Robert Frost. I borrowed the image of Frost that is reprinted on the cover of the Library of America’s 1995 collection of his poems, prose, and plays, a black-and-white photograph of the poet later in life. I have a hard time picturing Frost as a young man, or even Frost in his late thirties, the age he was when his first volume of poetry, A Boy’s Will, was published. While a Google Image search for “Robert Frost” does pull up images of the poet from this period of his life, the images of the elder statesman from the Library of America and other collections of his poetry loom largest in my mind.

I modeled Robert Frost’s voice on Twitter on the voice of a cranky, older, successful male blowhard. My interest was less in creating an accurate or even exaggerated image of the poet and more to play with the stereotypical image of an overconfident male artist with a public platform. He called out Elizabeth Alexander when she was chosen to read poetry at President Barack Obama’s first inauguration ceremony. He frequently referred to himself in the third person. He watched a lot of CBS television shows. The Robert Frost Twitter account was in many respects little more than a dumb joke, but making it also led me to some of the ideas about poetry and digital media in my dissertation. With digital technology and social media, it took a matter of minutes to find the image of Frost I wanted, upload it to Twitter, and publish a distorted version of the poet. The account gained a small following.
(mainly due to being promoted via retweets by some friends of mine with sizable audiences on the social network), and while I rarely update it, @Robert_Frost is still occasionally referenced by people on Twitter, many of whom seem unaware that they are linking their discussions or quotations of the poet to a parody account.

Like many of you, I spend a lot of time on social media networks like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Ello, Friendster, and Tumblr (among others). Creating the Robert Frost Twitter account also created, for me, a space to begin bringing the reading and writing I was doing on these networks into conversation with the reading and writing in my graduate studies. While I initially joined sites like Twitter and Facebook to stay in touch with friends and relatives, share photos and messages, and goof off, I started to look more closely at where poetry was being written, discussed, and circulated on these networks. On Twitter alone I found an impressive range of content. There are accounts like @E_Dickinson that take on the personae of deceased poets and then circulate a selection of curated quotations from their work. There are famous poets like Robert Pinsky (@RobertPinsky) promoting their work and providing links to information on upcoming readings. There are rhymed couplets hashtagged as #couplets, and haikus about current events. There are parodies of famous poems like William Carlos Williams’ “To Elsie” and @JustToSayBot, a Twitter “bot” created by Mark Sample that is programmed to write and publish new poems based on its structure. There are accounts like @Pentametron that use algorithms to retweet other users’ content to transform them into Shakespearean sonnets, and sites like Poetweet.com that invite users to make poems out of the tweets of individual users. There are self-described poets
who publish tweets that may or may not be poems who then publish screencaps of their tweets in print anthologies of poetry. There’s a lot going on here, and this is just the tip of the digital iceberg. As I spent more time tracking poetry on Twitter, I began to think more generally about how quickly texts, images, video, audio, and other forms of media are circulated, edited, cropped, remixed, and revised in these digital contexts.

I grew up with computers in our house, and my earliest memories of computing, as I watched my dad dismantle and reassemble the parts of his personal computer on our dining room table at night, were of frustrating, labor-intensive battles with hardware. I spent a lot of time in our family’s computer room in junior high school and high school, and I remember my own frustrations over an inability to view, let alone upload, download, or edit, the low-quality media files circulating on the web in the late 1990s on our modem. One of the few perks of an otherwise terrible job at an Irish newspaper in my early twenties was bootlegging a copy of Adobe PhotoShop from one of the computers we used to create ads, an act that enabled me to make very crude and dumb memes and images alongside my friends. The speed and range with which I can now cut, paste, edit, and remake digital content remains impressive to me. Twitter users now have the ability to quickly publish, recontextualize, and rewrite content about poetry, thanks to access to devices letting them cut, copy, and paste content from one context to another, the various archives and collections of material stored on the web, and reliable high-speed connections to the source of this content, among other factors. They can find images of Frost and Dickinson via Google Image searches, they can read and sample
digital versions of the work of William Carlos Williams and other poets, and they can learn how to create bots that are programmed to generate new work from old texts. They can playfully or seriously challenge canonical versions of revered poets, they can relocate classical genres and forms within new digital sites of publication, and they can publish and distribute work labeled “poetry” with a few clicks.

In a 2007 blog post for Harriet, the blog of the Poetry Foundation, Kenneth Goldsmith notes “I think it’s fair to say that most of us spend hours each day shifting content into different containers” on our digital devices (“Information Management”). Many of us download music and transfer it to mp3 players, copy and paste links to share on Facebook and Twitter, forward emails to co-workers, grab research from digital collections of academic journals and re-format it in our word processors, screencap text message conversations with friends to make fun of them behind their backs. In the twenty-first century, the digital resources available at our fingertips and in our pockets invite us to circulate, recirculate, and manipulate content with minimal effort. We live in a moment where remediation is an activity we can practice before we even get out of bed in the morning.

This dissertation examines the remediation of North American poetry in the twenty-first century. I borrow the term “remediation” from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, where it is broadly defined as “the representation of one medium in another” (45). Bolter and Grusin, among other critics and scholars, are interested in remediation in part because the processes involved in representing one form of media in another make us more aware of the material conditions and socio-cultural assumptions shaping the
creation, use, and reception of particular forms of media. The various architects of media – whether they are authors and editors, actors and directors, or musicians and producers – typically desire “that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented: sitting in a race car or standing on a mountaintop” (3-4). Bolter and Grusin begin their “conversation” on remediation with considerations of virtual reality, “with its goal of unmediated experience” (4), and “webcams,” with live feeds that “pretend to locate us in various natural environments” (5). Looking back on these particular examples fifteen years after the publication of Remediation – the clunky hardware of late twentieth-century virtual reality devices; the cluttered, choppy feeds of the then-innovative webcams providing “access” to the Grand Canyon – it may be easier for us to see the visible traces of their media, as opposed to the potentially less visible presences of the media we use on a daily basis in 2015: the mechanics of touch-screen interfaces on our phones and tablets, the transformations of computers into televisions and televisions into computers via streaming services like Netflix and Hulu, the metadata records required to “call” and pay for cabs via apps like Uber without audibly communicating with someone or handing them currency.

As Lori Emerson notes in 2015’s Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound, twenty-first-century consumers and producers of digital media typically expect “that a user-friendly interface be an invisible interface” (3). For example, the blogging platform Tumblr claims that it is “so easy to use that it’s hard to explain,” and tells news users that “[o]nce you follow a blog, all of its posts show up on your dashboard, just like you’d expect” (Tumblr). But the ease of use here
depends on familiarity with particular kinds of interfaces: the conventions of the “dashboard” screen (and the digital connotations of the term) from other blogging publication platforms like WordPress or Blogger. Emerson documents how “the consistency of contemporary typing interfaces produces familiarity and, in turn, a kind of invisibility” (xi). Tumblr users are encouraged to make their blogs “their own,” when in fact they are limited to the “glossy interface” provided by the network; Tumblr may in fact, be easy to use, but its system, as Emerson notes about such interfaces, “is the only possible version of the user-friendly, one that claims to successfully bridge the gap between human and computer” (xi).

What do media interfaces and considerations of their visibility and invisibility have to do with North American poetry in the twenty-first century? Emerson is particularly interested in the interface – the name in computing culture for “the point of interaction between any combination of hardware/software components” (x) – because she finds it “a productively open-ended, cross-disciplinary term” that helps frame an examination of “what’s revealed [...] through what’s concealed” in particular media contexts (x). Her work examines poets writing in print and digital contexts, in large part because “poets especially have long been attuned to – even written through – the distinct material limits and possibilities of writing interfaces of all kinds” (xiv). From the fascicles of Emily Dickinson in the nineteenth century to the typewritten Canadian concrete poetry of the 1960s and 1970s to the algorithmically-generated search engine poetry of Tan Lin in the early twenty-first century, Emerson highlights the ways poets have, for centuries, revealed, challenged, and reimagined certain assumptions and ideas about reading
and writing by calling attention to “the limits and possibilities” of particular interfaces (xix).¹

This project is centered on five poets who explore the limits and possibilities of particular media interfaces and the kinds of writing that might populate these material sites of publication. John Ashbery is arguably America’s most acclaimed living poet, and as his work has been reprinted in print and digital contexts, he has frequently explored the nature of its materiality. His work has been remediated in print anthologies and collections, on the walls of art galleries, as ebooks, and as texts encoded in accordance with the standards of the Text Encoding Initiative. Anne Carson creates volumes of poetry that call their status as poetry into question and frequently collaborates with artists and publishers on the unique design, arrangement, and form of her publications. She remediates translations of Greek fragments, pages from journals and dictionaries, photographs of relatives, and paintings of volcanoes. She reimagines Sappho as a talking head in a PBS documentary, re-casts a monster killed by Hercules as a sullen teenager coming to terms with his sexuality, and reprints pages torn from dictionaries as epitaphs for deceased family members. Kevin Young borrows strategies of sampling from hip-hop and applies their methods to his explorations of African-American history in his written poetry, borrowing wholesale the language of imprisoned Amistad rebels, highway signs, song lyrics, or remixing works by Allen Ginsberg or paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat into poems of his own. And Steve Roggenbuck and Patricia

¹ Additional examinations of poetry that call attention to the presence of particular interfaces are George Bornstein’s Material Modernism: The Politics of The Page (2000), Loss Pequeño Glazier’s Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries (2002), N.
Lockwood publish texts in print that borrow methods from the digital contexts – YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr – where they first began to experiment with the writing of work they labeled poetry.

Each poet’s approach to poetry challenges, implicitly and explicitly, certain cultural assumptions and standards of reading applied to their chosen literary form. Ashbery bristles at the notion that his entire poetic output might be neatly assigned to a single author whom readers watch develop over the course of a career. Carson questions at times whether what she writes is poetry, given the presence of dictionary entries, paintings, transcriptions, and essays on Greek fragments (among other items) in her volumes. Young writes book-length albums and mixtapes modeled on the structure and conventions of LPs and burned CDs. Roggenbuck refuses at times to write his poems down at all, and he and Lockwood have published screen captures of tweets as “poems” in anthologies.

Emerson and other scholars have often turned to avant-garde and experimental poets working in digital media as representative figures who reveal and work within the limitations of their materials and interfaces. These contemporary artists are often brought into conversation with twentieth-century avant-garde poets: Dadaists, Surrealists, concrete poets, participants in Oulipo, Gertrude Stein, and others with investments in the ways technology (and strategies of remediation dependent upon particular technologies) transform our ideas of poetry. For example, Paul Stephens, observing that “the twentieth-century avant-garde was extremely self-conscious of the rapid changes in technologies of communication and data storage,” constructs a literary history that sets out to
document how “[f]rom Dada photomontage to hypertext poetry, avant-garde methodology has been deeply concerned with remediation and transcoding – the movement from one technological medium format to another” (Stephens). Elsewhere, Marjorie Perloff argues that digital poets who “move from one medium to another and back again...experiment with temporal and spatial frames” in ways that resonate with the earlier work of John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, and other antecedents in the twentieth-century avant-garde (146). And Loss Pequeño Glazier argues in 2002’s Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries that “the processes of innovative poetry may be uniquely qualified to equip us to enter and investigate the expanded technology of digital writing” (xi).

I have learned much from these comparisons and claims for the avant-garde lineage of contemporary poets interested in digital media. But I have at times found these scholarly investments in intersections between twenty-first-century poetry and materiality to be a little too dependent on examples from particular “experimental” coteries of digital and avant-garde poetry. While I agree with Perloff that particular texts held up as exemplary often reveal a kind of fetishization of “digital presentation as something in itself remarkable” (143), I also would like to apply some of the interesting observations about materiality and remediation made in the context of experimental digital poetry more broadly to poets who both circulate work in print and have comparatively larger audiences for their poetry.

For example, N. Katherine Hayles cites the particular experiences of M.D. Coverley, a practitioner of electronic literature, as demonstrative of what is new about these digital sites of composition and publication:
[Coverley] asks us to consider the print poet who types a line of poetry and sits back, satisfied. As far as that line is concerned, he considers his work done. Compare this to the same line typed by an electronic author. In addition to considering the effects of the words, this author must also decide the background on which the words will appear, the behaviors that will attach to it, the color, size, and type of font in which it will appear, whether it will have links anchored to it or not, and a host of other factors that the digital medium makes possible. (184)

Hayles insists that a digital text, unlike its relatively stable counterpart in print, experiences “changes of some kind...virtually every time the text is performed,” and is defined by the ways it is “dispersed rather than unitary, processual rather than object-like, flickering rather than durably inscribed, [and] always differing from itself rather than reproducing itself as a stable entity” (186). While Hayles notes that “print texts are also affected by their conditions of production” (186), she also downplays the fact that the history of poetry in print and digital contexts is one of constant remediation, in which texts are produced and reproduced across chapbooks, volumes, collections, anthologies, course packets, PDF files, blogs, e-books, and other sites.

The work of Ashbery, Carson, Young, Roggenbuck, and Lockwood reminds us in various ways that constant remediation is a condition of our hypermediated lives. The poets surveyed here all write about cultural objects as they change over time: they demonstrate how works are overshadowed or otherwise obscured by historical imperatives that desire broad strokes and tidy narratives, fragmented or
erased by poor care or inattention over the passage of time, reprinted and
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distance between an earlier historical period and our own. And they are variously
interested in forms of digital media: composing work on word processors, scanning
and fragmenting digital images, mimicking digital sampling patterns, and circulating
texts and videos on social media networks.

In 1992’s *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, Jerome McGann highlights
the “hypnotic fascination with the isolated author” and “an overdetermined concept
of authorship” that informed remediations of literature into critical editions that
primarily and almost exclusively privileged the “final intentions” of writers (122).
While author’s intentions “can and must be analyzed,” McGann argued convincingly
as to why “fundamental decisions about copy-text and base text should not be made
solely on the basis of such an analysis” (122). In the decades that followed McGann’s
rejection of “textual criticism [that] has the effect of desocializing our historical view
of the literary work” (121), many scholars have highlighted the variety of material
forms poems by canonical figures take on over time, documenting the ways in which
revisions, edits, and altered bibliographic contexts inform the value of these works
for certain audiences, and suggesting alternate approaches to the fields of reception
history and editorial theory. For example, Yopie Prins’ *Victorian Sappho* (1999)
documentsthe ways “sexual politics determine the production of Victorian poetry
as well as its reception,” producing an “idea of Sappho” (9) – in fact, producing “more Victorian Sapphos” than Prins can name (18) – at several removes from the poet’s original cultural contexts. Elsewhere, George Bornstein’s *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (2006) examines the ways William Butler Yeats’ political poetry was remediated from Irish newspapers to literary anthologies and collections, observing an erasure of “the historical embedding” of his work through efforts “to present it as purely linguistic and aesthetic object” (52). And Ed Whitley’s *American Bards: Walt Whitman and Other Unlikely Candidates for National Poet* (2010) invites twenty-first century readers to join “an ongoing project of rethinking Whitman’s place in nineteenth-century U.S. poetry” by describing “the critical myopia that has cast Whitman as the ‘solitary singer’ of American poetry” and introducing other American poets whose contributions have been muted or obscured by this singular view (4). McGann, Prins, Bornstein, and Whitley all offer correctives to earlier models of literary history that obscure or erase the value of a poet’s reception history, highlighting the role particular material conditions and editorial practices play in the processes that define and shape ideas about literary value.

Digital tools and publications have increased the speed, quantity, and range of remediations that can be produced and consumed. Kenneth Goldsmith compares the hyperlinked web to “an ever-evolving game of telephone,” in which “[f]ree-floating media files around the net are subject to continuous morphing and manipulation as they become further removed from their sources” (*Uncreative Writing* 77). There may in fact be a wider range of editions, editors, and sites of
consumption in the twenty-first century than there were in previous historical moments, but this free and limitless “game” of remediation is in fact played within particular constraints and limits, impacted by legal and ethical questions of copyright and access, and its terms are accepted, rejected, or otherwise complicated by ideas about the value of art that haunt digital media, among other factors. Goldsmith himself was recently reminded that telephone games are not unidirectional in the age of digital media when he was criticized, primarily on Twitter, for remediating the autopsy report of a young black man killed by Ferguson police in a performance titled “The Body of Michael Brown” that took place at Brown University in March of 2015. The mechanics of Goldsmith’s performance of remediation involved on one level the simple cutting, pasting, and rearranging of the autopsy report’s language into poetry, an act Goldsmith complemented with digital images of Brown that were displayed via digital projector. But Goldsmith’s detractors questioned the ethics of these acts, highlighting Goldsmith’s status as a white male appropriating a description of a black body, questioning the ethics of doing so in a performance he was paid to complete, and ultimately critiquing the methods of remediation as a tone-deaf form of exploitation.

In The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information (2004), Alan Liu worries about “the fate of literary people” in the twenty-first century (3), in a cultural moment where “[i]mmediate, simultaneous, and on-demand information is the engine of the post-industrial ‘now’ submitting history to creative destruction” (8). Liu argues that “the job of literature and the arts” in such a moment is “history,” a particularly “dark kind of history” that is dedicated to “committing
acts of destruction against what is most valued in knowledge work – the content, form, or control of information” (8). The poets I examine here bring the historical dimensions of their hypermediated lives into sharp relief, calling our attention to the conditions shaping their encounters with cultural objects, their ideas of poetry, and their uses of particular media to write and publish poetry. They document and contribute to ongoing projects of remediation, sampling from the past while simultaneously excavating the agents that gave shape to that past. They at times refute or re-shape historical material to bring it more fully to bear on their present experiences, as their autobiographical impulses bring particular texts, literary figures, and other artifacts to bear on their subjective experiences. They are also acutely self-aware of the processes that will eventually revise, transform, or erase their own work in future remediations beyond their control. These poets create studies of remediation that may prove highly instructive to authors and consumers of digital media inhabiting spaces where their work and their words are in a state of constant remediation.

I borrowed the title of a poem by Kevin Young for my dissertation title. In Young’s poem “Borrowed Country,” from his 2008 collection For the Confederate Dead, the “Borrowed Country” is both a country house that he and his wife are literally borrowing from her mother and the country of America. “Borrowed Country” appears in a sequence of poems titled “Americana” in which Young tours various part of the country. In Young’s America, “only / the milk makes sense,” because it “expires” (97). Everything else seems to overstay its welcome, refuse to stay buried, resist erasure, stink up the fridge. Young leads his readers on a journey
through a South that “knows ruin & likes it” (67), into woods “filled with soggy / shallow graves,” through cemeteries where “You would expect silence / or at least reverence,” but “instead there’s only noise” (100). Viewed through these lenses, the country is always a “borrowed country,” a space where the traces of the past and the travels taken by objects and individuals are ever-present. As we grow more accustomed to the speed and ease with which we borrow, copy, remake, and remediate the world around us through digital tools and forms of media, Young and the other poets assembled here make visible the activities, benefits, losses, and costs of these acts of remediation.

These poets are also writing work that circulates widely and is read by a range of readers in a historical moment when poetry's demise is again being proclaimed in editorials and columns (among other places). A 2013 research report written by the National Endowment for the Arts found that “[p]oetry reading in particular has shown a pattern of long-term decline” (44). For example, when “overall reading rates” in the United States rose between 2002 and 2008, “the poetry-reading rate dropped by 31 percent over that [same] period” (46). Citing these numbers in a glib editorial that coincided with the April “National Poetry Month” initiative in 2015, *Washington Post* journalist Christopher Ingraham suggests that the Internet’s emergence as an increasingly ubiquitous resource for information in mid-1990s America may have played a considerable role in the decline of poetry, noting that “for 20 years, readers have been taking their attention elsewhere” (Ingraham). Evidence of readers who do head online for poems or information about poetry gathered via search engine metrics reveals that “poetry
searches account for only about one fifth of the total search volume they accounted for ten years ago,” and “the cyclical ups and downs of the poetry search trend generally follow the contours of the academic year,” a trend that indicates to Ingraham that “much of the online interest in poetry is driven by students looking for help with their coursework, rather than adults reading it for pleasure” (Ingraham).

This narrative of loss is one story we might tell about the state of American poetry in the twenty-first century. The story of the emergence of a new avant-garde via the emerging body of digital poets is another narrative, one that is limited in terms of its reach but nonetheless more generative than the image of poetry found in the NEA’s report. But there are other stories to tell about the state of poetry in the twenty-first century. In 1991’s The Textual Condition, Jerome McGann defines poetry as “language that calls attention to itself, that takes its own textual activities as its ground subject” and argues that “the object of poetry is to display the textual condition” (10). This project highlights moments when the textual conditions that inform our approach to poetry, and I have chosen particular poets whose work and reception document the benefits of exploring these conditions and their implications.

Chapter 1: Ashbery Incorporated

“Much of your time has been occupied by creative games

Until now, but we have all-inclusive plans for you.”
Blank Canvas

In 2008, John Ashbery became the first living American poet to have his work collected in the prestigious Library of America Series. According to the editorial note that appears on all books in this series, *Collected Poems 1956-1987* “will last for generations and withstand the wear of frequent use” (LOA). Ashbery’s poems have been reprinted here on “acid-free lightweight opaque paper,” material that “meets the requirements for permanence of the American National Standards Institute” and “will not turn yellow or brittle with age” (LOA). The Library of America notes that it was founded and funded in order “to preserve our nation’s literary heritage by publishing, and keeping in print, authoritative editions of America’s best and most significant writing” (LOA). But the organization is dedicated to more than just the act of preservation: it participates in the remediation of Ashbery’s poetry as explicitly canonical, American, and timeless. Ashbery and other authors become, via the Library of America, products of America made pure via editions with “[s]ewn bindings [that] allow the books to open easily and lie flat,” with poems arranged on pages “designed for readability as well as elegance” (LOA). John Ashbery, on the cover of *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, becomes “Ashbery,” his name writ large, in white cursive text set in a font that mimics handwriting, on a black cover above a red, white, and blue band.

This chapter examines several sites – print and digital -- where Ashbery and his poetry are remediated: printings and reprintings of individual volumes in print and digital editions, collections like the Library of America’s *Collected Poems 1956-
1987, anthologies, Wikipedia articles, and online resources like the Flow Chart Foundation. Ashbery has become an important figure in contemporary American poetry over the course of his career. What do the publications, editorial interventions, and critical frameworks involved in the canonization of Ashbery tell us about claims for the value of poetry – and, more specifically, American poetry – in the twenty-first century? What is preserved, revised, and erased in remediations of Ashbery and his work as they are reprinted and digitized? And how does Ashbery document – and, at times, challenge – assumptions made by readers and critics about the relationship between himself, his poems, their various sites of publication, and their reception?

In “The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers,” a poem published in 1956’s *Some Trees* when Ashbery was twenty-nine years old, he writes that “I cannot escape the picture / Of my small self in that bank of flowers” (*CP* 14). Escape does seem to materialize two stanzas later, when the poet is able to “find words” with the ability to “[d]isplace” the “hard stare” of the boy in the picture and his attendant belief in “accepting / Everything, taking nothing” (14). But displacement is not erasure, and the poet’s particular remediation (though he may not call it that, then or now) transforms the subject of the photograph into a “comic version of myself” in the material of the poem, a version of himself that he also feels is the “true

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2 There are also works that, for various reasons, are not remediated as frequently: chapbooks, collages, collaborations with painters on canvases and poets in prose.

3 Andrew Dubois notes that “The Picture of Little J.A.” is one of Ashbery’s many poems involving *ekphrasis*, a particular form of remediation in which a work of art is described and interpreted by the speaker of the poem. Of course, description is itself a form of interpretation, as Dubois and others have documented in their considerations of the uses of *ekphrasis* in poetry (33).
one” (14). “The shutter clicked” the moment the photograph of “Little J.A.” was taken, but “words” enable Ashbery to turn the image caught on film into a different “version” of himself. The poem ends with a rhymed couplet: “And only in the light of lost words / Can we imagine our rewards.” The “words” in the penultimate line are transformed (or rewritten) into “rewards” in a manner that might echo the transformation of the picture of “Little J.A.” elsewhere in the poem. A reader may continue to hear the presence of “words” in the sound of “rewards” as well, an echo of the poem’s apparent interest in displacement and not negation.

Ashbery’s poem focuses as much on “lost words” as it does on the “words” used to reimagine “The Picture of Little J.A.” on the page. There are various kinds of “lost words” in the poem: the lost words of “Little J.A.,” who can only speak through his “hard stare” in the afterlife of the photograph (and only via Ashbery, our sole witness to the photograph’s existence); the late-night words of Dick and Genevieve, the seemingly-young, pajama-clad lovers from an unspecified time and place who appear in the poem’s first section; the “recent scenes of badness” referred to but not expounded upon in the poem’s second section; the original words of Boris Pasternak, whose remarks were translated and used as an epigram for the entire poem; the words of Andrew Marvell, the seventeenth-century English poet whose work, “The Picture of Little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers,” is alluded to in Ashbery’s title. The shutter that “clicked” on the subject of the photograph is analogous to the moment the type finally “clicked” into place for the poet preparing his work for print in Some Trees. As Douglas Cruse notes, Ashbery seems to share Marvell’s belief that

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4 The allusions to Marvell in this poem and in other works by Ashbery have been discussed at length by Andrew Dubois and Douglas Crane, among others.
“a single point of view [is] impossible, not even desirable” (37). Ashbery’s poem is able to “find words” and “displace” the “loveliest feelings” he once possessed as a child, but it is also illuminated by “the light of lost words” through its various records of their presence in its lines.

“The Painter,” a poem that appears later in Some Trees, is another story about an artist engaging with questions of autobiography and representation in his work. But whereas “The Picture of Little J.A.” suggests that a successful distortion of the artist has materialized in the poem, “The Painter” ends with its subject thrown “from the tallest of buildings” after the sight of the artist’s never-ending crisis of confidence apparently drives his neighbors mad. We are told that this unnamed painter “enjoyed painting the sea’s portrait,” but also that “there was never any paint on his canvas” (27). The painter seems paralyzed by his own inability to accurately depict the world in his chosen medium: “he expected his subject / To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush, / Plaster its own portrait on the canvas” (27). The people in nearby buildings eventually attempt to “[p]ut him to work,” suggesting smaller subjects for portraits besides the vast sea (27-28). He is mocked by “some artists leaning from the buildings,” while “[o]thers” called the blank canvas itself “a self-portrait” (28). Unable to paint, “all indications of a subject / Began to fade” in the painter’s mind, “leaving the canvas / Perfectly white” (28). The poem ends with the painter and his materials “devoured” by the sea (28).

Leslie Wolf uses the sentiments expressed in “The Painter” to dismiss Some Trees as a whole, suggesting that the poet behind them lacks “a willingness to confront the authentic ‘difficulty’ of the medium” present in the later work (226).
evident from his tremendous output, Ashbery does not meet the same fate as his painter. But if Ashbery does not share his painter’s desire that “nature, not art, might usurp the canvas” (28), he does, at times, entertain and debate concerns and doubts about the limits of his materials, and he does hear and respond to the influence of people in his vicinity who are looking to put him and his art “to work” (27). For example, Ashbery begins 1991’s Flow Chart, a book-length poem, with the observation that he is “[s]till in the published city but not yet / overtaken by a new form of despair” (3). The source of the poet’s “despair” here seems in part caused by his place in “the published city,” a metropolis he has rarely departed from over the course of a career spent in print. Ashbery may fill his chosen canvas, unlike the painter, but the “howl” heard in that early poem’s “overcrowded buildings” seems audible in the pages of Flow Chart and elsewhere (28).

According to critic (and eventual acquaintance of Ashbery) David Lehman, Ashbery allegedly once declared to art critic Peter Schjeldahl that “You can't argue with me, because I don’t exist” (96-7). In his chapter on Ashbery in 1999’s The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets, Lehman calls the poet’s bon mot “an outrageous paradox that turns out even more outrageously to be true” (97). “In a crucial sense John Ashbery does not exist in his poems,” Lehman argues, since “for Ashbery, the act of writing a poem involves an emptying of his mind, an escape from his personality, and a departure from the particulars of his daily and professional lives” (97-8). The decision to name a 2008 collection of Ashbery’s “Later Poems” Notes from the Air might suggest that Ashbery has successfully rejected the terms of his own existence, or at the very least it is a sign that the poet
continues to confidently and successfully deny these conditions, supported by the sentiments of Lehman, publishers, and others.

I find Lehman’s claim that “John Ashbery does not exist in his poems” provocative but ultimately unsatisfying: it seems to congratulate the poet for an “escape” or a “departure” that he has not completely pulled off. Unlike Frank O’Hara, a poet who, as Ashbery himself notes in the introduction to 1971’s *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, “spent weeks and months combing the apartment, enthusiastic and bored at the same time” when asked to “assemble the poems” he composed into volumes fit for publication (vii), Ashbery seems very invested in writing, revising, and arranging his work for individual volumes. Since assembling the twelve works\(^5\) reprinted in *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, Ashbery has authored fourteen books\(^6\) of poetry that have been published by major houses. Each of these publications has featured the words “John Ashbery,” typically printed in large type, on its cover. Ashbery may “escape from his personality” while engaged in the act of writing his poetry, but the published poems are always aligned with the particular persona or poetic “voice” of a “John Ashbery.” It therefore seems difficult to argue that “John Ashbery does not exist in his poems,” despite the occasional wishes of their author and the perceptions of readers like Lehman. The reports of John Ashbery’s absence, in other words, have been greatly exaggerated.

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\(^5\) I use the word “work” and not “volumes” here to acknowledge the inclusion of 1975’s *The Vermont Notebook*, a book-length collaboration featuring illustrations by Joe Brainard whose contents are not clearly designated individual poems (or poems, for that matter), in *Collected Poems 1956-1987*.

\(^6\) Two of the fourteen books, 1991’s *Flow Chart* and 1999’s *Girls On The Run*, are book-length poems.
Ashbery has been asked to contend with the realities of his existence in print – or at the very least, the existence of poetry attributed to a “John Ashbery” – on several occasions. For example, in a 1983 interview with Peter Stitt published in *The Paris Review*, Ashbery notes that the “voice” of his poetry on the printed page “doesn’t seem to me like my voice” (“The Art of Poetry No. 33”). “I have had many arguments about this with my analyst,” he recounts: “It is hard for me to realize that because I have such an imprecise impression of what kind of a person I am. I know I appear differently to other people because I behave differently on different occasions” (“The Art of Poetry No. 33”). When asked by Stitt if he has “a sense of several selves,” Ashbery demurs, noting that if he does, he has “no more than the average person,” in the sense that “we are all different depending on who we happen to be with and what we are doing at a particular moment” (“The Art of Poetry No. 33”).

Such logic runs counter to the claims and desires of most architects of literary history, many of whom value poets based on a “singular” reputation as an individual with a fixed and legible identity: Ashbery is “America’s preeminent living poet,” a solitary traveler mapping “a profoundly original course.” The Library of America claims that “[t]o read Ashbery’s work in sequence is to marvel at his refusal to rest on what has already been accomplished, his insistence on constantly renewed modes of expression” (LOA). But creating and publishing this chronological sequence of Ashbery’s work and marveling at its trajectory amounts to what John Emil Vincent calls “proleptic retroactivity”: 
The process amounts to looking to the past from the present and devising a path between the two. The past thus becomes a product of the future, but at the same time the future is stabilized, fixed, such that it can serve as an end point. That is, we are always defined in time after the fact, as we look backward to find the origins of our present. In a kind of paradox, results produce causes. (133)

From the vantage point of 2008, the editors of the Library of America collection can confidently argue that Ashbery is capable of constant renewal because they are aware of the length of the poet’s career and his various successes; it is easier for a reader to believe that Ashbery possesses a “refusal to rest” after reading *Collected Poems 1956-1987* if the twelve volumes of poetry contained therein are being cited as evidence. The option to “displace” earlier Ashberys, an avenue taken by the poet himself in “The Picture of Little J.A.,” is not offered (or at least made explicit) by the Library of America.

Proleptic retroactivity has, for the most part, benefited Ashbery and bolstered his reputation at a cultural moment when it seems difficult for one to make a living as an author who primarily writes poetry. According to the editorial text printed on the interior flaps of the dust jacket for *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, John Ashbery is “America’s preeminent living poet,” a “profoundly original” poet whose is somehow simultaneously “hermetic and exuberantly curious, meditative

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7 Another example of proleptic retroactivity, this one from a 2007 blog post in which Language poet Ron Silliman reflects on Ashbery’s career: “The writer whom FOH [Frank O’Hara] so affectionately dubs as Ashes basically had just begun to emerge” (“Friday, August 03, 2007”). The awkward syntax here suggests that O’Hara had been using this nickname to refer to a poet who did not yet exist.
and unnervingly funny, dreamlike and steeped in everyday realities, [and] alive to every nuance of American speech” (LOA). Ashbery’s poetry, we learn, “chronicles life as really lived” (LOA). The Library of America editors attempt to give validity to such hyperbolic statements by citing an academic expert, the poet and Ashbery scholar David Shapiro, who observes that “The poems of Ashbery may seem so open that they become, like Hamlet, that rare inexhaustible thing, the irreducible fact of great art” (qtd in LOA). Ashbery is presented here to readers as a poet whose knowledge of the human condition is unparalleled and as an artist whose innovations were unprecedented in the world of poetry. But the drive to make the poet’s work “the irreducible fact of great art” also runs the risk of reducing Ashbery’s work to a unified, singular voice, his individual volumes fixed points on an easily-mapped aesthetic trajectory of a poet finding both success and his (singular) voice. It does not seem coincidental that Library of America editions, stripped of their paper jackets, resemble church hymnals, complete with similar felt bookmarks sewn into their bindings.8

Ashbery appears complicit in the creation of Collection Poems 1956-1987: editor Mark Ford notes that the poet himself “supervised the publication of the present volume” (1006).9 But Ashbery’s own commentary on the contents of the volume is secondary to the editorializing printed on the edition’s covers. The Library of America does circulate the poet’s impression of the collection, in the form

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8 Thanks to Guy Rotella for conversations that shaped and informed these readings of Library of America editions.
9 Specifically, Ashbery “specified which variant readings he prefers, approved the editor’s correction of a few unambiguous typographical errors, and advised about stanza breaks where it is not clear from the original printings whether a page break is also a stanza break” (1006).
of an interview available for download as a PDF file on the organization’s web site. Here Ashbery characteristically offers reflections that seem simultaneously complimentary and cutting. For example, he describes the experience of revisiting the poems in the volume as “like having a conversation with yourself, except you can’t see yourself” (Kelley 1). Perhaps registering the similarities between the physical appearance of a Library of America edition and a hymnal himself, he jokingly compares the experience of working on it to “talking to a priest in a confessional box,” an observation he then quickly disrupts: “maybe it was like being in the confessional and hearing my own confession” (Kelley 1). Though admittedly “not a Catholic” (Kelley 1), Ashbery is aware of the religious connotations present in secular acts of canonization. Ashbery’s equating of the process of revisiting his work with the activity of “hearing my own confession” calls to mind the Library of America’s investments in publishing works that seem to grant readers open and unmediated access to their subjects. Given the troubling stakes and implications of written confessions signed by their authors in legal contexts, Ashbery’s comment also might suggest some discomfort with the process of compiling this account in his name.

**Here In The Museum**

In “Quick Question,” the title poem of Ashbery’s twenty-sixth volume of poetry – published in 2011, the year he turned 85 – the poet observes that “[h]ere in the museum we do not invite trouble / only establishment woes, sort of.” Ashbery is

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10 The 2008 interview, whose publication coincided with the release date of *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, was originally circulated “exclusively” to recipients of The Library of America’s e-Newsletter (Kelley 1).
in “the museum” of American poetry, his place solidified via works like *Collected Poems 1956-1987*. But he also continues to write and publish new poetry.\(^{11}\) If not inviting “trouble,” Ashbery seems intent on creating the kind of “establishment woes” that might “sort of” remind readers, scholars, and book reviewers that he is not a passive object of study or consideration. In *Quick Question*, Ashbery seems to be anticipating and playfully acknowledging the perception that any book he publishes could be his “last book,” in the sense that it seems very much a work where the poet seems intent on putting his house in (dis)order. In a review for the *New Yorker*, Giles Harvey notes that the volume’s title “wryly acknowledges the way in which a new book of poems, especially from someone who has written so much and received such acclaim, might strike certain people as a slightly bothersome interruption, to be apologized for and gotten out of the way as quickly as possible” (“Notes on Distraction”). More specifically, I’d like to suggest that Ashbery’s title seems like a response to “certain people” who situated the poet’s previous volume, 2009’s *Planisphere*, as the last we’d hear from Ashbery. For example, Helen Vendler’s review of *Planisphere* for the *New York Times* Book Review describes the “last look” of the volume’s final lines, suggesting that Ashbery may not publish another collection of new poetry during his lifetime. She concludes her review of Ashbery’s “self-elegies” by noting that that the image of the poet catching a final “glimpse of / the books in their carrel, sweet in their stamped binding” is a reminder that “one of these days, the carrel will hold his ‘Collected Poems’” and Ashbery will

\(^{11}\) He has published two new volumes, *Quick Question* and *Breezeway*, since I began work on this chapter.
be gone ("John Ashbery, Toying with Words"). *Quick Question* finds Ashbery sitting up in his coffin, checking in with the organizers of his literary wake.  

In “A Sweet Disorder,” the last poem of Ashbery’s most recent volume, 2015’s *Breezeway*, the poet asks readers to “[p]ardon my past, because, you know, / it was like all one piece” (105). Reasserting his continued presence to critics who take this view of his work and life (and seeming to mock them, given the presence of “like” in the preceding line, a term that is prevalent in the intellectual discourse of surfers, stoners, and high school students), he notes that “It can’t have escaped your escaped your attention / that I would argue” (105). The odd repetition of “escaped” calls to mind the use of the word “escape” in “The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers,” a comment that seems to tease readers interested in a singular, comprehensive view of Ashbery for not recognizing that his aversion to being framed so neatly is documented in his first book-length collection of poetry. “How was it supposed to look?” he asks. The “rolled-up future” described in “The Picture of Little J.A.” has become a rolled-up past that Ashbery can’t help but attempt to displace.  

Robert Archambeau observes that “[i]f not exactly all things to all people, Ashbery is, at any rate, many things to many people” (3). Ashbery’s usefulness “to representatives of all quadrants of the American poetic field” has contributed greatly, Archambeau argues, to his stature as “one of the most canonical American poets of our time” (3):  

For some, Ashbery carries into our own time the great tradition that runs from Keats through Wallace Stevens (people like this write articles with titles
such as “John Ashbery’s Revision of the Post-Romantic Quest”). For others, he is the great linguistic innovator who inaugurated a new era in poetry with *The Tennis Court Oath* (people like this write articles with titles such as “Nimbus of Sensation: Eros and Reverie in the Poetry of John Ashbery and Ann Lauterbach”). For still others, Ashbery is the most personal and private of poets (people like this write articles with titles such as “John Ashbery: The Self against Its Images”). And for some, he is a representative of the gay male community (people like this write articles with titles such as “Reports of Looting and Insane Buggery behind Altars: John Ashbery’s Queer Politics”) (2-3).

Ashbery sounds here like a literary Rorschach test, with each critic seeing a different image that tells us more about the viewer than the object under consideration. While I agree that there are clearly various stakeholders and a range of claims being made for Ashbery’s value as a poet, I think Archambeau’s description here ignores the power dynamics and connections between the various quadrants of the American poetic field outlined here.

For example, the edit history of John Ashbery’s Wikipedia page documents moments when readers with seemingly-incompatible approaches to reading Ashbery emerge to dispute the image of the poet created by the online encyclopedia’s authors. Over a series of days in June of 2008, an editor named “Nightspore” fought to retain the presence of hyperlinks to blog posts about Ashbery’s collection *Three Poems* in a collection of “External Links” on the poet’s page. The posts were written by Ron Silliman, a Language poet and critic whose blog
was a popular reading destination on the web in the early twenty-first century for many readers looking for discussions of poetry online. Every time Nightspore would post the links, another editor – whose identity was only revealed by his or her computer’s IP address – would quickly remove the connections to Silliman. Over the course of the month, readers can see via Nightspore’s editorial commentary that he is increasingly frustrated by the “desultory” and “tireless” acts of “vandalism” committed to this section of the page via the removal of Silliman’s links (“John Ashbery: Revision History”). No explanation was provided by the editor (or editors) who erased the links. No reference to Silliman appears on John Ashbery’s Wikipedia page as of this writing.

Silliman’s commentary on *Three Poems* seems relatively innocuous, though its claims reflect its author’s investments in an Ashbery who should ideally reinvent himself with each new publication. Silliman begins his discussion of the 1972 volume by noting that Ashbery’s previous volume, 1970’s *Rivers and Mountains*, “offered little that was formally new or different from his earlier work” (“Tuesday, July 31, 2007”). *Three Poems*, which Silliman claims “introduce[ed] into American

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12 Silliman created his blog using the free hosting service Blogger in 2002. According to *Poets.org*, “[w]ithin three years, Silliman’s Blog had received over 500,000 visitors for its daily examination of poetry, the arts, and contemporary society” (Silliman). These numbers may be small when compared to the number of visitors reading gossip and entertainment blogs, but the half-a-million figure is impressive for a site that, for the most part, was devoted to reading and discussing poetry.

13 An IP address, or Internet Protocol address, reveals the location of the device being used by the editor, but no additional details. Wikipedia users are encouraged to create user names and profiles when editing, and excessive instances of vandalism (or other violations of Wikipedia’s policies) can result in an IP address being blocked by Wikipedia administrators (“Blocking IP Addresses”). IP addresses are particularly useful metadata records that can be traced to particular user residences, places of employment, etc.
poetry something that had not previously existed here: the prose poem as a serious and extended work of art, “is a return to form, in that it reflects this particular reader’s desire for work that is formally innovative (“Tuesday, July 31, 2007”).

Taking a long view of Ashbery’s career, Silliman argues that Three Poems is his “best and most important” book (“Friday, August 10, 2007”), and aligns it with what he calls the poet’s “One Offs”: books that disrupt the “mature rhythm” of Ashbery’s preference for “lyric collections” in the form of “unrepeated, potentially even unrepeatable projects,” experiments with long-form poetry, prose poems, and other modes of writing (“Friday, August 3, 2007”).

Silliman’s posts on Three Poems are informal and contain claims that are not necessarily substantiated with the kind of intellectual rigor readers might expect in a journal article or book-length academic study: we don’t get much in terms of a justification, for Silliman’s claim that Three Poems is Ashbery’s “best” book, and the comments made about the volume’s stature as America’s introduction to prose poetry are not supported extensively and seem dubious. But the reasons for Silliman’s exclusion from Ashbery’s Wikipedia page seem to stem more from the approach to poetry Silliman and his fellow Language poets privilege. A more explicit critique of a particular critical lens manifests in a series of edits from early February 2007, when a “Criticism” section is added to the page. Initially, the only content in the section is a quote on Ashbery from a review of 2006’s Break, Blow, Burn: Camille

14 The other “One Offs” are, according to Silliman, The Tennis Court Oath, Rivers and Mountains, The Vermont Notebook, "possibly As We Know," Flow Chart, and Girls on the Run (“Friday, August 3, 2007”).

John Ashbery would have given us dozens more poems as thrilling as his jeu d’esprit about Daffy Duck if he had never been raised to the combined status of totem pole and wind tunnel, in which configuration he produces one interminable outpouring that deals with everything in general, with nothing in particular, can be cut off at any length from six inches to a mile, and will be printed by editors who feel that the presence in their publication of an isotropic rigmarole signed with Ashbery’s name is a guarantee of seriousness precisely because they don’t enjoy a line of it. (qtd. in “John Ashbery,” 4 February 2007 edits)

Two days later, an editor (Nightspore again, in fact!) removes the James quote, on the grounds that it is “a pointless jibe from a fifth rate critic, and reduces the neutrality of the article” (“John Ashbery Revision History”). A series of revisions and attendant commentary between Nightspore and an editor named “88888” takes place, in which the latter defends James as “ok on poetry [sic]” and argues that “Ashbery divides critics,” while Nightspore claims that “no one thinks James is a person of any importance” and that “he’s not really a lit critic [sic]” (“John Ashbery Revision History”). A third party, an editor named “Sighrik,” eventually

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15 A reference to “Daffy Duck in Hollywood,” a poem that was first collected in 1977’s _Houseboat Days._
16 For more information on Wikipedia’s approach to “neutrality,” read the Wikipedia page titled “Wikipedia: Neutral point of view.” For commentary on Wikipedia’s implementation on a “neutral point of view,” see Marshall Poe’s “A Closer Look at the Neutral Point of View (NPOV)” (2006) as well as more recent online discussions of Wikipedia controversies surrounding the “Gamergate” movement and the presence / contributions of female editors on the site.
steps in and supports Nightspore’s decision to remove the James quote; the entire “Criticism” section is removed, in fact, and sections listing “Secondary Sources” and “External Links” (documented without much commentary beyond information on publishers and publication dates) become places where curious Wikipedia readers can gain access to criticism of Ashbery and his work. That being said, these lists are obviously subjective: for example, for much of the page’s history they privilege criticism published by authors with their own Wikipedia pages (Harold Bloom, Marjorie Perloff, Helen Vendler) or links published by organizations like The Poetry Foundation and The Electronic Poetry Center. There are what may appear to some readers to be anomalies: a suggestion to consult *The Velvet Years: Warhol’s Factory 1965-1967*, a book rarely cited in academic studies of Ashbery, remains on the Wikipedia page as of this writing, and a self-published “Criticism of Ashbery’s *Farm Implements and Rutabagas on a Landscape* [sic]” was added to the page by its author and survived a series of revisions until it was erased.

The Wikipedia page for John Ashbery was created on July 3rd, 2003. It contains incorrect information on his place of birth (listing Sodus, where his family relocated to after his birth in Rochester), an incomplete list of his publications, and privileges references to the awards received by *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* and to the poet’s affiliations with Harvard and Columbia. His poetry is described in two sentences: “Ashbery’s works are characterized by a free-flowing, often disjunctive syntax, extensive linguistic play, often infused with considerable humor, and a prosaic, sometimes disarmingly flat or parodic tone. The play of the human mind is the subject of a great many of his poems” (“John Ashbery”, 3 July 2003 edits). This
story of Ashbery’s poetic output and modes of operating here has a “flat, sandpapered look” to it (497). Ashbery notes in “Pyrography,” a poem from 1977’s *Houseboat Days*, that such a description would fit “the history of our time” were it devoid of “unimportant details” (496). Wikipedia and its editors strive for a kind of history that is both “neutral” and “stable” (“Featured article criteria”), while Ashbery reminds us that “The land wasn’t immediately appealing; we built it / Partly over with fake ruins, in the image of ourselves” (496).

**A Vast Unraveling**

“These Lacustrine Cities” is the first poem in *Rivers and Mountains*, the first book of Ashbery’s poetry to appear after 1962’s *The Tennis Court Oath*. *The Tennis Court Oath* is perhaps the most controversial work in Ashbery’s oeuvre (thus far), due to the range of “allegiances for or against” its aesthetic merits laid out by “strong and committed critics” like Harold Bloom and Charles Bernstein (DuBois 28-29). Marjorie Perloff argues that some of the champions of Ashbery who materialized after 1975’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* won the “triple crown” of literary awards – The Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, The National Book Award, and The National Book Critics Circle Award – made claims for Ashbery’s inheritance of a more culturally-acceptable modernist tradition by “erasing” works like *The Tennis Court Oath* from their evaluations of the poet (“Normalizing John Ashbery”). It is tempting to read “These Lacustrine Cities” as a response to the poor reception of the

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17 Interestingly, the promotional text for a 35th anniversary edition of *The Tennis Court Oath* found on the Wesleyan University Press web site contains several references to the awards won by Ashbery for *Self-Portrait*, a volume that was published thirteen years after *The Tennis Court Oath*.

18 The 1975 edition of *Self-Portrait* was published by Viking; since 1976, Penguin has reprinted the volume, with information about its awards adorning its cover.
previous volume. The poem addresses someone who “has been occupied by creative
games” who now must face the “all-inclusive plans” of its speaker and his
companions (125). Looking back on this period in an interview with The Paris
Review, Ashbery notes that he “was kind of fooling around and trying to do
something I hadn’t done before” in The Tennis Court Oath (Stitt). But one gets the
sense that at the time of Rivers and Mountains, he felt that he had little time to nurse
“some private project” when “the past is already here,” accompanied by its
attendant claims and serious expectations for the value of poetry (125).

*Houseboat Days* is the first collection of Ashbery’s poetry to appear after the
success of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. In a 2003 interview with Mark Ford,
Ashbery claims that he was not “consciously” responding to “the impact of [*Self
Portrait’s*] success” on his sense of self in “Daffy Duck in Hollywood,” one of the
volume’s longer poems (56). But it is difficult to ignore the frequency with which
ideas about tradition and the value of poetry appear in the collection, in poems
titled “The Other Tradition,” “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name,” and “What Is
Poetry,” among others. John Shoptaw reads the poems in *Houseboat Days* as
showing “Ashbery’s keen awareness of his new status as a member of the visible
avant-garde” (192). Andrew Epstein reads in this heightened awareness
“discomfort...with his newfound fame and critical acclaim, his induction into the
mainstream of American poetry” (277).

“Street Musicians,” the collection’s first poem, finds Ashbery “cradl[ing] this
average violin that knows / Only forgotten showtunes,” its music “anchored / To a
dull refrain” (491). *Houseboat Days* begins with the image of an artist mourning the
loss of a fellow musician, his soul “wrenched out,” his days spent “walking the streets / Wrapped in an identity like a coat,” his travels taking him “through increasingly suburban airs” (491). Later, in “Collective Dawns,” we learn that “[t]he old poems / In the book have changed value once again” (494). Ashbery calls our attention to the “black letter” of these works, print which “[f]ools only themselves into ignoring their stiff, formal / qualities” (494). Regardless of the material claims made on behalf of their authors and publishers for the value of these words at one point in time, they are now confined to “a weird ether of forgotten dismemberments” (494). Ashbery confronts these truths at dawn, named here “[t]he time of all forgotten / Things,” perhaps in an attempt to combat the positive connotations of the start of the new day, which he suggests is “the dawn’s / Coming up with the same idiot solution under another guise” (494). The poet suggests that his poem must inevitably contend with the presence of these positive connotations in the minds of readers, perceptions that leave his intended deviations “scrambled” (494). Though the poet ends the poem feeling “saved” from both “the mill pond of chill doubt / As to my own viability” and “the proud village of bourgeois comfort and despair,” he also seems to mourn the loss of the “guesswork” that has been “taken out” of the activity of reading, supplanted by “the pattern” of expectation (494).

“And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name” begins with Ashbery informing his readers that “[y]ou can’t say it that way any more” (519). Shoptaw describes the poem’s first line as a “parodic” remediation of Ezra Pound’s famous declaration to

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19 Epstein reads “Street Musicians” as a poem both “generally about friendship and rivalry” and more specifically concerned with “Ashbery’s divergence from [Frank] O’Hara and his work” (278-9).
“Make it new” (519). Ashbery’s revision rejects tradition but offers little in the way of advice: it is more an admonishment. But to who? The rest of the poem offers playful invitations to include a range of potential material in a poem: “whatever funny happens to you” is fair game, as are flowers and “[n]ames of boys you once knew” (519). The insistence on adding “a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed, / Dull-sounding ones” suggests that Ashbery cares little here for the scholars in the audience, suggesting both that such readers are looking more for material to mine in the performance of their own roles as intellectuals and that “[t]o demand more than this would be strange” and at odds with the mission of poetry (519). The acknowledgement of an inability to control what readers and later generations might think of the work is as present here as it was in “Collective Dawns,” but here the realization that readers will “desire to understand you and desert you / For other centers of communication” proves less troubling and bleak for the poet (520). Though Ashbery will later feel “despair” when returning to the “published city” of the early lines of Flow Chart, at this juncture he takes the long view on particular readers looking to control his mobility with their claims about his value, foreseeing their departure for other terrain.

In “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” Ashbery quotes Giorgio Vasari’s description of Francesco Parmigianino’s attempt to “take his own portrait,” a project in which “he set himself / With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass” (68). Ashbery extends Vasari’s description a few lines later: “The glass chose to reflect only what he saw / Which was enough for his purpose: his image / Glazed, embalmed, projected at a 180-degree angle” (68). There is no mention of “great art”
in Ashbery’s description of what Parmigianino saw in the glass. Christopher Nealon suggests that Ashbery “plumbs the implications of the painter’s painstaking representation of the distortions of figure produced by a curved mirror” and is shocked to find Parmigianino “structurally imprisoned” within the painting, “part of [the] material” (98). There is no “great art” here, in the sense that Parmigianino’s efforts reveal that “the soul is not a soul, / Has no secret, is small, and it fits / Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention” (69). Ashbery jokingly notes (via Vasari) that “Pope Clement and his court were ‘stupefied’” by the painting, “and promised a commission / That never materialized,” suggesting that their results of its investigation may be troubling to religious inquisitors unable to conjure a reproof to Parmigianino’s work that matched its materiality (69).

In Parmigianino’s painting, Ashbery witnesses “the chaos / Of your round mirror which organizes everything” (71). He describes the painting’s implications as troubling. He sees in its implications that “everything is surface,” and that “there are no words for the surface, that is, / No words to say what it really is, / that it is not / Superficial but a visible core... / No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience” (70). Parmigianino’s portrait “hints at / our own, which we were hoping to keep hidden” (79). But there is relief in rejecting “those assholes / Who would confuse everything with their mirror games” (79). Nealon reads in these lines an attack on critics, specifically those “trying to crawl back into the art of the past” in lieu of confronting a dynamic and unfolding present (103). You “can’t live” in a museum, Ashbery notes, a place where “all time” has been flattened and reduced to “no
special time" by its curators and architects, who have arranged everything in a neat trajectory (79).

Fans of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" have seemed at times guilty of performing mirror games “[w]hich seem to multiply stakes and possibilities,” readers who “confuse issues by means of an investing / Aura” (79). For example, Alfred Corn quickly moves from noting that he doesn’t “understand every line” in the poem to declaring that its principle theme is “that art is like a distorted mirror wherein we discover a more engaging, mysterious, and enduring image of ourselves than unmediated experience affords” (89). But Ashbery more intent on “renouncing the portrait” by the end of his poem rather than plumbing its depths any further: Anita Sokolsky finds in its final lines a rejection of Parmigianino’s work and its implications, an ending that “dismantles the image and thus what it reflects” (248-50). He revises the painting in less devout terms, joking that its perspective resembles the activity of “looking through the wrong end / Of the telescope” (82). He mocks the “naturalness” it aspires to, comparing the “gesture of welcome etched / On the air materializing behind it” to what is “materialized / In the disguising radiance of my room” (82), a less glamorous image comparable to “the gibbous / Mirrored eye of an insect” (82). The insect’s vision is smaller but also naturally multiplied by its fractured gaze, suggesting that there are other performances of natural or authentic vision beyond the globe of Parmigianino.

Towards the end of “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” Ashbery sententiously declares that “Today has no margins” (79). "Each person / Has one big theory to explain the universe,” he claims, “But it doesn’t tell the whole story” (81).
Ashbery clearly continues to write within the margins afforded his perspective in its material conditions, conscious at times of feeling too “confined” by an awareness of the limits of his “[p]arameter,” limits mapped by Parmigianino (83). Changed by the revelations derived from his encounter with the painting, he nonetheless seems, in *Houseboat Days*, content to reflect in print on his desire to “live / In the interstices, between a vacant stare and the ceiling” (“Saying It to Keep It from Happening,” 509). He even seems to acknowledge that some likeminded readers have begun to cease their mirror games, noting in “Saying It to Keep It from Happening” that “[t]he consensus gradually changed; nobody / Lies about it any more” (509).

In a 2001 interview, Anne Carson was asked about previous statements she had made in which she expressed feeling “troubled” by Ashbery’s poetry (Streckfus 218). Carson clarifies her point of view, noting that in Ashbery’s work she finds that “there’s a puzzle presented that the author himself turns away from” (219). More generous readers of Ashbery find the poet “aware of the unframed and unframeable nature of experience” (Kalstone 95) and under no obligation to “reject the mystique of language” in the wake of the revelations arrived at while considering Parmigianino’s work (Sokolsky 249). But I agree that Ashbery’s final thoughts in “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” after so much time spent with “the painter’s / Reflected face, in which we linger,” frustrate as they depart or disavow the implications of materiality raised throughout the poem. For Ashbery, “the hues have turned metallic” and “[t]he curves and edges” of the painting “are not so rich” (81).
Who are the patrons of the Library of America? The image below [Fig. 1] was taken in the Somerville warehouse of the Harvard Book Store, one of the oldest and most successful independent bookstores in Massachusetts (and the United States), during one of its sales events.

Figure 1: Instagram photo from the official Harvard Book Store account (@harvardbookstore) of discounted copies of Library of America editions at a June 2015 warehouse sale.
Visible in the foreground of the image are stacks and stacks of unsold, heavily discounted copies of Library of America editions. Though there may be several explanations as to why so many of them are part of the sale, one particular explanation – that customers frequenting the Harvard Book Store’s brick-and-mortar and digital storefronts may not be buying many Library of America editions – left me wondering who the target audience or audiences are for Library of America editions like *Collected Poems 1956-1987*. A banner advertising the Library of America on its home page notes that the company provides “Authoritative texts of great American writing” to its customers (loa.org). Its subscription model, which invites customers to “Build your library and save,” touts a “Uniform look – available only to subscribers,” in the form of a “handsome, sturdy slipcase” encasing each edition purchased via this program (loa.org). The emphasis on the uniformity and general “handsomeness” of its publications suggests that the Library of America considers these volumes aesthetic objects whose “sturdy” material conditions bolster the literary authority their editorial frameworks insist upon. Readers who value the work of Ashbery and other authors in the Library of America series might look upon the Harvard Book Store’s Instagram feed and despair, seeing, via the stacks of unsold works, a contemporary American culture that cares little for literary history.\(^{20}\) But these are texts that are meant to be displayed as much as they are meant to be read. Encountering them in the midst of a clearance sale, with their black covers defaced by stickers indicating their reduced value, brings the

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\(^{20}\) For the record, most comments under the photo in [Fig. 1] were from people who were excited about the sale or disappointed that they couldn’t make it; these emotions were displayed via text and emoji messages.
performative dimensions of publishing enterprises like the Library of America into stark relief.

The poems that make up the core text of the 2008 Library of America collection have been reprinted elsewhere. A 1990 reprinting of 1975’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is still available from Penguin, in large part because the volume was the recipient of the aforementioned “triple crown” of literary awards, and in 1997, Wesleyan University Press reprinted a “35th anniversary edition” of *The Tennis Court Oath*, suggesting that the efforts of Language poets and later readers had successfully argued on behalf of its literary value in enough circles. Since 1997, Ashbery’s “first” volumes 1956-1972 have been reprinted by Ecco Press in a single collection under the title *The Mooring of Starting Out: The First Five Books of Poetry*. In September 2014, Open Road Media, a self-described “digital publisher and multimedia content company,” published e-book editions of seventeen individual volumes of John Ashbery’s poetry, including all but three of the volumes reprinted in

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21 In addition to the twelve volumes, the Library of America edition features a selection of “Uncollected Poems” from the 1956-1987 period and appendix materials composed and compiled by editor Mark Ford and the Library of America: a twelve-page “Chronology” of Ashbery’s life, a “Note on the Texts” (with information on where poems originally appeared in print, what is missing from the period of 1956-1987 from the volume, notes on where stanza breaks occur at the bottoms of pages in the edition, and a brief note on minor revisions made to the language of Ashbery’s poems after their initial publication), a fourteen-and-a-half page section of “Notes” (with information about select allusions present in Ashbery’s poems, translations of brief passages not in English, and descriptions of historical persons and references), and an Index of Titles and First Lines.

22 As Mark Ford notes in the “Note on the Texts” in *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, Ashbery’s “debut” volume, *Turandot and Other Poems*, was published in 1953 by the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, but its status as one of several “limited editions by small presses” in Ashbery’s body of work has apparently disqualified it from the title of “first” volume recognized by the Library of America, Ecco, and other publishers and scholars (1006).
the Library of America edition.\textsuperscript{23} And thanks to digital marketplaces for secondhand books like eBay, Amazon, and abe-books, contemporary readers can readily find most if not all of the various editions of Ashbery’s publications should they be willing to spend additional money beyond mass market publishing prices.\textsuperscript{24} Despite the “authoritative” and “permanent” nature of the 2008 Library of America edition, other remediations of Ashbery and his work continue to circulate and complicate the collection’s claims for the poet and the value of his work.

Certain texts are valued more by critics and publishers in both their approaches to reprinting and in their reorganizations of narratives about the publishing histories of poets. For example, the Library of America makes decisions regarding which texts are apocryphal in The Book of Ashbery. Their claim that \textit{Collected Poems 1956-1987} contains “the texts of his first twelve books” is challenged by the existence of \textit{Turandot and other poems}, a chapbook of Ashbery’s poetry published by the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1953. Ashbery’s ties to the New York City art world of the 1950s are quietly acknowledged on the cover of \textit{Collected Poems 1956-1987}, which features a reprinting of a 1957 portrait of the poet by Fairfield Porter. The Tibor de Nagy Gallery often presented the work of Porter and many of his peers in the “New York School” of art in its exhibitions. In the “Note on

\textsuperscript{23} Wesleyan has published its own e-book edition of \textit{The Tennis Court Oath}; Penguin has not reprinted \textit{Self-Portrait} in the e-book format as of this writing. \textit{The Vermont Notebook}, a 1975 collaboration between Ashbery and the poet and artist Joe Brainard, has possibly not been reprinted as an e-book due to the presence of Brainard’s drawings, which may require additional formatting and digitization beyond the scope of Open Road Media’s digital publishing initiatives.

\textsuperscript{24} Several copies of \textit{Turandot and Other Poems} are, as of this writing, for sale on abebooks, for prices ranging from $600 (for an edition with a “narrow strip of stain to first few pages at inner edge”) to $5,000 (for a “fine, fresh” but “slightly creased” copy), plus shipping and handling.
the Texts” section at the back of the collection, editor Mark Ford does note that “separate publications brought out in limited editions by small presses” like Turandot are not part of the edition’s chronology, though “[a]ll poems in these limited-edition books are included in the present volume, either under the heading of the American trade-publisher collection in which they later appeared or in the ‘uncollected poems’ section at the end of this volume” (1006). But readers are not given a sense of which poems were originally published in Turandot, what sequence they appeared in there, or what revisions have been made to them when they did appear in later editions. A 1997 article on the British Library’s recent acquisition of a copy of Turandot provides more context than the Library of America on the chapbook, noting that nine poems were eventually reprinted in Ashbery’s first book-length volume, Some Trees, and that “neither the title poem, nor one other poem, ‘White’ had been republished prior to the Library of America’s inclusion of them, without contextual commentary, in the “Uncollected Poems” section of Collected Poems 1956-1987 (Digby 102).

While I am particularly critical of some of the editorial decisions and publishing practices that give shape to editions like Collected Poems 1956-1987, I do not wish to suggest that all of Ashbery’s work should remain in print in perpetuity, or that reprinting practices should not waver from the decisions made by the architects of first editions. For example, I was surprised to learn, via an essay on Ashbery by Richard Howard, that Viking Press did not reprint Parmigianino’s painting on the first printings of Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, “just where and when we need it” (42). It also may be worth noting that while Ashbery did see the
painting that inspired his most famous work “in Vienna,” his more memorable encounter with it took place in 1973, when he saw it on the cover of “one of those cheap books of reproductions of Italian masters” in a bookshop window in Provincetown, Massachusetts (Ford 55). These particular print contexts inevitably shape reception. Readers of the Viking Press edition in a pre-Internet moment only have Ashbery’s version of Parmigianano to rely on and can’t compare the poet’s insights to what they see in the painting. And Ashbery can’t make his first attempt at what became one of his most famous poems without the convenience of the “cheap” edition he bought “for $3 or $4” and took with him “back to my room where I was staying for a month, supposedly to write, at the Provincetown Fine Art Works Center” (Ford 55).

As Jerome McGann notes in *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*:

To determine the physical appearance of the critical text – indeed, to understand what is involved in such an apparently pedantic task – requires the operation of a complex structure of analysis which considers the history of the text in relation to the related histories of its production, reproduction, and reception. (122-3)

There are limits to the places Ashbery’s poetry might travel in twenty-first-century print and digital contexts: there are printing costs to consider, questions of copyright, and questions about the market for particular poets, editions, and collections. For many readers, *Collected Poems 1956-1987* may be the most affordable way to read Ashbery’s work. But the creation of an accessible edition that makes economical sense for a reader (or a library) with limited resources to
purchase seems short-sighted if that edition does not invite readers to consider their own responses in light of the development of Ashbery’s reputation over time.

Some critics have argued that the influence of particular aesthetic claims that elevate poetry as an important literary medium ironically contribute to low readership numbers. For example, Virginia Jackson claims that in the twenty-first century, poetry has been reduced to a “pathetic abstraction” by critics (and poets) who are invested in an idealized view of the art form (183). For Jackson, the investments certain readers have in an idealized view of poetry – evident in the concerns about how a general decline in the number of readers of poetry in recent years could mean that “we may be losing something poetry represents: subjective experience, say, or deep thought, or social consciousness, or beauty, or truth, or literature” – is evidence of a “historical transformation of many varied poetic genres into the single abstraction of the post-Romantic lyric” (183). “When the stipulative functions of particular genres are collapsed into one big idea of poems as lyrics,” Jackson argues, “then the only function poems can perform in our culture is to become individual or communal ideals” (183). Jackson encourages scholars “not to reject the lyricized version of the lyric that we have inherited” in the twenty-first century, but to examine and document “the history of lyricization” (183).

Material sites of publication and networks of distribution and circulation are important aspects of this history of lyricization. Jackson places particular emphasis on the need to reject “[t]he notion that poetry is or ever was one genre”:

the songs, riddles, epigrams, sonnets, epitaphs, blasons, lieder, elegies, marches, dialogues, conceits, ballads, epistles, hymns, odes, eclogues, and
monodramas considered lyric in the Western tradition before the early
nineteenth century were not lyric in the same sense as the poetry that we
think of as lyric. (183)

An awareness that ideas, definitions, and examples of poetry are often historically
contingent and change over time is particularly helpful when defining the value of
poetry for particular audiences, as is a familiarity with the range of poetry and the
attendant conventions for each form that were in circulation in a particular time and
place. I hope to demonstrate how Jackson’s concerns about the privileging of an
ahistorical approach to reading and publishing poetry should also focus our
attention toward material sites of publication as much as they should call our
attention to the historically-contingent nature of our ideas of genre.

Recent scholarship on nineteenth-century American poetry has often
carefully examined what the material conditions of poetry, from writing to
publication to consumption to remediation, might tell twenty-first-century readers
about earlier ideas and uses of poetry. At the moment, similar conversations and
publications in the academic corners of contemporary American poetry seem
scattered and fragmented. There have been recent editions of Sylvia Plath’s Ariel
and Allen Ginsberg’s Howl that present readers with facsimiles of original drafts,

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25 For example, Jackson’s Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading (2008) draws
attention to the materiality of the various sites where Emily Dickinson wrote much
of her work to “measure the distance between the circulation of Dickinson’s work in
several spheres of familiar and public culture in the nineteenth century and the
circulation of ideas of the lyric in academic culture in the twentieth century” (13).
Elsewhere, Yopi Prins (2008) has examined the ways passengers looking for reading
material on the American railway system “changed the way people read in
nineteenth-century America” and influenced the meter of poems written by Robert
Browning for these particular audiences (210).
provide overviews of their reception history, and suggest the trajectory of editorial influence that have framed and shaped these now-canonical texts over the years. These particular works have undergone fairly dramatic transformations in their various appearances in print: Ginsberg’s poem first appeared in print as a mimeographed edition, then circulated as a City Lights pocket collection with other poems, and eventually was anthologized in Ginsberg’s *Collected Poems* and *Selected Poems*; the debates that surround Plath’s work, on the other hand, frequently revolve around the editorial revisions and arrangements made by Ted Hughes in his preparations of the collection, as it was first published after her death. But these recent reappraisals are anomalies in recent reproductions of contemporary American poetry. Additionally, they often privilege, for particular reasons, “definitive” editions of the poems. Whereas scholars like George Bornstein argue that “poems exist in multiple, changing forms that constitute more an ongoing process than a final product” (36), the narrative of contemporary poetry that has been constructed by collected editions and anthologies over the last half-decade seems intent on continuing a trajectory that values product over process.

In his defense, Ashbery (and his publishers, and those invested variously in his career) have encouraged in small ways other avenues of accessibility. For example, recent “About the Author” narratives printed in *Breezeway* and *Quick Question* have documented the existence of “the Ashbery Resource Center’s website, a project of The Flow Chart Foundation” (*Breezeway* 110). The ARC ([www.flowchartfoundation.org/arc](http://www.flowchartfoundation.org/arc)), a project housed at Bard College, aims to produce “an annotated, searchable online catalogue...that will serve as a de facto
bibliography of Ashbery’s work” (ARC). The Flow Chart Foundation’s mission statement suggests that it is interested in shaping particular views on poets and poetry as much as it is invested in accessibility: established in 1998, it is committed to “the study of interrelationships among various art forms, as well as [the facilitation of] awareness of the roles that an artist’s environment can play in the creative process” (ARC). Specifically, the Foundation aims to document via the ARC “[t]he engagement of Ashbery’s poetry with other literature, music, the visual and decorative arts, architecture, theater, and film” (ARC).

A web presence gives the ARC the ability in theory to more explicitly link Ashbery’s work to music and movies via audio and video files. The site’s creators may run into similar challenges of copyright that a publisher interested in song lyrics and movie stills might encounter if it insists on storing all content in one place, but there is also the opportunity to use external links and embedded media players hosted by the legal owners of these materials. That being said, the Flow Chart Foundation’s call to connect Ashbery’s work more explicitly to other forms of media can be addressed in print contexts: one recent and exemplary example of a print edition is Rizzoli’s New York School Painters & Poets: Neon in Daylight (2014), a historical narrative and archival resource that “reproduces rare ephemera, collecting and reprinting collaborations, paintings, drawings, poetry, letters, art reviews, photographs, dialogues, manifestoes, and memories” (inside flap). Ashbery is represented as an art critic (via his 1986 introduction to a print collection of Jane Frielicher’s paintings), and a lecturer (via his 1968 lecture “The Invisible Avant-Garde,” which was reprinted in ArtNews) in texts not reprinted in the Library of
America edition. He is seen in a painting by Larry Rivers and a sketch by Frielicher, suggesting ties to the "New York School" of art that are glossed in the Library of America’s chronology. There are photographs of Ashbery and Harry Mathews, a novelist, American expatriate, and member of the Oulipo movement, and excerpts from *Locus Solus*, the literary magazine Ashbery worked on in the early 1960s. And there is a transcription of a letter Frank O’Hara mailed to Ashbery and Pierre Martory on March 16th, 1959, in which O’Hara recounts a disastrous encounter with Beat Generation “members” Jack Kerouac and Gregory Corso at a reading, gossips about mutual friends, and informally reviews a recent Tennessee Williams play starring a young Paul Newman.26 The assemblage and design of such an edition requires significant resources: access to institutions and archives, the digitization of various materials, the creation of still images from home movies. But its resulting edition creates an impressive range of entry points for the works of poets and painters whose work is typically isolated from other contexts and artists in print and in single-figure museum exhibitions.

Even projects on a smaller scale require significant labor and commitments of time and money. In April 2013, Robin Seguy published “a critical and genetic digital edition” of “The Skaters,” a poem from 1966’s *Rivers and Mountains* that has been frequently discussed and reprinted in considerations of Ashbery’s work. In her “Editor’s Note,” Seguy thanks an impressive range of people: Ashbery, Charles Bernstein, Karen Koch (the wife of the late Kenneth Koch, who allowed Seguy to reprint two poems co-written by Ashbery and Koch), several institutions (the

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26 There are no page numbers in this collection, which is infuriating despite its accomplishments elsewhere.
University of Pennsylvania, the Kelly Writers House, the Harvard University libraries), and individuals at these various places who facilitated access to archival materials, contextual information, and digital tools (“Editor's note”). Digital editions and resources, like print editions, take time to plan and publish, and even literary initiatives endorsed by their subjects and aided by access to institutions and archival resources run into difficulties. I was surprised to see The Flow Chart Foundation’s Ashbery Resource Center mentioned in Ashbery’s recent collections, as the lack of work done in the site in the last decade had suggested the project had been abandoned or at least put on hiatus. I was disappointed to encounter the same Shockwave animation on its home page. Shockwave is a relatively-obsolete platform in 2015, suggesting that either the site hasn’t seen much maintenance or that its architects, despite their noble intentions, are not publishing their content with an eye towards long-term preservation.27

Seguy’s edition of “The Skaters” seeks to both borrow well-tested strategies of editors of critical editions in print and to take advantage of the particular affordances available through digital media. Some of the features of the edition – numbered lines and stanzas, high-quality, readable reprints of earlier drafts – would be easily replicated in a print edition. But by encoding her versions of “The Skaters” in accordance with the Text Encoding Initiative’s (TEI) standards, Seguy has also created a searchable index of ‘‘referential’ data such as names, places, time markers,

27 When viewing the home page’s source code, I noticed that not only is the ARC relying on Shockwave, but that it also uses a version of Shockwave put out by Macromedia. As Wikipedia notes, Shockwave was acquired from Macromedia in 2005, meaning that this platform has not been updated in at least ten years (“Adobe Shockwave”).
etc.” an examination of the poem’s use of “personal pronouns,” and a collection of “thematic data such as sounds, color, and weather notations throughout the text” (Seguy). “The Skaters” has been remediated here in four formats: “HTML and XML-TEI...high-resolution image files, and searchable PDFs of the original pages” (Seguy). Julia Flanders argues that the approach to remediation encouraged by TEI enables the editors and publishers of digital editions to “state and demonstrate the importance of methodological transparency in the creation of digital objects” (Schlitz). Unlike Ford and the publishers of the Library of America Series, who construct what Flanders might call a “black box” edition that hides or conceals its approach to reading Ashbery (choosing to believe in poetry whose value is self-evident), Seguy makes her subjective approach to “The Skaters” explicit in her edition.

Print editions often relegate editorial commentary to the margins of their editions, and the methods of annotation used in scholarly print editions can be inconsistent at best. For example, in the “Notes” section of Collected Poems 1956-1987, Mark Ford explains that “[n]o note is made for material included in standard desk-reference books such as Webster’s Collegiate, Biographical, and Geographical dictionaries” (1014). We also learn that Ford has made use of the 1974 edition of The Riverside Shakespeare and “the King James version” of the Bible to trace relevant references found in Ashbery’s poetry. Readers interested in additional information are told to consult Ford’s own John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford and Ashbery Resource Center and the latter’s “annotated catalogue of its bibliographic archive” (1014). Ford gives little additional justification for why he has chosen to
document the particular references found in the “Notes” section, which spans 15 ½ pages and covers close to a thousand pages of poetry.²⁸ To give you a sense of their range, the first note to appear in the section covering 1972’s Three Poems is tied to the thirteenth page of the volume’s first prose poem, “The New Spirit.” Ford notes here that the “Acheron” referenced on “line 11” (Ford refers to line numbers despite the fact that neither the poems reprinted in the Library of America edition nor the original volumes include references to line numbers) is a “Greek river said to lead into the underworld” (1017).

On September 15, 2014, Open Road Media uploaded a video titled “Meet John Ashbery” to its YouTube channel. The video functions as an advertisement for Ashbery’s e-book editions and an introduction to the poet and his work: we hear and see Ashbery reading sections of “Just Walking Around” (from 1984’s A Wave) and “Syringa” (from 1977’s Houseboat Days). There are a lot of quick cuts: for example, as Ashbery reads the first stanzas of “Just Walking Around,” the camera jumps from a black-and-white photo of a younger, mustachioed Ashbery to close-ups of words from the poem “on the page” (they are actually digital effects), then to video of the older Ashbery reading, then various glimpses of the room Ashbery is reading in (which may be a room in his home in Hudson, New York, based on the presence of a Joseph Cornell work that Ashbery would probably have in a room in his home). Despite the fact that Open Road Media is advertising e-books, we occasionally hear the sound of a typewriter join Ashbery’s voice when the camera focuses on the page. Ashbery also speaks briefly about his work: he compares his

²⁸ It is unclear whether the length of the “Notes” section is determined by the decisions of the editor or by other parties at the Library of America.
poetry to music “in the way it unspools,” and he talks about “the way all kinds of things feed into the experience of writing: the room that you’re in, the room tone, the sounds that you’re hearing.” The clip concludes with a brief description of the poet (“John Ashbery has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award for his poetry”) and a quick tour of the covers created by Open Road Media for Ashbery’s e-books: an assembly of colorful-yet-nondescript frontispieces that neatly, perhaps too neatly, group the volumes together.

The first line “Just Walking Around” is a question: “What name do I have for you?” (404) Ashbery tells his subject that “there is no name for you / In the sense that the stars have names / That somehow fit them” (404). His invisible correspondent is made of more than stardust: Ashbery sees him of her “wander around, / Smiling to yourself and others”(404). It is amusing that Open Road Media would use video and audio footage of the poet reading these particular sentiments in an attempt to name and describe him, to fit him into a particular role and make him visible and accessible. But e-books are one more published city Ashbery finds himself inhabiting. Despite his desires for ephemerality in his poetry, Ashbery, like the wanderer in “Just Walking Around,” always seems “to be traveling in a circle” (404).

Chapter Two: The Smell of Autopsy
“Now I too am someone who knows marks.”

“Appendix to Ordinary Time”

Error Messages

In a 2000 profile published in the *New York Times*, Anne Carson discusses her writing process:

I write in notebooks, and I write everything in the same notebooks, academic stuff and footnotes and poetry, which is a mess because you can't find anything...But on the other hand, if I have a page with some little phrase I've thought up and then a quote from an ancient Greek poet and some other comment from a philosopher, it can all come together, and get pressed like veggie paté. You have your carrots and your broccoli and it all gets squished together, and it comes out very attractive. (Rehak)

Carson's publications often resemble her notebooks: they are a mixture of “academic stuff and footnotes and poetry,” as well as transcriptions, photographs, paintings, translations, and appendices. Joshua Marie Wilkinson notes that after reading Carson’s work for the first time, “criticism, reading, writing, visual art, philosophy, drama, poetry, and prose all seemed *of a piece*” (2). Carson's messes remind readers like Wilkinson and myself of our tendencies to read and watch and write across a range of genres and media, and of the ways these disparate materials can blur together in our minds. Carson’s private notebooks and public writings highlight the proximities as well as the perceived distances between professional commitments and hobbies, creative projects and scholarly pursuits, carrots and broccoli, art and life.
In the “Note on Method” that precedes 1999’s Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan), Carson declares that “[t]here is too much self in my writing” (vii). “I have struggled since the beginning to drive my thought out onto the landscape of science and fact where other people converse logically and exchange judgments,” she confesses, “but I go blind out there” (vii). She compares her approach to writing to the activity of “dashing back and forth between that darkening landscape where facticity is strewn and a windowless room cleared of everything I did not know” (vii). The Oxford English Dictionary helpfully notes that “in existential thought,” the term “facticity” describes “the fact of existing in the world or in a situation which is not of one’s own making or choosing” (“Facticity”). To keep such dark thoughts at bay, Carson pursues an almost relentless project of making, re-making, and un-making. She commits to an aesthetic of “[m]oving and not settling,” a process that frequently involves a shifting of attention on her part as she moves from one object to another to a consideration of herself in the process of moving from one object to another (viii). For example, her “Note on Method” concludes with the image of Carson “writing this on the train to Milan,” reflecting on George Eliot’s belief that “Attempts at description are stupid,” and searching for “a fragment of unexhausted time” in the “herd of black horses...just turning to race uphill” that she can see from her moving window (viii). Commitment to this process of moving and not settling as a form of “attention” and not distraction is key for Carson. Her messy notebooks document her desire “to copy down whatever vibration you see while your attention is strong,” a kind of mess that reflects her belief that “[t]o keep attention strong is to keep it from settling” (viii).
Carson is particularly attentive\textsuperscript{29} to the material and social conditions of reading, and her work often reveals the messy and contentious histories behind our encounters with cultural objects. Fragments, particularly fragments of text, are important documents to her, and she spends poems, essays, and sometimes entire books remediating them – sometimes multiple times – through processes of description, transcription, and, at times, translation. In a 2002 \textit{Paris Review} interview, Carson describes “the magic of fragments,” and notes that “the space where a thought would be, but which you can’t get hold of” is an invitation for “the suggestion of a thought that the space gives you” (Aitken). Reading Carson’s work leaves one with the feeling that all cultural objects are incomplete records, fragmented by the hands of their creators, the material conditions of media, the architects of historical knowledge, and other factors. But these conditions are not lamentable for their audiences, or at least they do not have to be.

While Will Aitken notes that Carson “has always been reluctant to call herself a poet,” unlike some of the other job titles she has held – academic, historian, classicist – this particular affiliation has afforded Carson the space to make her suggestions more freely. In the context of publications that fall under the umbrella term of “poetry,” she seems to have more flexibility to examine fragments and pursue thoughts on her own terms. But Carson does not ignore the various forces shaping conventional approaches to academic labor or the expected roles of the historian or classicist. Carson’s perceptions of academic discourse are tied to her own personal experiences at particular institutions. She taught in the Classics

\textsuperscript{29} Sorry.
Department at Princeton University from 1980-1987, leaving after she was denied tenure (Scranton 205). She continues to hold professional titles with institutional affiliations, but as she tells Aitken, she also has reservations about particular forms of academic discourse:

I was taught that objective reportage of academic questions is the ideal form for scholarship to take, but in pursuing scholarship myself I never found that possible. I never found it possible to think without thinking about myself thinking. And I’m not sure if that’s a casualty of being me or a casualty of being human, so I decided to assume the latter and just go ahead with the project of thinking of me as if it were a legitimate human enterprise and would be enlightening to other humans. So my scholarship, such as it is, is intensely subjective. But because I am aware of this as a problem, I make an attempt to continually bridge the gap between that subjective self and the reader. So although it’s a private vision, it also brings the reader into its vision from time to time. (Aitken)

Carson often outlines the stakes informing her scholarly projects directly to her audience, asking them to confront her problems with certain assumptions about reading practices as well. For example, the form and content of the “Note on Method” in Economy of the Unlost anticipates critiques of some of the decisions she makes in her version of what some readers would consider “academic” scholarship. The inclusion of a section titled “Note on Method” acknowledges the interest many readers of academic prose have in discussions of a project’s methodological

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30 As of this writing, she is a Distinguished Poet-in-Residence on the Creative Writing faculty at New York University.
dimensions. She notes that while her subjects “do not know one another, did not live in the same era, [and] never spoke the same language,” they will nonetheless “keep each other from settling” when they are “placed like a surface on which the other may come into focus” (viii).

Some academic audiences may not be satisfied with Carson’s justification here of her decision to compare the work of a twentieth-century German poet with the fragments of an ancient Greek poet. These readers may desire more from the author of a work with apparent academic aspirations. For the most part, _Economy of the Unlost_ generated enthusiastic reviews from academically-oriented publications like the _London Review of Books_, literary magazines like the _Chicago Review_, and journals like _Common Knowledge_ and _modernism / modernity_. In _The Classical Review_, Simon Goldhill called the book an “exemplary provocation” that “[insists] that facing the question of what is at stake always trumps the observances of the pieties of a profession,” and suggested that Carson is “risking it all” in her unconventional approach to her subject matter for the right reasons (376).31 However, traces of such professional pieties reveal themselves in David Sider’s declaration in _Classical World_ that the book is a “disappointment,” in large part due its absence of a “valid approach” to its subject matter and Carson’s “cavalier attitude toward historical accuracy” (113). Sider, at the time a Professor of Classics at

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31 Goldhill makes a “risky” decision to write his review of _Economy of the Unlost_ in the form of a letter addressed to “Anne,” breaking with the conventions of the journal. Carson often inspires acts of creativity in her reviewers: for example, Graham Foust writes “‘Some Affluence’: Reading Wallace Stevens with Anne Carson’s _Economy of the Unlost_” without quoting a single line of the book, choosing instead to focus on poems of Stevens and a particular fragment of Heraclitus, works that are never mentioned or even alluded to in its pages (82-87).
Fordham University\textsuperscript{32}, concludes his review of Economy of the Unlost by expressing gratitude that he has the ability “to warn readers away from it” (114).

In “Essay on What I Think About Most,” Carson traces her definition of poetry back to Aristotle, who claimed “Imitation (\textit{mimesis} in Greek)” as a “collective term for the true mistakes of poetry” (35). The “Essay,” which appears in 2000’s \textit{Men in the Off Hours} (and whose title seems at first like a mistake, given that the ways Carson arranges her text into lines and stanzas suggests that this work is a poem), finds Carson preoccupied with a poetic fragment allegedly written by the Spartan poet Alkman before the Common Era. She translates Alkman’s fragment from Greek in “Essay on What I Think About Most” and transcribes it in italics:

\begin{quote}
[?] made three seasons, summer

and winter and autumn third

and fourth spring when

there is blooming but to eat enough

is not. (32)
\end{quote}

Carson calls our attention to the “errors” present in Alkman’s fragment, in her translation of the fragment, and in the “Essay” in which the transcription of the translation appears. There is “no explanation” given “of where spring came from / or why numbers don’t help us / control reality better” (34). There is also, in Alkman’s fragment, “an error of arithmetic” (31), as the poet includes a fourth season “in a series of three, / unbalancing his arithmetic / and enjambing his verse” (32-3). Carson mimics Alkman’s error here: she declares that there are “three things

\textsuperscript{32} As of this writing, he is a Professor of Classics at New York University.
I like” about the poem (33), but later refers to a “fourth thing” (34). “Strict philologists,” citing how “unusual” it is “in Greek / for a verb to have no subject,” may claim that the absent subject in the poem’s first line “is just an accident of transmission” (33), and that “Alkman almost certainly did / name the agent of creation / in the verses preceding what we have here” (34). Carson, however, prefers to “leave the question mark there / at the beginning of the poem / and admire Alkman’s courage / in confronting what it brackets” (34). Her error in evaluating the fragment as a whole in spite of the evidence of conventions is a “willful creation” in the same way that her decision to call what looks like a poem on the page an “Essay” is a deliberate choice (35).

Though she may be reluctant to label her own work courageous, Carson adopts Alkman’s strategies of confronting “the fact of the matter” in her work. “The fact of the matter for humans is imperfection,” Carson declares, and “Alkman breaks the rules of arithmetic / and jeopardizes grammar / and messes up the material form of his verse / in order to draw us into this fact” (35). Similarly, Carson is not afraid to mess up the “material form” of her verse to highlight what is beyond her control. Numbers won’t help us control reality better, but neither will poetry. Instead, Carson documents imperfection and curates museums of mistakes. Like Alkman, Carson may be “no less hungry” after creating the messes she makes out of the material forms at her disposal (35), but the fact that “something has changed in the quotient of our expectations” seems motivation enough to continue writing poetry.
In Carson’s reading, Alkman’s ultimate confrontation with his own imperfections materializes in the form of the fragment’s question mark. Carson offers what she feels is a more generous (and generative) interpretation of his poem, imagining its author as a “master contriver” of “inadvertent lucidity” (33). She is particularly averse to interpretive strategies that “reduce all textual delight / to an accident of history” (34). The absent subject in Alkman’s first verse could be quickly and authoritatively explained away as just a mistake, a common occurrence. But Carson is “uneasy with any claim to know exactly / what a poet means to say” (34). This comment seems to contradict the Carson who is writing declarative statements about Alkman and his fragment throughout her “Essay.” Her interpretations grow bolder with each description of what she likes about the poem: she begins with the relatively indisputable claim that it is “small,” then notes that “it seems to suggest colors...without ever naming them,” a claim she does not support with any evidence (33). We then learn that Alkman “manages to put into play / some major metaphysical questions / ... without overt analysis” (35). Like her imagined Alkman, who “sidesteps fear, anxiety, shame, remorse / and all the other silly emotions associated with making mistakes,” Carson confidently offers her remediation and reading of the poet’s fragment, secure in her belief in “the willful creation of error” (35).

Carson seems less secure in her abilities when she leaves the space she has created for error in her poetry. “A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR” is printed on the last page of Men in the Off Hours. The information provided about the author here is brief: “Anne Carson lives in Canada.” This reads more like the kind of “fact” Carson
might explore herself in greater detail in one of her own poems. The statement is so brief that its length is mentioned in nearly every profile of the poet. For example, Melanie Rehak, author of the 2000 *New York Times* profile of the poet mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, cites the sentence while describing Carson as someone who, in conversation, “can seem reserved to the point of diffidence” (Rehak). A 2013 profile of Carson by Sam Anderson (also for the *New York Times*) refers to a revised and slightly longer biographical note that now appears in her work – “Anne Carson was born in Canada and teaches ancient Greek for a living” – as “so minimalist that it sounds like a parody of a back-flap biography” (Anderson). Both *Times* authors describe Carson as an object of inquiry who is particularly resistant to certain lines of inquiry: Rehak highlights the “uncomfortable silence” present in the room whenever she has asked the poet “categorical questions” that evidently meet her disapproval (Rehak), while Anderson notes that Carson described her publisher’s eventually-successful attempts to get her to agree to the profile as “akin to water torture” (Anderson).

Carson tells Anderson that her reluctance to speak with the press stems in large part from “a bad experience with the private-detective model of journalism” in her past (Anderson). But I also wonder if her reservations about journalistic collaborations stem from both an inability to control the channels of remediation and from frustrations concerning the ways the conventional uses of particular forms of media by news organizations like the *Times* inevitably shape the kinds of stories

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33 One potential area of research that might have irritated the poet may be information related to her divorce, biographical details that have interested certain readers in the wake of both *Men in the Off Hours* and 2001’s *The Beauty of the Husband.*
that can be told in these contexts. For example, Anderson tells us that Carson “told me” about her reservations, but direct quotes on this subject from Carson have not been transcribed in the article (Anderson). Given her stature and the level of interest surrounding her work, Carson is able to dictate the terms of her conversation with the Times, agreeing “to exchange some e-mails” with Anderson and to primarily participate in the profile in this fashion (Anderson). Anderson describes Carson’s approach to their correspondence as “friendly” but also “slightly unorthodox,” noting that she “wrote almost entirely in lowercase letters” and that “[h]er subject lines contained only punctuation marks: an angle bracket, a comma, parentheses” (Anderson). Carson’s approach to email calls Anderson’s attention to the mediating circumstances of their “conversation,” and Anderson becomes preoccupied with how Carson decides to communicate with him. He often does little more than cut and paste selected portions of Carson’s emails into his profile to give readers “the flavor” of their correspondence, but Anderson’s published article reveals more of what Carson calls “the struggle [in writing] to drag a thought over from the mush of the unconscious into some kind of grammar, syntax, human sense” than a Times profile that did not call as much attention to the material conditions behind its composition (Anderson).

Carson’s deliberate defamiliarizations of the conventions of email in her correspondence with Anderson call attention to their author and her chosen medium: her comments on her work and poetry in general cannot be easily extracted from the person behind the act of composition. Anderson can easily cut

34 She eventually agreed to meet with Anderson in New York to continue their discussions in person (Anderson).
and paste Carson’s remarks into his word processor without calling attention to the circumstances surrounding and informing their creation. Some contemporary journalists do not reveal to their readers that their “interviews” are conducted via email correspondence and not in person or over the phone. Some poets choose to document their influences through carefully-chosen allusions that reveal their familiarity with a chosen text but not the circumstances behind when, where, how, or why these texts were encountered. Carson is interested in these details and their implications. For example, she wants her audience to know that “Alkman lived in Sparta in the 7th century B.C.,” that “Sparta was a poor country,” that “it is unlikely / that Alkman led a wealthy or well-fed life there,” all factors in “the background of his remarks / which end in hunger” (32). She also wants her readers to know that she has encountered Alkman’s poem in the form of a fragment, over two thousand years after the portion that remains was transcribed, and that its fragmentary nature has informed her thoughts on poetry and imperfection.

Carson’s poetry, especially when it centers on a scene of reading, is a kind of descriptive metadata in practice. As we have seen, even her “errors” and deviations from conventional reading strategies are carefully documented and published. Traditional data points – biographical information about the author, context on the region and culture he or she wrote within, the editorial history of the cultural artifact – are brought into conversation with data records about the reader: events taking place in his or her life at the time of the occasion of reading, points of reference between the object under consideration and other works encountered by
that reader, connections that are more eccentric and personalized than traditional narratives of reading and influence might be.

To take a cue from Carson’s own methodologies, particularly her interest in documenting the experiences in her life inflecting her reading practices: while revising this chapter (and re-reading lots of Anne Carson’s work), I heard a lecture in which digital scholar Miriam Posner issued a call for projects interested in gathering and analyzing “weird data” as an alternative to methods of distant reading and approaches to visualization that ignore or otherwise fail to interrogate the subjective dimensions of the data valued by certain “big data” proponents in the fields of digital humanities and social sciences (among others). Rob Horning argues that subjectivity in the twenty-first century “now consists of...a consciousness of metadata,” describing the processes in which “metadata categories are imposed on us, and we embrace them as truth, as a new dimension of what makes our experiences ‘real’” that may resonate with inhabitants of social networks or digital modes of communication that provide particular terms (or tags) to describe our experiences: categories of emotional registers, emojis, graphic image files (“Safe In Our Archives”). Carson is more interested in coupling stories about data with stories about how the data came to exist in this particular material form, and how that materiality – and her knowledge of the history of that materiality – informs her reception of it. She interrogates our categories and classification

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35 Posner’s talk, titled “What’s Next? The Radical, Unrealized Potential of Digital Humanities,” was the keynote lecture at the 2015 Keystone Digital Humanities conference, hosted by the University of Pennsylvania.
systems, exposing their role in the shaping of her subjectivity alongside the cultural objects defined by their conventions.

**Continuity Problems**

When Carson finds a singular perspective limiting, she often dramatizes those limits by presenting the object of analysis from a different vantage point. The most famous example of this sort of remediation in her body of work is probably 1998’s *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*, which finds Carson allegedly translating a collection of Greek fragments into English and then immediately presenting a rewritten narrative of those fragments in lines of her own invention. By 2000, 25,000 copies of the novel had been sold, a “rare” accomplishment for a text classified as poetry in the late twentieth century (Rehak).

*Autobiography of Red* begins with a critical evaluation of Stesichoros, a Greek poet who lived “after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet” (3). Carson is particularly interested in “the fragments of the *Geryoneis*,” the parts that remain of a “very long lyric poem” written by Stesichoros about “a strange winged red monster who lived on an island called Erytheia...quietly tending a herd of magical red cattle, until one day the hero Herakles came across the sea and killed him to get the cattle” (5). She notes that “[t]here were many different ways to tell a story like this,” and she highlights the fact that Stesichoros demonstrated his deviation from the mindset of a “conventional poet” of the period by refusing to take “the point of view of Herakles and [frame] a thrilling account of the victory of culture” (5-6). Instead, Stesichoros tells the story “from Geryon’s own experience,” an account documented via “a tantalizing cross section of scenes” that is less heroic
in the classical sense and more “proud and pitiful” in its dimensions and emphases (6). Carson observes that Stesichoros was born into a culture with a “passion for substances” (5), a world where “being is stable and particularity is set fast in tradition” (4). The remaining fragments of the Geryoneis, on the other hand, “[read] as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat” (6-7).

Carson notes that when faced with the absence of “adequate representation” of the Geryoneis, she decided to invent “all these angles” in the project, an effort that manages the impossible task of providing access to a “main room in the center” by at least providing “glimpses of that main room” (Aitken). The work of Stesichoros is represented here in sixteen translated fragments, collected under the title “Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros.” Despite being attributed to the same author, these verses provide several different perspectives on the life and death of Geryon. In the fourteenth fragment, we learn that an arrow “parted Geryon’s skull like a comb” (13). After reading about his death from this particular vantage point, we are then provided with a collection of “Total Things Known About Geryon” in a fifteenth fragment. Here we discover that Geryon “loved lightning,” that he “lived on an island,” that he is the child of “a / Nymph” and “a gold / Cutting tool,” and that “He was red and / His strange red cattle excited envy” (14). The circumstances of his death are recounted matter-of-factly: “Herakles came and / Killed him for his cattle” (14). The final translated fragment finds Stesichoros describing the story of Geryon
told in fifteen different fragments in just one and a half lines: “The red world And corresponding red breezes / Went Geryon did not” (14).

Bruce Beasley notes that most reviewers and critics “have had to take Carson’s word for it that the ‘Read Meat’ fragments provide some glimpse into Stesichoros’s *Geryoneis* fragments” (74). However, Beasley takes the time to compare Carson’s versions of the fragments to other translations (time that may not be available to book reviewers writing on deadline, but time that one would expect an academic to invest in before publishing scholarship), and he discovers that “only two of Carson’s sixteen [fragments] bear any recognizable relationship to the *Geryoneis* fragments” (75). Rather than “loose” translations, the fragments in *Autobiography of Red* are, in Beasley’s mind, “fragments of a nonexistent poem under the camouflage of translation” (75). When Carson asks “What difference does Stesichoros make?” in the section of the book that precedes these fragments, she may be referring to her own lack of interest in a translation that mirrors her predecessor (3). Or, as Beasley suggests, she may be inventing a text that is “more deeply parodic of scholarly authority and readerly and critical passivity than most reviewers and critics yet acknowledge” (77).

Carson doesn’t seem to go to great lengths to camouflage her translations of the *Geryoneis*. A “red taxi” appears in the third fragment (10). The seventh fragment, titled “Geryon’s Weekend,” finds Geryon leaving “the bar” and going home with a centaur for what reads like a one-night stand (11). Readers who took Carson’s critical essay on Stesichoros seriously and expected a more rigid approach to translation would be quickly dissuaded, even if they had no familiarity with the
Greek language in general or the fragments of Stesichoros in particular. The imagined transcript of an “Interview” with Stesichoros appears at the end of Autobiography of Red, and it reads like something out of Beckett (an author Carson clearly admires). The interviewer begins by citing an interest in criticism about Stesichoros in the “concealment drama” depicted in his poems, a line of questioning that leads the ancient Greek poet to note that “[u]p to 1907 I was seriously interested in seeing” (147). “1907,” replies the interviewer, whose extended ruminations on Stesichoros are quickly replaced by one-word responses suggesting confusion or frustration with the poet’s responses (147).

Like Carson, Stesichoros seems to take a “special interest in finding out what or how people act when they know important information is being withheld” (147). Some interlocutors, imagined or real, grow quickly tired with this approach, as do certain readers. For example, New York Times critic William Logan once described Carson’s poetry as “parlor games of extraordinary tedium” (qtd. in Ford, “Samurai Critic”). Similarly, a Bookforum reviewer found the “shattered glass” of Autobiography of Red a “hip” affectation that “verged on shallowness” (Rudman).

Even some admirers of Autobiography of Red grew frustrated with Carson’s further remediation of the Geryoneis in its “sequel,” 2013’s Red Doc>. In text printed on the inside front flap of the Knopf hardcover edition, Carson notes that she “began to wonder” what happened to Geryon and Herakles “in later life,” and so she decided to pick up “their adventures,” albeit in a “very different style and with changed names” (Red Doc>). A character named Herakles does not appear on any of the pages of Red Doc>, though Geryon, who does appear, makes reference to a man who “had been
his oxygen once” (14). “Memory is exhausting,” reflects Geryon – known in Red Doc> as “G,” and Geryon’s past affair with Herakles – the classic heroic figure who, in the original Geryoneis, kills Geryon – haunts Red Doc> to such an extent that it is no
wonder Carson suggests that his presence is felt in its pages (14).

Red Doc> does not contain any appendices, translated fragments, or critical essays, but its title may suggest that Carson has chosen an unorthodox approach in her return to the characters from Autobiography of Red. Sam Anderson notes in his profile of the poet that the book’s title “was the default name Carson’s word-
processing program gave to the file, and she stuck with it” (Anderson). The whims of Carson’s preferred digital interface for composition further impacted the book when
“Carson hit a wrong button” on her computer, and “it made the margins go crazy” (Anderson). Like A.R. Ammons’ Tape for the Turn of the Year, Red Doc> features
narrow blocks of text printed in blocks down the center of its pages. But Carson also ignores the playful constraints that she found “instantly liberating” when they
accidentally revealed themselves: for example, the book’s “Wife of Brain” interludes,
which Anderson compares to “a kind of Greek chorus” in the book, feature lines
shorter and longer than the blocks of text that appear elsewhere (Anderson).

Carson’s “TV Men” sequence, one of the highlights of Men in the Off Hours,
gave some readers the impression that the poet dismissed or even outright
disdained the conventions and forms of new media. In a 2000 profile for Publishers
Weekly, Stephen Burt asked Carson if she liked movies, and seemed surprised to
report that, while admittedly a “sporadic” viewer, the poet loved them (Burt). Burt’s
question was informed by the perspective of television evident in “TV Men,” a work
that was informed by her “dehumanizing” experiences with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) on a documentary series about the “Nobel science prizes” whose producers were interested in “a kind of sarcastic overlay by some representative humanist” (Burt).

Carson suggests that the mechanics of television production wreck havoc on attempts at communication through the medium. She recounts her experiences on the PBS shoot in greater detail to Burt:

We did a show in Paris, for example. I had to walk into traffic on the Place de la Concorde, at 8 a.m., into rush-hour traffic, while talking my speech for the scene—they wanted a scene of the stress of modern life! But the thing with TV is that nothing happens right the first time, and you have to do it over and over and over. We did that 26 times, into traffic, saying the same things, and the worst part of it is not the death-defying scenario itself but having to repeat your own language. Nothing deadens language like repetition. So you write a sentence and you really like it and you have it in your mind and then you say it once, twice, three times. By the seventh time it’s just the worst sentence in the world and then you hate it and you have to go on to number 26. (Burt)

“TV Men” begins with what Carson claims is a translation of Longinus\textsuperscript{36} that exaggerates this deadening effect to the point of disintegration: “TV makes things disappear. Oddly the word comes from Latin *videre* ‘to see’” (61).

\textsuperscript{36} Longinus, like Carson, does not own a television.
The sequence of poems imagines a series of unlikely actors and participants – not all of whom are men – as the subjects of (and occasional participants in) big-budget television productions. For example, in “TV Men: Sappho,” the poem’s speaker (who may be Carson, Sappho, or both\(^{37}\)) is dismayed to “notice the leaves in the Jardin have changed / overnight,” an observation she mentions “to no one / for fear of continuity problems” (62). Working within the medium of television, the speaker has “invalidated” the desired perception of unmediated or “natural” access to the world by changing an earring between takes. The television producers are forced to discard this footage because they are unable to create the illusion of reality with these recordings: the mismatched earrings worn by the multiple versions of the recorded speaker would inevitably reveal the fact that multiple takes are spliced together and edited. As a result, the speaker now views changes to the weather and her surroundings as proof of discontinuity, a careless editor. The presence of flux or disharmony is now overshadowed by the perceived mandate of the production team: “You cannot erase” (62).

The longest sequence in “TV Men” centers on the creation, revision, and performance of a script about the life of the French artist and dramatist Antonin Artaud. “They gave me a week to ‘get’ Artaud and come up with a script,” we learn, an experience the author calls “Semaine d’Artaud” (64). Carson first recounts this week by assigning a word, presumably having to do with Artaud, to a list of each day of the week written in French (65). This approach to her subject is quickly

\(^{37}\) For more on Carson’s interest in the adoption of alternate personas off the page, see her discussion of Oscar Wilde and her “life as a gay man” in her Paris Review interview (Schitt).
discarded. In “Lundi,” we learn that “Artaud is mad,” and we are treated to extended considerations of his particular associations with madness (66). “For Artaud,” Carson writes, “the real drawback of being mad is not that consciousness / is crushed and torn but that he cannot say so, / fascinating as this would be, while it is happening” (66, emphasis in quote). In the revised “script” about Artaud’s life that materializes after the seven days of writing, these and other explorations of the topic have been reduced to shorter text: “Artaud is mad. / He stayed close to the madness” (73). These words are joined with italicized descriptions of similarly reductive shots: “There is a close-up of me driven to despair” (73). Later in “TV Men” we see a similarly aggressive approach to editing: for example, in “TV Men: Antigone (Scripts 1 and 2),” a note indicates that “[f]or sound-bite purposes we had to cut Antigone’s script from 42 seconds to 7: substantial changes of wording were involved but we felt we got her ‘take’ right” (101).

Readers familiar with Carson’s interest with fragmentation and the limits of language may be surprised by her critique of television’s interest in revision and its approach to editing and remaking its subject matter. But Carson seems to align with the imperatives of television a desire to “handle horrors / and to have a theory of them” (87). In “TV Men: Lazarus,” she describes the interest in making a “more interesting TV show” out of the life of the resurrected Biblical figure (89). In the hands of an imagined TV crew, Lazarus is reduced to “a man of no / importance” out of a perceived desire to cast the God who brought him back from the dead as an agent of “the ultimate benevolence” (88). “TV Men: Lazarus” reads like a parody of Carson’s own writing. Its speaker turns to etymology and earlier languages to
discover that the word Lazarus means “God has helped,” but interest in this topic begins and ends with this definition, as the speaker quickly moves to a vague and clichéd consideration of “those whom God has helped” (88). The speaker cynically remarks that there is “[n]o use being historical / about this planet,” given that “it is just an imitation” (89). This reductive, one-dimensional, and crudely nihilistic view leads to the declaration that “Lazarus is an imitation of Christ,” that “TV is an imitation of / Lazarus,” and that “you and I are an imitation of / TV” (89).

When Carson mocks and rejects the notion that “reality is just a TV set / inside a TV set inside a TV set,” she seems to be particularly concerned with what disappears in the process. The final poem of the “TV Men” sequence, a return to Sappho, finds its lines disrupted by the repetition of the word “disappearance” (118). The potential for multiple forms of Sappho are reduced to a singular actress “smearing on her makeup at 5 a.m.” who is expected to stick to a particular script (118). Any deviations result in the producers of this historical narrative simply yelling “Cut” and refusing to include these moments of discontinuity (118). The desire for a particular kind of “documentary” approach to reality, one that is heavily edited and manipulated, and one whose architects have little time or interest in engaging with the history of its chosen subjects beyond what is familiar or recognizable from their own experiences (for example, reading the lessons of Lazarus through a limited sense of religion and charity). And the critiques of the mechanics of television echo in many respects Carson’s concerns over the dissemination of history in other contexts: the errors documented in “TV Men” seem to resemble the decisions made by editors, classicists, scholars, and readers at times.
An Account That Makes Sense

*Men in the Off Hours* concludes with three versions of its author: the aforementioned “NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR,” a photograph, and an appendix. Their inclusion in the volume suggests that Carson’s reputation as an exceedingly private public figure is itself a fragmented view of the poet. “Appendix to Ordinary Time” begins with the statement: “My mother died the autumn I was writing this” (165). Carson’s reflections on her mother press up against the pages of the diaries of Virginia Woolf, “still piled on my desk the day after the funeral” (165). She initially mocks herself for “looking for comfort” in the words of Woolf, who died by her own hand, a fate that suggests this author’s work may not be the best refuge (165). As the night and her mood “grows dark,” Carson turns next to a fragment from a letter penned by Woolf in February of 1941. She notes that the presence of a crossed-out line “fills me with a sudden understanding” (166). Like Alkman’s bracketed question mark, crossed-out lines reveal to Carson confrontations between authors and facts. “Death is a fact,” she writes, and crossouts for her are reminders that “all is lost, yet still there” (166). She concludes her “Appendix” with “an epitaph for my mother I found on p. 19 of the Fitzwilliam Manuscript of Virginia Woolf’s *Women and Fiction*:

*such*

*abandon* Obviously it is impossible, I thought, looking into those

*ment* foaming waters, to

*such* compare the living with the dead make any comparison

*rapture* compare them. (166)
On the next page, we see a more traditional epitaph for Margaret Carson: an incomplete record of her life ("1913-1997"), a photograph of Anne as a child, sitting next to her mother on a dock with their feet in the water of a lake, and an italicized inscription in Latin: "Eclipsis est pro dolore" (167).

In search of a Latin translation, I transcribed and pasted this latter phrase into Google’s search engine. One of the results directed me to an incomplete digital record of Suzanne Reynolds’s Medieval Reading: Grammar, Rhetoric, and the Classical Text, a book published by Cambridge University Press in 2004 (four years after the publication of Men in the Off Hours). The phrase appears in a discussion of a twelfth-century glossator’s commentary on a line in Horace’s Satires, a moment similar to Alkman’s “grammatical mistake” where a word – in this case a verb, not a noun – is missing from the text. Reynolds tells us that the missing verb appears at a moment in the text “where Tiresias, advising a resuscitated Ulysses in the manner of legacy hunting, suggests how he react when the death of a ‘friend’ finally secures his fortune” (123). After Ulysses cries out “Unde mihi tam fortem tamque fidelem? (‘where to me one so reliable, so faithful?’),” the gloss notes that “eclipsis est pro dolore (‘the ellipsis is because of grief’)” (123). Reynolds, in her role as one of Carson’s “philologists,” describes the absent verb as a mistake, but she also admires the manner in which “the gloss transforms a grammatical defect into an intended stylistic trick” (123).

Carson and Reynolds are surely not discussing the same gloss written by an unnamed twelfth-century glossator in the marginalia of a transcription of Horace’s Satires. That may be so. But I am struck by the similarities in the generous readings
present in the glosser’s interpretation of Ulysses’ words and in Carson’s version of Alkamen in “Essay on What I Think About Most.” In both texts, an error – and more specifically, an error that may be attributed to the text’s remediation via transcription by hands other than their original author – is revised to favor its author. But I don’t want to reduce Carson to a reader who is always willing to give the author the benefit of the doubt. It seems more the case that Carson is more interested in reading practices that reveal traces of individual readers and the circumstances of their occasions of reading. Evidence of “textual delight” is preferable to boredom. “I will do anything to avoid boredom,” Carson notes in the introduction to a series of “Short Talks” published in 1995’s Plainwater: Essays and Poetry (29). “It is the task of a lifetime” (29).

The glosses written by Carson are not always so forgiving of the authors she is reading. For example, Marcel Proust seems both an object of study and a target of ridicule in The Albertine Workout, a “Poetry Pamphlet” published by New Directions in 2014, Carson examines A la recherché du temps perdu\(^{38}\) to highlight the presence (and absence) of Albertine, its narrator’s object of affection, in Proust’s project. The text begins with a general summary of Albertine’s appearances in the text: we learn that her “name occurs 2,363 times in Proust’s novel, more than any other character,” that “Albertine herself is present or mentioned on 807 pages of Proust’s novel,” and that “[o]n a good 19% of these pages she is asleep” (5). While she notes (citing her apparent agreement with an observation first made by Samuel Beckett) that “[t]here

\(^{38}\) Translated into English, A la recherché du temps perdu is often called Remembrance of Things Past or (since a 1992 translation by D.J. Enright) In Search of Lost Time (“In Search of Lost Time”).
is no right or wrong in Proust” (16), she nonetheless seems to criticize “Marcel's theory of desire, which equates possession of another person with erasure of the otherness of her mind, while at the same time positing otherness as what makes another person desirable” (9). In the pamphlet’s “appendix,” Carson takes particular issue with “Marcel’s use of the phrase ‘heavy slave’” when discussing Albertine, and connects this instance to a general discomfort with “[a] certain master/slave tonality in Marcel’s relationships with other people” (32).

For Carson, a major feature of Proust’s worldview seems to be the belief that “[k]nowledge of other people is unendurable” (31). Proust seems at times like the kind of author that Carson is afraid to turning into when she mentions the problem of there being “too much self in my writing” (Economy vii). Where Carson’s art seeks to reveal and curate fragments, Proust’s novels obliterate and erase his subjects. She observes in Proust the fact “that a novelist has the option to disenfranchise, disempower or delete his slave grammatically” (35, emphasis in quote). Proust’s writing demonstrates the use of language to restrict the agency of particular subjects, as in “Marcel’s ultimate reference to Albertine on the last page of the novel...a sentence without a main verb: Profound Albertine, whom I saw sleeping and who was dead” (35, italics in quote). Marcel’s Albertine lacks her own language or the capacity to determine her own course of action, because Marcel has taken these things away from her (if he has even given them to her in the first place).

The Albertine Workout also discusses “the transposition theory” (6): the belief certain readers of the novel have that Albertine is a “disguised version” of Alfred Agostinelli, “the chauffeur whom Proust in letters to friends admitted that he
not only loved but adored” (17). Carson connects Agostinelli’s relationship to Proust and the circumstances of his accidental death to Albertine’s subjugation to Marcel and her own “sudden fictional death” (17). She raises “the question [of] whether to read an author’s work in light of his life or not” (19) but nonetheless remains fascinated by “the weird and lonely shadow” Proust’s novel casts “on these two love affairs, the fictional and the real” (20). People and our relationships with them are fragments, can become fragmented by the stories we tell about them. Carson declares the transposition theory ultimately “graceless” and “intrusive,” perhaps because it too neatly suggests that Albertine is, in fact, Agostinelli, and because its advocates use Marcel’s thoughts about the object of his desire to create a mental map of Proust’s view of Agostinelli (57). For example, she notes that Marcel’s receipt of a posthumous telegram from Albertine becomes “one of the weirdest [scenes] in fiction” once the similarities between Proust’s receipt of a similar letter written by Agostinelli just days after learning of his chauffeur’s tragic death, but the former is still a fiction (17).

Despite its short length, The Albertine Workout contains an “appendix,” a collection of notes linked to particular numbered observations in her “workout.” The fifty-ninth and final part of The Albertine Workout is a translation of a quote from La Prisonnière, the fifth volume of A la recherché du temps perdu: “Everything, indeed, is at least double” (21). In the appendix, Carson describes in detail “a small poorly reproduced 1907 photo of Proust and Alfred Agostinelli seated on their motor vehicle, dressed for a journey” (38). The image of Proust and Agostinelli is at

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39 La Prisonnière is often translated as “The Captive” in English.
least a double of Carson’s discussion of their relationship in the core text of *The Albertine Workout*, if not a further revision beyond the images of Proust and Agostinelli in Proust’s novel when viewed through the lens of the transposition theory. Carson seems particularly taken with the image because of the way Albert “has trust his head back at an angle suggesting the velocity of their forward motion” in the car, a posture that attempts to deceive the viewer from realizing that he and Marcel “are sitting stock-still in the car” (38). But the attempt is clearly doomed, given the technology of photography at the time: Carson is left wondering “if it gave him a pain in the neck to hold his head that way for the numerous minutes of the exposure” (38). Embedded in the particular context of *The Albertine Workout*, the clearest picture of Agostinelli an interested reader⁴⁰ is transformed by Carson’s perspective and prose into a “bad photograph” (the title she gives this particular note in her appendix) whose subject has playfully refused to reveal himself to the photographer’s gaze (38).

Carson’s doubling of the relationship between Agostinelli and Proust seems in part like an attempt to counter the transposition theory’s strict rendering of the pair. She replaces this version of the pair with speculation on “what the two of them talked about under their breath” while their picture was being taken, “as the photographer fiddled with his lenses and the cicadas sang in the hawthorn hedge and a summer afternoon on the farthest edge of human love extended itself before them into, apparently, eternity” (38). This image of “human love” and its attendant

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⁴⁰ Or biographer: Carson describes the image as it appeared in “a celebrated biography of Proust,” suggesting that its poor material state was nonetheless sufficient for its author and his publishers (38).
desires counters Marcel’s own theory of desire and its attendant erasure: despite their status in a car they are only pretending is in motion, both parties here retain their mobility and agency in Carson’s revision of a relationship. Like Albertine, Carson can’t help but strike her own pose, providing the two men with singing cicadas (which she obviously has no photographic evidence of) and a picturesque summer afternoon. Her Agostinelli may differ in significant ways from Proust’s Albert (and Agostinelli’s performance of Agostinelli for the photographer), but she seems to prefer her “double” to the image of Albertine invented by Proust in his novel.

The work of the biographer is comparable is Carson’s mind to the work of the historian, an occupation she defines in 2010’s Nox as “[o]ne who asks about things – about their dimensions, weight, locations, moods, names, holiness, smell” (1.1).41 This job may at times involve “autopsy,” which Carson notes is “a term historians use of the ‘eyewitnessing’ of data or events by the historian himself, a mode of authorial power” (1.2). She suggests that it is equally “powerful” to “withold this authorization [sic]” (1.2).42 Historians at times seem to privilege the perspective of “autopsy,” choosing to confidently recount events and moments from generations past as if they had unfolded before their eyes. While a Greek historian like Herodotos “trains you as you read,” revealing history as “a process of asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming, and above all standing

41 Nox does not have page numbers. Certain sections of the work, such as the one cited above, are attached to units in numerical sequences (1.1). I have recorded such moments when relevant so that interested readers might locate them.
42 The “[sic]” here is a reference to the deviation in spelling in the quote; it is not part of the quote. I only mention this because Carson is the type of writer who might make use of “[sic]” in her work.
amazed at the strange things humans do” (1.3), Carson’s experiences with historians have left her viewing Herodotos as both an exemplary figure and an anomaly of sorts.

Carson’s discussions of Herodotos and the idea of history as autopsy appear early in Nox, in a prose section recounting the behavior of her brother’s dog on the day of his funeral. She notes (qualifying her statements, like Herodotus, by introducing the information with a qualifying statement: “it is said”) that her brother’s dog “got angry” and “stayed angry” on the day her brother died (1.2). When the dog was brought into the room where his owner had been laid out in his coffin, his anger stopped “as soon as he smell[ed] the fact” of death (1.2). Carson suggests that she is unable to remain silent when confronted with such circumstances. “I wonder what the smell of nothing is,” she asks, equating it with the “smell of autopsy” (1.2). Carson avoids the narrative of autopsy in favor of an image of history as “elegy,” noting at the beginning of Nox that the two forms are “akin” (1.1). Instead of relegating her brother to an inaccessible point in the past, Carson sets about to the task of “asking about something,” a process that enables her to “fashion it into a thing that carries itself” (1.1).

The “it” in these remarks is Michael, and “it” is also Nox, the object Carson has fashioned out of her elegiac line of questioning. In an interview Carson notes that the project came about due to “a need to gather up the shards of his story and make it into something containable” (Paris Review?). Nox originally materialized as a private edition created by the poet; a revised edition was later published in 2010 by
New Directions. *Nox* is printed on “acid-free paper,” as all New Directions editions are, but it is not bound through conventional means.

A book (or “book”) like *Nox* would not be possible without the digital tools needed to scan, arrange, and manipulate the images reprinted on its pages. Despite the many words that appear here, all of them are “embedded” in traces of other material. For example, the numbered sections that seem to function as *Nox*’s primary narrative, in which Carson simultaneously describes her brother and her attempts to describe her brother, appear to have been typed out on separate pages, torn from their original context, and then pasted into this book. Traces of tears are documented throughout *Nox*, most visibly on its cover, which reprints a neat square of a black-and-white photograph of a young Michael in goggles and a bathing suit. The clean and compact crop suggests one view of Michael that Carson might adopt: a sibling still young, preserved in memory and secure from death. But the image is layered on the remnants of something torn from the foundation of the book’s cover. In *Men in the Off Hours*, Carson described herself as “someone who knows marks” after living through the experience of her mother’s death (“Appendix of Lost Time”). In *Nox*, she similarly chooses to make the presence of absence visible by focusing on the materiality of loss.

Carson calls *Nox* “an attempt to contain a person after they’re no longer reachable” (Paris Review). Containment is preferable to creation to Carson: she notes early in *Nox* that “[n]o matter how I try to evoke the starry lad [Michael] was, it remains a plain, odd history” (1.0). Though she notes that a first she believed that “Words cannot add” to death or restore its loss, Carson nonetheless writes an elegy
to her brother that identifies and traces his absence, though she is careful in her
approach to her subject matter. She often turns to Herodotos for advice, despite his
standing in the eyes of Plutarch as a historian with a tendency to “dance the truth
away” (qtd. in Nox). But Carson appreciates the historical outlook that earned
Herodotos this reputation: when he reached his limits in his capacity to explain a
historical event, he revealed these boundaries to his readers, informing them to “let
anyone who finds such things credible make use of them” (qtd. in Nox). Carson
follows these caveats with the remarks of her brother’s widow at his funeral: a set of
brief remarks remediated in a manner that both shores them up against the
reservations of Herodotus and lets them stand as “credible” to their author (or to
receptive readers). Michael’s widow provides “food for thought” to the assembled
mourners: “Yesterday you cannot change. Today you might alter. Tomorrow does
not give any promise” (qtd. in Nox).

Nox powerfully highlights tensions between remediation and translation. The
section labeled “2.2” is made up of two fragments. Carson begins with a biographical
sketch of a particular moment in Michael’s life:

2.2. My brother ran away in 1978, rather than go to jail. He wandered in
Europe and India, seeing something, and sent us postcards or a Christmas
gift, no return address. He was traveling on a false passport and living under
other people’s names. This isn’t hard to arrange. It is irremediable. I don’t
know how he made his decisions in those days. The postcards were laconic.
He wrote only one letter, to my mother, that winter the girl died.
We see digitized fragments of Michael’s letter, but the reader is never allowed to view it in its entirety, nor does Carson provide a transcription of its contents. The book remediates particular sections, all of which reveal that the document has been scanned at a high resolution: we can see traces of handwriting on its back in some of the images. But it is frustratingly incomplete, even with Carson’s contextual material. “The girl” is never named. As readers, we are not even certain if the original letter has been torn by Carson, digitally torn, or ripped by her mother, who requested it on her death bed (2.1). The postcards referred to never materialize. And the pieces of Michael’s letter begin to take up the central space of the pages of *Nox*, while “2.2” is reprinted four consecutive times, slowly moving out of view of the reader: its final remediation, like Carson’s poetic project, is incomplete.
Chapter 3: Counterfeit Culture

“The smoke of who came
here before us, who went
after breathing another’s breath”

“Hotel Purgatorio”

Restless Fragments

In 2012’s The Grey Album: On The Blackness of Blackness, Kevin Young recalls his tenure as a DJ at WHRB, Harvard University’s radio station, “during rap’s Golden age” in the late 1980s and early 1990s (337). Young’s late-night show, which was officially titled “The Dark Side,” was more commonly known as “AR&B,” or “alternative R&B.” Calling it “not the best term,” he notes that AR&B “did describe something of how hip-hop was just one music of many – and justified, say, my starting a set with King of Go-Go Chuck Brown or all of James Brown’s ‘Funky Drummer’ before seguing into a more proper hip-hop cut that sampled it” (337). Young playfully and thoroughly documented the origins and various uses of samples in hip-hop music on his show, revealing his interest in “meaning produced by juxtapositions of disparate elements” (343). For example, listeners hearing Public Enemy’s “Rebel Without A Pause” after “Funky Drummer” were invited to consider the continuities and discontinuities between Brown and the hip-hop culture that sampled (and continues to sample) his work. Though he notes that he was only a “radio DJ in the old-fashioned, platter-spinning sense” in his WHRB days (“Dark Matter”), Young has since become a practitioner of what I would call poetic mash-ups, writing several book-length volumes that “sample” work from a wide range of
texts and contexts, remediated content including, but not limited to, lyrics from rap, reggae, country, rock, and blues songs, ad copy for runaway slaves, slogans from billboards, lists of Negro League rosters, lines from Beat poetry, journal entries from the Harlem Renaissance, telegrams, dialogue from film noir, letters from the Amistad rebels.

This chapter examines the role hip-hop has played (and continues to play) in shaping Young's approach to poetry. Its musicians created a singular aesthetic out of disparate elements taken from various musical genres and styles. Young's interest in the sampling practices and “concept albums” prevalent in the “golden age” of his WHRB days clearly informs his “Devil's Music” trilogy: 2001’s *To Repel Ghosts* (and 2005’s *To Repel Ghosts: Remixed from the Original Masters*), 2003’s *Jell Roll: A Blues*, and 2005’s *Black Maria: Being the Adventures of Delilah Redbone and A.K.A. Jones*. Hip-hop is just one “music” of many cited in these volumes of poetry: Young also borrows from Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Dante, Robert Johnson, John Berryman, Kenneth Koch, and film noir, among other sources. But the strategies of remediation adopted by Young in his use of this diverse inheritance seem primarily influenced by hip-hop's aesthetic strategies during its so-called golden era. Young describes hip-hop as “a flexible form, which, at its best, is unafraid to take from any source” (“The Black Psychic Hotline” 7). This definition calls to mind the particular albums Young was fond of spinning in his Harvard days, and it also describes the strategies of fragmentation and revision, the range of poetic and musical genres, and the variety of subjects present in the volumes of poetry that make up his “Devil's Music” project.
To Repel Ghosts is Young’s earliest attempt to use the sampling practices of hip-hop in his poetry, and it strikes me as the volume that most explicitly strives to match the aesthetics of hip-hop albums like De La Soul’s Three Feet High and Rising and Public Enemy’s It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back. Young suggests that its road to publication was rocky: despite the success of his first volume of poetry, 1995’s Most Way Home, he notes in the introduction to the “Remix” of his second collection that “[t]he double album version of To Repel Ghosts had been complete enough to circulate since 1997, yet couldn’t get airplay” (“Note from The Management”). This temporary setback may have contributed to Young’s interest in the curation and recovery of overlooked authors and texts. Young is especially invested in the legacy of African American culture in the twenty-first century. In 2012’s The Grey Album: On The Blackness of Blackness, he describes “the vast unwritten that threatens us all and that in the case of the African American writer, seems too much like the life denied him or her, the black literature denied existence” (11). “It is this reason,” he notes, “I found myself a poet and a collector and now a curator: to save what we didn’t even know needed saving” (14).

We could also add “teacher,” “critic,” “archivist,” and “editor” to the list of Young’s occupations. In addition to publishing eight volumes of poetry (including the “double LP” of To Repel Ghosts, which Zoland Books eventually put out), he has edited a range of collections for the Library of America, Random House, Bloomsbury, and other major publishers. These works include Blues Poems (2003) Selected Poems: John Berryman (2004), Jazz Poems (2006), The Art of Losing: Poems of Grief and Healing (2010), The Hungry Ear: Poems of Food and Drink (2012), and most
recently (with Michael S. Glaser), 2012’s *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010*. Young both teaches Creative Writing at Emory University and serves as the curator of the college’s Raymond Danowski Poetry Library. *The Grey Album*, his first book-length volume of criticism, won the Greywolf Press Nonfiction Prize: he has also published scholarly essays in the *Kenyon Review* (among other journals) and he contributed a piece to the 2001 collection *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism*. Young clearly recognizes the value in what Theodor Adorno calls “the means of administration and its institutions” and the roles these forces play in the privileging of particular aesthetic practices (“Culture and administration” 113). His affiliations with colleges and major publishers play an important role in the work he does in print to “save what we didn’t even know needed saving” from the recent past. Such efforts acknowledge Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s observation that “history and institutions are not just something we study, they’re also something we live, and live through” (“The Master’s Pieces” 34).

Young’s first volume of poetry, 1995’s *Most Way Home*, is notable for the accolades it received within the communities of contemporary poetry and African-American literature: it was selected by Lucille Clifton for the National Poetry Series, and in 1996 it won the *Ploughshares* Zacharis Award. It is less memorable as a volume of poetry aligned with the aesthetics of hip-hop: when mentioned at all, “music” is found in “men / off early from work” in Southern barbershops (“Eddie Priest’s Barbershop & Notary”) and the “stomping zydeco night” of Louisiana (“The Spectacle”). As a blurb from *Booklist* notes on the back cover of the Zoland Books’ first edition of *Most Way Home*, the volume is one that sings “with such controlled
music.” There are no traces of contemporary pop culture, no indication that its author was a late-night DJ spinning the sound collages of groups like De La Soul and Public Enemy. In *The Grey Album* Young looks back on *Most Way Home* (which he does not mention by name), noting that he “used to hope for a poetry of preserving – in my first book, this is what emerged, writing to try and capture the voices of the life I saw that was rapidly disappearing” (401). He has elsewhere recalled with fondness how Lucille Clifton “changed my life” by selecting the book for the National Poetry Series, and Young recently returned the favor by co-editing her *Collected Poems* for BOA (“Lucille Clifton’s Legacy”). But in *The Grey Album* he seems to find his attempt at “preserving” the past in *Most Way Home* to be somewhat naïve, and his use of the word “capture” suggests that his project may, in retrospect, have occasionally stifled some of the voices it sought to let speak.

As noted earlier, Young had finished a “complete enough” version of *To Repel Ghosts* by 1997, but he was apparently unable to find a publisher for the manuscript. In a 2009 interview he recalls that “no one wanted it,” or that if they admired it, they nonetheless “balked” at the prospect of publishing it (“failbetter”). Described by its author as a “350-page epic,” *To Repel Ghosts* is a volume that is as messy, varied, and experimental in style and form as *Most Way Home* is compact, conservative, and composed. Regardless of his previous accolades, Young’s setback here seems to confirm Lynn Keller’s concerns about the future of experimental poetry: “[t]he question of whether poetry can still matter, asked in a number of ways by recent poets, critics, and public intellectuals across the political spectrum, has acquired new urgency, especially for those who would link cultural significance with
innovation” (124). While the “golden age” of hip-hop features several artists whose records went “platinum,” selling over a million record units of albums with experimental leanings, poets who cited these popular works as points of influence encountered skepticism from editors, publishers, and readers at times.

In a 1999 essay on John Berryman for the Kenyon Review, Young seems to be talking about the recent response to his own planned “epic” as much as he is describing the challenges facing the Dream Songs at the end of the twentieth century:

...unlike Whitman, or Eliot, Berryman has suffered from his epic impulse--the long, fragmentary form he practiced and in some ways invented does not fit the way we are taught poetry today by free promotional samples, not large quantities, by anthology, not individual volumes. This is partly economic, but more often than not pedagogical: Which teacher, either high school or college, would rather take a week with Berryman's Dream Songs than an hour with the self-contained “For the Union Dead” by Robert Lowell or Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish"? Far harder to explain Berryman's slapstick than narrative and symbol, no matter how dense. This lack of one representative masterpiece, his poems' heft and hubris have led to Berryman's being considered less and less since his suicide in 1972. (161)

Young lets Berryman share part of the blame for the relatively poor posthumous showing of the Dream Songs. He claims that “the poems' conflicting chorus of voices seems too much dream and not enough song,” and describes an audience (which he includes himself in) who “is left not with catharsis or wisdom or even high
modernist hint of the fragment-as-whole” (161). Though he still views the work as a “masterpiece,” Young finds that after reading the Dream Songs “we cannot shake off a lingering incompleteness, a hangover in which no dreams are present” (162). But he also acknowledges a perceived need to attend to the social networks and sites of reading that successful poetry inhabits: the “epic impulse” runs headfirst into “practical” considerations tied to how poetry travels from original sites of publication to anthologies and classrooms.

On the other hand, Young suggests that “it is not Henry’s dream, but America’s that is disappointing us,” and he wonders if Berryman described “the same Dream Deferred that Langston Hughes wrote of” (162). Like the Dream Songs, 1951’s Montage of a Dream Deferred is a book whose length and fragmentary nature might conflict with the “economic” and “pedagogical” practices of high school and college teachers tasked with surveying periods of poetry and literature. The reference to Hughes here also recalls the initial reception that greeted Montage. As Arnold Rampersand notes, the manuscript for the volume was completed in 1948, but its delayed release may have in part stemmed from the fact that “Esquire and Mademoiselle,” among other magazines, “rejected a suite of the be-bop poems” for publication (153). Hughes, like Young, was taking cues from “the popular song” of his day, “the riffs, runs, breaks, and disc-tortions of a community in transition” (Hughes qtd. In Rampersand 153). Montage received a “generally cool” response from critics when it was first published (192). It would take the efforts of Young and other scholars more receptive to Hughes’ collage aesthetic and his appropriation of bebop to make a case for the value of its “restless fragment” (The Grey Album 202).
Young’s awareness of the role such institutional practices play in the shaping of an audience’s aesthetic is present in his readings of Berryman and Hughes, and the lessons he learned from the careers of these poets may have motivated him to take a more active role in describing the aesthetic practices of his own generation, creating a more receptive space for such “difficult” material.

In February 2000, *Giant Steps: The New Generation of African-American Writers*, an anthology edited by Young, was published by the HarperCollins imprint Perennial. Less than a year after doubting the “conflicting voices” and fragmentary nature of Berryman, Young here mounts a defense of similar practices deployed by the so-called “hip-hop generation.” In the anthology’s introduction, he highlights the ways he and his fellow authors “use, quite comfortably, hip-hop’s aesthetic and sense of history – that is, that history is ever-present, the past easily taken from (‘sampled’), repeated (‘looped’), collaged together, unified only by voice and by the rhythm of day-to-day life (‘flow’ and ‘beat’)” (6). The influence of earlier literary movements is also acknowledged: for example, the title of the anthology “pays homage to John Coltrane’s groundbreaking *Giant Steps* – which, with its ‘sheets of sound,’ its tender ballads, and bursts of saxophone, changed the way we hear and see” (1). Young notes that “what folk culture was to the Harlem Renaissance, popular culture is to the post-soul writer,” and he claims that “hip-hop’s premise” to “hear it new” is one “that matches modernism’s urging the write to ‘make it new’” (7). But he also argues that the writers of this generation, whose formative years coincide with the “golden age” of sampling, are unique in that “what was previously
seen as fragmentation, these writers see as unity; what once was heard as siren, we hear as song” (7).

The title of Young’s introduction to *Giant Steps* is “The Black Psychic Hotline, or the Future of American Writing.” It’s a display of self-awareness that tempers the hyperbole and grandstanding we tend to associate with attempts to define a generation and its impact on a cultural moment. But the joke also reflects Young’s desire to have this generation speak for itself, in its own language of pop culture references. “The Black Psychic Hotline” is a reference that demonstrates Young’s comfort with American pop culture: it evokes “Miss Cleo,” a representative of the Psychic Readers Network who spoke in a suspicious “Jamaican” accent, who appeared in commercials and infomercials that seemed to run at all hours on TV at the end of the twentieth century. One doesn’t necessarily need to be familiar with Miss Cleo to recognize Young’s joke, but its presence seems part of a conscious effort to incorporate the language of hip-hop into academic and scholarly surveys of its value.

It also seems like the kind of reference someone from the hip-hop generation would make, rather than the voice of an author assessing its practices from beyond its contours. While acknowledging the need “to celebrate our ancestry” and the “living legacy” of African American cultural antecedents, Young’s introduction also admonishes the various gatekeepers of African American culture (and, more broadly, American culture), telling them to no longer “neglect the transformative possibilities of youth” present in this generation (4). He claims that “[w]hile in previous generations, the young have determined how the tradition was seen,
currently we young guns are too often those under the radar gun” (4). Noting that his generation is often regarded by these cultural arbiters as little more than “the tail end” of the Civil Rights movement, Young attempts to step out of “this shadow of canonization” by asserting his particular claims for the hip-hop generation (5).

None of the poems Young contributes to Giant Steps are taken from Most Way Home: three of the six included in the anthology would go on to be included in the first published edition of To Repel Ghosts. His author’s note describes this forthcoming volume as a project that “takes up the history of black and popular culture through the figure of the late artist Jean-Michel Basquiat,” and it further states that “these ‘riffs’ may start with Basquiat as inspiration but more often than not end up taking on race [...] and popular culture” (335). Young’s description of his poems as “riffs” aligns them with the practices of jazz musicians, but the term is often used in hip-hop parlance as well. Young describes the similarities and differences in these approaches to “riffing” in The Grey Album:

Both jazz and hip-hop seek the song within the song. That is, they often take older songs – and indeed, song itself – and bend, stretch, and riff it till it almost rips at the seams. In jazz, however free, the desire is to see how far the song can go without breaking: in hip-hop, the wish is to find the breaks, to break on it, to divide and conquer and reconfigure. In our own image.

(299)

“Charlie Chan on Horn,” one of the poems published in Giant Steps that would reappear in To Repel Ghosts, seems like a “riff” that matches Young’s description of hip-hop’s aesthetic. Centered on Charlie Parker’s use of the name “Charlie Chan” on
certain jazz records due to contractual obligations, the poem begins with the line “For Prestige.” Young here acknowledges the name of the label “Chan” frequently appeared on, Bob Weinstock’s Prestige Records, while playing with the various meanings of “prestige”: the “illusion” of Parker’s appearance under a pseudonym, the reputation of the label within jazz circles, the immortality attained by recording music. The poem begins as a riff in the jazz sense, with Young noting that “no matter / the name his blues / sound the same,” a rhymed couplet stretched across three lines. In the first part of the poem Parker is likewise “stretched” across two names (“Bird” and “Chan”) but kept relatively whole. But soon the poem’s focus starts to “break” away from Parker and Chan, as Young’s poem moves toward the cinematic detective Charlie Chan and then “Chan’s dark sidekick / Birmingham Brown / (aka Man- / tan Moreland).” Brown’s dialogue, a crude caricature of black dialect (no longer Bird, but a voice from Hollywood: “Feets / do yo stuff”), is then introduced, then Bird (no longer Chan) becomes himself cartoonish, “eyes bugged out.” The poem then transitions into a crude pun which aligns Parker’s playing with his drug habits (“Solos snorted -- / in one nose / & out the other”), and then we are back to Detective Chan, as the poem’s speaker wonders if “they know” that “Charlie Chan / is a white man,” alluding to one or more of the Caucasian actors who played the character on film. We eventually get around to Basquiat paying tribute to Parker, painting a tribute piece to him “in the Stan - / hope Hotel, / the one Bird bit / the dust in,” and the poem ends with the artist following his hero “feet (six deep) first” into a death caused by addiction.
Young’s “riff” is written in tercets, as are most of the poems in To Repel Ghosts. “The tercets, for me, were very well thought out,” he tells his friend, novelist Colson Whitehead, in a 2003 interview: “They were a way for me to think about epic length – Dante’s Inferno in tercets” (36). But despite the borrowing of a poetic structure from a literary work familiar to any reader informed by the Western canon, “Charlie Chan on Horn” has no consistent rhyme scheme or meter, and Young further disrupts the rhythm of the poem by stretching words across tercets and by using em dashes to create additional “breaks.” Metaphors are constructed and then abandoned: Parker is briefly heard “blowing / like Gabriel,” for instance, but the comparison is quickly dropped. The poem’s speaker is “interrupted” by parenthetical asides: “Fu Manchu too. / (Bless you.).” Young draws on a number of disparate time periods and artistic mediums: 1940s Hollywood film, 1950s jazz, 1980s art. The story of Parker as Chan includes “samples” of Mantan Moreland’s voice (“Feets / do yo stuff”) and snippets of Parker’s performance (“NOWS THE TIME / NOWS THE TIME / BIRD GETS THE WORM –”). He also combines bits of sound collage with visual text from two of Basquiat’s paintings: “CPRKR,” from the work of the same name, and “TEETH. / HALOES / FIFTY NINE CENT.” from Charles the First. The poem’s components are not wholly fragmented from each other: Moreland, Parker, and Basquiat are all on the run and yet trapped “(in one place),” and they are all linked by their use of pseudonyms (Basquiat, whose alias is not mentioned here, masqueraded as the graffiti artist SAMO© early in his “career”). But Moreland had no history of addiction, and Birmingham Brown was not a self-chosen nickname.
Then again, all three men were motivated to play these parts, to “entertain” in varying degrees, to play to type, by economic factors.

Young’s interest in “THRIVING ON A RIFF” might frustrate strategies of close reading. The poem’s polyvocality, its use of italics and capital letters, and its juxtapositions of visual and auditory “samples” also seem to resist attempts to “translate” the poem into an oral performance, limiting its potential remediation in a popular venue for contemporary poets. It is difficult to imagine Young (or anyone, for that matter) reading this poem aloud. Of the three poems from the To Repel Ghosts manuscript that are published in Giant Steps, “Charlie Chan on Horn” is the one that riffs most visibly and audibly in the style of hip-hop music: “Negative” could easily be an outtake from Most Way Home, and “Langston Hughes” anticipates the “blues poems” that appear prominently in the second volume of Young’s “Devil’s Music,” Jelly Roll. While it pulls from a diverse range of sources and contexts, the voice at the center of “Charlie Chan on Horn” is nonplussed by the frequent interruptions and detours, reflecting Young’s comfort with these practices: the poem’s eventual transition from a consideration of Parker to a discussion of Basquiat is pulled off casually: “Now dig / this.”

**The Sound of Postmodernism**

Young’s decision to title his first book-length work of criticism The Grey Album seems like an attempt to draw more attention to sampling in academic discourse. The discussions of hip-hop in the volume trace the development of more recent sampling practices and their ties to hip-hop’s golden age. The title refers to the 2004 DJ Danger Mouse mash-up project in which a capella versions of tracks
from Jay-Z’s 2003 “swan song” (he would later renounce his retirement) *The Black Album* were juxtaposed with music from The Beatles’ 1968 “White Album” (the record’s “official” name is *The Beatles*). Jay-Z’s Roc-a-Fella Records officially released *The Black Album: Acapella*, a decision that acknowledged the proliferation of remixes and mash-ups in the culture of contemporary hip-hop and seemed to condone experiments like *The Grey Album*. The Beatles were less complicit in such a project: though Paul McCartney would later lend his verbal support to the project (a response that reflects the gradual acceptance of sampling practices by bands like The Beatles: George Harrison called rap “computerized crap” back in 1991), EMI Recorded Music (on behalf of Capitol Records) served Danger Mouse with a cease-and-desist letter shortly after *The Grey Album* appeared on the web. The project became a battleground for various artists, scholars, and lawyers on various sides of the debate around the legal terrain of sampling, and the celebrity of the artists involved in the remix project resulted in extensive media coverage.

Young claims that Danger Mouse “made the Beatles music again” via *The Grey Album* (395). Ignoring the history of resistance the band and the owners of its music have greeted hip-hop with over the years, the producer “bring the Fab Four down to earth” by proceeding with the project and “offer[ing] it up” to the web for free (395). Though “the ways in which the Beatles have suffused the culture” are evident to Young (395), he suggests that Danger Mouse, by rejecting the “economy” of music as determined by EMI and other rights holders in the music industry, travels “a subterranean railroad of meaning” that privileges the subjective experiences of an individual listener over the claims made for the Beatles by the officially-sanctioned
forces that seek to dictate the terms of their cultural legacy (396). The statement made by The Grey Album, according to Young, is: “The record, like the world, is round. It’s yours” (396, emphasis in quote). Danger Mouse “returned the DJ to the center of the groove” in a cultural moment that otherwise privileges hip-hop’s lyrical contributions, asserting the sampler’s identity as “spinner of both history and the future” (396).

More broadly, Danger Mouse and many of the poets, novelists, and musicians surveyed in The Grey Album are part of what Young calls “the counterfeit tradition” (18), united in their use of “fabrication” as a way of “making a way out of no way, and making it up as you go along” (17). Young arrived at the idea of a “counterfeit tradition” in a 2001’s “Visiting St. Elizabeths: Ezra Pound, Impersonation, and the Mask of the Modern Poet,” an essay included in Ezra Pound and African American Modernism. Here he considers “the ways even a black reader [of Pound] might find something smuggled within the lines worth preserving, just as others found in Pound’s poetics a radical form that fought his own fascism” (215). But he seems more interested in connecting the ways Langston Hughes, Allen Ginsberg, and other poets “can see the value of Pound’s perspective while also seeking to ‘counter’ it” to “the way in which black folks forge – by which I mean ‘create’ and ‘fake’ – black authority in a world not necessarily of their making” (199). Comparing these projects to counterfeit money that “both circulates in and subverts the dominant system” and “the forged free passes” used by runaway slaves in nineteenth-century America, Young argues that “the black writer in the counterfeit tradition crosses
then questions the bounds between ‘bound’ and free, between fact and fiction, between ‘real’ bills and fake ones” (199).

Most hip-hop, like much of the poetry and fiction of earlier African-American writers in Young’s counterfeit tradition, involves “making meaning from history and meanings already established” (363). It is music that “raps of and samples the past as a corrective to the present,” looking backwards to look forward (362). For example, Danger Mouse distributes The Grey Album free of charge on the web, an act that challenges the claims of ownership that are insisted upon by EMI. In fact, when news of the EMI cease-and-desist spread, fans of the album organized “Grey Tuesday,” an act of online protest “where at least 170 websites risked lawsuit by hosting the album” (McLeod 80). The decision to work exclusively with commercially successful albums rejects certain tenets of sampling in the early twentieth-century. Many contemporary DJs and producers fed up with the commercialization of sampling view the use of recognizable samples as unoriginal or an act of pandering to Top 40 interests (Schloss 105). But the presence of uncleared samples from popular music is a callback to hip-hop’s golden age, which in the days before litigation liberally borrowed from classic rock (McLeod and DiCola 21). In a 2004 interview Danger Mouse described the project as an attempt to insist that sampling “doesn’t have to be what people call stealing” (Moss). Ironically, and in keeping with the kind of strategies Young aligns with the counterfeit tradition, it is through the blatant theft of intellectual property that he sets out to present sampling in a more flattering light.
Not everyone shares Young’s comfort with the shape and sound of hip-hop’s sampling practices in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1990’s *Signifying Rappers*, Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace attempted to describe the sound collages created during this particular moment in hip-hop culture, focusing on the role of the DJ in these productions:

His responsibility is the song behind and around the rap – the backbeat, krush groove, and the ‘sound carpet,’ i.e. a kind of electric aural environment, a chaos beyond the rapper’s rhymed order, a digitalized [sic] blend of snippets, squeaks, screams, sirens, snatches from pop media, all mixed and splattered so that the listener cannot really listen but only feel the mash of ‘samples’ that results. The most recognizable of these samples range from staccato record scratches to James Brown and Funkadelic licks, to M.L.K.’s public Dream, to quotidian pop pap like “The Theme from Shaft,” *Brady Bunch* dialogue, and 50s detergent commercials. (25)

Some of the more memorable records from this period – Public Enemy’s *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988), De La Soul’s *Three Feet High and Rising* (1989), and the Beastie Boys’ *Paul’s Boutique* (1989), among others – contained dozens if not hundreds of samples from an impressive range of musical genres and time periods, as well as sound clips from sitcoms, cartoons, political speeches, and private phone calls. But in claiming that audiences “cannot really listen but only feel” the sounds created by these disparate elements, Costello and Wallace downplay the citational power of sampling and its uses in calling to mind various historical moments and cultural contexts. “The rap is primarily the rap,” they argue, while “the
coldly manufactured, self-consciously derivative sound carpet of samples over which the rapper and DJ declaim serves to focus listeners’ creative attention on the complex and human lyrics themselves” (97).

Intersections between rap and poetry are of particular interest to critics concerned about the value of poetry in twenty-first century American culture, but the interest taken in rap’s ties to poetry predominantly focus on lyrics and oral performances. For example, in 2004’s *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*, Dana Gioia calls rap “the only formal verse – indeed perhaps the only literary form of any kind – truly popular among American youth of all races” (18). Though Gioia notes that he does “not consider Busta Rhymes and Jay-Z the Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot *de nos jours,*” he argues that “their creative methods, performance techniques, and public reception illuminate the world of literary poetry in ways that conventional frames of reference do not” (19). Gioia suggests that academics must learn to discuss rap “on its own terms” (19), and in doing so, “the seemingly familiar world of literary poetry will begin to look slightly different” (20). But he also insists that the core values of poetry will also seem familiar to readers of “literary poetry” by claiming that “the qualities most prized in the new oral culture [...] are also the virtues traditionally associated with the art” (31). In Gioia’s estimation, rap matches the best literary poetry when it is “concise, immediate, emotive, memorable, and musical” (31).

In a 2011 survey of twenty-first century American poetry for a special issue of *Contemporary Literature*, Michael Davidson describes our contemporary moment as one in which “poetry is sometimes indistinguishable from other forms of writing,
morphing into prose, rap lyrics, journalism, critical theory, or in the case of digital poetry, cartoon or conceptual art” (616). Echoing Gioia, he observes that “when critics bemoan the weakened state of poetry, they seldom refer to actual readership but to its cultural authority, especially within the academy” (616). But disputes about claims for the “poetic” qualities of rap music do not always originate with intellectual straw men, nor do these critiques dismiss all potential links between the aesthetics of hip-hop and contemporary American poetry. In fact, while Gioia suggests that he is interested in a range of “creative methods” and “poetic techniques” in rap music, he and other scholars often ignore hip-hop’s polyvocality, its fragmentation, and its sampling practices, favoring assessment strategies that make rap more immediately recognizable to readers of so-called “literary poetry.”

Despite the large number of scholarly publications on hip-hop in the twenty-first century, few books focus on the role sampling has played in its overall aesthetic.43 Recent publications that focus more broadly on sampling in contemporary music include 2011’s Creative License: The Law and Culture of Digital Sampling and the 2008 anthology Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture. In Making Beats, Joseph Schloss argues that hip-hop scholars “emerged from disciplines that are oriented toward the study of texts or social processes, rather than musical structures” (20), and that their approaches tend to “reinforce the notion that the nonverbal aspects of hip-hop are not worthy of attention” (21). For example, the privileging of lyrics present in the critical framework of The Anthology of Rap (and elsewhere in Hip Hop Studies) is also a privileging of clarity and

linearity over the collage aesthetics cited by Young as one of hip-hop’s most compelling aesthetic traits. In making his case for the value of rap and the necessity of a *The Anthology of Rap*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (in his introduction) addresses the emphasis the collection places “upon Rap’s lyrics alone,” and he argues that “the words are finally the best reason for the beat” (xxvi). The editors of the volume, Adam Bradley and Andrew Dubois, view the collection of printed lyrics as a supplementary tool rather than a document which seeks to supplant the source of its transcriptions, noting that it “encourages readers to focus upon the discrete elements of rap’s poetic form in isolation before returning them to the whole performance” (xxxv). But while they acknowledge that “[v]iable approaches to the aesthetics of rap abound,” Bradley and Dubois are less interested in reading traces of fragmentation in the lyrical content of rap, declaring authoritatively that “[t]he MC not only must craft a coherent poetic narrative or create a compelling persona, but must do so while rhyming with some regularity and without ever losing the beat” (xxxiii).

In a 2010 *New Yorker* review of *The Anthology of Rap*, Kelefa Sanneh notes the way “the form of the project dictates its content,” observing that its editors “are sympathetic to rappers whose lyrics survive the transition to the printed page” (“Word”). For example, the anthology’s “Golden Age” section includes lyrics from three Beastie Boys songs, only one of which, “Shadrach,” is a track from *Paul's Boutique*. Similarly, Bradley and Dubois acknowledge the cultural impact of *Three Feet High and Rising* and *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back* by including lyrics from each album in their survey, but their transcriptions fail to demonstrate
why Young and other listeners view this particular moment in hip-hop history as a golden age. Sanneh questions what has actually survived this translation into print, arguing that *The Anthology of Rap* has “trouble with line breaks (not to mention punctuation)” in some of its transcriptions. For example, he describes how one set of Big Daddy Kane lyrics arranged into three lines of similar length could just as easily be translated by “a different anthologist” into “six lines of varying length” (“Word”).

Public Enemy frontman Chuck D contributes an “Afterword” to *The Anthology of Rap*, lending the project his hip-hop credibility and hoping that the credentials of “Dr. Andrew DuBois” and “Dr. Bradley” might help “break the commercial trance that’s had rap in a choke hold for the past several years” (790). Five Public Enemy songs have their lyrics reprinted in the anthology, including two tracks from *It Takes A Nation* (“Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos” and “Rebel Without a Pause”). Released in 1988, *It Takes A Nation* was one of hip-hop’s earliest commercial successes: the album “sold over 800,000 copies and nailed the Number One spot on *Billboard*’s Top Black Albums Chart” (Dery 409). In *The Grey Album*, Young’s describes his initial encounter with the record:

“It Takes a Nation was the first time I heard what postmodernism sounded like. Loud, layered, filled with longing and language – not just self-conscious but self-referential – the songs as produced by the Bomb Squad contained bits and even samples of songs by other people (such as Queen’s “Flash Gordon” in “Terminator X to the Edge of Panic”) as well as samples of other songs on the album itself. Like the nation, it suggested, the whole was the
sum of its parts. Like DNA, or some good gumbo, each part could conjure the whole" (348).

While Young eventually considers Chuck D’s lyrics and vocals, his discussion of Public Enemy begins with a description of the sampling practices of its “Bomb Squad” production team (a “group within the group” that Chuck was a member of as well).

Collage practices were an essential component of Public Enemy’s aesthetic. In a book-length examination of It Takes a Nation, Christopher Weingarten notes that unofficial Bomb Squad leader Hank Shocklee made his partners “tap their samples in by hand,” rejecting the “crisp breaks and sharp, jabbing riffs” that were a staple of conventional sampling practices and “creating natural tensions and queasiness when things didn’t line up perfectly, a push-and-pull that by comparison made most hip-hop sound clinical and safe” (11). Even at a moment in hip-hop history when most groups sampled in excess, Public Enemy stood out with their “cavalier, frontiersman attitude toward sampling,” their “violent pointillism,” and the way they “mistreated” and distorted their samples when things sounded too “clean” (40). Elsewhere, journalist Mark Dery describes the music of Public Enemy as a collection of “off-kilter loops, aliased or scratch samples, and high-pitched spiraling sounds,” a “noisy collage” of sounds and samples that create a noise comparable to “the heart of a riot” (408).

Unsympathetic listeners found little substance in the band’s seemingly-chaotic sampling practices: influential New York DJ Mr. Magic famously smashed the band’s first single, “Public Enemy No. 1,” on the air to make his feelings on the
band’s sound crystal-clear (Reeves 70). In The Anthology of Rap, Bradley and Dubois acknowledge the role “radically textured sampling” played in the overall aesthetic of Public Enemy, but in addition to privileging the “lyrical protest” of Chuck D, their reading of the group reduces the sampling practices of the Bomb Squad to attempts “to demand attention by, if necessary, irritating eardrums with discomfiting noises” (248). What is ignored in this reading of the band’s aesthetic is the way sampling in hip-hop also engages with history, appropriating and rewriting its narratives, and often demanding that listeners consider their own relationship with American culture and its past.

Danger Mouse looks back to the golden age of sampling, bringing its methods into the present to challenge the litigious landscape of hip-hop (and, more broadly, the music industry at-large) and its influence on the shape of its aesthetic. The golden age of hip-hop similarly made use of earlier African-American music to find a way out of the landscape of American culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Earlier in The Grey Album Young inventories some of the samples found on Public Enemy’s It Takes a Nation, observing that despite their quantity, “most if not all” of them “are from another, previous golden era, of soul and funk” (348). Chris Weingarten claims that the Bomb Squad made use of 100 or more samples on It Takes a Nation, with sources ranging “from the familiar to the obscure to the completely unrecognizable” (39). Young’s point is that by privileging particular sounds from the 1970s, Public Enemy is not just borrowing “other people’s music.” The band’s collages also reveal “how another era sounded” to an earlier generation of African Americans (348). Simon Reynolds makes a similar claim in Retromania:
Pop Culture’s Addiction to Itself, noting that the music from hip-hop’s golden age “communicates a sense of cultural identity just through its sound, being woven from vintage funk and soul, Blaxploitation soundtracks, eighties quiet storm and ‘slow jams’” (327). Young argues that what sounds to some listeners like wildly disparate elements is actually “an attempt to capture and re-create the music of one’s parents and one’s childhood, of soul and all it stood for” (348-9).

Young claims that Public Enemy’s relationship to the music of the 1970s is indicative of a larger current of nostalgia that travels through most iterations of hip-hop, a specific longing for “the past’s view of the future” (361, italics in quote). Samples appropriated from the soundtracks of artists’ childhoods, “a time when the future was filled with promise,” are common on songs and albums that describe “the illusions of the American dream while mourning its disappearance” (361). For example, “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos” includes a sample from Isaac Hayes’ “Hyperbolicsyllabicesquedalymystic,” a song from 1968’s Hot Buttered Soul. Chris Weingarten notes that Hayes “was one of Chuck [D]’s heroes,” and that the R&B singer frequently appeared “on records bought by his aunts, uncles, and parents” (83). “Hyperbolicsyllabicesquedalymystic” is a study in excess, a “nine-minute sex romp” that includes a “six-minute piano solo” that Public Enemy would go on to sample in their own song (83). “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” conversely, is an angry repudiation of “a land that never gave a damn / About a brother like me and myself,” a story told from the perspective of a black man imprisoned for refusing to be drafted in an unspecified war. Weingarten reads the inclusion of the Hayes track as in accordance with “the importance of autonomy and self-reliance that Public
Enemy stress both creatively and politically” (83). But the contrast between the
escapist, seemingly-uncensored aesthetic of “Hyperbolicsyllabicesquadalymystic”
and the images of prison and oppression in the lyrics of “Black Steel” seems more
like a repudiation of Chuck D’s childhood image of Hayes as “black Superman” (88).
The “freedom” or autonomy Hayes reveled in seems unattainable in 1988, the stuff
of fantasy.

But “Black Steel” does not end with confinement: it concludes with a
jailbreak, and in its last line Chuck D imagines “Fifty-three brothers on the run, and
we are gone.” The escapees are not out of the woods yet: noting that “the chase is
on,” Chuck refuses to guarantee safe passage, choosing to remain cautiously
optimistic instead. They are fugitives, not free men, but they are on the run. The
Bomb Squad rewrites the utopic tenor of Hayes’ piano, transforming it into a tense,
jittery melody that complements Chuck D’s incarcerated musings. But they do not
abandon the dream entirely: it’s been brought back to the future, made “rougher
than the average bluffer.” There’s an element of unpredictability acknowledged here
too: Chuck D’s speaker acts on his dream to escape, but he also notes that “to my
surprise,” the plan actually worked.

**Watching The Static**

Hank Shocklee notes that Public Enemy and its Bomb Squad would “use
samples like an artist would use paint” (qtd. in Weingarten 39). In *To Repel Ghosts,*
Young flips the script somewhat, using the language, rhythms, and imagery of hip-
hop and jazz to consider the life and work of a painter. Young arranges *To Repel
Ghosts* as a double album, a decision motivated in part by Basquiat’s documented
love of records and vinyl (Ploughshares 188). The volume’s frontispiece is a reproduction of Now’s the Time, a Basquiat painting that mimics the appearance of the Charlie Parker single. The collection’s subtitle describes it as “five sides in B minor,” and its table of contents arranges the poems in a kind of double LP: 117 numbered “tracks” are spread across various “sides” (Bootlegs, Hits, Takes, B-Sides, and Solos) that span two “discs” (Zydeco and Mojo). But the amount of poems arranged on each disc seems to defy the conventions of jazz arrangements and the available recording space on a vinyl record. Their quantity seems to more closely resemble the number of samples present on a hip-hop album than a Charlie Parker record. Similarly, the book’s Table of Contents contains a number of titles that have been crossed out. While these strike-throughs invoke Basquiat’s tendency to include crossed-out words in his paintings, in the context of hip-hop they also resemble the “scratches” a DJ might leave on an album, or the methods of distortion favored by the Bomb Squad.

Basquiat was an active participant in the New York City hip-hop scene of the early 1980s. He financed, “produced,”44 and released “Beat Bop” in 1983, a single featuring lyrics by rappers Rammellzee and K-Rob and music by Al Diaz. Though the song “was never played on the radio” (“Rammellzee Interview”), “Beat Bop” is now a seminal record in hip-hop: one can easily trace a path from its collage aesthetic to the work of the Beastie Boys (who have sampled “Beat Bop” in several songs), among others. Jeff Chang calls “Beat Bop” a song that “brought the aesthetic tensions of graffiti into rap: representation versus abstraction, roots-rocking versus avant-

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44 His collaborators dispute the nature of this role, though Basquiat is credited with it in the record’s liner notes.
guardism” (200). Evidence of the tensions between Basquiat, a tagger on the Lower East Side and an artist whose work was championed by the city’s art scene, and Rammellzee, a Far Rockaway native who viewed the painter as “a fake” graffiti artist because “Basquiat had never hit a train,” is recognizable to Chang and to other listeners in the music that came from their collaboration (201).

To Repel Ghosts begins with a disclaimer in verse: “distortions clicks & pops / from analog equipment / are part of the fabric / & only contribute / to the garment’s uniqueness / & sound quality.” Young’s reference to “analog equipment” seems to align the sound of his volume with the era before digital sampling, and it leads one reviewer to insist that “Young’s Basquiat is analog” (Kun). But as Simon Reynolds notes, hip-hop artists like Public Enemy often retain “the crackles, pops and hiss of vinyl surface noise” in their samples, “drawing attention to the fact that you were listening to a record made out of other records” (330). Similarly, Young describes the “alternative spellings” that frequently appear in the volume’s poems “another kind of rewriting,” (“Liner Notes”). Young is imitating Basquiat’s own tendency to misspell words in his work, but his remark here does not cite mimicry as the reason for their inclusion in his poetry. Instead, he highlights the origins of his project in earlier “takes” on Basquiat and his work, calling attention to what is being rewritten, how, and why.

Unlike his mentor Andy Warhol, Basquiat and his celebrity faded quickly after his death. For example, a New York Times reviewer called a 1990 exhibition of the late painter’s work “yet another depressing chapter in a pathetic story,” and marveled at the fact that “[t]wo years after Jean-Michel Basquiat’s death, the cynics
and opportunists who made such absurd claims for his slender talents are apparently still at it” (Kimmelman). The painter would occasionally resurface, most visibly in Julian Schnabel’s 1996 biopic *Basquiat*, but Young notes in the “Liner Notes” of *To Repel Ghosts* that “a growing number of articles on the artist” had only recently begun appearing in the twenty-first century. He speculates that much of the silence and disapproval had been generated by “so-called critics [who] have often blurred” the painter’s “work and life” (“Liner Notes”). More recent re-evaluations buck this trend; Young cites “one from the British *Guardian*” as “a rare, balanced, and accurate piece of journalism” (“Liner Notes”). Young may be referring to a 2000 review of a London Basquiat exhibition in which Jonathan Jones observes “anarchic juxtapositions [that] chronicle an America descending into chaos,” and claims that the painter’s work ultimately “rubs out any illusion that American history coheres” (Jones).

In the “Liner Notes” of *To Repel Ghosts*, Young provides a quote from Basquiat: in describing “the seeming casualness of his canvases,” the painter declared that “[e]verything is well stretched even though it looks like it might not be” (345). Basquiat’s work – populated by child-like figures, icons of popular culture (be they Batman or the boxer Jack Johnson), and seemingly-obtuse statements (PAY FOR SOUP, BUILD A FORT, SET THAT ON FIRE) – is often dismissed as sloppy or intellectually shallow, and these opinions are not helped by the stories of Basquiat’s drug abuse and the speed at which he painted. But Young praises Basquiat’s attempts at “scraping the uncanny” and “making / a tin thing sing.” What is often “stretched” (or “riffed” upon: Young uses the same term to describe the
practices of jazz musicians and hip-hop artists) in his work are the underlying assumptions that define aesthetic value in his cultural moment.

In “Campbell’s Black Bean Soup,” the first of the “Bootlegs” on Side One, Young asks two questions that align Basquiat’s aesthetic with the counterfeit tradition: “How to sell out / something bankrupt / already? How to copy / rights?” One way the painter attended to these questions was by creating SAMO©, a tag Basquiat began using in his graffiti during the late 1970s. The “Sameold” heard in the name embraces the absence of originality in the creation of art, which Basquiat subverts by branding it, claiming ownership via the copyright logo. Richard Schur reads this act as “a subtle but ironic commentary on intellectual property’s symbol of authenticity by replacing trademarks with copyright marks, which regulate who can possess the rights to copy a text or phrase” (203). SAMO© is one way in which the artist “stripped / labels, opened & ate / alphabets” (“Campbell’s Black Bean Soup”), mocking the art world’s preoccupation with economic value by making his art about asserting his value in economic terms, announcing his intellectual property on other people’s property. Jeff Chang notes that Basquiat “constantly toyed with names and classifications, exploring how science defined and ranked difference, how capital affixed weight and value” (200).

In “Negative,” Young imagines waking up “to find everything black / what was white, all the vice / versa.” Listening to “white songs / on the radio stolen by black bands” and watching “snow / covering everything black / as Christmas,” the poem’s speaker asks “Is this what we’ve wanted / & waited for?” What has not changed in this Twilight Zone is the value of “money,” which “keeps / green, still
grows & burns like grass / under dark daylight.” “Negative” is the first poem of “Side 2” of Two Repel Ghosts, a collection of the album’s “Hits.” It precedes “Jack Johnson,” a series of poems and prose excerpts masquerading as a single song. Though the verse components of the sequence have their own headings, Young decides to unite them all under one title instead of giving each poem its individual track. “Jack Johnson” is one of several “tracks” in To Repel Ghosts whose arrangement seems indebted to the sampling aesthetic of hip-hop.

“Jack Johnson” begins with a reference to the date of composition and the materials used in a Basquiat painting of the boxer: “1982, acrylic & oil paintstick / on canvas.” The painter and his subject are not entirely dissimilar: a quote Young takes from Denzil Batchelor, one of the boxer’s biographers, notes that Johnson “decided that being a painter was less of a vocation than he had supposed. He would be a boxer instead.” Basquiat is not mentioned in the rest of the sequence, but as Young notes in his “Liner Notes,” To Repel Ghosts is “not a biography” of the painter but an “extended riff,” one in which “Basquiat and his work serves as a bass line, a rhythm section, a melody from which the poems improvise” (“Liner Notes”).

“Jack Johnson” is primarily made up of tercets arranged chronologically and written in the voice of the boxer. In “BLACK JACK: b. 31 March 1878,” Johnson echoes the sentiment about money expressed in “Negative,” observing that while “most white folks would love / to see me whupped,” they nonetheless “bet / on me to win.” Johnson acknowledges the names he is given by white America (“dog, cad / or card”) but he asserts that he’s “still / an ace & the whole / world knows it.” In Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson, Geoffrey Ward notes that notes that “[a]t
a time when whites ran everything in America, he took orders from no one and
resolved to live always as if color did not exist” (3-4). The success of Jack Johnson in
the boxing ring was for many white Americans of the early twentieth-century like a
*Twilight Zone* story come to life. But Young's Johnson, unlike Ward's, asserts his
racial identity, announcing in the poem that “I'm black all / right & I'll never let
them / forget it.” This version of Johnson also lines up with the image of the boxer
on Basquiat’s white canvas, a faceless black figure underneath a crown, his arm
raised triumphantly. In the poems found in the first half of the “Jack Johnson”
sequence, the boxer frequently asserts his racial identity, embracing what his
enemies are most terrified of. For example, in “THE RING: 13 May 1913” he refers to
his relationships with white women, boasting that “The bed is just / another ring I’d
beat / them white boys in –.“

Between each poem is a quote, often arranged in prose, on the subject of
Johnson. Here Young includes the various claims history has made upon the boxer.
For example, in an excerpt from *Knuckles & Gloves*, a history of boxing published in
1923, Bohun Lynch initially damns the boxer with faint praise, calling him “by no
means unintelligent.” He then notes that Johnson, “not without good reason, was
regarded generally with the greatest possible dislike,” primarily because his
“physical triumph over white men” led him to display “all the gross and overbearing
insolence which makes what we call the buck nigger insufferable.” Young also
includes critiques of Johnson by African-American intellectuals: in one excerpt
Booker T. Washington notes that the boxer “has been able to bring humiliation upon
the whole race of which he is a member.” This quote is followed not by a poem
(disrupting the rhythm Young had previously established in the sequence) but by W.E.B. DuBois’ famous quote about “this unforgivable blackness” that is a condition of Johnson’s existence and the experience of all African Americans in the early twentieth century.

In *The Grey Album* Young claims that hip-hop “courts ruin, which is the form of history it knows best” (362). Sampling, which disrupts the tidy narrative of history by demonstrating where the past “keeps poking – or breaking – through” (363) reveals (and occasionally revels in) the “damaged vessel” it describes (362). Young notes that “[w]hen done right,” sampling “insists on fission, going down to the atomic level and splitting even that apart” (364). Young’s “Jack Johnson” sequence seems to be arranged with these tenets in mind. Johnson is imagined speaking in his own words, but the racism of Lynch and the disappointment of Washington contest his claims. This history of rejection appears to work its way into the voice Young creates for Johnson in poetry. While the initial poems in the sequence present a boastful, assured Johnson, by “EXHIBITIONS” the boxer believes himself to be pursued by “a zeppelin only I could see.” A Miles Davis quote preceding the poem claims that Johnson was “exiled to Paris with joy” in the wake of his legal troubles in the United States, But Young has Johnson compare his time in “Europa” to being “kept [...] under her opera glass.” So encased, Johnson begins to look back on his own past, its memories interrupting his recollection of his time in Paris. Acknowledging his “retired” status in the United States, he thinks back to his “first / fight against the Giant / at the carny.” But he soon returns to describing his life after boxing, noting that he played “an Ethiopian / King” in a 1936 production of *Aida*. In
his role as a king “in chains,” bowing “to a blackface queen,” Johnson’s past career and the racist tendencies that colored his reign reveal themselves. In fact, the producers of this particular production of Aida may have banked on this past by hiring Johnson to play the role, given its resonances.

By the final poem of Young’s sequence, Johnson imagines “my black body / thrown free” in death. “THE RACE d. 10 June 1945” begins with Johnson embracing the varied claims made on his name:

Always was
ahead
of myself

my time.
Despised
by whites

& blacks alike
just cause

I didn’t act right.

Young’s decision to start the poem with the word “Always” in a poem that imagines Johnson’s self-written obituary suggests that history and its claims tend to always win out in the end. Despite a life spent “crossing color / lines I never drew,” the color line reasserts its claims on Jackson’s identity by contributing to his rejection “by whites / & blacks alike.” Johnson, had spent his career hearing reporters like
Jack London note in print (in an excerpt provided to us by Young) that “Naturally, I wanted to see the white man win.” The boxer responds by doubling down on his own racial identity, asserting himself as a descendent of “pure / Caromontee stock.” If conceptions of race cannot be challenged and dismantled, Johnson will nonetheless go down swinging.

But this is decidedly Johnson’s final look at the role history has designated for him, not Young’s reading. The “samples” Young includes throughout this sequence demonstrate the various forces that shape the conditions of Johnson’s career and his ideas of race. By highlighting these various claims for Johnson’s identity Young exposes their seams: London’s description of boxing as “a sport that belongs unequivocally to the English-speaking race” seems absurd in the context of “Jack Johnson.” But Young, in drawing our attention to some of the racist sentiments common in the early twentieth century, also indirectly highlights moments where such views surface in appraisals of Basquiat and his work. Johnson’s time is not locked safely in the past but continues to shape the painter’s present and the life of the poet who revisits them both in the future.

Young refuses to neatly wrap up the story of Jack Johnson. Though the final poem in the “Jack Johnson” sequence describes the car accident that killed the boxer, a collision that left his “Zephyr hugging / like an opponent / in the last round / this pole,” Johnson refuses to go down: we last see him “thrown free –“ from the wreck. Similarly, Young closes To Repel Ghosts with “Retrospective,” a poem whose last tercet finds its author considering “more – color – / before brief / black – the static –.” These poems refuse to close the books on their subjects, quietly rejecting the
dividing lines of history and mortality. Unlike Andy Warhol, who laments the fact that “when you died, you didn’t just vanish, and everything could just keep going the way it was only you wouldn’t be there” (*To Repel Ghosts* 246), Young knows what happens when we go off the air.

“Retrospective” begins “In the dark,” and given the use of tercets throughout *To Repel Ghosts*, the callback to the first line of the *Inferno* seems intentional: Basquiat’s journey through history, which a retrospective seeks to arrange, often neatly, has just begun. Young describes a spectral figure who has returned after his death, “looking, not for fame” but instead “collecting / on what was owed.” But this image seems at odds with the “counterfeit tradition” Young values, as Basquiat, in death, is no longer capable of being subversive. “Let us guess / JMB,” the poem asks, confronting the painter: “you can see / everything clear / as your complexion, / as composed.” The price of clarity is too great. Instead of abruptly disconnecting, pulling the plug, Young wishes that Basquiat had “said so / long like a television / station, signed off / the air.” It seems that such a departure acknowledges that “the static” will persist, that closure is only a way of measuring time, reducing it to something more manageable. In a 2009 interview Young claims that Basquiat provided him with “a way of learning about history, not just his own” (Donnelly). Digging deeper, “making a tin thing sing” like the painter who inspired him, Young watches the static and lets its sound linger on. “In our digital age,” Young observes in *The Grey Album*, “we only pretend there’s silence” (311).
In *The Grey Album* Young argues that “the thing the African American writer might be most interested in, and might ultimately be confronting most often, is the American Dream” (61). Rather than “a call for isolationism” or “a return to some mythic purity,” Young is interested in how various African Americans have used the Dream to describe “ourselves we knew as renewable, sustainable, and not just black, but evergreen” (63). *The Grey Album* is “an attempt at a unifying theory,” but it is one that is self-aware: its author acknowledges that the desire for “a book that would encompass most everything” is a callback to “the promise of modernity, at least in poetry” (16). Young knows that in many academic circles it seems foolhardy to adhere too closely to the tenets motivating “books like William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson* or Ezra Pound’s *Cantos,*” in the sense that most twenty-first century poets no longer “wonder, if only by their form, can the poem, can any one book, contain everything?” (16). He tempers this impulse by claiming that he seeks to tell “the story of what I read, heard, and saw at the crossroads of African American and American culture,” a statement of purpose that declares the subjectivity of its historical overview (18). Though it resides in the Cultural Studies section of the bookstore, *The Grey Album* is part of the “storying” tradition, a form perfected by Zora Neale Hurston in *Mules and Men* and one that allows Young to examine “the ways the fabric of black life has often meant its very fabrication” (17).

Young’s “counterfeit tradition” is another way of reading the storying tradition in African American culture: as in *Giant Steps,* where he asserts the identity of the hip-hop generation, he rewrites a familiar story, an act which acknowledges a
literary tradition but insists on the agency and authority of a younger set of writers who wish to contribute to that tradition on their own terms. By claiming that “[t]he storying artist's job is to dance in and on the breaks,” Young describes that tradition in a manner that privileges the aesthetic of golden age hip-hop (19). The art of sampling is preoccupied with history, but it also invents a past to free its practitioners and listeners “from the bounds of fact” (19). In hip-hop, Young hears “a music of the ever-present” (314). It replaces one mode of subjectivity, the “fact” insisted upon by history and its divides, with another, more hopeful narrative. But sampling also acknowledges earlier historical forces and their power. In “The Historical Genesis of the Pure Aesthetic,” Pierre Bourdieu argues that “[t]o escape (however slightly) from history, understanding must know itself as historical and give itself the means to understand itself historically; and it must, in the same movement, understand historically the historical situation in which what it labors to understand was formed” (310). Sampling seems to provide many artists in hip-hop with a technology that helps them reveal what Bourdieu calls “the historical truth in the objectivized or incorporeal traces of history which present themselves to awareness in the guise of a universal essence” (311). Chuck D famously called hip-hop “Black America’s CNN” (Chang 251). Young, borrowing from a more recent technological development, argues instead that “Hip-hop was *wiki* before *wiki* was” (314). He’s as interested in the range of subjective experiences of music, and “the missed words, the missing music, the wordless wishes, in the gaps of the groove” of the sound of history as he is in the story being told (314).
“Deadism,” the final section of *The Grey Album*, is an ars poetica describing Young’s investment in “a poetry that speaks from the mouths of those gone that aren’t really gone, a poetry of ghosts and haunts” (401). Responding to various reports that “poetry is dead,” Young embraces its alleged passing: “Let it be dead then; let us write as if we are already dead” (399). He describes the poet in twenty-first century American culture as a spectral figure who insists that the reports of his or her death have been greatly exaggerated. But the voice of this poet is loud and assertive, a declaration of continued presence rather than “the poetry of lament, of victimization” (403). Young addresses “Deadism” to his fellow poets, who he challenges to behave less like the terrified human survivors of a zombie film and more like the zombies themselves, writing a poetry “of shambling power, devouring everything in its path” (400). “Only by writing a dead poetry, a zombie poetry,” he argues, “can the thing come back to life, not so much reborn as born for the first time” (404).

Young’s call for a “zombie poetry” reveals that he still practices what he preaches in 2012, continuing to “devour” the language and imagery of popular culture as he did in 2000’s “The Black Psychic Hotline.” While Young no longer organizes his volumes as if they were records, he continues to “stretch” his work across sequences that rely heavily upon fragmentation and material appropriated from other sources. For example, 2011’s *Ardency: A Chronicle of the Amistad Rebels*, claims on its cover page to be “compiled from authentic sources.” One of the book’s major sequences in “Correspondance,” a collection of letters and speeches “from the Mendi people of Sierra Leone” aboard the Amistad, written in prison in the
nineteenth century and set to verse in the twenty-first. “Correspondance” also includes other fragments: quotes from the Book of Job, engravings from newspapers of the Mendi, pages from the New England Primer, letters from Mendi supporters in the States. Young arranges the letters written by the Mendi in a number of different ways – there are couplets, prose poems, free verse – and he retains the “broken” English of its authors, sometimes shoring it up against the more polished rhetoric of others writing on their behalf. By resituating the text within a collection of poetry, Young is also inviting his audience to read these letters as poems, arguing for their literary and aesthetic traits now that they are removed from their archival contexts.

The “Correspondance” sequence begins in “Westville” on October 30, 1840. The arrangement of the first letter’s text on the page suggests its author’s lack of familiarity with this form of communication. Its first line, “dear Sir Mr tappan” documents the uncertainty of its audience and the degrees of decorum and familiarity to adopt in this occasion for writing. Its author, “Kale,” introduces himself in the final lines of the letter’s body as “your friend” who will “give you this letter” (33). In the index, we learn that Kale “was the youngest of the Amistad captives,” and that he “was asked to spell words and religious phrases to prove both the Mendi’s devotion and intelligence” (248). Young includes gaps between his early letter’s sentence fragments and keeps the message free of punctuation, perhaps imitating its original contours and spacings, a reflection of the fact that Kale’s mastery of English developed over time. Over the sequence, the letters from the various members of the Mendi take on more “polished” prose at times: the uncertainty of the greeting in “Westville” is absent from “Boston, Mass.,” dated November 8, 1841
and addressed “To the Hon. Judge Quincy Adams” (43). Young arranges the text here, authored by Kale and two companions, in neat couplets, as the Mendi captives look toward a future in which they will “soar into the gate and airs of Heaven” beyond the walls of their prison (44).

Rather than “a realm for upholding ‘reality’ as we see it,” Young believes that the cultural imaginary might be “a place to confront reality, and even fictionalize it, in the process remaking it in our image – not necessarily as we live, but as we would like to” (61). In “Hotel Purgatorio,” a poem from 2008’s For the Confederate Dead, Young writes that there is

Nothing on the TV –
We are the channels changing, chained

to dresser drawers full
of maps to the missing
Legends

I don’t read these lines as yet another poetic lament about the incursion of television in our lives. In The Grey Album Young wishes to counter “the ongoing, reflexive desire in our culture for ‘realness’ in all its forms,” a trend he aligns with “reality television” and its promise of “an experience beyond the phony or the phoned in, beyond the mode of pretense that daily life insists upon” (19). In “Hotel Purgatorio,” such images on television “don’t much measure” up to the desired experience. But sampling and its appropriation, its insistence on re-shaping and re-mapping, might
provide an out from such a purgatory. In *The Grey Album* and in his poetry, Young documents the various ways “black folks have upended the status quo, shattering the glass – using quotations, sampling, storying, and saving the scraps of things to stitch together something altogether more powerful” (312).
Chapter 4: On The Internet, Nobody Knows You’re A Poet

Jim McGrath

In “AN INTERNET BARD AT LAST!!!” (2013) ARS POETICA,” a video posted to his YouTube channel on July 14th, 2013, American poet Steve Roggenbuck calls Twitter, the popular social media platform with 284 million monthly active users45, “the dream for poets.” He describes the average day for a poet who uses Twitter as a publication platform:

When people wake up and check their phone, and they’re scrolling through their Twitter, they can get your poetry right then. You get to reach people with lines of poetry immediately when they wake up. And on their lunch break, every day. And before bed at night. When they’re scrolling through…and you get to be, you get to be right next to their friends, their family members…they’re reading updates from their mom, and then they read an update from you, the poet. You get to be in people’s lives on such a…such a crazy level.46

Roggenbuck views Twitter’s “timeline” – its display of the messages, updated in real-time, from accounts that a user has chosen to follow – as a site where intimate encounters between readers and poets can take place. A poet can be a constant presence “in people’s lives,” if not a part of the family then at least “right next to”

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45 This is the estimated number provided by Twitter on its official web site as of January 7, 2015 (“Company”).
46 I have transcribed the quotations from Roggenbuck’s “(2013) Ars Poetica” video, inserting punctuation and making use of capitalization in an attempt to reflect what I hear in the poet’s inflection and delivery.
friends and loved ones. Roggenbuck feels truly fortunate “to be a poet while the Internet exists.” And he imagines his poetic antecedents feeling similarly about the potential of social media networks like Twitter. “Walt Whitman would die for this,” Roggenbuck claims, concluding his video by speculating that the nineteenth-century American poet “would be on TweetDeck [a third-party Twitter tool]...kicking his legs up and going hard!” Roggenbuck sees Twitter as a space where the professional networks of poets overlap with the personal networks of readers, where the language of poets becomes at times indistinguishable from the lives of friends and relatives.

In a 2012 interview with the literary blog HTMLGIANT that declared her “Poet Laureate of Twitter,” Lockwood describes her writing on the social media network as part of “the Communal Book of Twit,” a massive tome co-authored by an endless stream of writers producing “what could only be described as Literature.” While she initially felt removed from the “separate aesthetic” of some of the kinds of writing she encountered on Twitter, Lockwood soon found that her interests “dovetailed so prettily” with the myriad voices filling her timeline. Lockwood, Roggenbuck and other poets who write prolifically on Twitter – Kenneth Goldsmith, Tao Lin, and Melissa Broder, among others – revel in the effects social networks have on our contemporary ideas about reading and writing. By rhetorically situating Twitter as a site of publication for poetry (and, more broadly, literature), Lockwood, Roggenbuck and their contemporaries bring its linguistic and social conventions into conversation with ideas of poetry that implicitly or explicitly privilege work that circulates in more traditional publishing models.
What does it mean to “be a poet while the internet exists”? Matthew Kirschenbaum claims that “[t]oday you cannot write seriously about contemporary literature without taking into account myriad channels and venues for online exchange” (“What is an @uthor?”). Surveying the digital landscapes and social media platforms that so many contemporary authors inhabit in the twenty-first century, Kirschenbaum argues that “Authorship [...] has become a kind of media, algorithmically tractable and traceable and disseminated and distributed across the same networks and infrastructure carrying other kinds of previously differentiated cultural production” (“What is an @uthor?”). Authors and readers are now facing “a landscape of authorship and reading that is no longer confined to simple geometries and lines of influence, and no longer served by the established critical schools” (“What is an @uthor?”).

Kirschenbaum makes these observations in part to champion the “analytical tools and techniques” prevalent in research circulating under the label of “digital humanities,” and we might imagine some of these methods productively applied to a Twitter-savvy poet like Roggenbuck. A visualization of the poet’s network of Twitter followers, for example, might yield insights on the professional identities – critics, poets, editors, and otherwise – present, prevalent, or surprisingly absent from that particular web of accounts. Kirschenbaum, in his attention to the transformations of the “landscape of authorship and reading” via social media activity, challenges critics to trace the impact of these newer modes of communication on our aesthetic

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47 In addition to individuals who may be employed to speak on their behalf in digital forums like official author sites and Facebook pages, web sites and Twitter accounts run by various publishers, and Amazon author pages (among other venues).
sentiments and ideas of literary value. His discussion of our contemporary moment as “The Age Of The @uthor” does not ignore the role that print publications and more traditional sites of cultural exchange (major publishing houses, media outlets, and academic institutions) continue to play in endorsing and authorizing popular aesthetic sentiments, but it does insist on treating online discourse and social media activity as important factors in shaping how we think about reading and writing in the twenty-first century.

This chapter examines both the impact of social media on poetry and the impact of poetry on social media. I argue that poets like Roggenbuck and Lockwood, who explicitly inhabit Twitter and other social networks as poets and publish writing they describe as poetry via these platforms, are engaged in more than just self-promotion: they are making the social dimensions of poetry visible to twenty-first century readers. These poets are reinvigorating and redefining the inherently social nature of poets and poetry, aspects of the literary form that have been rejected at times by popular conceptions of poetry in the lyric mode. More specifically, these poets are calling attention to the ways our ideas of reading and writing have been transformed by the material conditions of social media and the web at-large.

There have been many “internet bards” writing on the web long before Roggenbuck and Lockwood, archived online in spaces like the Electronic Poetry Center (established in 1995) and The Electronic Literature Organization (founded in 1999) and discussed in scholarly publications like Loss Pequeño Glazier’s Digital Poetics: The Making of e-Poetries (2002), Adalaide Morris and Thomas Swiss’ New
Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories (2009), C.T. Funkhouser's New Directions in Digital Poetry (2012), and Marjorie Perloff's Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century (2012). With few exceptions, many of the poets and works discussed in these texts have failed to match the visibility and attendant press coverage attained by Roggenbuck and Lockwood in their short careers. This is due in part to the material conditions used to write and publish many of these earlier forms of digital poetry. Assessing the state of “digital poetics at the university” in 2006, Al Filreis notes that “a college or university course that includes digital poetry is not by any means the necessary conditions for the server space, Web [sic] design, keyboarding assistance, and network speed that digital poets need and crave” (129). What seem like obstacles to digital writing and publication before 2006 (when many of the poets and authors discussed in the aforementioned body of scholarship are writing and publishing online) are for the most part absent to poets like Roggenbuck and Lockwood, who can publish work freely on Twitter, post additional content on or free or inexpensive blogs hosted on available servers, and take advantage of design templates available via Blogger, WordPress, Tumblr, or other publishing platforms.

Lockwood notes that she didn’t see “the possibilities right away” for poetic output when she first joined Twitter:

When I first signed up, I was aware of a few accounts that I thought were really funny, like @gregerskine and @extranapkins. I followed them, and discovered a bunch of other people who were writing what could only be described as Literature. There was no doubt in my mind. Subjects were:
toads, bogs, jorts, gender, Animorphs, Chingy, wasps, “im gay,” Kate Bush, crieing, and pizza; but the tweets themselves were Literature. I was writing in a separate aesthetic, but it dovetailed so prettily with what they were doing that it was easy to enter into conversation with these people...

(Simmons)

Lockwood’s first tweet on her @tricialockwood account, time-stamped at 3:09pm on May 16th, 201148 – “It took me so long to get on this Twitter” – is marked by a tone common to most “first tweets” on the site: users are announcing their presence to an imagined audience that is not fully formed in their minds, tentatively feeling out what they are comfortable broadcasting and how they might use the network.49 Lockwood felt more assured as a poet than as a tweeter: before introducing herself to the digital republic; she had posted poems to message boards online and had been submitting work regularly to poetry and literary journals (Lichtenstein), and her first poem in Poetry, “The Church of the Open Crayon Box,” was published in its February 2011 issue. And while she has frequently referenced how close she is to her parents and four siblings in interviews, her HTMLGIAN comments highlight her eventual interest in using Twitter to find comedic accounts, which led her to “Literature.” For Lockwood, Twitter is less a familial network and more a place to converse and write alongside likeminded authors, comedians, and poets.

48 I say “timestamped” instead of “dated” here in order to acknowledge that the timestamps published by Twitter are not always accurate, due to settings on electronic devices and other factors.
49 Roggenbuck’s first tweet on his @steveroggenbuck account, timestamped at 4:01pm on November 27th, 2009, contains a link to what was then his “new blog,” suggesting an early interest in using the site as a tool to promote his writing.
On its “About” page, Twitter notes that it “helps you create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers” (“About Twitter”). To Roggenbuck, Twitter’s timeline has the potential to blur distinctions and divides between poet and friend, family and stranger. The social network is imagined as a space where the vision of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” might become a reality: “You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor / look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the / spectres in books” (rpt. in i love you, before long i die). On Twitter, life is mediated not through the “eyes of the dead” or via “spectres in books” but by a stream of the present that never seems to run dry. “Walt Whitman made me appreciate my life more actively than I had ever appreciated it before,” Roggenbuck notes in “ARS POETICA.” On Twitter, he can document and publish the ways in which, thanks to Whitman, he has come to the realization that “[t]he world is wonderful.” For example, he can “text people just a reminder: remember to look at the sunset this evening,” a message that could “effortlessly reach thousands of people now” via his Twitter profile. Roggenbuck views such actions as the terrain and responsibility of the poet in the twenty-first century: “As a poet, it’s your job to text people pictures of the sunset” (“ARS POETICA”).

Lockwood’s discussion of the role of the poet on Twitter is much less ambitious or didactic in tone. “When I did join [Twitter],” she tells HTMLGIANT, “I spent my first week livetweeting the movie Bambi, focusing specifically on the puberty of Bambi and Thumper, and was subsequently unfollowed with extreme prejudice by the few poets who had charitably followed me in the first place” (Simmons). She initially responds to the question of whether tweets are “literature”
or “a kind of ‘poetry’” with jokes: “WHAT IS POETRY. CAN SOMETHING THAT IS NOT POETRY ... BE POETRY. IF IT IS POETRY, CAN IT NOT BE POETRY? In this interview I will answer the question so good that no one needs to answer it ever again!” (Simmons). Though continuing to joke here and throughout the interview, Lockwood eventually notes that she has “no problem thinking of tweets as poetry, because the really great ones function in the same way that poetry does to me” (Simmons). Like poetry, Lockwood argues that “really great” tweets “are clear and cubic thinking, and they repay obsessive thinking-about” (Simmons). She classifies a person looking for a more precise or nuanced distinction between tweets and poetry as “some sort of taxonomy psycho” (Simmons).

There are of course a plurality of modes of communication on Twitter, a wide range of stylistic conventions and aesthetic impulses on display within and across various social networks. Rather than embracing my inner taxonomy psycho, I hope to demonstrate the advantages of careful attendance to the particular sites of communication, print and digital, that Roggenbuck and Lockwood publish and inhabit as poets. I am particularly interested in the ways Twitter has heightened our awareness of the multitude of aesthetic choices and modes of communication circulating online and offline by collapsing these various voices into a messy and ever-changing timeline. This messy stream of discourse and its invitation to treat any public account as a potential partner in simultaneous conversation is further complicated by a range of factors: the fact that there are potentially as many unique timelines as there are accounts on Twitter, the presence of web and mobile applications that promise to bring more order and control to a reader’s view of the
network, the increasingly ubiquity of bots, promoted tweets, spam accounts, and fictional characters, the inability at times to tell the difference between correspondence with a program and an exchange taking place between two human beings.

I argue that Roggenbuck and Lockwood navigate these choppy digital waters in ways that call attention to the twenty-first century’s predilections for mobile communication, its investments in particular modes of constantly streaming information, and its general collapse of once-fortified divisions of labor and modes of writing in popular forms of media. Advertising has become indistinguishable from editorializing, online communication shifts quickly and effortlessly from text to sound to video to image and back again, and a totalizing privatization over all seems to threaten the once-idealized terrain of the web at the same time at which more global citizens than ever before have been granted access to that space. Within these conditions, Roggenbuck, Lockwood, and others have assumed the mantle of poet, carving out a space from which they might reimagine the social role of poetry as a kind of meta-commentator on the language of our media-saturated environs.

As of this writing Lockwood has amassed close to 50,000 followers on her account (@tricialockwood), a small number compared to the general vastness of both the social network and the web at-large, but a sizable audience when viewed in light of other poetic coteries, circles, and networks online. Compared to other American poets on Twitter – the two most recent “inaugural” poets during the Obama administration, Elizabeth Alexander (3,243 followers) and Richard Blanco (7,824 followers), poets who have long been entrenched in the web like Ron
Silliman (6,829 followers) or Kenneth Goldsmith (12,600 followers), and deceased canonical figures with digital afterlives like Allen Ginsberg (7,065 following @ginsbergquotes), Walt Whitman (24,400 following @TweetsOfGrass), and Emily Dickinson (6,871 following @E_Dickinson) – Lockwood appears to have earned her title as “the poet laureate of Twitter.” The online attention given to Lockwood may seem more impressive considering her comparatively small output as a poet: two book-length collections (2012’s Ballloon Pop Outlaw Black, via the small press Octopus Books and 2014’s Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals, published by Penguin), two poems published in The New Yorker (one in 2011 and one in 2013), and additional appearances in print and digital literary publications like Poetry, The London Review of Books, The Awl, and Slate (among others).

Though he had two more years than Lockwood to gain an audience, Roggenbuck is presently followed on Twitter (@steveroggenbuck) by over 17,000 accounts. He has self-published the bulk of his poetry (“four little poetry collections”) online, circulating his work for free via his personal web site in XML and PDF formats. In December 2013 Roggenbuck successfully raised over $17,000 on Kickstarter to initiate boost house, a “publisher and intentional community” made up of writers and editors who live in the same house and subside on the funds earned from their publications (Kickstarter). In addition to i love you, before long i die, a 2013 “walt whitman mixtape” edited and compiled by Roggenbuck, boost house has published (among other works) THE YOLO PAGES, a collection that announced itself in April 2014 as “one of the first anthologies ever to cover ‘alt lit,’ ‘weird twitter,’ flarf, and associated communities and figures” (Boost House). While
he has not yet circulated work in print with an established journal or publishing house, Roggenbuck’s poetry has been discussed in the New York Times, Rolling Stone, and Gawker (among other publications). In a May 2014 New Yorker profile of Roggenbuck titled “If Walt Whitman Vlogged,” Kenneth Goldsmith called the then-26 year-old poet “one of the bright stars of Alt Lit [sic]” and compared the “punk-inspired outlaw energy” in his writing and performances favorably to that of Whitman and James Joyce (Goldsmith).

Reviewing the contents of THE YOLO PAGES, Goldsmith notes that “[a]t least half of the book is made up of tweets” (Goldsmith). Like many contemporary critics and journalists interested in the potential literary value of Twitter, Goldsmith focuses more on the network’s 140-character limit on correspondence than its status as a network. He describes one writer’s contributions to THE YOLO PAGES “[a]t their best” to “a contemporary version of haiku.” More broadly, he praises the poets whose Tweets are reprinted in the anthology as “examples of how much feeling and humor can be packed into this compressed form” (Goldsmith). Though it highlighted the potential for “communal immediacy” in the platform, a March 2011 New York Times piece – titled “How Do I Love Thee? Count 140 Characters” – devoted more space to the potential value of a “Twitter haiku movement” and to asking whether literature on the platform could ever be more than a “punch line” (Kennedy).50 A follow-up piece published four poems composed “within Twitter’s text limit of 140 characters” by Billy Collins, Claudia Rankine, Elizabeth Alexander, and Robert Pinsky under the headline “Four New Twitter Poems.” Most poems

50 The word “poesy” was also used, as was the phrase “hash tag.”
referenced length or space explicitly in their lines: Alexander’s “Teeny tiny poem” described itself as “just enuf 2hold / 1 xllent big word,” whereas Rankine’s poem ended by noting that “cross characters translated / in kanji could say much more” (“Four New Twitter Poems”). Alexander’s decision to shorten words in the interest of conserving space invokes the kind of shorthand individuals who do not text often imagine to be found on the phones of teenagers. I mention this only to further stress the fact that these readings of Twitter demonstrate an apparent unfamiliarity with the lived experiences of communication in digital contexts.

Readers were invited by the New York Times to follow the leads of Alexander, Rankine, Collins, and Pinsky and “share their own verse.” The Times encouraged participants to compose poems on Twitter and to use the “hash tag” [sic] #poetweet to call them to the attention of the Times. A collection of reader tweets was then embedded (via Storify, a service that allows users to collect and curate tweets) within a page on the Times’ site a few days after “Four Twitter Poems” was published. Many of the chosen poems explicitly describe themselves as haikus; others imitate the interest their poetic models had in calling attention to the limits of what can be said within the confines of a single tweet. Many of the same strategies of writing within limited constraints were also adopted: numbers and symbols substituted letters and words to maximize character use. If certain readers chose to deviate from the conventions of “Twitter poetry” created and endorsed by the Times – composing works spread across multiple tweets, including additional hashtags, replying to other Twitter users to create more collaborative texts – their work did

51 The less said about Robert Pinsky’s Twitter poem the better.
not appear under its digital masthead. Aside from including the #poetweet “hash tag” at the end of each poem (giving them nine less characters to work with than the *Times* poets) and, in some instances, resorting to forward slash marks to indicate line breaks (lacking the formatting available to the poets published in the *Times*), these authors, like the organizers of this call for poetry, privileged character limits above all other material conditions of writing when creating work recognizable as both “Twitter” and “poetry.”

Some critical assessments of Lockwood and Roggenbuck privilege their subjects’ familiarity with social media at the expense of acknowledging the ways these poets situate their work within and against earlier poets and literary conventions. For example, a 2014 *New Yorker* review of *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals*, worried that “the constant reinforcement” Lockwood receives via Twitter might limit her work to mere “rhetoric” and not, presumably, “art” or “poetry,” though its author, Adam Plunkett, does not explain or define these terms and their apparent distinctions. Plunkett goes on to describe “Rape Joke” – a poem from the collection that was originally published on the arts and culture blog *The Awl* in 2013 and quickly went viral – as one that “probably could not have been written if Twitter hadn’t been around” (“Patricia Lockwood’s Crowd-Pleasing Poetry”). I agree that the poem’s lines at times “could be read as a series of exceptional tweets,” but Lockwood chose not to publish them there, and many of the poem’s lines and sections extend well beyond the 140-character limit of an individual tweet. For example, Lockwood’s decision to begin many of the poem’s lines with the phrase “The rape joke is...” recalls the use of anaphora by American
poets like Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, and Joe Brainard, among many others, as much as it seems indebted to rhetorical strategies familiar to users of social media. By reducing Lockwood’s aesthetic to “search-engine optimized” remarks or “titles and jokes ready to tweet,” Plunkett ignores the range of voices, rhetorical strategies, and modes of writing present in Lockwood’s work.

Furthermore, when Plunkett suggests that Lockwood’s writing resembles “search-engine optimized” content designed for little more than maximum visibility and/or shock value, he seems to imply that the language of poetry in more traditional material contexts (like the printed collection where Lockwood’s poems reside) is somehow less tainted or free of the language of commerce. In a 2013 interview Roggenbuck criticizes “much of the poetry world” for having “a knee-jerk reaction against anything that can be considered ‘self-promotion’ or ‘marketing’” (Davidson). As Lockwood suggests in “The Father and Mother of American Tit-Pics,” the image of Emily Dickinson posting photos of herself to Instagram seems to conflict with traditional ideas about poetry, publicity, and decorum. I’m interested in marketing,” Roggenbuck admits (or confesses) in his “ARS POETICA,” “but I’m really interested in marketing the moon. ‘Do you love the light of the moon, son? And if you don’t, can I convince you?’” (“ARS POETICA”). While he cites ways in which reading Whitman has enabled him to “appreciate my life more actively than I have ever appreciated before,” Roggenbuck also shares with him what David Haven Blake calls “Whitman’s capacity to fuse poetry with advertisements” (xiii). Blake recalls an experience rereading Leaves of Grass and noticing how “much of the poetry seemed dedicated to proclaiming its cultural relevance” (xiii). Similarly, despite claims that
Roggenbuck’s is a champion of a kind of “raw...solipsism” or that his videos are performances of “raw virtuosity” (Chen), this self-appointed literary descendant of Whitman admits the influence of the language of commerce in his poetry.

Roggenbuck and Lockwood explicitly place their work in conversation with earlier American poets: they seem more interested in canonical figures from pre-digital eras than in poets who have long resided on the web like Ron Silliman, Brian Kim Stefans, and Charles Bernstein. For example, the title of Roggenbuck’s “ARS POETICA,” (“AN INTERNET BARD AT LAST”) is an allusion to the proclamation made, in an anonymous review of Leaves of Grass published in a September 1855 edition of The United States Review, that Whitman was “an American bard at last!” (“Walt Whitman and His Poems”). Whitman himself was eventually discovered to be the author of this review, which he used “to introduce himself as the poet that antebellum literary nationalists had anxiously been awaiting: the poet who spoke to and for the nation as its representative bard” (Whitley 155). Roggenbuck’s use of quotation marks in his own title seems like a playful revision of Whitman’s invention of his own enthusiastic supporter.

While Roggenbuck’s allusion to Whitman seems like a respectful nod to the nineteenth-century poet’s interest in self-promotion, Lockwood presents an image of Whitman “suckling grizzled wild dogs at his teats” in “The Father and Mother of American Tit-Pics,” a poem from her 2014 collection, Motherland Fatherland

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52 The absence of explicit references to these figures may not just be due to lack of interest: for example, Dene Grigar describes the “danger of becoming inaccessible” facing poets who created work in Flash (“Curating Electronic Literature as Critical and Scholarly Practice”), a once-popular software that has not been supported by most mobile phone providers since 2011 (Trenholme).
*Homelandsexuals.* Here Lockwood revives Whitman and Emily Dickinson, the “father and mother of American poetry,” to spend one day “back from the dead.” They spend most of the time “exchanging tit-pics” with each other like a couple of flirty twenty-first century college students. In the poem, Lockwood notes that she “brought them back from the dead because I was standing in front of the mirror taking picture after picture of my tits in order to establish for once and all time what a tit actually looks like.” After “taking hundreds of boob photos, and studying them closely,” she finds herself thinking “‘This is not something Emily Dickinson would have done. Or is it.’”

“The Father and Mother of American Tit-Pics” mocks the average social media user’s seemingly-insatiable desire for immediate and comprehensive access to the photos and thoughts of her friends, lovers, co-workers, and celebrities. “Thank God” Whitman and Dickinson were able to come back and share their nude photos, Lockwood notes, “or we might never have known what the tits of them looked like.” But it also mocks older strategies of shaping literary reputations and aesthetic sentiments: “When you want to say a poet is mysterious, say ‘Very few tit-pics of him exist,’ or ‘Reading his letters and journals, we are able to piece together a pic of his tits – they loved butter and radishes and were devoted to his sister.’”

Lockwood is interested in highlighting the absurdity of our present uses of social media as well as the absurdity of imagining the past as a more dignified literary, asocial era whose poets would have scoffed at smart phones and selfies. She playfully calls attention to the mediating forces that have shaped the literary reputations, noting, for instance, that “Walt Whitman is the Number Two Beach
Body every year, because look at the way he snapped back into shape only months after giving birth to American Poetry.” Here Lockwood reduces what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “prestige” of poetry, the processes by which “charismatic legitimation [...] is given to only a few individuals, sometimes only one per generation and, by the same token, to a continuous struggle for the monopoly of poetic legitimacy,” to the stature of a bodybuilding competition (51).

Much recent poetry scholarship highlights what is disavowed or made invisible as a result of particular reading conventions and assumptions. In 2008, Virginia Jackson described the situation of American poetry at the beginning of the twenty-first century as one in which the idea of “poetry as cultural practice” has been replaced by a “pathetic abstraction” (183). Specifically, “our current, spectral ideal of a genre powerful enough to overcome our habits of not reading it” is fostered by “the lyricization of poetry,” a condition of “the historical transformation of many varied poetic genres into the single abstraction of the post-Romantic lyric” (183). Similar frustrations with popular ideas of how to read and write poetry materialize in interviews with Roggenbuck and Lockwood. Before dropping out of an MFA program, Roggenbuck encountered teachers who “were very dismissive of my internet- and flarf-influenced poetry,” perceptions that led him to more visibly and vocally “assert in response that it is valuable, perhaps more valuable than print work, because it’s able to become some regularly integrated into my readers’ lives”

53 Recent scholarship that maps the history of the “lyricization of poetry” while proposing alternate modes of reading include Christopher Nealon’s The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century (2011), Mike Chasar’s Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America (2012), and Gillian White’s Lyric Shame: The “Lyric” Subject of Contemporary American Poetry (2014).
(Davidson). And Lockwood seems unable an abstract, idealized vision of poetry’s value seriously, especially if it has the capacity to exclude certain topics or modes of composition. When asked by an interviewer to more carefully define the poetic nature of Twitter, she responds: “Honestly, when I think of the question ‘what is poetry,’ I picture Linnaeus and David Lehman absolutely making out, hands up each other’s shirts, while everyone who participates in modern American poetry watches” (Simmons).

In “Sing to Me, O Muse (But Keep It Brief),” a 2014 essay for the New York Times Sunday Book Review, David Lehman takes up the “panel-discussion perennial” topic of “poetry in the digital age.” “The integrity of the poetic line can be a serious casualty” in the age of “electronic transmission,” Lehman warns, but he ultimately concludes that “it is fruitless to quarrel with the actuality of change.” Lehman may not be looking for a fight, but Roggenbuck and Lockwood write poems that challenge his sense that “the proliferation of poems” written and circulated online result in a “devaluation of currency,” and that poetry is best defined as “an experience of the mind – mediated by memorable speech – that feeds and sustains the imagination and helps us make sense of our lives.” Lockwood and Roggenbuck consider social media as a different but not necessarily inferior coin of the realm, one whose value may be informed by but need not be wholly contingent on its standing in relationship to earlier material forms of literary composition and publication.

Trolls, Weird Twitter and The Poetics of Social Media
When discussing the effects of “the internet” and “social media” on poetry (and vice versa), it is important to more precisely describe the material conditions of reading and writing on Twitter in the early twenty-first century. Peter Steiner’s once-ubiquitous 1993 *New Yorker* cartoon popularized the notion that “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” A 2000 *New York Times* interview with Steiner notes that the phrase has become something of a clichéd opening remark due to its popularity with authors writing about “Internet privacy and anonymity” (Fleishman). Fifteen years later, it is much easier to determine when a dog is a dog on the (now-lowercased) internet. For example, a 2013 *MIT Technology Review* article cited a study arguing that “just four different data points about a phone’s position can usually link the phone to a unique person,” even when “location data is anonymous” (Tucker). Attempts at maintaining degrees of anonymity prove difficult at a cultural moment when our social media profiles, records of electronic consumption, and personal mobile devices contain so much data about our lives, networks, and habits.

Given the ease with which identities can be easily verified on the web, many Twitter users include disclaimers in the biographies tied to their avatars. These messages often reflect the ways professional identities limit the potential for public discourse that might deviate from the corporate and institutional identities tied to our employers. For example, in 2008 “Retweets are not endorsements” became a common phrase present in the profiles of journalists who re-circulated links from stories that were not published by the news outlets who paid them (Warzel). Similarly, the seemingly unnecessary declaration that “opinions are my own” is
often deployed by users in order to stress that their employers may not agree with comments they make on social media. However, businesses that do not have clearly-defined employee policies on social media use are under no legal obligation to acknowledge these statements. “The reality is that in all of our interactions [...] we are always representing our employers,” argues Joshua Kim in a 2013 Inside Higher Ed blog post. “It is important that we always act professionally, thoughtfully, and in a manner that reflects well upon the organizations that we work [sic].”

The public nature of social media may seem obvious and straightforward to people like Kim, but I find the realities of resigning myself to a life in which we are “always representing our employers” whenever we speak or appear in public to be troubling and depressing. While I am not financially compensated by my university for the time I spend on social media, I am nonetheless expected to adhere to its “Code of Student Conduct” when I am “on campus as well as off campus” (“Code of Student Conduct”). The language governing student (and employee) behavior in codes of conduct is often intentionally vague, allowing the institutional forces who interpret and enforce its policies a significant degree of flexibility:

It is recognized that all members of an academic community, individually and collectively, have a right to express their views publicly on any issue; however, the University insists that all such expressions be peaceful and orderly; conducted in a manner consistent with the Code and University policies; and in such a way that University business and respectful academic discourse are not unduly disrupted. Moreover, students must clearly indicate
that they are speaking as individuals and not for or on behalf of the University community.

In the twenty-first century, many individuals have been fired or reprimanded for content circulated on Twitter. For example, in 2014 Steven Salaita found that a teaching offer he received from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was retracted, allegedly due to “the tone of his comments on Twitter about Israel’s policies in Gaza” (Weber). The hiring decision led to campus protests and public accusations that the university was paving “[t]he road to a censored community” (Flanagin). In an open letter, University Chancellor Phyllis Wise defended the decision, arguing that it was not Salaita’s “positions on the conflict in the Middle East nor his criticism of Israel” that led to the retraction, but rather his use on Twitter of “personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them” (qtd. in Wilson).

Unlike Facebook, whose “Community Standards” state that “people connect using their real names and identities” and that “[c]laiming to be another person, creating a false presence for an organization, or creating multiple accounts undermines community and violates Facebook's terms” (“Community Standards”), Twitter allows users to create multiple accounts under various pseudonyms54. In some cases these comparatively lax standards have resulted in “trolling”: abusive

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54 There are some limitations: in its overview of “Content Boundaries and Use of Twitter,” users are told that they “may not impersonate others through the Twitter service in a matter that does or is intended to mislead, confuse, or deceive others,” and that “[a]ccounts using business names and/or logos to mislead others may be permanently suspended” (“The Twitter Rules”). In practice, Twitter seems to generally allow impersonations that comedic or nature or clear attempts at satire or parody, and in fact many of the site’s most popular accounts fall under the category of “parody accounts.”
behavior involving anonymous or pseudonymous accounts targeting particular individuals.\textsuperscript{55} In extreme circumstances, Twitter users facing the wrath of trolls have received death threats. For example, the architects and acolytes of #GamerGate, a deeply-misguided “activist” campaign that claims to be driven by “an overarching desire to see more transparency in the [video] game press” but in reality targets women in gaming who are vocal about negative perceptions and treatment of women in the industry, have “doxxed”\textsuperscript{56} particular developers and sent messages on Twitter that have led some individuals to flee their homes and make reports to local authorities (Totilo).

The idealized vision in “ARS POETICA” of Twitter as a digital commons where all voices are equal ignores the various institutional and social forces, online and offline, that inflect discourse. In later writings and performances, Roggenbuck has acknowledged the ways that asymmetrical power structures and affiliations with particular racial, sexual, and gender identities (among other factors) inform social networks and their uses by various participants. For example, in the fall of 2014 “alt lit,” the literary coterie that Roggenbuck has been affiliated with for most of his career, was publicly attacked and criticized in a range of online publications – blogs, Tweets, Facebook posts, and eventually some national press in America – after some of its members – including two of Roggenbuck’s longtime friends: the editor and writer Stephen Tully Dierks and the novelist and poet Tao Lin – faced public

\textsuperscript{55} Twitter’s “Rules” include an overview of policies regarding “Abuse and Spam,” but many users have criticized the social network at times for failing to protect certain users from hate speech or threats of violence (Brustein).

\textsuperscript{56} “[D]oxxing is the Internet-based practice of researching and broadcasting personally identifiable information about an individual” (Wikipedia).
accusations of rape (Klee). In the wake of the accusations Dierks announced, via a Facebook post that he eventually deleted, that he would “cease pursuing a public writing career” (qtd. in Jones). He also deleted his Twitter account. Roggenbuck felt compelled to publish a long, public message on Facebook in which he regretted his decision to not be “more vocal” about similar concerns raised about the predominantly-male alt lit community, condemned Dierks and other male authors accused of rape and misogyny, and engaged in conversations about masculinity and perceptions of “consent” in contemporary American culture (“October 2014”).

In a tweet time-stamped at 8:21 pm on October 21, 201457, poet Patricia Lockwood tweeted “RIP to alt lit,” a message accompanied by a screenshot of an additional, longer message written in a word processor58. This longer note finds Lockwood situating alt lit, a coterie also affiliated with HTMLGIANT, which (as previously noted) crowned her “Poet Laureate of Twitter,” within the longer literary history of male-dominated movements in a mock-eulogy:

RIP to alt lit. RIP to regular lit. RIP to dad lit, lad lit, and most heinous of all, 

brad lit. RIP to the Angry Young Men. RIP to the nasty-ass Beats. RIP to modernism, postmodernism, post-postmodernism, post-postmodern-

modernism, and pre-postmodernpremodernism. RIP to Hemingway. It was

57 I say “time-stamped” instead of “dated” here in order to acknowledge that the timestamps published by Twitter are not always accurate, due to settings on electronic devices and other factors.
58 Options for publishing content longer than the 140-character limit of the individual Tweet range from third-party applications like TwitLonger, publishing strings of tweets with corresponding sequential numbers to document the order in which they are meant to be read, and uploading screenshots of text composed elsewhere. The latter method, used by Lockwood here, seems like the way to display text that is the least disruptive to readers more interested in scrolling through their timeline than in pursuing external links elsewhere.
an awfully simple operation. They should just let the air in. RIP to T.S. Eliot.

YOU SHOULD HAVE MARRIED A FUCKING CAT. (“RIP alt lit”)

Lockwood’s note goes on to mention canonical male authors like Yeats, Joyce, Tolstoy, “the Romantics,” “the Lake Poets,” the misogynistic contemporary memoirist Tucker Max (author of the New York Times bestselling collection I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell, a canonical text for many American college students in the twenty-first century), “the men who grew mustaches in France,” and an unnamed “guy who wrote a whole novella about his girlfriend putting an eyeball up her vagina” (“RIP alt lit”). A depressing continuum is mapped, stretching back thousands of years to “Saint Paul,” who “fucked up so bad” for reasons unstated here. Lockwood imagines an unpleasant end for these kinds of literary men, hoping that “all those dudes who stabbed their wives” are “reborn as teenage boys who buy swords at the mall” (“RIP alt lit”).

The form and tone of Lockwood’s eulogy to alt lit echoes the language of “Weird Twitter,” a collective of Twitter users spread across various geographic regions and populated by both users who align their birth names with their accounts (like Lockwood) and a host of profiles written under various pseudonyms. Unlike alt lit, a coterie that despite its use of the web was in many ways explicitly tied to the geographic regions of Brooklyn and Manhattan, Weird Twitter contains multitudes and stretches across the continental United States and into various international regions. A 2013 “oral history” of Weird Twitter published on Buzzfeed describes it as “a meritocratic place where genders, ages, backgrounds, and jobs are either absent or distorted beyond recognition” (Herrman and Notopoulos). While
the accounts cited by *Buzzfeed* note that the sense of a shared aesthetic began
developing prior to what we now think of as “social media” on a public forum hosted
on the web site *Something Awful*, many authors gravitated to Twitter as the
network’s user base grew and gained visibility.

Many users view Twitter as a faster and more reliable news source than
traditional outfits: echoing many similar assessments published elsewhere, *Time*
columnist Ben Bajarin notes that the network “has replaced the morning paper.”
Twitter encourages first-time users to populate their timelines with “interesting
Tweets” by “interesting people,” suggesting as potential candidates “friends,
celebrities, [and] news sources” (“Where do Tweets live?”). In addition to
connecting to a network of acquaintances known via personal and professional
contexts, users tend to curate timelines and create lists focusing on particular topics
and content: for example, Bajarin notes that he tracks “all the major tech
publications and individuals who regularly say or share relevant technology news,
analysis, or other insights I’m interested in” on Twitter. And Bajarin seems
relentlessly “on message” in his use of his own Twitter account (@benbajarin) to
primarily and almost-exclusively discuss “personal computing and mobile trends”
(as he notes in his Twitter bio): an informal review of the last few weeks of his
tweets found that every one was somehow related to these stated interests. As
Lockwood notes, “[p]eople are on the internet for serious business!” (Herrman and
Notopoulos).

Twitter users invested in posting disclaimers that “opinions are my own”
suggest are interested in discussions on the social network that extend beyond
topics they focus on in their professional lives. Many user biographies on Twitter read like grocery lists of hobbies and topics: the bio on the Twitter account I have designated for “professional” discourse (@JimMc_Grath) contains such a list, noting that I am interested in “[n]ew media, American poetry, digital archives, comics, [and] Chipotle” (McGrath). And while my timeline is dominated by digital humanities practitioners, archivists, librarians, and scholars, I also follow a smaller number of comedians, comic book artists, and corporate fast food accounts. A random glance at the current updates on this timeline reveals tweets about digital humanities employment opportunities, CFPs for upcoming conferences, and conversations about computational journalism, but it also features images of sports mascots and images of Chipotle restaurants.

*Gawker* writer Max Read describes Weird Twitter’s aesthetic as dedicated to a kind of “social hacking” of the network’s conventions of discourse (Herrman and Notopoulos). Specifically, the writing circulated from these accounts frequently disrupts the conventions of discourse of Twitter by calling attention to those very same conventions. Lockwood compares the experience of sighting a post from a Weird Twitter account in a timeline to seeing “a bunch of people walking around acting normal and then in the middle there’s a clown doing himself with a banana” (Herrman and Notopoulos). Weird Twitter accounts can even impact a user’s experience on the network when they are absent from their timelines. For example, a Weird Twitter campaign to get the hashtag #RIPScottBaio to become a trending topic led users to believe the *Charles in Charge* actor had died, “a prank [that] became national news” (Herrman and Notopoulos).
On the surface, these pranks don’t seem much different from the forms of “trolling” that have caused serious harm to the lives of women in the video game industry. However, stunts like #RIPScottBaio seem more like critiques of the certain social conventions of online discourse. In the race to gain attention as a news source or as an individual who prides himself or herself on knowing about breaking developments before their peers (and broadcasting that knowledge as quickly as possible on social networks), many professional and personal accounts privilege speed over accuracy. In a cultural moment when “34% of cell internet users go online mostly using their phone, and not using some other device such as a desktop or laptop computer” (Pew Research Center), a collective of artists and comedians mocking investments in the accuracy of information received via Twitter timelines by seeing how far easily-disputed lies can circulate is performing a public service.

Similarly, Weird Twitter is often preoccupied with a particular style of “corporate trolling,” a practice that rejects the notion that social media is little more than a way “for advertisers to reach new and potential customers” (Boston). Some recent critiques of Twitter have described a site of cultural exchange that evokes parapsychologist Peter Venkman’s apocalyptic vision of “dogs and cats, living together, mass hysteria” (Ghostbusters). Many of these critiques are circulated on the social network by some of its more active users. For example, the popular Twitter account @BrandsSayingBae documents tweets from companies that use the phrase “bae,” a popular twenty-first century term of affection popular among many younger Twitter users. “It’s cool when a corporation tweets like a teenager,” the account’s profile sarcastically notes: “It makes me want to buy the corporation’s
products” (@BrandsSayingBae). Naomi Klein notes that “direct advertising” is viewed by many twentieth-century consumers as “a rather clumsy intrusion into a much more organic approach to image building” (loc. 835). Similarly, the central observation at the core of accounts like @BrandsSayingBae seems less a rejection of the presence of marketers on social media and more a critique by media-savvy users of “clumsy” approaches targeting certain demographics.

In a February 2015 blog post for Gawker titled “Brands Are Not Your Friends,” Sam Biddle describes social media as “an incongruous and gross place for brands to mingle” with consumers as if they are fellow guests at a social event, arguing that interacting with corporate Twitter accounts in the same manner as one does with friends on the network “undermines the vital skepticism of corporate America and capitalism altogether” (Biddle). A more authentically or productively skeptical user of Twitter would presumably refuse to engage with brands on Twitter altogether. Unfortunately for Biddle, the decisions Twitter users make to curate their timelines and follow particular accounts are already complicated by the presence of “Promoted Tweets” inserted there via the social network’s advertising model. The popularity of corporate accounts on Twitter is not a sign that we have “collectively lost our minds as a species,” to the extent that the presence of commercial interests in daily communication is not a recent development (Biddle). In fact, sites like Gawker are just as guilty of “mingling” advertising and editorial

59 After writing that sentence (in early 2015), I paused to check a tab open to Twitter on Google Chrome: “Apple,” “Sony,” and “Ghostbusters” are among the topics currently “trending” there. Users can not opt out of “Trends” on Twitter, but they can decide whether their timelines track popular terms “based on your location and who you follow” or geographic locations of their own choosing (“Trends”).
content as Twitter: the blog offers “editorial content sponsorship” packages to companies who wish to “[a]lign [their] brand message with relevant content and themes to create a stronger association for readers” (“Content Sponsorship”).

Despite their occasional blind spots, critiques similar the ones raised by Biddle, @BrandsSayingBae, and others seem to have made an impact on how Roggenbuck uses Twitter. According to Favstar, a site that tracks and documents the most popular tweets of users by measuring the number of times they have been “Favorited,” Roggenbuck’s most popular Tweet was posted on November 1, 2013: “are u the internet ? because i wanna spend all day with u in my room, then finally go out to a public place but still only pay attention to u [sic].” In certain respects, Roggenbuck echoes sociologist Nathan Jurgenson’s critique of “digital dualism,” the perception that “the digital world is ‘virtual’ and the physical world is ‘real’” (Jurgenson). Roggenbuck inverts the hierarchical nature of the divide between “virtual” and “real” in this tweet, privileging the time he spends socializing on the web over a more analog mode of socializing that is often privileged or even “fetishized” (“The IRL Fetish”). But the spirit of “YOLO” (“You Only Live Once,” an acronym made popular by the contemporary hip-hop artist Drake) that infuses much of Roggenbuck’s early work (and informs the decision to name THE YOLO PAGES) is tempered in more recent years by concerns about the asymmetrical nature of public discourse on social media (among other sites of public and private discourse).

For example, on February 20, 2015, Roggenbuck tweeted: “spend a few days learning about U.S. imperialism & war crimes, then go stand in a Target or Wal mart
[sic] and ask yourself what the f [sic] is going on” (@steveroggenbuck). Readers continue to recirculate Roggenbuck's more explicitly political and didactic exchanges on Twitter – additional tweets listed on Favstar include a condemnation of Sea World's treatment of orcas and a message supporting protestors in Ferguson, Missouri – but there is also a noticeable decrease in the number of favorites and retweets compared to some of Roggenbuck's more playful, earlier messages on Twitter. Roggenbuck still uses the social network to post comedic lines, but they pop up intermittently between links to Noam Chomsky videos on YouTube, retweets about emerging civil rights movements, and messages of support for feminist causes. There are occasional hiatuses taken from social media, and some more recent comments suggest that Roggenbuck is questioning his use of time on social media. One recent tweet from late February states: “today i regret that i did not rly [sic] go outside for more than 5 minutes of daylight.”

In her contributions to the oral history of Weird Twitter, Lockwood recounts an exchange with the “verified” Twitter account of T.J. Maxx (@tjmaxx), in which the clothing store took offense to the poet's claim that “you could die by looking in their mirrors” (Herrman and Notopoulos). “It was literally a tweet from my life,” Lockwood notes, admitting that she had not even considered the observation to be an explicit form of “corporate trolling” that sought the attention of the company's Twitter account (Herrman and Notopoulos). But unlike Roggenbuck, Lockwood seems less interested in using Twitter as a site where she might romanticize or long for a public space free of corporate language and influence. She highlights the potential for “little masterpieces amidst a stream of discourse about poetry and
literature,” but she also enjoys the messiness of the “big humor blob” that forms via the open-ended, multidirectional stream of communication between poets, department stores, and celebrities of public dialogue on Twitter (Herrman and Notopoulos). Unlike Roggenbuck, whose initial trust of social media as a site of free exchange gives way to a more reserved, self-conscious poetics on Twitter and in the poems he circulates in print, Lockwood’s aesthetic seems far more embracing and comfortable in the confused, often-uncomfortably public terrain of the network.

“It gets funnier”

On October 19, 2010, Steve Roggenbuck published his first “chapbook,” titled i am like october when i am dead, as a web site, “released into the public domain” (“about”). A collection of “15 short poems without titles,” the chapbook is “set” in the Minima Blogger template and leads readers through a hyperlinked series of pages, with each page’s poem displayed in short lines of text printed in the Arial typeface. William Carlos Williams seems like an early touchstone for Roggenbuck in these poems: they are written in free verse, they are at times reminiscent of the length and tone of “This Is Just To Say” (one poem reads, in its entirety: “you are gone / for lunch i had peanuts”), and at one point we find their author at one “sitting under the moon inside of a wheelbarrow.” The chapbook ends on a Whitmanian note, with Roggenbuck revising Emerson’s oft-reprinted remark to his younger peer to suit his particular ambitions: “i greet myself at the beginning of a great career.”

While it was reviewed positively by a few literary blogs and by poets on their personal blogs, i am like october when i am dead was no Leaves of Grass. At the time of its publication, Roggenbuck had been submitting poems to poetry journals with
engaged and vocal audiences but limited social reach and distribution. A second volume of poetry, 2011’s *DOWNLOAD HELVETICA FOR FREE.COM*, is a collection of stray, one or two-sentence observations printed a page at a time in large Helvetica font. The humorous or inane nature of these observations – “I WISH I OWNED A GYM” on one page, followed by “MY NEW POEM IS ABOUT THE COMFORT OF HUGGING YOU,” followed by “HAVE YOU EVER SEEN THE SHOW GHOST HUNTERS?” – is more pronounced when written with a typeface that is better known for its presence on subway platform signs and corporate logos. But unlike the work of earlier visual artists like Jenny Holzer, who create jarring, public installations that directly challenge the language of advertising on the city streets where it is commonly found, Roggenbuck’s work resides in .PDF format, a mode of publication which often lacks “the HTML tag structure which informs Google what [the text] is about and helps to rank the content for target keywords” (Smith).

It was not until Roggenbuck began recording and “publishing” poetry via filmed and edited performances on YouTube that he began to get wider recognition from outlets like *Gawker* and *The New Yorker*. Roggenbuck had created “trailers” for his first two self-published collections of poetry, and he occasionally uploaded reviews of favorite bands (“owl city fan video [2011]”), informal discussions of poetry (“introduction to microflarf [2011]”) and video of “guerilla” campaigns to place his work in commercial storefronts (“putting my minimalist greeting cards in walgreens [2010]”). In many respects, these videos suggest a desire to make

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60 Several of the links Roggenbuck printed in an overview of his output “from november 2009 to april 2010” on his web site direct readers to blogs and journals that no longer exist.
particular reading habits more explicitly performative and public, broadcasting his engagement with flarf and conceptual poetry in an attempt to invite comparisons between these established poetic camps and his own aesthetics. Roggenbuck’s “walt whitman mixtape,” published in 2013, is similarly performative: though Roggenbuck explicitly states his desire to “show you exactly what i love about walt” by reprinting his favorite poems and lines, he is also inviting comparisons between his “persona” and the canonical figure by highlighting his “whitmanian outlook” (“foreword”).

Roggenbuck’s most popular YouTube video (in terms of recorded views by YouTube) is presently “make something beautiful before you are dead (2012).” Over the course of just over three minutes, Roggenbuck discusses his love of Marxism, the moon, and reality star Dog The Bounty Hunter in a celebration of the world that invites his audience to express similar sentiments through creative means.

Conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith argues that Roggenbuck’s use of “shaky handheld cameras, hazy inspirational background music, and rough jump cuts” successfully mimics “the look of amateur videos strewn across YouTube,” channeling a “punk-inspired outlaw energy” despite the careful mediation of language and performance via editing, multiple takes, and post-production work. Rather than attempting to document his investments in internet culture in poems that, despite their hyperlinked and typographic arrangements, resemble more familiar aesthetic traits of poetry, Roggenbuck’s videos instead resemble the generic

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61 Roggenbuck also cites “obsessions with minimalism, flarf poetry, and lil b the based god,” the latter being an underground hip-hop artist with over one million followers on Twitter who has a devoted following in alt lit and Weird Twitter camps.
conventions of home videos shot on smart phones and uploaded quickly to YouTube.

Roggenbuck continues to circulate poetry in print, but he becomes more interested in attempting to explicitly claim tweets as poems, rather than a separate genre with “poetic” leanings. Most of his contributions to 2014’s *THE YOLO PAGES* are screenshots of a collection of tweets curated by Roggenbuck (who is also editor of the anthology). In an excerpt from an interview with the blog *FANZINE* that precedes his tweets, Roggenbuck claims that “if you study much of 20-th century avant-garde lit, you’ll know that you can call literally ~anything~ poetry based on the precedents that exist now” (193). Roggenbuck’s sense of “the public perception of my occupation” as a poet is that he is obligated to “tell you wise things about life” while engaged with the activity of “the idealist that most people are too busy or too business-oriented to be” (193). As previously discussed, the implosion of alt lit coincides with a more recent turn away from “idealism” and more towards “political” engagement. Roggenbuck now feels compelled to publicly interrogate “the ideology inside of my own / head,” as he does in the final “story” printed in his most recent work, 2015’s *calculating how big of a tip to give is the easiest thing ever, shout out to my family & friends*. The messy exuberance praised by Goldsmith and others has been replaced by a more repetitive, insular tone, wherein Roggenbuck is left uncertain and ultimately silent when faced with the realities of “the / media and the schools and the church and / the press.”

In “He Marries the Stuffed-Owl Exhibit at the Indiana Welcome Center,” a poem from *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals*, Patricia Lockwood describes
an unnamed man who marries a stuffed-owl exhibit at the Indiana Welcome Center. Like “The Monument” in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem, the stuffed-owl exhibit becomes less fixed and more unstable as more attention is paid to its physical condition: the “real-looking moss / and dead leaves” left by its architect are joined by “the moths / who make holes in the owl, who have eaten the owl / almost all away.” We are never told why the man in the poem wished to marry the stuffed-owl exhibit: reference is made to “some vows that he wrote himself,” but they are not uttered in the poem’s lines. We are only told that he’ll “ALWAYS / LOVE HER,” that “they elope into the darkness of Indiana,” and that they live in “the state of all-consuming love.”

Compared to the surreal, frenetic tone of Lockwood’s tweets (for example: “I’m selling my body on Craigslist – not for sex, but because it’s haunted”), her first volume of poetry, 2012’s Balloon Pop Outlaw Black, seems devoid of the persona Lockwood created and cultivated on social media. Any autobiographical traces are buried under layers of considerations of Popeye, the cartoon sailor whose name, life, and behavior is dissected in the volume’s first poem, which spans close to twenty pages. A “picture of the author” finally materializes in the volume’s last poem, “FIG. 1,” in which Lockwood inventories an imagined writer, her family, and her possessions, among which we see “a page of notes” containing another poem called “FIG. 1,” describing an author, her family, and her possessions. Things are carefully arranged in the first figure – “Here is the author in her kitchen, grinding / whole punctuation into little pepper” – whereas “Lines ray away” freely from the author described in the second figure, who “wonders” and “wonders” as she “begins to suffer / from exposure.” Lockwood’s poetic labyrinth seems designed to prevent
certain kinds of “exposure”; at this juncture in her career, she is unwilling to blur her literary production too closely with memoir or autobiography.

In comparison, the centerpiece of *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals* is “Rape Joke,” a poem that Lockwood admits is based “on a painful incident from her late teens” (Lichtenstein). Unlike the distance between poet and audience in “FIG. 1,” this later poem directly confronts the author’s past: its first line states “The rape joke is that you were nineteen years old.” Later in the poem, Lockwood seems to describe the author of *Balloon Pop Outlaw Black*:

The rape joke is that for the next five years all you did was write, and never about yourself, about anything else, about apples on the tree, about islands, dead poets and the worms that aerated them, and there was no warm body in what you wrote, it was elsewhere.

She goes on to anticipate a potential consequence of discussing rape in a public forum like a poem, fearing that “if you write a poem called Rape Joke, you’re asking for it to become the only thing people will remember about you.”

“Rape Joke” ends, it seems, on the poet’s own terms. In a darkly comic detour before its final line, Lockwood recalls that her attacker “said he was sorry and then he gave you *Pet Sounds,*” and then addresses her imagined reader: “Come on, that’s a little bit funny.” “Can rape jokes be funny at all,” Lockwood asks shortly before presenting this anecdote as an example. Before arriving there, she notes that she “did dream of killing the rape joke for years, spilling all of its blood out, and telling it that way,” suggesting that the search for humor in the situation does not disavow the pain and anger it created. In a tweet that appeared the day “Rape Joke” went
viral, Lockwood said that “The real final line of ‘Rape Joke’ is this. You don’t ever have to write about it. But if you do, you can write about it any way you want” (qtd. in Lichtenstein).

Unlike Roggenbuck, who seems unable at times to come to terms with the simultaneity of the world’s beauty and horror, Lockwood rejects both the desire to transcend horror and the impulse to somehow effectively balance or counter these competing forces. The landscape of *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals* is dominated by individuals misreading social cues, disrupting normative conventions, looking for love in stuffed-owl exhibits. While there are comedic insights, there are often more serious and threatening implications behind the mistaken identities and misplaced affections on display in the volume. For example, Lockwood describes the unnamed male figure who marries the stuffed-owl exhibit as screaming “OWL instead of I’LL” when he confesses his love, a groan-inducing joke recognizable to fans of Weird Twitter as a comedic impulse readily pounced upon in the search for intentionally-bad humor. But shortly after we are shown the last thoughts of the still-sentient owl in her exhibit, on the verge of “the final hungry kiss” of her suitor, thinking “there is no more / left of me to eat and thank God.” This is a comedic moment whose gendered dimensions also suggests the worst domineering and oppressive tendencies of men pursuing women, actions displayed to a much more severe degree in “Rape Joke.”

The impetus for Lockwood to complete and publish “Rape Joke” came in part from a news story that had gone viral on Twitter in 2012: male comedian Daniel Tosh, facing a female heckler, “went into an extended riff on rape jokes,” and the
internet was full of stories about “taboos in comedy” (Lichtenstein). Weird Twitter is arguably “one of the biggest influences on comedy today” (Herrman and Notopoulos). While it featured a quote from Poetry editor Don Share, Lockwood’s New York Times profile spent more time with the stand-up comics, writers for NBC sitcoms, and late-night talk show hosts who “read everything by her” (Lichtenstein).

Lockwood’s interest in declaring that victims of rape can write about their experiences in any way they want challenges blanket assessments about taboos, but it also locates these barometers of freedom of expression within the sphere of the survivors of these experiences. But while it traffics in humor present in various strands of Weird Twitter, “Rape Joke” and Lockwood’s additional comments suggest that blanket acceptance or rejection of particular comedic subjects ignores the complicated dynamics of public utterance.

In “The Mass Public and The Mass Subject,” Michael Warner observes that “the rhetorical strategy of personal abstraction is both the utopian moment of the public sphere and a major source of domination, for the ability to abstract oneself in public discussion has always been an unequally available resource” (165).

Discussions of social media – and, more broadly, conversations regarding all forms of discourse on the web – have in recent years become more invested in examining “how real, embodied, and material digitality is” (“q&a on digital dualism”). In attending to the both material conditions of online discourse and the embodied experiences of the users behind the digital avatars on social networks, poets like Lockwood and Lockwood have wrestled with the question of how poets might inhabit these spaces.
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