LYRIC HEMISPHERE:
LATIN AMERICA IN UNITED STATES POETRY, 1927-1981

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines Latin Americanist representation in United States poetry. It is a study of the ways in which American poets have depicted persons, locales, and events in Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, and El Salvador. It is also an account of aesthetic and ethical concerns in a rarely studied but vital body of modern poetry.

This study focuses on four U.S. poets and their work: Archibald MacLeish and Conquistador (1932), a long poem about the Spanish conquest of Mexico; Langston Hughes and Cuba Libre (1948), a translation undertaken with Ben Carruthers, based on the poems of Afro-Cubanist poet Nicolás Guillén; Elizabeth Bishop and Questions of Travel (1965), featuring a sequence of poems about Brazil; and finally, Carolyn Forché and The Country Between Us (1982), a poetry collection based on the human rights crisis in El Salvador. Each of the four chapters treats a form or aspect of lyric expression, namely: elegy, translation, pastoral, and vocality.

“Lyric Hemisphere” takes an interdisciplinary approach. It presents close readings of poems with insights drawn from the history of U.S. relations with Latin America, American studies, and critical theory. Each chapter explores the poems’ historical or cultural bearings alongside the formal study of lyric. And each is informed by archival and library research. The research materials include the poets’ other works, their letters and journals, as well as newspaper articles, historical and sociological accounts relevant to each writer. It engages
thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, Allen Grossman, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Walter Mignolo.

This study suggests that the task of representing Latin America has been a challenging project for U.S. poets because of the former’s paradoxical nearness and otherness, the difficult history it shares with the U.S., and its status as an object of fantasy and disdain. When U.S. poets meet the challenge of representing Latin America, it is because they are able to tap into the ancient as well as most innovative resources of lyric, and so to mark the important distinction between subjects and persons.
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INTRODUCTION

IDEAS OF ORDER AT KEY WEST

Can poems shed light on the events from which a voice breaks off, speaking as if in the dark? What can we learn from lyric about the way two continents form an image of a place, a geographic construct arising from a shared name, from traces of the colonial experiment, and from similar dreams of collectivity? In “Jeronimo’s House,” Elizabeth Bishop invites us to set forth with these questions. The poem is based on the memory of starting a new life in Key West, Florida.

Sometime in 1938, Bishop looks out her boarding room’s window, peering into a neighbor’s interior. The household across the street is Cuban. From her vantage, Bishop spots a French horn and “paper streamers up all the time to decorate the ceilings, like a children’s party.”¹ The poet clearly admires these details. They instill a kind of wonder and empathy, guided by the conviction that attending upon the nondescript permits an onlooker to surmise another’s ideas about the life of persons. In 1940, Bishop writes a poem much along these lines, speaking in the voice of Jeronimo. Writing to Marianne Moore that year, Bishop encloses the poem and provides some of its background. The younger poet quotes a statement on Cuban émigrés, from her housekeeper Hanna Almyda: “Poor things, they have to move every month or so, and when they go they clean out even the electric wiring.”² After reading this letter, we turn to the poem itself and cannot fail to register the allusion in the sixth stanza as follows:

Also I have
hung on a hook,
an old French horn
repainted with
aluminum paint.
I play each year
in the parade
for José Martí.³
Of course, grasping at poetic gestation is no prerequisite to experiencing the strength of a poem. Readers need not enter into the biographical or historical circumstances, because the power of lyric lets itself be felt even in the interval between the language of memory and the life no longer recalled. Readers are able to read outside an archive, and they register the effect even of places and names that no etiology easily can unravel. The name “Jeronimo,” for instance, writes over the name “José” in early drafts. Beyond the dates provided by scholars, neither the words of Bishop nor the name of José Martí grounds this lyric in a key event. Nor does the poem oblige us to make much of the speaker’s civic pride, though Bishop offers it as a hint of his national identifications. And finally, although an important part of Bishop’s reading at Key West has been the book *Imperialism* by one V.I. Lenin, “Jeronimo’s House” is not all a breathless attempt to criticize, or to declare support for, “the policy of fraternal cooperation” which Franklin Delano Roosevelt evoked in a 1933 speech addressed mainly to Latin America.

The magic of the poem in which Jeronimo speaks lies in its attention to the place where he lives, the sense of place created by him. Bishop’s curiosity about the everyday life of this Cuban émigré works in tension with tact, “the most beautiful virtue going by a minor name,” according to the poet. Description works to shelter a person’s mode of dwelling as a site of fantasy. Bishop’s language imitates the attentiveness with which a particular neighbor—not an abstraction like the Good Neighbor—turns space into “my love-nest,” a place imbued with the unsaid. And yet if part of lyric tact entails cherishing this neighbor’s attachment to the markers of his inwardness, are there not other signals somehow audible, drawn from Jeronimo’s peculiar relationship to other places, perceived through a wider scale?

Bishop and Jeronimo both dwell on dwelling, and in response to them, what my queries have signaled so far is the topic of my study: the challenge of locating a lyric hemisphere. Through ordinary modes of inhabiting a site, Jeronimo articulates the idea of being-in-the-world. Eschewing the bind of sentiment, Bishop bears witness to his deepest fictions—among them, the Cuban émigré’s identification with a nation, an identification borne away from its
proper geographic setting. There is time yet for teasing out, beyond this threshold, the premises of my inquiry. Let us linger a bit more on the place of lyric.

“Jeronimo’s House” begins by noting the house’s materials, parameters, and divisions—moving around its trimmings, and then to the interior. We enter the place, the rooms and its larger context, via the stanzas and lines of the poem. The poem is typeset in two columns in one page. The visual effect allows us to read the eight lines per stanza as a fractal pattern. It is this interplay between repetition and variation which built environments strive subtly to regulate, and through which nature luxuriates. The stanzas, “rooms” as per the etymology, trace both the “wooden lace” and “ferns” that manifest subjective predilections and give the place its boundary. They give focus to details while expanding our awareness of Jeronimo’s inwardness.

When the poem records what the Cuban family eats, “homy grits” on the table and fish glazed with “scarlet sauce,” Bishop stretches the limit of lyric probing. Description foregrounds somatic fiber, and Bishop curbs the risk of indelicacy by gesturing towards human interiority—as indicated by the stanza quoted earlier, on music. As if to recoil from the limit where wonder approaches the prying gaze, the poem draws to its conclusion, portraying nightfall. The speaker turns to us with an invitation, imparting a sense of dignity and motive to the description:

Come closer. You
can see and hear
the writing-paper
  lines of light
and the voices of
  my radio

singing flamencos
  in between
lottery numbers.
  When I move
I take these things,
  not much more, from
my shelter from
  the hurricane.
**Description of the study**

By a decade, the poem seems to preempt Martin Heidegger saying: “Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building.” But why build and dwell? The answer is implicit in Bishop’s last word. The poet waits till the terminus before interrupting the bounding language with the idea of impermanence. Up until the word “hurricane,” the reader is quite ready to forget the racial, economic aspects of domicile in Depression-era Florida, and the volatile weather. The element of fantasy in the poem gains surprising density, once read in light of Jeronimo’s impending flight. “Jeronimo’s House” seems driven less by proprietary motive, than by a desire to build in language a place imbued with personal meaning despite its privations. A hurricane punctuates the text. An image of rupture as well as of movement, it marks the shift from a site of domesticity to the abstract matter of geographic borders.

This study grew out of the scalar movement Bishop’s poem encodes. “Lyric Hemisphere: Latin America in United States Poetry, 1927-1981” examines a body of modernist poetry dwelling on the Americas. Through close readings of poems, theoretical texts, and historiographic materials, this dissertation track the ways in which American poets reflect on their experiences of heterogeneous Latin American cultures—through actual traversals, writing, and translation. Including the chapter on Bishop, the four chapters that make up this study are each devoted to individual oeuvres, namely: the 1931 long poem *Conquistador* by Archibald MacLeish, based on the sixteenth century conquest of Mexico; Langston Hughes’ translations of Spanish poetry by Nicolás Guillén, gathered in the 1948 volume *Cuba Libre*; and finally, the 1981 volume *The Country Between Us* by Carolyn Forché, responding to the human rights crisis in El Salvador, during the most brutal phases of an international anticommunist campaign.

At its broadest level, this study argues that poetics is a vital practice for understanding our current debates on the transnational ethos. The poems make apparent to us our identifications with the ideals and competing attitudes that give us our personal bearings and keep our lives in motion. Bishop, MacLiesh, Forché, Hughes and Guillén destabilize the forms of
coherence that make our interactions possible but that also tend to reify unfair social arrangements. They challenge us to think through the discourse that brings about what Walter Mignolo has called “the idea of Latin America.” Just as the hemisphere is a spatial fiction, so lyric shelters fantasy, theoretic play, and the nightfall over feelings and knowledge. The scales of lyric, geography, and history are outcomes of language, dispersals and linkage, making and unmaking.

As Bishop’s poem suggests, the questions related to the transnational ethos are a matter of deciding on our spatial limits and human interactions. The last line of “Jeronimo’s House” is remarkable for this very reason. The writing anticipates “a scale-jumping poetic reading practice,” as the critic Christopher Nealon might put it. Bishop’s final stanzas frame sound waves and light as writing metaphors, so much so that upon reaching the word “hurricane,” we cannot but notice the way the segmenting units of the stanza and the poetic line whirl up against the units of prose. More significantly, the poem explores shifts in scale. It not only joins the scale of everyday architecture to the psychical shape of persons. Rather, “Jeronimo’s House” also plays host to geographic segmentation borne out by the allusion to Martí. The poem ends by recalibrating our sense of place from clapboard walls to national borders. It enriches our ways of locating Key West. It threads Jeronimo’s homeland to the southernmost contour of Florida by way of radio frequencies and storms.

The house of lyric opens to a spatial construct. “Jeronimo’s House” is striking in the way its language wends its way unpredictably to the hemispheric idea. In an essay called “Our America,” Martí proposes a heuristic model for overcoming the antagonisms dividing persons as well as communities, divisions traced to colonial pasts. “The problem can be resolved, for the peace of centuries to come,” writes Martí, “by appropriate study, and by tacit and immediate unity in the continental spirit.”
Like and unlike the figure of tacit union in Martí, the poem by Bishop presents a larger frame that is at once spectral—or “fairy,” as Bishop might put it—and geographically grounded. The word “hurricane” traces the very edge of the poem contemplating a site at the southernmost limit of a northern country. This skewed perspective effects a question about a larger whole: Have there been, in twentieth-century United States poetry, similar scenes of hospitality towards Martí’s elusive figure?

As I went on to read Bishop’s 1965 collection featuring vivid portraits of Brazil, what I found were moving poems on the empathic links between persons as well as on the anxiety of cultural divergence. Questions of Travel reworks pastoral poetics, and records instances of mutuality enmeshed in the racial and class lines that Martí critiques. Looking back on “Jeronimo’s House” from this later body of work, I find it intriguing that almost a decade after the publication of Martí’s critique of colonial history in Mexico and New York, Bishop sets eyes on a man whom she initially calls “José,” and then presents under a different name. Beyond euphony, it is not possible to determine the reasons.

This kind of ambivalent receptivity is endemic to what Mary Louise Pratt calls the “contact zone.” As Pratt writes, this zone describes a social space “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.” To trace such a zone is to reckon with “highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths.” Contact zones act to mediate but also to set persons apart and to divide worlds. A kind of bifurcated gaze perplexes us when we invoke the lyric beside the inequities implicit in cross-culture. The modes of hospitality and encounter, principles guiding literary representation, come up against social boundaries—or more accurately, against as well as with the processes that conflate persons with subjects.

Part of the conundrum, as Martí suggests, lies in the history of the Americas. In 1945, writing in Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace, W.E.B. Du Bois renews the urgency of Martí’s insight. Du Bois critiques the problem of ignoring “the causes of war, especially those
causes which lurk in rivalry for power and prestige, race dominance, and income arising from the ownership of men, land, and materials.” Alongside but also in contrast to the act of dwelling, territoriality is the deepest wedge that deters the advent of a collective spirit. “So long as colonial imperialism exists,” writes Du Bois, “there can be neither peace on earth nor goodwill towards men.” This problem continues to speak to where we are. Martí and Du Bois both point to the historical legacies of the Americas.

This view provokes a number of other questions my dissertation works to answer: In what ways do lyric fantasies, observation, translation, dispute, and elegiac speech shed light on the negotiated constructions of the transnational? What do poems arising from contact—figured on borders of collectivity, through passing encounters or deeply felt connection—teach us about matters of tact? Given literature’s interest in the singularity of finite beings, reciprocity, and competing valuations, can poetics clarify the clefts of ethical decision, as well as the privations inscribed in our modes of dwelling? Quite simply, faced with ambivalent crossroads, why scale the hemisphere with the lyric?

The significance of lyric

Clearly, my mode of questioning holds the Latin American presence in United States poetry to concerns raised by recent Americanist scholarship, in cultural as well as in literary studies. Admittedly, this approach meets with a number of signposts—various ways of writing over the red letters “Caution, Cuidado.” In the space of an introduction, I cannot discuss all of them, but two are worth underscoring at the outset. This study seeks to intervene in the discussions that fall under these two headings. The first concerns our dispute regarding what poetry or lyric can and cannot do; tied to this heading is the analytical usefulness of identifying modern poetics specifically with lyric. The second locates my undertaking in the debates about transnational Americanist studies.
Nealon hits the nail on the head when in *The Matter of Capital*, he mentions that analyses of our unfair social arrangements often spike up the barometer in conversations on poetry. It is supposed that “if one is a critic of poetry,” Nealon writes, “the too-critical critical loses the ability to perform subtle close readings.” This view alleges that critique neglects “the small beauties.” Even more damning, it is imputed that such critique “hurt others more vulnerable than the critic.” One consequence of this situation, in my view is that when interlocutors convene from the uneven locales of exceptionalism—whether non-American or usually otherwise, they sit together warily, feeling enraged or doubtful about what can and cannot be said in connection with, say, these following lines: “Here are your waters and your watering place,” writes Robert Frost in 1946. “Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.” Frost writes after a moment of disarray.

Our hesitations in reading poetry alongside history are not simply because the acrimony between one resistant camp and another—or between one kind of liberalism and another neglected kind of positive freedom—is unproductive. On the contrary, whichever discussion we join, the dispute has spilled as much ink as ever. Rather, as Nealon suggests, it is that poetic thinking somehow has managed to lurk at the margins of public debate, quietly perturbed though staying always within earshot. The consensus-loving aspect of affirmations about poetry ends up foreclosing the chance for investigating those cases when indeed, the different scales of experience meet in moral, political, and personal “confusion” in a specific poetic utterance. In keeping with the Frost quotation, one recalls “Drunkard,” a poem Langston Hughes features in his 1951 collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred*:

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Voice grows thicker
as song grows stronger
as time grows longer until day
trying to forget to remember
the taste of day.
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In the chapters that follow, my aim is to show how we find in some case of the modern American lyric, that the space of fantasy cannot be thought apart from larger concerns, although that fantasy may withhold any sort of discursive knowledge about events. “Poets behold and approve the value of the women, men, and landscapes that move them,” the critic Robert von Hallberg writes, “but they don’t explain that value.” Indeed, poetic authority may even stem from “something normally hidden and revealed only momentarily.” When von Hallberg speaks of the decisive but momentary authority of poetry, his conception of lyric power seems to be in conversation with Hannah Arendt’s idea of the political.

For Arendt, principled action is the very meaning of politics and freedom. A principle, in contrast to a program or a goal, can only animate and guide an action. It is unable to produce anything resembling the determinable result of a program. Arendt cites the “love of equality” as an illustration, and then contends: “Freedom or its opposite appear in the world whenever such principles are actualized.” Arendt suggests that there are actions that subvert the very principles that guide them. In poetry, there is the case of Marianne Moore. In the famous poem “Poetry,” the action consists in refusing the imaginary site that poetry defines: “I, too, dislike it.” Moore works out an exquisite paradox, gesturing to “a place for the genuine” by thrusting to the reader a claim that seems not at all interested in what it makes manifest: the principle of poetry.

According to Arendt, when what animates an act is a principle in place of a goal, that action is free. In Moore’s poem, poetry ceases to be a goal. “Poetry” distills the freeing action of working against what we often regard as the capacity of a poem to mark its own articulation, teaching us how to read what the word “poetry” itself implies. More specifically, in anticipatory fashion, “Poetry” projects the time of reading onto the time of composition or shaping, acting against the principle that it names. “The appearance of freedom,” writes Arendt, “like the manifestation of principles, coincides with the performing act.” The temporal element is as crucial to the political as it is to performance. The freedom of action, as well as the principle
itself, thrives in the duration of the action, “but no longer.” In theater, when spectators and actors convene, theirs is the twin obligation to make sense of a display, to synchronize sense-making during the gathering. For such purpose among the ancients, a site was often carved out of sloping terrain. Just as Arendt points to the time-bound condition of free action, so does the freedom created by Moore’s refusal of poetry last in the duration it takes for the poem’s enunciation or reading. The virtuosity of “Poetry” is a kind of flame that burns up, consumed by the manifestation of a principle. Moore asks us to consider this principle, namely, that poetry is a place in which we are free to discern the basic difference between what is real and what is not.

What the performing arts and politics share hinges on this action freed in the manifestation of a principle as well as by the instant of display. It sparks in the interaction between the excellence of actors and the attentiveness of spectators—or as Jonathan Culler puts it, the drama of consciousness.” Audiences who read or listen to poems participate in an action, insofar as they testify to the manifestation of representational principle, the principles of forming images themselves: the appearance of the human. What happens when spectators disperse? The field of action remains.

“The oldest notion of poiein,” Stathis Gourgouris writes, “pertains primarily to working on matter, shape, or form and only secondarily to abstraction, whereby it might suggest available or producing forms.” Composition may seem distant from labor, but it is not wholly abstract. Speaking entails breath, and writing, a movement across a resistant surface. The textual records of poems bound particular sites in language bequeathed by finite actors to future readers.

Language, however, is not an inert thing such as limestone or “wooden lace.” Words in poems, moreover, are doubly capable than ordinary usage in aiding our attempts to think through the principles we uphold, as they are prone to destabilize what we think we know of those principles. Von Hallberg’s phrase, in this regard, is wholly apt: there are such things as “lyric powers,” which paradoxically are as fluid as they are trenchant. And however minor and
temporal, these lyric powers nonetheless bear urgently on the appearance—and not just the
idea—of persons, singular beings whose “places for the genuine” are necessarily constrained by
the unpredictable vicissitudes of nature as well as of history. Concerning the image of persons,
or the eidos, more will have to be said. Meanwhile, in light of the political in Arendt as well as of
Gourgouris, it is worth considering both the oldest and newer meanings of poiein.

As von Hallberg suggests, poems are a kind of performance. Poetic actions are borne
out of imagination as well as language, and as such, although they exhibit profound singularity,
are also susceptible to citation—to shared idioms, linguistic and cultural crossovers, and to
discussions about whole or dispersed communities and their configuration of history.
Paradoxically, in the dance between fluidity and bounding, between finite meaning and renewed
acts of beholding, poetic action is also open to the incalculable. It is this tension that permits the
linguistic action of poetry to move in and out of disputed concerns. And while lyric poems may
be aligned with the domain of persons distanced from public events, the places of their
intimation form the obverse to the deeds and words directly answerable to the political domain.

If it is possible for lyric to register the elastic transformations of scale, if lyric is able to
imagine “a noiseless patient spider” alongside “measureless oceans of space,” then it is apt to
consider what it can bear upon the hemispheric configuration as “a place for the genuine.”
Moore leaves the meaning of “the genuine” undetermined but no less compelling. We enter it
through a speculative intimacy, as though it were always already meant for us. It is a truism to
say that the political shares a border with the image of persons. It bears repeating here for
another reason: there may be some confusion as to why I say poetry and also mean lyric. There
are objections to such usage. When Marjorie Perloff points out the danger of using “poetry and
lyric interchangeably,” she dissociates poetry from the songlike requisites of lyric. Susan
Stewart offers a counterpoint: “Lyric poetry has in its very etymology the presence of musical
accompaniment, and even when such accompaniment is no longer used, lyric necessarily
internalizes music.” The key word here is the verb internalize. Often enough these days, we
read poems that highlight the fragmentary components of speech or that present language as a material imprint on a page. In such cases where an “anti-musical” poetic is operative, we may follow through with Stewart’s insight that the melodic idea resides in poems through a structure of haunting.

This conception of lyric, however, seems to offer small help when we think about its relation to the political as well as to history. To align poetry with melos, as a matter of fact, would seem to aggravate the perplexity. “Hypnotic poetry especially relies on periodic sounds,” writes Mutlu Konuk Blasing. “Poetic effects thus entail a delay or a disruption of the smooth cognitive functioning.” On historical terrain, the demands of cognition cannot but find music-haunted language off tangent. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak offers an illustration in what perhaps is the most sensitive anecdote in her recent compendium. There the tension between melos and cognition surfaces as a question of tact. The scene Spivak recalls involves an aboriginal named Lochan Sabar, who is interested to recount his participation in India’s decolonizing struggles. Spivak writes:

> There was a moment when another man, who didn’t know what was going on, cried from the opening of the enclosure, “Lochan, sing, sing for us,” and Lochan Sabar said loudly and with great dignity, “No, this is not a moment for singing. I am saying History.” He himself was making a distinction between entertainment and knowledge.  

**Transnational history**

Lochan Sabar gives us the lesson that not all the pleasures afforded by lyric resist our practical need for a reprieve from history, as well as for the recuperations that passing amusements bestow. Sabar suggests that cognition must have its time of saying, and that even if it wards off melos, that very gesture depends on a sense of tact whose demand is also the lesson we find in poetry, in shapes born out of deciding which words in what order are apt for a certain theme, atmosphere, and purpose.
In my view, the apparent disproportion between lyric and the scales of history is quite deceptive. While these two forms of mediation tend not to hold any accountability to each other, they speak across an interval in which texts of all kinds become a contact zone. Central to my study is the sense that poems by MacLeish, Hughes, Guillén, Bishop and Forché raise questions that lyric poems signal in peculiar ways. Some of these poems sing; others do not. With Bishop, a poem can bring into focus the limits of touristic voyeurism in tension with dwelling. Other poems record volatile interactions: colonial conquest in MacLeish, the dispute over democracy in Hughes and Guillén, and the erasures of the voice in Forché’s work. All of these poets beg us to parse through perplexity. And I hope that through my account, the reader can agree that the queries and decisions these poets beg us to weigh are not the same as the exchanges taking place in an import goods store.

“Discourse about poetry,” Allen Grossman writes, “is displaced discourse about persons.” I add to this statement that the questions we ask to gauge the scale between one construct and another, spatial or linguistic, are questions about the human who dwells. The field of action, according to Arendt, is none other than the space where the human appears. In entering this space, we often neglect that while the eidos (the human image through which persons appear) may be shared by all persons, it is neither equally shaped nor distributed among them in parity. The image of persons is entirely the concern of poetic representation because it is a theme that inspires both ardor and confusion, clarification and indeterminacy, the said and the unsaid. “As the kind which imitates man alone,” writes Grossman, “lyric is the first and the last poetic sort.” Lyric is the name given to the work of eidetic construction that subtends all poetic making. I say lyric and mean poetry at the same time, bearing Grossman’s insight in mind. Lyric’s profound role in building the eidos points to the fact that whatever disputes we bring to the field of action, it is “eidetic construction,” the means by which persons appear, that ensures intelligible repartee as well as forceful contention and division. Poems
respond to the fact that there would be neither contact zones nor any place promised for genuine reciprocity, when persons disappear.

On this matter of persons as subjects, the second concern intersects the first. It is my aim to show that a discussion of lyric is urgent for hemispheric studies. Being a category of the transnational, the hemispheric is deeply problematic. In the contemporary iteration of “Nuestra America,” the warning signs and pointers for thought are writ even larger. I have drawn much insight from critics who theorize the borderlands, coloniality, exceptionalism, and what Wai Chee Dimock regards as the deep time of literature.32 In my reading of Cuban presence in Langston Hughes’s oeuvre, I think about “the practice of diaspora” as a way to intervene in the contact zones, as Brent Hayes Edwards understands the work of translation.33 For this introduction, I limit my comments here to insights drawn from two scholars, on the risks and possibilities of hemispheric criticism: Alberto Moreiras in the remainder of this section; and in the next, Kirsten Silva Gruesz, who maps the Latin Americanist presence in nineteenth-century United States literature.

Moreiras investigates both the fruitful outcomes and impasses of naming Latin American difference. Latin Americanism is “an apparatus of mediation for transcultural social relations.” For Moreiras, even the most well-meaning attempts to represent the alterity of Latin America cannot but fall back into a social relation fraught with power, with an imbalance affecting the medium itself.34 I have alluded to this point earlier. All contact zones bear the workings of a medium that allows persons to make sense of each other but also to make distinctions between kinds. And yet another question cannot escape us: If a medium implicates a differential in power, why are there moments of encounter that proceed in excess of power’s logic, which is one of equivalence or exchange? Is there not something else at work in the partition itself? The medium that links as well as divides, Moreiras suggests, has to maintain alterity as such.35 Power needs alterity for its subjective workings to have something to work on, or someone to subject—hence, the logic of equivalence or exchange.
“Jeronimo’s House,” for instance, speaks to us with something other than exchange, in spite of the fact that Bishop speaks for a person. More intriguing, the imbalance at work there is somewhat mercurial, for while it bears witness to the power differential between an American poet and a Cuban émigré, the act of speaking with Jeronimo’s voice, as well as the act of withholding his true name, immerses us in incalculable aspects of an encounter. Let us leave aside the obvious reading that Jeronimo is himself a producer of spatial meaning, as Bishop is the bearer of a mimesis—it is the argument of multiculturalism. We cannot ignore the differential. There is dissymmetry for sure. But there is also a kind of reciprocity never realized except in the scene of fantasy, which is also the addressee’s thing: an alterity. The poem does not record, for example, the response to an invitation. The absence of knowledge here is important because it marks how, in the social relation itself, something eludes the powerful logic that maintains an equivalence of subjects. In Bishop’s poem, the person appears most intimately at nightfall.

The field of action, as per Arendt, entails the capacity to enter the field of appearance, implicitly, also to exit it freely from it—or at least, to fantasize that one can be freed from any social obligation. In my study, then, I hold lyric accountable to the freedom implicit in two main tasks: first, to generate connections between persons and the world; and second, to give audiences a chance to examine the processes by which the partition that mediates—taboo, in the case of tragedy—are constituted and through which the medium in turn constitutes subjects.

Another way of stating this is that poetry brings to the test, or an experiment in mimesis, the principles guiding the construction of the human image. In doing so, lyric action not only destabilizes the principle of subjectivity in mediation. It also makes room, or lets-dwell, the unpredictable aspects of the way persons interact. Written during the decade when Bishop and Hughes pondered the legacies of the Americas, here is a passage from T.S. Eliot’s 1943 *Four Quartets*, in which a person contemplates the eidetic construction upon which social relations are founded, a figural experiment in collectivity:
Thus, love of country
Begins as attachment to our own field of action
And comes to the find that action of little importance
Though never indifferent. History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.37

A lyric hemisphere can go by other names in the work of scholars: Aztlán, the Black
Atlantic, or “the struggle against interpellation,” as Winfried Fluck describes “aesthetic
transnationalism.”38 Except for the name invoked by Gloria Anzaldúa, these categories are not
tied to poetry. In my work, a lyric hemisphere designates the specific constellation that poetry
carries from the contact zone, drawing on Latin Americanist presence but also exposing Latin
Americanism as a medium. A lyric hemisphere is not legible by itself. Like all linguistic acts, its
sense emerges alongside other practices and genres—not all of which is political. Like Moreiras,
I do not wish to ignore the risk of poetizing what has no essential substance, or of confusing
metaphorical solidarity with decisions that involve life-altering stakes. Democratic collectivity
“is not figurable,” as Jean-Luc Nancy writes,

it overthrows the assumption of a figuration of a destiny. ... But it imposes
the configuration of common space in a way that opens up the greatest
possible proliferation of forms that the infinite can take, figures of our
affirmation and declarations of our desires.39

The poetic may be well in excess of politics. But paradoxically for that reason, as a kind
of action or performance, it is speaks to the political. In lyric, the workings of tropology or
imagery, line segmentation, phonemic or phonetic patterning, and rhythm are experiments in
call and response. That is to say, within the dissymmetrical social relation Moreiras describes,
within the contact zone, within the processes that interpellate persons as subjects, there are
intimations of a lyric hemisphere whose work is to bear witness to something irreducible to the
homogenizing movement of equivalence. Lyric marks the turn from subjects to persons, a turn
that even in the subjections found at contact zones, lodges an indeterminable surplus. In that
fracture of the genuine, hence, there remains something in excess, not bound to the political. “Politics is in charge of spaces and of spacing,” writes Nancy, “but it is not in charge of figuring.”

Reading Nancy, it is well for us to revisit Grossman’s statement: “lyric is the first and the last poetic sort.” The responsibility of figuring does not immediately arrive at the place for the genuine. But it holds out for it, not as something to be redeemed but as something gestured, something named but also left unsaid in the duration of the performance, marking the shift from subjects to persons, or during the transition from space to dwelling. These processes all refer the lyric poem to the singularity of finite beings, to the making and the undoing of things. Perhaps their perishable character is what makes them more in need of valuing; they bear the trait of the unrepeatable, the very sense of finitude. And yet however fleeting the constellation of a lyric hemisphere may be, I maintain that it is no less vital to the struggle that persons of all kinds have to wage against the vexing realities Martí and Du Bois describe—against the forms of coherence to which coloniality’s shadows give the strange substance of a hurricane.

Lyric bears out, or bears away, the marks of scale-shifting in such zones, as the flame of transition itself either makes-true or denudes received modes of feeling and thought. What I designate as a “lyric hemisphere” forms there in that interval, in the often-obscure advent of a new principle. It refers to a momentary constellation, as in the ancient function of navigators and of lyric—pointing not to the sky but to secular alternatives for discovery and making. I draw great strength from William Bronk’s statement in his book of essays, *The New World*. Provoked by his encounters with Mayan civilization, Bronk writes: “We have often wanted something more than a vague ‘here’ to answer to the question of where we are.”

**Organization and method**

My project takes up the challenge to think about literature through its “deep time.” Dimock’s resonant phrase names the way literature grows out of “crisscrossing set of pathways”
and weaves “in and out of other geographies, other languages, and cultures,” and even other epochs. It is the problem of part-whole relations between the intimately singular and nondescript with which lyric is identified, and the temporal arc to which historical representation aspires. The traces of events may fade from the lyric text, but its resonance with other kinds of writing does not just vanish into thin air. If global collectivity is a risky ideal, caught up in the logic of exchange by which recycled forms of colonialism threaten to erase nondescript persons and, as George Oppen says, “the unacknowledged world” itself, then it seems all the more urgent to think poetically, to think with poetry about persons, and to meditate on lyric traversals that are spatially and temporally closer to home. My project tracks a smaller scale of deep time in American literature. But no less compelling, its errand is to clarify the outline of a lyric hemisphere.

In many ways, the heuristic model I use in my study builds on the work of Gruesz in Ambassador of Culture. Her book is an important contribution to transnational scholarship. It is also valuable to my project in that Gruesz considers poetry a vital component of the shared hemispheric discourses in the nineteenth century. MacLeish’s Conquistador can be read as a twentieth-century response to the critique of colonialism in nineteenth-century American poetry. Gruesz foregrounds such critique in the 1847 poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie.” Further, the wonderment of Bishop’s “hurricane” would not have been legible to me, had I not read about “En una tempestad: Al huracán.” Gruesz begins Ambassador of Culture with a reflection on this 1825 poem by José María Heredia, and on its eventual translation by the poet William Cullen Bryant called “The Hurricane.”

Although I have begun this meditation on Bishop, this dissertation first analyzes the interesting disjunction between lyric and epic in Archibald MacLeish’s long poem Conquistador, published in 1932. In this dissertation’s title, I set the timeline of a twentieth-century lyric hemisphere by starting in 1927 for two reasons. First, around this time, the scale-shifting rhetoric framing the hemisphere as a neighborhood already had made a come-back through
President Herbert Hoover. In 1928, even before the Good Neighbor policy was formalized by President Roosevelt, President Hoover made a “good-will tour” of Latin America, equipped with a discourse alluding to a staple phrase *buena vecindad* among nineteenth-century Latin American statesmen. Second, it was also around this time when, in Paris, MacLeish began to read Bernal Díaz’s account of the conquest of Mexico in the sixteenth-century, the text on which *Conquistador* is based.

Chapter 1, “Archibald MacLeish’s *Conquistador*: American Elegy and the Idea of Mexico” hinges on the idea of colonial spatiality. The poem combines an elegiac sensitivity to the particularities of place and westward movement. The nod toward the Turnerian idea is a telling anachronism in MacLeish’s work. It brings to view our own contemporary notions of the contact zone likely as a belated reworking of the frontier idea. It also comments on the continuities that link territorial encounters in transamerican history. My chapter reads *Conquistador* as an implicit response to the U.S. attitude towards Nicaragua and Mexico from 1912 to 1932. Description in this Pulitzer Prize-winning work brings to light the colonial in the modern. Just as elegy stalls movement in traditional poems of adventure, MacLeish employs a descriptive style as an attempt to mourn epic violence.

In Chapter 2, “*Cuba Libre* Writes to Harlem: Democracy in Translation,” the contact zone becomes a “translation zone.” It becomes the site that, according to Emily Apter, “belongs to no single, discrete language or single medium of communication.” *Cuba Libre* is a collection of poems written by the Afrocubanist poet Nicolás Guillén, translated into English by Langston Hughes and Ben Frederic Carruthers. While this Harlem-Havana relay has been cast as a biographical case of failed transnationalism, I argue for the import of revisiting the lyric dossier itself. This chapter seeks to foreground the ways in which *Cuba Libre* participates in conflicting articulations of the democratic principle.
Poetics in *Cuba Libre* acts to interpret the meaning of democracy from the point of view of persons striving to mark their rightful place in the collective. Both Guillén and Hughes seek out democratic vistas other than the economic drives of Pan Americanism between the 1930s and 1948, the years marking the writing and the translation of Guillén’s poetry. Comparing the poems rendered in English and Guillén’s original work in Spanish, this chapter traces an experimental feedback loop for “hemispheric citizenship.” *Cuba Libre* makes legible the disputes between democracy and the color line running from Havana to Harlem.

In Chapter 3, “Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘golden silence’: Pastoral and the Poor of Brazil,” I study poems about cross-cultural, cross-class encounters. This chapter asks: How can the pastoral mode foreground the resilience of cultures bred in scarcity, without idealizing destitution? I argue that Bishop’s critique of tourism in *Questions of Travel* is traceable to the Virgilian eclogue, with its themes of dispossession and survival. Analyzing the thematic as well as rhythmic structures, this chapter illuminates the representation of class in Bishop’s work. It argues that her versions of pastoral index the antagonisms as well as unstable forms of cooperation, shaped by the Cold War’s impact on the tropes of property and dwelling. Incorporating unpublished material from Bishop’s papers at Vassar College, I discuss poems written between 1951 and 1965, the period spanning Bishop’s arrival in Brazil and the publication of *Questions of Travel*.

At the heart of lyric is the voice. To be a person is to relate to the dwelt world with a singular resonance. But what happens when the lyric responds to a voice in ruin? In Chapter 4, “El Salvador and the Lyric of Rights: Vocality in Carolyn Forché’s *The Country Between Us*,” I examine the poems written by an American human rights investigator between 1976 and 1981. I argue that Forché’s poems hinge on “vocality,” a term for the structural interval between speech and phonation. Vocality sheds light on Forché’s lyric vigil over the human rights crisis in El Salvador during the Carter and Reagan administrations. These poems dwell on the risks incurred by a lyric voicing confronted by “the disappearance of voice,” the danger of what I call
“lyric sovereignty.” Forché re-thinks the subject of rights at the threshold where the call to responsibility is no longer strictly the call of a speaking subject.

Beyond Gruesz’s invaluable work, there are to my knowledge only two other accounts sharing my study’s topic and timeline. Poems harboring Latin Americanist presence are intermittent in individual poetry collections. And more often than not, they reflect on the impressionistic experience of travel. Of course the subject of tourism itself can be a source of astute lyric observation, as in the 1956 poem on Guadalajara, “The Instruction Manual” by John Ashbery. As I proceeded to explore Questions of Travel, however, I was curious to see what the United States’ poetic landscape would look like in works that enact a sustained reflection on Latin American places and persons.

Except for Guillén, and for the Salvadoran voices found in my chapter on Forché, the voices of U.S. Latino poets are admittedly not well represented in this study. There are practical reasons for my deferral of reading their work. It takes more than one study and more than one poetics to give the hemispheric idea its broadest scale of intelligibility. Because U.S. Latino poets write out of more than one site of national identification, they would appear to be the likely legislators of the hemispheric idea. As Anzaldúa suggests, however, the places and images they have built out of the transamerican experience often have been relegated to the realm of the unacknowledged: the borderlands. I rephrase a question asked earlier in a somewhat counterintuitive way: In U.S. poems by non-Latinos, where might we locate a tradition of literary hospitality to Latino poetics?

My intention here, therefore, has never been to exclude U.S. Latino voices. Even if there may be no proper justification for the scope I have chosen to track, I would beg the reader to be patient in my deferral of crossing to the borderlands. There are strong poets apart from Anzaldúa—poets like Sharon Doubiago, Rigoberto González, and Sylvia Curbelo. I feel committed to reading them, too, but not as a project of the recovery from the margins. What I seek, rather, is a way to clear some ground for another occasion of locating these poets in
relation to textual spaces that welcome Latin Americanist presence on the whole—especially in a literary tradition where such welcoming has been least expected.

Each of my four chapter discusses (1) the work of a poet, or a set of related texts written by him or her; (2) a Latin Americanist presence in that author’s work; and (3) the relays between historical transformations and the human encounters readable in the poems. These three aspects call for the close reading of poetic works, in conjunction with library and archival research, reading historical accounts as well as literary criticism, and critical theory. The sources for these texts are diverse. Apart from databases now available through electronic libraries, I also draw from archival materials held at the Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, the Center for Human Rights Documentation and Research at Columbia University, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the Vassar College Libraries.

In undertaking this project, one methodological challenge is the apparent incompatibility of scales between the boundaries of transnational inquiry and the bounded language of lyric. This problem of scale perhaps explains the dearth of research on the configuration I am trying to map. There is a larger critical investment in prose genres, because they seem more transparent than lyric to social relations. As Gruesz points out, referring to another time frame: “Poetry on the whole has been largely neglected in recent historicist analysis of nineteenth-century literary culture, presumably because of its apparent removal from the daily life of readers and the political evolution of nations.” Lyric is conventionally assigned to the domains where history vanishes into the nondescript forms, making it seem too narrow a scope for analyzing historical formations.

But as Edwards writes, reflecting on Adorno, poetics is valuable in that it “indexes the social precisely in terms of its distance from society.” I would add to this point by saying that lyric allows us to distance persons from the idea of subjects. In so doing, lyric helps us to account for the elastic connections between these two images of the human, as they are
articulated through the singular being of language. Lyric testifies to our capacity to reflect on the widest range of experience, pained and ecstatic, ordinary and momentous, private and public—in sum, on the multiple portals and exits to the field of human action as well as to repose. My project therefore strives to combine formal-aesthetic and historicist methods. It enters a long line of literary scholarship that responds to the astonishing linguistic, affective structures found in poems. This somewhat traditional interest stems from the conviction that, as Von Hallberg writes, the “power of poetry to change hearts and minds rests on trust: that form alters all.”

To read the place of lyric historically is not to tie it to indexicality, but rather, to enrich it. It is not to reify meaning, but to amplify the resonance of language in contact with many kinds of speech. The idea of lyric manages the problems of scale by moving away from the abstract toward the question of persons. Recuperating from history, persons in lyric speak as though without a sense of scale—or more accurately, with the aesthetics and social construction of scale only implicit. “Jeronimo’s House” shows that by bounding a place of fantasy as well as dissymmetry, lyric allows persons their place in the world. The person in lyric shelters whatever it is that is difficult to say or locate at the heart of the contact zone. Because the image of persons dislodges us from the logic of equivalence and binds us instead to responsible obligation, encounters or contact is fraught with shadows or risk but also with a compromised simplicity. Poems speak to that tension. They are forms of letting-dwell as they are forms of letting-speak. Bishop has phrased this point more felicitously as a demand and an invitation: “Come closer.”

Notes


an earlier title for the poem. Almyda is “the housekeeper who I love more than precious jewels,” in an unfinished poem featured in Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke Box, ed. Alice Quinn (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 276. Describing the vernacular features of Almyda’s speech, Brett Millier in his biography suggests—but does not indicate—that the housekeeper appears to have been African American.


The phrase is quoted from one of Bishop’s Key West notebooks, in Edgar Allan Poe, op. cit., 265.

Bonnie Costello ascribes intention to the typesetting, in Planets on Tables: Poetry, Still Life, and the Turning World (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008), 93. Linked to “the culture of the table,” the two columns on a single page speak to “the finite sense of space.” This form, according to Costello, works in tension with “the disorganized and even threatening presence of nature.” Using this reading as a point of departure, I suggest other spatial models.


13 Nealon, 7-9.


18 Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 36. Based on the 1967 Viking Press edition. It is interesting to debate whether the longer version of this poem is better than the one Moore proffered as her final version. But what I think is more compelling is the action Moore leaves for reader: either to choose the longer descriptive versions; or to wander into imaginary realm exposed by punctuated vision, “a place for the genuine” ending the poem; or yet a third way (since it is hard not to read the abbreviated final version without the memory of the longer ones), to thrive in the readerly freedom of choosing not to choose.


30 Ibid., 212.


34 Alberto Moreiras, *The Exhaustion of Difference: the Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001). Cf. Fluck, 369. “Aesthetic transnationalism,” according to Fluck, “refers to an extension of the aesthetic promise of diversity beyond national borders to arrive at fascinating new aesthetic objects that have emerged out of the contact of cultures.” Fluck goes on in this same page: “In aesthetic transnationalism, the word transnationalism is basically a code word for an America reinvigorated by an aesthetic plenitude made possible by cultural flow and exchange.”
Moreiras writes: “The dissymmetrical gaze, however, does not entirely preempt the possibility of transcultural exchange. Endotopic knowledge of the other still must, at the limit, retain the possibility of a genuine opening to alterity if only because without the latter alterity would be radically unable to constitute itself.” On Latin Americanism as an exercise in power constituting itself through alterity, see also 160.


On geographic scale as a social construct, I am indebted to the article by Amy Spellacy, “Mapping the Good Neighbor: Geography, Globalism, and Pan-Americanism during the 1930s” *American Studies* 47.2 (Summer 2006): 39-66.


I thank my teacher William Gleason for this insight, in his marginal comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.


56 A useful introduction to poems on travel can be found in a chapter on travel, in Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985). Equally useful are the chapters tracking Afro-Caribbean routes in Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). For another occasion, a subject I wish to investigate further is the trace of Latin America in Wallace Stevens’ oeuvre, based on his trips to the Caribbean and his correspondence with the Cuban writer José Rodríguez Feo. Unlike the criticism on another modernist master William Carlos Williams, Latin Americanist presence in Stevens in often unremarked—as with Hart Crane and George
Oppen, both of whom intermittently have written poems about Mexico.

57 I thank Jeff Dolven for pointing out John Ashbery, “The Instruction Manual,” *Some Trees* (New York: Cortinth Books, 1956), 14. Given Ashbery’s preoccupation with the scale of the urban environment in this poem, “The Instruction Manual” is remarkable in that it precedes, by two decades, Michel de Certeau writing on “voyeurs ou marcheurs” in *L’invention du quotidien* (Paris: Union General d’Editions, Gallimard, 1980), 140-141. Perhaps naively, I am somewhat attached to the notion that a time lag seems to exist between the enigmatic apprehensions of lyric or aesthetics, and belated theoretic discourse—in this case, between Ashbery’s grasp of the theoretic implications of viewing a city from above, and the de Certeau’s formalization of our scopic habits in the twentieth century. This time lag is acknowledged by de Certeau himself (140) when he writes about painting: “La volonté de voir la ville a précédé les moyens de la satisfaire. Les peintures médiévales ou renaissantes figuraient la cité vue en perspective par un œil qui pourtant n’avait encore jamais existé.” De Certeau foreground’s the sightseers’ desire for god-like distance and links it “l’immense texturologie qu’on a sous les yeux.” In Ashbery’s poem, on the other hand, the mineralogist-speaker is distracted from a task that involves abstraction. Looking out the window, the speaker slips into the fantasy of a tourism he is unable to accomplish, because he has “to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal.” In lieu of walking the streets of Guadalajara, the onlooker imagines himself descending at ground level, immersed in the local activities from which he is excluded. I take it that Ashbery describes the goings-on not so much to revel in *costumbrismo* as to put on display the act of looking, the stories that the onlooker infers through fantasy, by identifying with distant figures below. Unlike the cartographers whom de Certeau critiques, Ashbery’s practice of projection moves not to abstract the viewer from the scene, but to involve the senses in the dream of immersion in the alterity of persons. If lyric apprehends what we only begin to notice about the social imaginaries of our built world, then is it not possible that it can also gesture toward untested ways of mapping space and of reading the processes by which our figural scales enable such mapping?


CHAPTER 1

ARCHIBALD MACLEISH’S CONQUISTADOR:
AMERICAN ELEGY AND THE IDEA OF MEXICO

In the original 1932 edition of Conquistador, after the conclusion, Archibald MacLeish leaves us with a map to unfold. We glimpse the entire Gulf of Mexico and its surrounding geography, what present political boundaries delineate as the United States Southwest, the entirety of Cuba, parts of the Caribbean, Florida, Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. Inscribed across a section of the map, a thin broken line represents the trail that the sixteenth-century expedition led by Hernán Cortés cut into the American hemisphere. The line shows the voyage from Cuba to the Mexican town of Tabasco. Moving westward, it traces the corridor linking Veracruz and Tenochtitlan, the former capital of the Aztec empire and the foundation of modern Mexico’s Federal District. “Cortés traversed this corridor,” Raymond Craib writes, “viewed these topographical features, and conquered an empire.” Among new arrivals and even latter-day travelers, the passage through Veracruz into Distrito Federal came to be “imbued with the weight of the conquest.”¹

The map MacLeish appends to his poem, however, reveals as much as it conceals. It gives us a sense of the land’s sheer magnitude. But it intimates none of their experiences and much less, none of the transformations giving rise to the knowledge that the map represents. The map brings an appropriate close to a poem concerned with the enigma of crossing a distance. Conquistador begins similarly with the idea of crossing distance in time. MacLeish writes:

And the way goes on in the worn earth:
and we (others)—
What are the dead to us in our better fortune?²

The poem opens by gesturing toward an imaginary community: the “we” and parenthetical “others” who make up the poet’s immediate addressees. The earth is worn out not simply by the
passage of time but with the traces the dead have left behind: “roads made and the walls standing,” with “words in the stone” and “the rusted tang of turf-root where they fought”(C 1). Although the world of the living is an inherited world, making the link between the present and the past is as difficult as imagining the affinity between “we” and “others” in the poem. MacLeish suggests the possibility that these two tasks may be inseparable. If there is any chance for us to establish the relation between “others” and “us in our better fortune,” the work of American cultural memory may begin by exhuming its forgotten routes.

My reading of MacLeish’s poem is organized around two sets of questions. First, I inquire into the relationship between epic and elegy in Conquistador, between the poetic narration of heroic action and the lyric genre of mourning? How does the interweaving of the elegiac and the epic negotiate the tension between the lyric commemoration of singularity and historical representation of collectivities across time, between “we” and “others,” between modernity and the colonial past? Not unrelated to the first, my second concern has to do the cultural work of Conquistador. The questions pertaining to the lyric genre guide my response to the poet’s critique of American coloniality, particularly its disposition to stage the process of self-making outside United States national borders.

Second, I ask about the connection between the interplay of generic traits and the problem of coloniality. In particular, how does the poem speak to the period of its writing, between 1927 and 1932? MacLeish’s poem implicitly argues for a connection between the US frontier experience and hemispheric history. The imaginary link Conquistador traces gains ethicopolitical urgency in the context of the 1920s. Around this decade, one of the antinomial characteristics of modernity came to light in the United States’ policy towards Latin America. Frontier discourse places a mythical overlay on US incursions upon their sovereignty. By framing the conquest of Mexico as an earlier instance of frontier traversal, MacLeish offers a paradoxical resource for critiquing the past and present course of US coloniality, and identifying the decolonizing turns in modern American poetry.
Awarded the Pulitzer the year after its publication, *Conquistador*’s immediate critical success may be due to the kind of historicist preoccupations of its time. Its Latin American topos also contributes to the positive reception of the work, whose gestation and publication coincided with the height of the crises of United States relations with Mexico and Nicaragua.

The idea of Mexico in MacLeish’s poem is both historical and mythic. The poem insistently refers to this space in terms of its cardinality, “Westward out of the sun” (C 46). This chapter argues that *Conquistador* figures Mexico as a kind of frontier. MacLeish’s poem anachronistically brings the idea of the frontier on the history of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. I argue that *Conquistador* revisits the European presence in the Americas, in order to mourn the American myth of the West. In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner, on whose work I will reflect more deeply below, posited the idea of the frontier as a way to account for the traits that define United States cultural identity. In MacLeish, this idea, mapped onto Mexico at the time of the conquest, allows us to think critically about the relationship between the colonial and modern subjects. His poem retrieves the past specifically as a colonial past. The problem of colonialism questions the usability of the frontier past. As a result, the elegiac longing for the West becomes an occasion to mourn the present as a world haunted by colonial specters in spite of our claims to having achieved decolonization.

The events of the Spanish colonization of Mexico in MacLeish’s work are based on the eye-witness account of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, written between 1551 and 1568. The poem begins with the departure of the colonists from the Spanish settlement in Cuba—through Cozumel, an island off the Yucatan, through the towns of Tabasco and what is now the city of Vera Cruz, through Jalapa and Tlaxcala—to Tenochtitlan, the capital of Mexico, a grand city built on island in the middle of a lake. It recalls the meeting with the translator Jeronimo de Aguilar, the Spanish captive of the Indians at Cozumel, and the other translator Doña Marina. The poem depicts the conquistadors’ various kinds of contact with the Indians and their experience of Old Mexico’s topography. Cortés and his men strike an
alliance with the Totonacs, wage battle against the Tlaxcalans, make truce, trade gifts, and enter Tenochtitlan. Although their stay in Tenochtitlan seems idyllic, the conquistadors eventually fear Indian betrayal. They seize Montezuma, the leader of Old Mexican empire, and hold him hostage. After Montezuma’s death during a skirmish with Tenochtitlans in revolt, the Indians attack them. The Spanish adventurers are driven out of the city on the night now known as the Noche Triste. The conquistadors return to Tenochtitlan and lay siege to the city. The poem ends with the settling of Mexico.

MacLeish follows the timeline found in Díaz’s chronicle. *Conquistador* is divided into two main sections. The first set of pages is made up of two exergues in verse: the authorial prologue (*C* 1-5); and the preface spoken in the voice of Díaz (*C* 9-21), which summarizes the pivotal turns of his account. The subsequent section, the main body, describes the conquerors’ journey across Old Mexico. In fifteen “books,” MacLeish depicts the Spanish traversal as a westward movement.

Filled with sea imagery, the first three books portray the voyage westward from Havana, Cuba. The rest of the books trace the march from the Mexican coast to Tenochtitlan, the capital city of Montezuma. After the fall of Tenochtitlan, the conclusion in the fifteenth book moves briskly—perhaps almost too abruptly. In no more than two pages, it sketches the process of settling New Spain after the destruction of the capital. And there, as with the argument and the first book’s opening salvo, the attribution of voice is once more troubled. *Conquistador* ends with frontier longing. “And the west is gone now: the west is the ocean sky” (*C* 104).

MacLeish’s modern epic recites the past with an elegiac posture. While the poem ends with Díaz mourning the loss of the Mexican frontier, *Conquistador* begins with an authorial voice anxious about the possible loss of historical memory. “What are the dead to us in our better fortune?” (*C* 1). The question that opens the poem manifests a desire to retrieve lost relations. Time erodes the American past. But whose past? The double attribution of poetic speakers begs this question. What is the relationship between the conquistadors and the modern
American subject, the Mexican past and US history? Added to the gap between the past and the present, then, is the difficulty of representing the connections between the US past and the history of another America, outside US borders. Although the poem proper assumes the voice of the dead conqueror, it is the authorial voice that inaugurates the work:

And the way goes on in the worn earth:
    and we (others)—

What are the dead to us in our better fortune?
Their words made and the walls standing:
They have left us the chairs in the rooms:
    what is there more of them—

Either their words in the stone or their graves in the land
Or the rusted tang in the turf-root where they fought—
Has truth against us?
  (And another man

Where the wild geese rise from Michigan the water
Veering the clay bluff: in another wind....)  (C 1)

Lingering on our spaces and its corrosions, Conquistador opens with the elegiac recognition of modern America as an inherited world. “Ruins,” the poet Nathaniel Tarn writes, “as well as the whole paradigm of tombs, bones, jewels, minerals, and other fallen entities in them, are often diacritical of an elegiac mode, of the act of looking backward that characterizes elegy.”6 Seeking lost time, MacLeish also struggles with the problem of space, specifically of locating the sites through which we can identify transamerican belonging and identity. “Even my sons have the strangeness of dark in them,” the conquistador says in the preface, “Indian dogs will bark by my sepulchre” (C 12). The memory of the conquest is specifically American in the larger geopolitical sense.7 Díaz, conquistador turned encomendero, is no longer quite a Spaniard; he has become a Guatemalan, or at least a subject of the New World. This doubling of identification in the prologue anticipates the mixed vocal attribution in the work. It foreshadows the way MacLeish lends his voice to the dead colonizer. Likewise, the authorial prologue refers to his audience as though the latter’s identifications were double. MacLeish interpellates us with
the phrase “we (others).” The slivers of punctuation constitute subtle provocation. Like the italicized typography linking the argument and the first book, they crease the text with transamerican markings. Another landscape opens up between another pair of parentheses. MacLeish limns Lake Michigan with signs of migrancy, and gestures toward the North American frontiersman.

MacLeish grounds the question of the dead in a temporal and geopolitical enigma. I wish to read this enigma as a manifestation of what Walter Mignolo calls the “double density” formed by the modern and the colonial. The American past to which the work belongs occupies a space in which national boundaries and identifications turn fluid. Thus the question of the dead points to another challenge, namely, that of retrieving lost relations not only within the United States but also across the Americas. It asks us to unearth the links between the United States’ cultural trajectories and the larger historical shifts in the American hemisphere. At the heart of poem lies the idea of the frontier. MacLeish begins his poem by inscribing a psychical affinity between Spaniards journeying toward “that city on the inland sea” (C 13) and the solitary figure looking out onto Lake Michigan. The distance wrought by time makes strangers of the dead. Bound to the articulation of national borders, moreover, the assumed integrity of the living conspires with such distance to forget the dead. But MacLeish imagines fraternity with and among the dead, affirming it even at the risk of presumption and substitution. The dedication, where MacLeish quotes from Dante’s Inferno, asserts the rights to imagined kinship that the sociality of elegy bestows: “I said: ‘O Brothers, who, in sun and wind,/ The West, at last, through countless risks have won.’” The frontier idea avows kinship with the conquistadors, as much as it seeks to distance the “we (others)” to whom MacLeish poses the challenge of commemorating the dead. Mignolo’s concept of “double density” speaks to the manner by which MacLeish hails the audience of Conquistador. The use of parentheses suggests the problem of isolating or entombing the colonial within the modern.
What, then, is achieved by the interplay of generic traits in MacLeish’s representation of
coloniality in the Americas, in the past and during the time of poem’s writing and reception? To
what extent does his idea of Mexico reach toward a different horizon of collectivity? These
questions, clearly not unrelated to the questions posed earlier, form my second set of
considerations. The poem, I argue, strives to understand the frontier experience in the larger
context of transamerican belonging. MacLeish’s stakes are at once aesthetic and ethico-political.
In the 1920s, one of the antinomial characteristics of modernity comes to light in United States
relations with Latin America, particularly toward Mexico and Nicaragua. Both nations, rather
than being perceived as modern sovereignties, come to be seen as spaces in which to revive the
mythic frontier.

During an interview, MacLeish talks about the experience of reading Díaz’s chronicle and
of being fascinated by “the obvious metaphor of the unknown West.” He regards the Cortés
expedition as an event that sheds light on “the whole experience of the Americas to the
Europeans.”10 The allusion to Turner’s 1893 lecture is arguably a calculated anachronism.
Revisiting the frontier idea, which is often understood mainly in relation to U.S. history,
MacLeish’s portrayal of the conquest as a prior form of westward movement offers an implicit
critique of both modern and colonial forms of subjectivity. The frontier thesis, however, is not
only narrative of progress but also of loss. “The wilderness disappears,” writes Turner, “the
West’ proper passes on to a new frontier, and in the former area, a new society has emerged
from its contact with the backwoods.”11 The search for other spaces of westering is founded on
the closure or disappearance of the frontier. Composed in four parts, this chapter strives to show
that by recalling the Mexican conquest as the originary westward expansionist traversal in the
American hemisphere, and by framing this colonial “usable past” in epic as well as elegy,
MacLeish offers a paradoxical resource for critiquing Americanity, and for identifying some of
the decolonizing turns in American modern poetry’s transnational contours.
Participation as nonbelonging

Opening with the question of the dead, *Conquistador* invites the reader to examine the gaps in United States cultural memory in relation to Latin America. These breaches represent what Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein call “Americanity,” a long colonial process begun in the age of the conquistadors. Modern life today thrives under empire. “And the way goes on in the worn earth,” as MacLeish writes. From the sixteenth century onwards, the way the New World came to be imagined or mapped as we know it today coincided with the establishment there of European systems of rule, economics, and culture. The world we know, “the roads made and the walls standing” (*C* 1), arose from the process by which colonialism altered the Americas. Quijano and Wallerstein write:

> there was such a widespread destruction of the indigenous populations, especially among hunting and gathering populations, and such widespread importation of a labour force, that the process of peripheralization involved less the reconstruction of economic and political institutions than their construction, virtually *ex nihilo* everywhere (except perhaps in the Mexican and Andean zones). Hence, from the beginning, the mode of cultural resistance to oppressive conditions was less in the claims of historicity than in the flight forward to ‘modernity.’ Americanity has always been, remains to this day, an essential element in what we mean by modernity.¹²

The concept of Americanity has two functions, one of which already has been considered. It serves to underline the distinction between formal empire and coloniality, the institutions of power that allows us to live the way we do even as such power colonizes our subjectivities. Second, it locates the American hemisphere as the site through which, according to Quijano and Wallerstein, colonialism exited into modernity and the rest of the world. The Americas was where the European system turned into a modern world system and in the process, made for the preservation of colonial culture in modernity. Our present world could not have arisen without the conquest of the Americas.¹³ Because “the mode of cultural resistance to oppressive conditions” are at work “less in the claims of historicity than in the flight forward to
‘modernity,’” our anti-colonial struggles are still likely to maroon us in coloniality. Building on Quijano and Wallerstein’s thesis, Mignolo writes: “The very idea of America cannot be separated from coloniality: the entire continent emerged as such in the European consciousness as a massive extent of land to be appropriated and of people to be converted to Christianity, and whose labor could be exploited.” To the degree that this kind of exploitation continues, reproducing colonial hierarchies, Americanity for Mignolo refers to the uneven modernity of the Americas. This interplay between the colonial and the modern allows us to hear the urgency implicit in the question MacLeish asks more than once in his prologue: “What are the dead to us in the world’s wonder?”

Two contemporary thinkers underpin MacLeish’s historicism: the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks and T.S. Eliot. “On Creating a Usable Past,” Brooks’s essay, preempts MacLeish’s question of the dead this way: “What is important for us? What, out of all the multifarious achievements and impulses and desires of the American literary mind, ought we to elect to remember?” Brooks’s question arises out of what he perceived as a literary culture hampered by the absence of tradition and, as a consequence, possessing little vitality as compared to the literatures of Europe. According to Brooks, American writers have “no cumulative culture.” They lack “any sense of inherited resources,” and suffer from a kind of “anarchy that prevents growth, because it lays too great a strain upon the individual.” This view not only echoes an Arnoldian anxiety regarding the fate of culture in industrial society. It also betrays an anxiety over the fate of culture in the wake of industrialized warfare: “The present is a void,” Brooks writes, “and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value.” The statement elides both European and non-European legacies in twentieth-century US culture. Brooks posits American modernity’s ostensible capacity for regenerating newness or overturning the cultural patterns of the Old World. Appearing in print in 1918, “On Creating a Usable Past” can be read as a literary equivalent to protectionism, distancing American culture from the anarchy occurring across the Atlantic. It is
no surprise, then, that the apparent bleakness of his critical gesture, the hystericalization of the American literary mind, comes with an affirmation: “Discover, invent a usable past we certainly can.”

Faced with post-war London and Paris, Eliot in his own way shares Brooks’s need for a usable past. “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow,” Eliot asks in *The Waste Land*, “Out of this stony rubbish?”17 These lines, according to Sandra Gilbert, inscribe “haunting references to Gallipoli,” and indicate Eliot’s grief for the death of Jean Verdenal. His poem presents an antithesis to landscape. Eliot recalls the unnamed object of mourning among “the details of the battlefield, whose most gruesome particularities had been widely reported.”18 Save for words drawn from the Upanishad, what Eliot gathers from the historical rubble are largely of European provenance. In lieu of creating a usable past, the poet reasserts “tradition.” Printed in two installments in the *Egoist* a year after Brooks’s essay, “Tradition and the Individual talent” formalizes theoretically the act of gathering fragments shored up against Eliot’s ruins. This essay runs counter to Brooks’s view.19 Eliot affirms that the present is not a void. For an American poet deeply cognizant of his European identifications, the past lives in the present. That poet’s task is to recuperate the forms of such living-on, and work to obtain historical knowledge. Tradition, Eliot writes,

> cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence[.]

To affirm tradition is *not* to repeat it slavishly or promote a “blind or timid adherence to its successes.” Tradition, rather, is a dynamic configuration. The past does not survive in a monumental way, as we often understand tradition. It changes in relation to the long memory of the present. The “historical sense,” which “makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in
time, of his contemporaneity,” depends on the relationships that a poet sees between the present and the past. If one is “to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year,” the recognition of tradition as a fretwork of mutable components is vital to the task. The poem is a record that embodies such recognition. It makes available to others the acute experience of shifts in thought and feeling, upon responding to the past as present, and upon perceiving the motility of configurations that abandon nothing en route.

Unlike Eliot’s emphasis on the need to inherit the past, Brooks valorizes the need to invent the usable past. “On Creating a Usable Past” portrays American culture as a void that may be said to reproduce what Quijano and Wallerstein trenchantly call a contribution of Americanity: “the deification and reification of newness.”21 This view was already foreshadowed by William Carlos Williams in 1925, implicitly critiquing the problematic assumptions behind the selectivity of Brooks’s usable past. Williams writes, “We fools, what do we know or care? History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery.”22 Countering Brooks, MacLeish shares with Eliot the need to reflect on the living relation of the present to the past. He also shares with Williams the vigilance required to confront the problem of coloniality.

These historicisms underlie MacLeish’s work. Conquistador begins with the question of the dead and ends with lament, framing the entire epic with the elegiac utterance. In reading MacLeish’s epic as elegy, I am building on James E. Miller’s observation that the American modern epic, a form inaugurated by Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, develops on a lyric register. The plot of the American modern epic “emphasizes interior action (meditation, rumination, contemplation), with deeds scaled down to human dimensions, and with an open, continuing, and fluid action.”23 The “interior action” of MacLeish’s poem is played out through elegiac poetics. His epic unfolds as a process of mourning, unsettling, and re-imagining the mythic space of the West. My characterization of Conquistador echoes the individual and group identifications in the American modern epic as defined by Miller:
The personal epic (anti-epic, lyric-epic) may be defined, then: a long poem whose narrative is of an interior rather than exterior action, with emphasis on successive mental or emotional states; on a subject or theme not special or superior but common and vital; related not in a literary, measured, and elevated style but in a personal, free, and familiar style; focusing not on a heroic or semidivine individual but on the poet himself as representative figure, comprehending and illuminating the age; and whose awareness, insight, being—rather than heroic actions—involves, however obliquely, the fate of the society, the nation, the human race.

For Miller, the American modern epic is deeply invested in expressing the connections between social collectivity and the individual. It is crucial, then, to consider how the questions of cultural identity and the questions of literary genre illuminate each other. MacLeish’s poem not only enriches our contemporary understanding of the relationship between “nation” and “individual.” It also allows us to appreciate how the multiple tensions between the collective and the personal in American conceptualizations of selfhood occur through temporal and spatial displacements. MacLeish “discovers” the American usable past in the sixteenth-century Mexican frontier.

Jacques Derrida’s thinking on genre informs my attempt to understand the extrusions of *Conquistador*. “The eyelid closes,” Derrida writes, “but barely, an instant among instants, and what it closes is verily the eye, the view, the light of day. But without the respite or interval of a blink, nothing would come to light.” The hyphen in Miller’s term “lyric-epic” is reminiscent of this visceral trope of the eyelid. The generic trait marks a breach to exteriority or otherness within a genre’s supposed integrity. We posit the existence of a genre often by excluding traits that are supposedly, on its own, peculiar to that genre. But such positing lacks rigor, because a generic peculiarity is identifiable only with reference to a network of relations with other genres. “Every text participates in one or several genres,” Derrida says, “there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.” Because of this simultaneity—“a genre and genres,” the law of genre cannot but be paradoxical. Nothing belongs specifically to a genre except its participation with other genres. It is through generic
interdependency that one genre cannot be mistaken as another. The purported uniqueness of one kind of text is lodged not in itself but its extrusion into these interrelationships, into differences among genres that produce nonbelonging. When a trait appears to belong exclusively to a genre, it is “the trait of participation itself,” as Derrida emphatically states in the same passage. The participation of one genre in several is what gives us the concept of its identity.

Lyric and epic, needless to say, bear memories and intergeneric folds older than American coloniality. Two of these folds are worth recalling here. Writing on classic forms, Margaret Beissinger, Jane Tylus, and Susanne Wofford define epic as “a poetic narrative of length and complexity” that recalls acts of “grandeur or heroism” and portrays them “from within a verisimilitudinous frame of reference.” The deeds chosen to be narrated are specifically those that are “of significance to the community.” This last-mentioned trait is something that lyric shares with epic. Though concentration or brevity is one of its conventional traits, lyric is like epic in that it seeks to make a community present to itself. Such cultural work is evident in elegy, one of the most venerable forms of lyric vocation. “Pastoral elegy,” Paul Alpers writes, “plays out the motives of the whole world by directly engaging the question of how a world continues after a loss and separation.” Epic and lyric represent forms of encounter and affirm a communal identity. They compose the space for community anew when grief disrupts its sense of impermeability and coherence.

The theme of grief informs our second concern regarding the intergenericity between lyric and epic. We often set the epic, understood as a poem of deeds, in opposition to the pensiveness of lyric lament. Thomas Greene’s essay “The Natural Tears of Epic,” an astutely cogent revaluation of the epic tradition, reminds us that such opposition is inaccurate. “Typically epic grief is shared by two or more characters who are then joined by the audience,” Greene writes. “That shared stillness within tremendous ruin is what heroic poetry brings to us and brings us to, and the hard acquisition of that stillness derives from a ritual [tragic rite] that
many cultures have independently produced.” It is astonishing to realize with Greene that from Gilgamesh and Homer to the Christian era, the grief felt by characters driving epic action often conclude most works, suggesting that tears may be indeed the telos of epic. The resonance of grief does not belong to lyric alone. Epic, too, elicits sympathetic grief as the proper mode of its reception. More astoundingly for this present discussion, Greene notes that “those few that fail to do so tend to center on a pivotal scene of mourning.” Conquistador’s epic tears reside in the search for an absent space. MacLeish’s theme may be adventure, but its storyteller recalls the journey as an elegist.

The work exhibits what Derrida calls “participation without membership” in terms of both aesthetic and national identifications. The stanzaic form of Conquistador is a minor example of such recitation. The ghost of Dante’s terza rima attends its organization into tercets but without the interlacing rhyme scheme linking the stanzas. Its recourse to Díaz’s narrative as means to recall the origins of Americanity to the people of the United States is another example of its literary nonbelonging. Both features, poetic and geopolitical, may even be said to draw from the tendencies of modern poetry, namely: its quest for singular ways of invoking poetic codes, its citationality and re-combinations, and particularly in the case of American poetry, its indebtedness to different kinds of cultural interactions. Like the light in a blink of an eye, such extrusions mark MacLeish’s poem as lyric-epic. It recites these literary genres—alongside other kinds of texts, as further sections in this chapter show.

**Modern epic as elegy**

Allen Tate’s review of the work for The New Republic in 1932 neglects the possibility that the poem, for all its apparent fragmentation, thrives in the interplay of generic traits. The review praises “the flawless craft” of Conquistador’s appropriation of terza rima, “the power to sustain the form without a false note,” and its recourse to using “flashes of recollection” as a method by which to dispose “of the great modern difficulty of presenting the objective detail of the
conventional epic form.” Tate counters this hint of praise with a somewhat exasperated
pronouncement later in the text: “There is not one moment of action objectively rendered in the
whole poem. There is constantly and solely the pattern of sensation that surrounds the moment
of action.” Tate’s contention is instructive. It shows us that the richness and significance of
*Conquistador* depends not just on what seems to inhere in the work but, more important, on the
way readers “perform” or interpret it. Tate expects to encounter mainly epic traits. That is why
the apparent vagueness of the storyline dissatisfies him. “The poem recovers Bernal’s
perceptions,” Tate writes, “but it does not place them against the objective stream of events.”
While Tate entertains the possibility that sense impressions may be the tackle and trim of
MacLeish’s poem, he ultimately privileges the epic thrust and consequently, some kind of
narrative. He neglects MacLeish’s commitment to a perceptual style.

What would it mean for us to accept as the donée of lyric-epic not the privileging of “the
objective stream of events” but rather its paucity? It would mean, for one thing, that to read
MacLeish’s lyric-epic is to attend to the expectation of narrative only in so far as it recedes,
placing in high relief the poetics of description. It also would mean reflecting on the challenge
MacLeish appears to have set up for himself, that of inscribing the poem’s descriptive style—its
“flashes of recollection”—in the writing of history. Working alongside narrative, and in tension
with it, MacLeish’s perceptualism strives for nondiscursive modes of accessing historical
knowledge. The poem’s participation not only in epic but also in the eye-witness historical
account is certainly a kind of historicist lever. But because the work is highly dependent on
elegy, what intrigues me here is how the interplay between description and mourning places
epic speech under duress in spite of the latter genre’s conventional ties with the representation
of history. The implications of epic’s displacement by elegy are to be discussed in further
sections of this chapter. In the remainder of this section, I wish to focus on the kind of poetic
vitality MacLeish gains by mixing epic and elegiac poetics.
Modern poems of mourning, Jahan Ramazani argues, strive to efface their elegiac precursors and at the same time retain their traces. Like Wallace Stevens in Ramazani’s account, MacLeish can be said to maintain “an intense but covert dialogue between modernist poets and elegiac tradition.” Faithful to the law of genre, MacLeish strives to inherit epic vocation by chipping at its linguistic massif to get to the elegiac ore. The gesture is consistent with modernist aesthetics. As Ramazani suggests: “The modernist resistance to traditional elegy belongs to a broad cultural repudiation that characterizes much twentieth-century literature in many genres.” Elegy and the epic become subject to revaluation in MacLeish’s work. The prologue and the preface in Conquistador form an afterimage of the traditional mise-en-scene featuring two herdsmen mourning in song, the prototype of which is Virgil’s fifth eclogue. Menalcas and Mopsus in the eclogue meet and commemorate their predecessor. “Daphnis died,” Menalcas begins his lament. “The nymphs bewailed his death—rivers and hazels heard them weeping.” After lauding each other’s lyric prowess, they take turns making music of the pain they feel over Daphnis’s passing. Mopsus imagines the dead shepherd, singing of an afterlife, “Daphnis shines at heaven’s dazzling gate.” The convention between the two herdsmen ends with the circulation of gifts. Menalcas presents Mopsus a reed-pipe, and Mopsus in turns gives him a crook ornamented with bronze.

In the prologue of Conquistador, MacLeish portrays a kind of séance instead of a convention pastoral gathering. The authorial speaker encounters the ghosts of Díaz and company. MacLeish states neither the motives for the conjuration nor the details of the site where it takes place. The poet addresses the dead, “Speak to me Conquerors!”(C 2). When the ghosts begin to appear, MacLeish hails two of the conquistadors with praise: Alvarádo, “the brave one ... Shining with good looks,” and Olíd, “the good fighter ... His teeth clean as a dog’s”(C 3). Beside these two figures, MacLeish’s portrait of Hernán Cortés, the leader of the expedition, is telling: his “eye-holes narrow to the long night’s ebbing,” and his “grey skin craws beneath the scanty beard” (C 4). MacLeish portrays Cortés as someone plagued with historical
amnesia even in death, and proceeds to imply a contrast between the leader of the expedition and Díaz. The poet presents the latter as the favored speaker:

So does a man speak from the dream that bears his
Sleeping body with it and the cry
Comes from a great way off as over water—
As the sea-bell’s that the veering wind divides:

(And the sound runs on the valleys of the water:)

And the light returns as in past time
as in evenings
Distant with yellow summer on the straw—
As the light in America comes: without leaves. . . . (C 4-5)

While the prologue begins with images of a built environment, it ends here with the theme of lack. The terminal image of the prologue is an enigma; the “light in America” shines upon an impoverished world, “without leaves.” MacLeish names such lack just before ceding his voice to the ghost, just as we are about to turn the page to read “Bernal Díaz’s Preface to His Book”(C 9-21). The light may be said to hover, then, between two temporalities of lack. It indexes, on the one hand, the “yellow summer on the straw” of MacLeish’s childhood in Illinois at the dawn of the twentieth century and, on the other hand, alludes to the way colonialism diminishes the landscape. The authorial prologue and the dead storyteller’s preface speak to each other through these ecological ciphers. “We looked to the west,” Díaz tells us in the preface, “we remembered the foreign trees.” (C 17) In place of two herdsmen convening in traditional elegy, MacLeish features two speakers who, in spite of being divided by history, echo each other from across the temporal distance and bear local inflections of a shared spatial concept. In the prologue MacLeish juxtaposes “the roads made and the walls standing” and “the chairs in the rooms,” with the “words in the stone of their graves in the land.” In the preface, where MacLeish ventriloquizes Díaz, time works less to liquidate the past than to expose its buried traces. More accurately, the knowingness of age sheds light on the past. MacLeish nods toward the mystical
idea of seeing the entirety of one’s life flare up at the time of dying:

... the lives of men are covered and not shown—

Only late to the old at their time’s ending
The land shows backward and the way is there:  (C 19)

The prologue represents the landscape of the modern as a kind of crypt. The prologue’s language succumbs to “the rusted tang in the turf-root,” echoing Eliot’s search for vegetation in *The Waste Land*. Apart from supplementing the encounter in traditional pastoral elegy, the call-and-response we find between the two exergues also works to create proximity between the world of the present and that of the past. Over the image of an American modernity “without leaves” in the prologue, MacLeish superimposes the idea of Mexico as a luxuriant place recalled by Díaz’s ghost in the preface. Counterpoint links the imagery of the two exergues. Taking up the ecological cipher, Díaz’s preface offers contrast to the authorial prologue’s last line:

... we were young then:
The strong sun was standing in deep trees:
We drank at the springs: the thongs of our swords unslung to it:

We saw that city on the inland sea:
Towers between: and the green-crowned Montezúma
Walking the gardens of shade: and the staggering bees:  (C 13)

... We could not lie in our towns for the sound of the sea:
We could not rest at all in our thoughts: we were young then:

We looked to the west: we remembered the foreign trees
Borne out on the title from the unknown rivers
And the clouds like hills in the air our eyes had seen:  (C 17)

As their page numbers indicate, the sequence of images in Díaz’s preface departs from the chronology of the Cortés expedition. The first excerpt above, which appears textually prior, recalls the idyll in Tenochtitlan in 1521. The second, on the other hand, points to the Cuban settlement in 1519, before Cortés set out for “that westward country”(*C, 17*). What the living and
dead speakers of the respective exergues mourn is the same lost object. They mourn the frontier. MacLeish’s reference to frontier’s cardinal name, alongside tropes of light, is insistent throughout the poem. Light inscribes the desire for repetition, the re-enactment of the westward movement or westering, but also the reversal of its fatal consequences. It suffuses the prologue and the preface, disjointing the time that separates the two voices and confounding the spaces that each strives to describe. The light that comes without leaves is evocative of adventure and promise but also of the colonial desire to void a landscape of its historical traces. In Conquistador’s version of the pastoral convention, Americanity creates the space for encounter between the living and the dead speakers.

The motif of light and leafage in Díaz’s preface recurs throughout the poem. It extends throughout the work the similarity as well as difference between authorial and spectral voices, respectively, of the preface and prologue. The preface, though tinged with the remembrance of death, counters the prologue’s thanatoptic movement. Díaz’s ghost recalls “Graves in the wild earth: in the Godless sand” (C 12); images of Aztec sacrifice, “the idols hung with the/ Dried shells of the hearts like the husks of cicadas/ And their human eyeballs” (C 19). It is perhaps more accurate to say that in the preface, as with the rest of the work’s succeeding books, the voice from the crypt seeks to regenerate the West’s former visage. With Díaz we see anew the “strong sun was standing in deep trees,” “the gardens of shade,” “the staggering bees,” and “the foreign trees.” The prologue’s geography teems with “the green look of the land” (C 73), perhaps alluding to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 novel The Great Gatsby. MacLeish uses other tropes for this image of lush nature, as with the line “light first in the leaves” (C 68). We recall the “Unknown birds in the west with their beautiful wings” (C 11); “the shine of the/ Sun in that time: the wind then, the step/ Of the moon over those leaf-fallen nights: the sleet in the dry grass” (C 12-13); “the palms in the square in the green gloaming/ With the delicate girls [of Tenochtitlan] on our knees” (C 19). Díaz’s preface displays a tendency towards catalogue, harking back to modern elegy’s origins in pastoral.
MacLeish’s work recalls what Thomas Rosenmayer calls the priamel. Distinct from the catalogue, the priamel is a kind of serial listing we find in pastoral. While the catalogue “tends to be series of terms rather than propositions” and “does not exhibit terminal weighting,” the priamel designates “a series of brief statements or propositions which are felt to be based on an underlying pattern, and which usually lead up to a terminal proposition of somewhat greater weight.” Engaging Rosenmeyer’s reflections, Paul Alpers reads the priamel as a structure predicated on loss and recuperation. “The priamel can be seen as a form song takes when the shepherds recover their voices,” Alpers writes. “The idea of convention, then, is crucial to it: not only the idea of gathering for song on a specific occasion and the gathering of items in a list, but also the idea of a usage that implicitly convenes an absent predecessor—the poet who instituted the practice of these priamels.” Most relevant to MacLeish’s poem is the significance of space in the priamel which, according to Rosenmayer, “furnishes proof that the grove is harmonious, a miniscule but well-ordered universe whose parts tend to group themselves together for purposes of inspection and enjoyment.” This act of imagining the space for gathering works beside the recuperative function that Alpers underscores. Through its descriptive style, Conquistador contains the priamel’s function. The poem seeks to regenerate the space that it mourns.

This elegiac-perceptual mode in MacLeish’s work, however, chafes against its own imperatives. Mourning seeks to come to terms with the impossibility of return, and bears witness to the singularity of the loved object. But because the priamel culls together those things that are contiguous with the object of mourning, this elegiac gesture betrays its telos by rendering the loved object vulnerable to substitution. What complicates the kind of mourning we find in MacLeish is the fact that the figures analogous to herdsmen in his poem—Díaz included—are all antiheroic. There are no heroes to mourn in colonial traversal across old Mexican space. Moreover, this space is not merely founded on absence. Rather, even as the poem’s main speaker seeks to reanimate the space that it mourns, its recuperation also recalls the lost object at the moment of its disappearance. Conquistador reverses the compensatory
work of the priamel. The sensuous details we find in it call forth its object: a space of gathering between two subjects invested in frontier traversal—not a grove but the lands under the power of Montezuma and his capital city. Beyond the dead narrator’s preface, descriptive passages occupy the poem, most notably in the sixth, seventh, and tenth books. Even in sections that are not explicitly mournful, or that are not tinged with the elegy’s predilection for pathetic fallacy, *Conquistador* seeks to linger on topographic and ecological components of the surround.

The priamel’s contradictory workings fit the descriptive requirements of MacLeish’s elegiac-epic recitation. It is also apropos the object of the elegy. The poem bemoans the loss of an ideal space, the West that disappears as the frontier expands. Coloniality sustains but also alters and destroys such space. In the prologue and the preface, we find antinomial images of the same mythic topos: on the one hand, modernity bereft of “green gloaming,” with its “roads made and the walls standing” and “the chairs in the rooms,” and on the other, the lush world that the conquistadors longed for and went on to see and traverse with murderous violence. In the Fifteenth Book, in the lines that conclude the entire poem, the ghost of Díaz the tone of longing found in both Prologue and Preface is intensified with a sense of remorse: “O day that brings the earth back bring again,” Díaz says in the conclusion to the poem, “That well-swept town those towers and that island”(C 114).

These contradictions are hardly surprising, however. “For the whole point of the frontier,” as William Cronon observes, “had been to vanish.” Apart from the priamel, it is to the 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” that MacLeish owes his idea of Mexico as a space vacillating between absence and presence. MacLeish’s journal containing drafts of his modern epic echoes this very title. The poet writes: “The poetic significance of any material is its spiritual significance.” It is tempting to speculate that some of MacLeish’s readers may have recognized traces of Turner’s frontier thesis in *Conquistador*. In 1933, a New York Times article reports that, alongside the Pulitzer conferred on MacLeish, the award “for the best volume dealing with history of the United States was made posthumously to
the late Frederick Jackson Turner.” The frontier accounts for the development of a peculiarly American identity. Turner’s idea is a prefiguration of what Mary Louise Pratt calls the “contact zone,” in this case, a zone where civilization and wilderness meet. Even upon the assimilation of frontier space into society, the frontier virtues continue to shape U.S. institutions. The Turnerian thesis is also charged with a kind of death-work. As the memory of the frontier grows more and more temporally distant, social institutions infused with frontier virtues risk losing their vitality. Americanity becomes elegiac of the object that it has assimilated. Upon further contact with civilization, the wilderness as well as the frontier itself disappears.

**A poem of force**

MacLeish concludes his poem by letting imagination conserve the repeatability of frontier spatialization. “The west is gone now,” the ghost of Díaz intones, “the west is the ocean sky.” Although once touched the frontier seems to disappear, it paradoxically returns upon disappearing. Frontier desire depends on the sensation of first contact but also, paradoxically, on the displacement of the object. MacLeish gestures toward this impossibility by invoking “the ocean sky,” the horizon that recedes continually. But he also recalls to us as we finish reading *Conquistador* the voyaging found in its first three books. “Why is it,” Cronon wryly asks, “that the ‘vanishing frontier’ refuses to vanish?” Cronon’s question leads him to note the difference between the analytic usure of the Turnerian thesis and the inexhaustible allure of its rhetoricity. As civilization steadily overtakes and transforms the wilderness, the frontier loses its power to provide an analysis for the specific character of the societies founded on the West. Its conceptual traction dissipates as the frontier recedes. The frontier, however, is also a trope for plot. It continues to provide a persuasive narrative about American ventures and about the cusp formed by environmental and societal spaces. Such rhetoricity is the reason for the frontier’s interminable dying, its vacillation between presence and absence and presence yet again. “The
key question, then,” Cronon proposes, “is whether we can still escape the analytical weaknesses of Turner’s ‘vanishing frontier’ and still retain his narrative strengths.”

MacLeish’s work inherits not only the idea that the contact zone between civilization and wilderness determined the character of American individuals and institutions. The debt to Turner, rather, also consists of the generic textures of the frontier thesis. With such genericity, the poem also inherits its ambivalence. Proposed mainly as an historiographic model, the frontier thesis participates in a genre and in genres. Such participation, however, never amounts to belonging either in historiography or epic narrative or elegy. While the fantasy of voyaging forms American character, MacLeish’s poem calls forth a diagnostic awareness of such character. It seeks to account for the frontier character in terms of its elegiac formation. The epic aspect of the Turnarian frontiersman is an incomplete portrait, because the genre of mourning underwrites the American individual in spite of his consciously sought identification with frontier mobility. The subject of westering, as well as his generic kin, is simultaneously the subject of genre, namely, of elegy. We find this double generic register in the way MacLeish depicts the frontier idea, analeptically transposed over a different locus of American hemispheric history and bruited to inspire courageous deeds. In the Fifth Book, confronting soldiers who are about to abandon the journey and are on the brink of mutiny, Cortés rallies them back to his cause:

‘Tell them that in the tight towns when you talk of us!
‘The west is dangerous for thoughtful men:
‘Eastward is all sure: all as it ought to be:

‘A man may know the will of God by the fences:
‘Get yourselves to the ship and the stale shore
‘And the smell of your father’s dung in the earth: at the end of it

‘There where the hills look over and before us
‘Lies in the west that city that new world
‘We that are left will envy your good fortune!’ (C 60)
Díaz’s ghost frames as verbatim recollection Cortés’s fictive speech, which relies on an ironic dictum to abandon the quest. The valiant captain cum rhetoricitian sets up a strict dichotomy between “the stale shore” of Europe, in the east where habit and sameness resides and, on the other hand, “in the west that city, that new world.” The terse image Cortés uses to refer to sameness is dung, placing a sting of sarcasm in the “good fortune” that remains eastward, far from the dangers of the West. Cortés appears to define Old World boundaries according to an orb of stench. This language of crude particulars gives way to the language of distance. At the end of the poetic line, poised on a delicate caesura, we feel the tug of the horizon and its promise of mobility. Staleness and decomposition characterize the land eastward, but “at the end of it,” the west opens a vista “where the hills look over and before us.”

The suasive rhetoric, however, is itself subject to the tone of decomposition. Its framing discourse is ghostly recollection, and the exergue where we first encounter Cortés portrays him as an inarticulate figure. The interwoven voices, hence, creates a degree of novelistic irony through which the captain intones his heroic speech. Speakers other than Díaz, Cortés, or the author interrupt the voice that is in fact already an effect of ventriloquism. The speech is an image of the heroic style. The intonational quotation marks with which it is framed call to mind other framing devices in the poem, the remorseful tone set by the lyric-epic’s exergues, and the relentless, though implicit, citation of the historiographical document on which the modern epic is based.46 This novelistic irony suggests in advance the conquistadors’ disillusionment wrought by their own utopian errand. It prompts comparisons between the mimetic work of poetry and that of the chronicle by Díaz himself, a document which, although it notes the eloquence of Cortés, records no heroic speech. Subjected to decomposition by novelistic irony, what we hear in Cortés’s evocation of the horizon is the tragic reversal of colonial hope. The poem calls forth the originary American frontier as a place already haunted by its repeated disapparitions. Through the Turnerian idea, Díaz’s ghost and MacLeish both conspire to insert elegy in a speech requiring the epic posture.
Conquistador weaves the tensions of the elegiac-epic modernity of the Turnerian frontier. Tracing the development of American individuals and institutions, the frontier thesis narrates American spatiality in terms of progress and expansion. At the same time, however, anxious over civilization’s assimilative restlessness, it exhibits elegiac traits. The imperiled status of the wild otherness to which the frontier owes its vitality bodes the decline of American character. This elegiac structure accompanies the usefulness of the Turnerian thesis as narrative structure. MacLeish, however, inherits the frontier myth by reworking its rhetorical progression. In his poem the elegiac impetus of its lyric description competes with the narrative urge and frequently overwhelms the latter. MacLeish’s modern epic tries to evade the persuasive hold of narrative and instead allows the elegiac-descriptive to come to the fore. It is a narrative spoken through, and not simply interrupted by, its perceptual style. Alongside the chronicle and the modern novel, epic and elegy are the two poetic genres that move in tandem in MacLeish’s work.

While it may be said that the epic storytelling of Díaz’s ghost recedes from the poetic séance, it does not simply fade. As the seventh book illustrates:

And they came like dogs with their arms down: and their faces

Painted and black and with death’s eyes and their breasts
Quilted with cotton and their naked arms:
And the hard hammer of sun and the gold: and their crests like a

Squall of rain across the whitening barley—
We that were mortal and feared death—and the roll of the
Drums like the thud in the ear of a man’s heart and the

Arrows raking us: rattle of metal: the goad
Stuck in the fat of the hand: and we standing there
Taking the sting of it … (C 70)

Depicting the clash with the Tlaxcálan army under the Xicotenga on August 31, 1519, the seventh book presents what can easily be construed as a traditionally epic nucleus. The fragmentary description has a filmic quality. It is evocative of the tightly shot frames and discontinuities we find in Eisenstein’s montage. In a 1927 essay published in The Nation,
Eisenstein recounts what we now recognize as an iconic image from *Battleship Potemkin*: “By consciously combining the elements of legs, steps, blood, people, we produce an impression—of what kind? The spectator does not imagine himself at the Odessa wharf in 1905. But as the soldiers’ boots press forward he physically recoils.” MacLeish’s lines elicit the same kind of response. The syntax presses against grammatical limits; the first line in the quotation functions as the main clause with the preposition *with* to hinge the rest of the nominatives on the one coherent idea in this passage. The seventh book conveys the disorientation of battle, notably in the synaesthesia we find in “the roll of the / Drums like the thud in the ear of a man’s heart.”

Already in this line there occurs the derangement of the sense apparatus gripped by the dread of confronting Xicotenga’s army. It is this dread that, a few lines later, distorts what the senses perceive: “And [the Indians] came like dogs with their arms down.” The line portray the enemy as though in the process of shape-shifting. The human form alternates with the bestial, depending on the degree to which we allow ourselves to hear the ambiguity in the prepositional modification. As the lines get carried away with enumeration, a kind of verbal shattering ensues.

“Force,” Simone Weil writes of the *Iliad*, “is that which makes a thing of whoever submits to it.” Díaz recalls the Tlaxcalan army through a meteorological trope, identifying the surround with Indian savagery and stripping it of its romanticized visage. Images of military apparel decompose into anatomical language, finally exposing the object-life of the body as Díaz notes the spike of the Indians arrows “Stuck in the fat of the hand.” The parataxis of the seventh book does more than convey the disorientation of embattled men. MacLeish marshals the epic function of valorizing heroic deeds, shedding the feminized lament that inscribes in the traditional epic the critique of violence. While MacLeish lets the epic perform its traditional function of representing violence, it does so only to bring it close to ruination. In lieu of laments sung by female characters, we find the paratactic style, troubling the eloquence of epic vocation. The fragmented quality of *Conquistador*’s epic scenes makes the representational work expected of language break under the strain of representing violence and thereby precludes the figuration
of a heroic subject. Continuing the passage from the seventh book, here is the conclusion of the battle with the Tlaxcalans:

No! we were good soldiers—

Nevertheless it was ill weird for a man
One against many on those dangerous plains
And the sea behind and the hills: and we chocked the cannon

Ramming the stone to the stock and the stiff blaze of it
Flat to the grass: burning the gorse with the powder:
Taking them clean in the bellies with link chain:

And they near the sun: and they took it shouting;
They threw dust in the air: when the smoke lifted
The dead were vanished from the bloody ground....

Then indeed did our hearts fail to give us
All the force and the Indians still in their numbers:
The dead gone: the plain dark with the living: (C 70)

Whereas readers of epic expect acts of valor, in Conquistador we find only dread. MacLeish’s seventh book comes at the cost of perceptual attunement to frontier space. “The sea behind and the hills” recalls the first three books, but the frontier idea recedes from the text, hovering merely as a backdrop to the violence that unfolds before us. Only smoke, burnt grass, dust, and bodies struck “clean in the bellies with link chain” are visible. The plain turns “dark with the living,” suggesting not only the way corpses disappear as more Indian warriors take their place but also the way this thwarted occasion for heroic action disables the lyric engagement with the physical surround. Within the moment of violence, the breakdown in intersubjective relations between the conquerors and the natives coincides with the way consciousness of the horizon and the material environment frays. The alternation of the living Indian bodies and the dead Indian bodies overwhelms the senses. To paraphrase Weil, the vitality of language, along with the speaking subject, turns into a thing. MacLeish lets the genericity of his work succumb to the poem of force. In the passage drawn from the seventh book, the poem of force peels off the status of mastery even from the conquistadors. The
anatomical signifier of human volition and power is reduced to its object-status, “the fat of the hand.” It is not the only time MacLeish zeroes in on such grisly imagery. The third book gives us a comparable instance, this time involving not the colonizer’s body but that of the Indian:

And our wounds we laid in the ravel of torn sleeves
Larded—so did we lack all things—from dead men:
And they sent us over the marshes to make peace:

They were sick of the battles of horses! and that war ended:
And the chiefs came down with a golden dog and some lizards
And five ducks and of gold and the masks of men  (C 41)

The skirmish in the third book takes place in Tabasco, later renamed Santa Maria de la Victoria. As Indian corpses are being “Larded,” the imperial telos of westering extrudes on the superficies of frontier traversal. The passage from the third book evades the occasion for narrating heroic action, and instead hastens toward the desirable consequences of venturing into Indian lands. The idiom of the priamel takes over the text. This turn in MacLeish’s lyric-epic indexes the founding of the New World system. Specifically, in the words of Quijano and Wallerstein, it depicts the early stages of “the acquisition of the immense metallic wealth and the virtually inexhaustible free labour of colonial America.” As the Spanish frontiersmen collect the first artifacts to be absorbed into a colonial emporium, the circulation of objects already begins to confound the forms of commercial and gift exchange. The episode sets in motion other scenes of exchange repeated into the long sixteenth century. With its mineral fascinations, the apparently smooth transition from the clash to the truce creases with the knowledge of colonial outcomes. More interesting to our discussion of MacLeish’s debt to the frontier thesis, the occlusion of narrative in the third book echoes Turner’s summation of the strange economy that Indian removal created. Turner writes:

Long before the pioneer farmer appeared on the scene, primitive Indian life had passed away. The farmers met Indians armed with guns. The trading frontier, while steadily undermining Indian power by making the tribes ultimately dependent on the whites, yet, through
its sale of guns, gave to the Indian increased power of resistance to the farming frontier.54

Lodged in brisk account of colonial transformation is the antimony of anti-colonial resistance that Quijano and Wallerstein describe as the flight from colonialism into colonial modernity. In Turner, even the primary modes of resistance can be spoken as being indebted to colonial settlers. Securing the peace after a brutal conflict, coloniality abolishes the need to lard the Indian of his fat. The natives, on the other hand, give up the armed struggle and come to wage it through institutional processes. MacLeish, read beside Turner, exhibits the ways in which Pax Americana has always been a disciplinary process, transforming Indians into agents of empire themselves. In the image of Spanish westering, MacLeish recovers tracks of the United States’ own frontier journeys occurring later in the history of Americanity. The third book quickly passes over the violence and the tensions between encounter and negotiation upon Spanish-Indian contact. But the enjambment in the line after which “Larded” falls has done its work. It opens a breach in the lyric-epic document for the reader to perform one of the poem’s distinctly citational turns. In the True History, Díaz writes of the same incident in Tabasco:

After this we bound up the hurts of the wounded with cloths, for we had nothing else, and we doctored the horses by searing their wounds with the fat from the body of a dead Indian which we cut up to get out the fat, and we went to look at the dead lying on the plain and there were more than eight hundred of them, the greater number killed by thrusts, the others by the cannon, muskets, and crossbows, and many were stretched on the ground half dead.55

The battle scenes in the third and seventh books are a typical kernel of epic plot. More violent events occur after the tenth book, but they are not assimilated into a coherent narrative. Tate regrets this trait of the work, declaring that the “personal significance [of Díaz’s memories as MacLeish tells them] is impenetrable; the meaning of the course of outside events is obscure.”56 Because the charge of obscurity is unfair, contingent as it is upon the kinds of historical knowledge actively circulating in a culture, Tate’s objection is better understood as a
demand for narrative. The poem, however, depends on narrative less as a causal sequence tracing the conquest than as means to concatenate the lyric instants of westward movement. The traditional work of epic is to interpret trauma and thereby re-establish communal identity. Collective identification with the heroic subject who undergoes violence gestates a sense of belonging. MacLeish, however, resists this function by trying resolutely to adhere to description. His poem attends upon the shifting of perception, moment to moment, across the space of conquest. Where perception of the surround falters due to violence, the clash also frays narrative logic by accumulating what graphic detail the sensorium can apprehend under duress. The passing reference to the horizon in the seventh book illustrates this point. In other passages where no violence is portrayed, MacLeish’s text surrenders the gaze to details that unfold before the horizon as the journey proceeds. But perceptualism with reference to the surround has little place in the seventh book. Tate’s review teaches us not so much the inadequacy of storytelling on the part of MacLeish, as the failure of epic as elegy to sustain thoroughly a generic amalgam. The poem, in short, exhibits participation as nonbelonging. Hence, to rephrase the questions asked at the outset of this chapter, what aspects of the relationship between epic narration and elegiac description in a modern poem does MacLeish illuminate? What does this relationship tell us about lyric-epic poetics as a ground for recuperating historical vision? The immediate section below responds to the former question. The section afterwards is devoted to the latter question, concerning MacLeish’s historicist poetics.

**A description of westering**

According to Angus Fletcher, the descriptive style is constitutive of storytelling. In assembling physical details of the space in which an event unravels, description moves the plot forward. “Throughout all narratives ‘what happens’ is often described discursively,” Fletcher writes, “so that the descriptive part is removed from lists, enumerations, and catalogues of formal content and shifted into a mode of active discovery.” For us to arrive at what Tate calls
“a stream of objective events,” the accumulation of descriptive residue is needed to gain narrative momentum. In this light, our earlier discussion on the place of priamel in elegy all the more suggests that for description to arise, it cannot do away with a form of narrative construction. Spatializing in its impetus, description does not establish causal relations between the objects it accumulates. But it nonetheless operates upon a fictive sense of inevitability attributed to these objects’ emplacement and relationship to each other in situ, at the point at which they enter the senses. We may add to Fletcher’s observation, then, that performing the lyric text with the disposition to hear the susurrus of narrative, description recedes—or more accurately, fades into—the logic of storytelling, so much so that we end up reading for the plot. We stretch towards the temporal movement that may or may not formally anchor the description.

In the case of Conquistador, although the narrative of conquest equally serves as the description of the frontier, the work’s accumulation of perceptual detail serves to inhibit, rather than drive, the plot. The diegetic passages in the seventh book, for example, as with many sections depicting clash, are riddled with omissions that become evident only upon comparison with Díaz’s actual chronicle. Without its tropological layering, it may even be said to approach the cursory language of a synopsis—as with the line, “And the blood of our veins was run in the earth with our victories” (C 72). Riding through maize-fields concealing Mexican warriors, we read about the conquistadors “Driving the stiff of the steel to the squealing clouts” (C 73). These instances suggest that MacLeish tends to condense the duration—or the time of narrative discourse varying from its “real” events—where epic scenes are involved, and in inverse proportion to the duration of its lyric description. A relevant question, then, is why the lyric mode seems to take precedence in this belated reckoning of the Cortés expedition. The question points to the need to think about the intricacy with which MacLeish weaves together an elegiac poetics and a historicist meditation on Americanity.
Hemispheric history begins with wounds. While a critic like Tate can lament the obscurity of the conquest of New Spain, the power of MacLeish’s work in fact may be said to lie in making readers responsible for recalling the history of the New World. The work’s two exergues, and the argument, redundantly trace the narrative arc of this modern epic and underscore its significance. Even as MacLeish seeks to bring such history to light, his work strives to conserve the kind of perceptions that colonial traversal affords—the wonder and trauma, but also the occlusion of the latter. Freeing the poem from the epic’s traditional constraints of narrative legibility, MacLeish allows the reader to engage the journey not as a documentary trace but as a sensuous experience. The cognitive overlap between the senses and the sensed is not beholden to narrative, much less to the adjudication that benefits from hindsight. The obvious point, however, is that poetic utterance is not pure cognitive datum, so much so that the process of adjudication potentiated in language, even prior to narrative organization, cannot be excluded from the saying of the senses. Thus, MacLeish could not be oblivious to the history out of which his poems emerged. “What white men have done to the land was made pretty explicit,” MacLeish says of the westward movement in his Reflections.59

The frontier is half an object of plenitude, and half an object of ruin. All the descriptive turns in the poem, then, along with the corresponding reduction of narrative logic, are mutely elegiac. The poem imitates the staggered experience of moving into unfamiliar space. Díaz’s gaze settles on objects doomed in spite of the wonder this space affords. It is through conquest that the sensuous details of the frontier come under our purview—“As the light in America comes: without leaves” (C 5). The two exergues of the poem bear out this loss in advance. The march to Tenochtitlan ends in the destruction of the space for journeying. But framed in the perspective of the dead, Conquistador lingers on the natural surround, forgetful of the imperial dictum granting contact with the loved object. The colonial process that occasions wonder is at the same time the movement that spells out disenchantment. The poem, however, allows us to experience the journey, partially shielded from the march’s significance beyond its sensuous novelty. The
frontier’s otherness heightens the senses, in spite of the fact that the westward journey is doomed in advance to exhaust its desire and ruin the space for realizing such desire. The novelty of sensation sustains the conquistadors’ passage into the unknown. It supplants the need for concatenating heroic deeds to form an overarching significance or even, as Tate puts it, a “criticism of the avowed purposes of ‘conquest.’”60 This preoccupation with description is the reason for the haste with which the third book passes over the scenes of battle, the very stuff that makes up the original chronicle by Díaz, into the scenes of truce and exchange. The seventh book likewise resumes the perceptual style soon after the frenetic parataxis depicting Indian-Spanish conflict:

And they brought us in by their town and their hempen garments
Painted and red: and we came by the water trees

And the green look of the land and the girls their arms like
Harvest withes about the shocks of flowers:
And all laughing with words: and they brought us garlands:

It smelled of the sun and of dust in that town:
They sprinkled the dry earth with the odor of water:
The shape the shadows faded from morning ground:

And we laid us down in the doors where the moon haunted:
The broom water smelled on the streets of the heat to come:
We woke with our knees across the stones of dawn there .... (C 73–74)

Hardly has the violence ended. But in the ghost’s reckoning, the air of festivity immediately fills in the defeated Tlaxcalan capital. Indian women welcome the Spanish interlopers with garlands, “all laughing with words.” The dramatic irony of the phrase is hard to miss, on at least two levels. First, it disturbs the mastery of Díaz’s point of view, which fantasizes the natives’ capacity for welcome in much the same way the act of westering feminizes landscape. Commenting on Turner’s thesis, Annette Kolodny writes: “the West was woman, and to it belonged the hope of rebirth and regeneration.”61 A tradition of writing about the New World, Kolodny observes, imagines the frontier as a feminine body. American letters either
venerate the land through maternal tropes, or portray it as a luxuriant, seductive mistress requiring the mastery of reason and cultivation. Such feminization chafes with contradictory affect. It results in both longing and guilt, such that the desire to return to maternal space fuels, at the same time, the urge to discipline the land. The lyric passage above concatenates with ease the verdant and the feminine, and the ceremony, or rather, the conquistadors’ fantasy of welcome, manages or contains the bruising awareness of native resentment. Díaz’s ghost, however—and here is the second level of dramatic irony—betrays the suspicion that the welcoming gestures are likely transactional. Native hospitality is an attempt to obviate further violence by exploiting and appeasing the sense of entitlement on the part of the victors. Hence, although this passage is steeped in idyllic calm, the irony doubles with our foregrasping of the journey’s outcome. Sun, dust, and shadows warping form already begin to evoke the calamity of Indian-Spanish contact. The phrase “morning ground” quivers with an ominous pun.

“The real subject of the poem,” Tate contends, “is fear at the gradual disappearance of sensation.” This reading only needs to be modulated with the understanding that the sensations the ghost recalls are those specific to the frontier. The disappearance of the “morning ground” is as important an anxiety in Conquistador as the fate of sensation. MacLeish projects the closure of the frontier and displaces Turner’s timeline onto an earlier stage in hemispheric history. As we have already learned from Cronon, this ground vacillates between presence and absence. The activity of westering itself generates the idea of the frontier, but it also occasions an incomplete erasure. Mexican spatiality vanishes into the idea of the West. When we regard all description in the poem as elegiac, then, it is not simply a case of ontological grievance. It is not merely the regret over the notion that emergence is simultaneously entropic. MacLeish, rather, yields the paradox of frontier ruination: to conquer the West is to incur the loss of the mythic space the journey itself generates. The poem lays bare the fact that the disappearance of the frontier and the sensations it affords results from human agency under colonialism.
Just as presence and absence interweave in MacLeish’s anachronistic recourse to the
Turnerian thesis, the conquistador depicted in his poem fantasizes the impossibility of
immediate harmony with the vanquished—even the promise of intimacy by the gift-bearing
other. The colonialist determination of this repose in otherness, and of frontier loss, is not
named as such. Verisimilitude in representing Díaz’s point of view limits the naming of
colonialism as well as the remorse that modernity’s continuing assertion of colonial mastery
must repudiate. MacLeish, nonetheless, represents the other’s openness alongside the odd
sensation that the object-world is gazing back at conquerors, “the green look of the land.” The
frontier proffers both estrangement and welcome. Potentially menacing in its otherness, Old
Mexico appears to conserve a place of repose; there we can lay “us down in the doors where the
moon haunted.” This space of familiarity within the unfamiliar heightens the demands upon
cognition to articulate the unmapped, occasioning lyric. The descriptive style, as well as the
weave of labials and occasional assonance in the seventh book, is crucial for understanding what
resists naming in the subjectivity of Díaz. The colonial ghost elegizes what it destroys. In the
tenth book, as in the other descriptive sections of the work, the tears of coloniality come in the
form of an intense preoccupation with the physical details of frontier. Like the passage about
Tlaxcala in the seventh book, the tenth book flashes an image of colonial mourning:

So I remember it: yes: and the evening bringing the
Doves down from the air: their wings steep to it!
And thou Colúa! and the paddles rinsed in the

Clear pools of thy sun! I cannot sleep for the
Light under my lids of thy bitter water:
I cannot sleep for thy cries and the walls keeping the

Leaning weight of thy sun by night and the autumn
Smelling of flowers as spring does: (wearing the
Cotton sleeves we were drunk and the wind caught in them):

And the girls they gave us for love with the scented hair:
The green light through the leaves: the slow awakening:
How there were many and small birds in the air then....
We were like those that in their lands they say
The steers of the sun went up through the wave-lit orchards
Shaking the water drops and those gold naked

Girls before them at their dripping horns!
And they ate the sea-doused figs with the salt taste:
And all their time was of kine and of sea and of morning:  (C 84-85)

The desirability of otherness intensifies in the wake of violence and regret over its loss.
MacLeish calls attention to the elegiac in the description above with the use of apostrophe. The
ghost remembers the old Mexican capital, and addresses it by its Nahuatl name: “thou Colúa!”
Apostrophic address participates in the function of pathetic fallacy in traditional elegy, of
reanimating the dead as a gesture of denying the loss or straining towards a compensation for
grief, as with Virgil’s Daphnis bathed in light. It presupposes that its addressee can no longer
return or respond. In his mind’s eye Díaz grapples with his longing for Colúa—“lo! upsprang the
aboriginal name,” to borrow Whitman’s phrase—only to be met with its irretrievability.
MacLeish here engages the kind of apostrophic usage that comes to pervade late twentieth-
century American lyric. The speaker in traditional lyric depends on the fiction of a present
addressee. In modern poetry, however, according to Anne Keniston, the speaker hails the
addressee while making the latter’s absence prominent, highlighting the artifice of the
apostrophic gesture. “Apostrophe,” Keniston writes, “is structured to articulate a desire whose
fulfillment lyric prohibits.”
Sound, scent, and the insistent reference to light and girls suffuse the memory of Tenochtitlan in the tenth book. Longing to reanimate the place, Díaz utters his
memory to the city itself. But in spite of the vivid quality of this passage, it is from the realm of
death, after all, where he speaks to a city destroyed in the sixteenth century and replaced by
Spanish infrastructure. MacLeish seals the description framed as apostrophe in two forms of
loss—hence the sleeplessness of the ghost, driven by desire and its thwarted fulfillment.

The passage from the tenth book deviates from the work’s general usage of first-person
plural. We cannot but hear in the sudden shift to the first-person singular a hint of authorial
identification with the conquistador. MacLeish’s notes to the poem suggest that he himself is not
immune to frontier nostalgia. "Until the discovery and settlement of the Western hemisphere,”
MacLeish writes in one of his drafts, “there was always for all men, a margin of unknown earth.
This unknown earth, and particularly that part of it which lay to the West, for the movements of
the races of men and their aspirations also have set toward the West, served as a habitation and
an actual seat of hope.” Nor is MacLeish’s authorial presence in the poem indifferent to
apostrophe. “Speak to me Conquerors!” MacLeish writes in the prologue. He goes on to refer to
the Great War: “Bring not those others with you whose new-closed … And weeping eyes
remember living men.”(C 3) The notion of the West as “a habitation and actual seat of hope”
accompanies grief over recent historical trauma. This frontier longing is not necessarily the tone
with which the conquest is recalled and justified by the conquistadors themselves. As Rolena
Adorno’s meticulous reading of Díaz demonstrates, the speaker we find in The True History
occupies a different point of view. The chronicle is driven in part by a need to assert the justness
of the conquest, particularly in relation to the controversial massacre at Cholula. Díaz the
chronicler interprets the violence at Cholula as strategically necessary and strives to show that
circumstances justified the use of violence. The Cholulans’ defeat resulted in an eventual alliance
with the Spaniards, and boosted the reputation of Spanish military strength in the unsettled
territory.67

The tone that MacLeish adopts, then, marks a revision of Díaz’s chronicle. Díaz in
Conquistador is not interested in justifying the conquest, but rather in justifying the utopian
fantasy of the West. It is a paradoxical fantasy which, resuming a theme I have already begun to
explore, I strive to articulate tentatively as follows: The West in MacLeish’s poem is a place
where the colonial subject can be at home in otherness. It is a place that is capable of receiving
and sheltering the culture and expectations of the colonial, and whose alterity, even in its
capacity for receiving the Old World, remains undiminished. Apostrophe in MacLeish’s poem
signals mourning. It also happens to mark the instances in which the work swings fully into the
lyric mode. The ghost calls forth a place immune to the repetition of the Old World, the “father’s
dung in the earth,” and yet not unwelcoming of the reproduction of the same, particularly of Old World fantasies of otherness. Perhaps more than identification, what necessitates MacLeish’s revision of The True History’s tone is the recognition of likeness between the Turnerian account of United States expansion and the experience of journeying and staying in Colúa:

I began reading that and was immediately struck by the metaphor in a way that I had not been in reading Prescott. I mean the obvious metaphor of the unknown West, the difficult and dangerous journey into the West, the wonders of that, the scene at the beach below when Cortés burned his ships, cut himself off from Europe, cut himself off from Cuba, made it impossible for anyone to go anywhere else but West with him. All these things subsume and clarify the whole experience of the Americas to the Europeans, including the disastrous ending—the noche triste—and the destruction of the city and the miserable, beastly decay and degradation that set in afterward. What white men have done to the land was made pretty explicit.

The lure represented by an impossible colonial object cuts across two temporally disparate spaces. Turnerian and Colúan frontiers overlap as sites of lament. It comes as no surprise then that MacLeish devotes an entire section, the tenth book, solely to describing Tenochtitlan. The ghost steeps the poem in most sensuous aspects of the lost city. The tenth book, as the exemplary passage quoted above shows, even engages a variety of senses: taste and scent, tactile vision and kinesthesia. While “among central attributes of the descriptive,” as Fletcher notes, “is a power to place inventories in motion,” MacLeish’s poem seeks to inhibit the momentum description creates. The descriptive in Conquistador relives the experience of the journey as a dilatory movement. It competes with the “heroic” deeds scripted by colonialism, and ultimately takes precedence in the text. The poem speaks in complicity with the desire for the Old Mexico’s unfamiliarity as a kind of home. The journey occurs purely on the level of memory; it is a simulation woven out of poetic utterance. As such, it affords the conquistador the fiction of rejecting the violence required by the impossible ideal of habitable otherness. It affords, moreover, the fiction of frontier traversal as a meditation on landscape.
The march across the Mexican frontier ends with wounds and ruin inflicted not only upon the conquered but also upon the pleasure of westering. The space given to description serves to prolong the experience of movement and the attendant wonder of contemplating otherness. It diminishes the sway of narrative and tries to wrest the experience of “Wheeling to westward” (C 71) from the colonial telos of the march. Implicitly mournful of the destructive outcome of the march, the poem stalls the assimilation of habitable otherness into colonial spatiality, and conversely, the ideal frontiersman, into violent typology. Elegy, which grounds the perceptualism of the work, participates in the epic vocation and holds it in abeyance. Description reanimates a kind of frontier space that immediately upon colonial contact does not appear to recoil into the space of the impossible. MacLeish’s elegiac perceptualism inhabits, but also parries with, empire’s bruising touch.

**An elegy including history**

The possibility of violence in the frontier, however, is inseparable from our experience of lyric wonder in *Conquistador*. To return to questions asked earlier in this chapter, then, what kind of cultural work does the specifically *elegiac* retrieval of the frontier engage, given such proximity to violence? How does lyric description in MacLeish’s work and his preoccupation with the colonization of Mexico respond to its historical moment? In asking these questions, my premise is that the preoccupation with America’s usable past is one of the influences on MacLeish’s modernism. Two concerns impinge on the poem: the strained diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico as well as Nicaragua; and second, the 1920s United States literary culture’s representation of the colonial formation that Quijano and Wallerstein call Americanity. The remaining sections of this chapter study the way MacLeish’s commitment to lyric reckons with coloniality.

In December 1926 American journalist and expatriate in Mexico Carleton Beals called attention to the rivalry between the United States and Mexico for “the moral leadership of the
Western Hemisphere.”71 Beals judged in favor of Mexico, writing just before the Nicaraguan crisis and the deadlock of US-Mexican oil negotiations. In the same month, The Labour Monthly issued Victor Haya de lat Torres’s “A Latin American Doctrine of Anti-Imperialism,” the founding document of the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana. Among its general principles, the doctrine called for “the political unity of Latin America,” “the nationalization of land and industry,” and “the solidarity of all the oppressed people and classes of the world.”72 Nicaragua became the point of conflict between Mexico and the US. The two larger countries respectively supported the political factions warring for leadership in the isthmian nation. North Americans were not unsympathetic to anti-imperialism; the ideal of decolonization in the hemisphere coincided with a protectionist vision of Pan America, shadowed by the trauma of the Great War. As a result, when the US government redeployed the marines to Nicaragua in January 1927, the American liberal press, as well as other Latin American periodicals, began to denounce the United States government’s imperialistic aspirations. The press saw the US as an obstacle to decolonization and unity in the Americas.

Occupying the isthmian nation since 1912, American marines were withdrawn from Nicaragua in August 1925. But the US government sent them once more on January 5, 1927 to prevent the escalation of conflict there. There were two main political players in Nicaragua’s domestic strife: the military junta led by Emiliano Chamorro, and the political faction led by Adolfo Díaz against Chamorro. Díaz sought the help of US marines to stabilize his rule in Nicaragua. To such extent, then, United Sates presence in Nicaragua was welcomed. The Nicaraguans were being rescued from themselves. The New York Times reports: “A force of 160 will be landed from the Galveson at Corinto, proceeding to Managua as a guard for the United States Legation. High officials in the Conservative Government of General Díaz declared the arrival of the marines was timely and would save the country from anarchy.”73 Consonant with the American government’s notions of political progress in the region, Nicaraguans maintained that US intervention would strengthen the Nicaraguan state and end dollar diplomacy.
Nicaragua’s national bank in the 1920s was controlled by Wall Street. Both Díaz and Chamorro used dollar diplomacy to serve their own interests, blocking attempts to nationalize the Banco Nacional de Nicaragua. Even the revolutionaries eventually agreed to “the imposition of a US military protectorate but not a financial one.” Only the peasant-based movement led by Agustino Sandino challenged both the US occupation and the foreign control of Nicaragua’s financial structure. It was against Sandino’s movement that Nicaragua’s US-trained National Guard waged their battles.74

The Nicaraguan crisis occurred amid the Mexican one, involving American claims on Mexico’s petroliferous lands. Anxious over the strained US-Mexico relations, the US public opinion cast blame on the private American interests in Mexico’s northern region. The oil men were perceived to influence the US government’s aggressive stance towards the immediate southern neighbor. Mexico was striving to bolster its sovereignty by consolidating its economic resources. In the late 1920s the Mexican government began to seek a strict enforcement of the property clauses of the 1917 Mexican Constitution. In particular, Article 27 declared that all the lands and subsoil rights in Mexican territory now belonged to the state. American oil companies in Mexico were given until the start of January 1927 to exchange property titles for concessions. The concessions to nationalized properties were to last for fifty years.75 American oil men, however, who happened to yield “75 per cent of the total petroleum production of Mexico,”76 deemed the Mexican Constitution’s strict enforcement as unjust confiscation of American property. Instead of applying for concessions, they decided simply to ignore Mexican law.77 They tried to persuade the US government to intervene through military means. “Like the Texan Americans who rebelled against Mexico in the days of Sam Houston,” T.R. Ybarra in 1927 observed, “these present-day American rebels have their eyes fixed hopefully on the Government of the United States.”78 Ybarra’s report appeared only three months after the return of US troops to Nicaragua. His caricature of American owners of Mexican oilfields vaguely alludes to the Díaz government of Nicaragua.
Mexico was not without its own “hegemonic pretensions in Central America” according to Richard Salisbury. Its hand in the Nicaraguan crisis exacerbated its relations with the United States. Mexico supplied military provisions to the Liberal forces fighting against Chamorro’s military junta, the faction opposed to the US-propped Nicaraguan government led by Adolfo Díaz. The US government’s official statements condemned Mexico’s involvement in Nicaragua as an attempt to foster communism in Latin America. Such statements, however, obscured the complexity of political divisions even within the revolutionary faction itself, which had been founded on a bipartisan alliance between Conservatives and Liberals against Chamorro’s regime. The charge of Mexico’s communism was unfounded. As a result, as Josefina Zoraida Vazquez and Lorenzo Meyer maintain, Mexicans saw the US as a potential aggressor prepared for “military action against Mexico similar to the action being taken in Nicaragua.” Mexico’s involvement in the Nicaraguan crisis served as a potential excuse for an invasion of Mexico. The US-Mexican oil war and the occupation of Nicaragua both appeared to be the outcome of imperialist US foreign policy towards Latin America.

This interpretation was faulty according to James Horn. Evidence drawn mainly from Congressional records “supports the conclusion that such fears were founded more upon rumor, nervousness, and a misreading of Washington’s intentions.” The misreading, however, if it was indeed that, was prevalent not only among Mexican commentators. The Chicago Daily Tribune on January 17, 1927 reports: “Washington is alive with the emissaries of the big financiers sent to headquarters to learn, if possible, whether in the opinion of the Coolidge administration the row with Mexico over anti-American plotting in Nicaragua and over the Mexican oil and alien land laws is verging toward armed hostilities and whether the administration contemplates employing force as a last resort for the protection of American rights and interests beyond the Rio Grande.” Although there was no formal intent to send the marines to Mexico, Horn also notes that “a contingency plan for the invasion of Mexico did exist and parts of it were in Mexican hands, possibly buttressing Calles’s fears of US intervention.” This “contingency plan”
Fortunately was averted. American business interests in Mexico could not persuade the United States government to support their cause. One senator from Montana spoke against the prospect of deploying “the sons of Americans to protect the property of the oil companies,” and urged instead more active negotiations.

Disdain, however, tinged US diplomacy toward Latin American sovereignties. In a letter to the president of Columbia University the US ambassador wrote in 1925 that Mexican leadership as prompted by “greed, a wholly Mexican view of nationalism and an Indian, not Latin, hatred of all peoples not on the reservation. There is very little white blood in the cabinet—that is it is very thin.” The representation of the Nicaraguan crisis reflected the same attitude. In May 1927 the *Wall Street Journal* advocated US presence in Nicaragua against the charge of imperialism by underlining the official reason for the occupation, the need to stabilize democracy there. “There is nothing to be said,” the journal states, “for the political systems of any country where a change in government is effected only by the bayonet, and where the men in the ranks are compelled to fight without knowing for what they are fighting. In such cases nationalism is a masquerade for personal greed.” In both cases, the specific colonial legacy constraining US recognition of Latin American sovereignties is what Quijano and Wallerstein might call the “meritocratic system [that] justifies racist attitudes without the need to verbalize them.” Seen through the medium of race, Mexican sovereignty in the early twentieth century seemed unimportant. U.S. officials’ doubts regarding Mexico’s capacity to govern were verbalized only in private correspondence. In public statements, the racialization of political merit was coded in the language of morality.

Whether MacLeish observed them closely or not, his work on *Conquistador* commenced in the wake of these hemispheric scrapes. In Paris, on June 1927, while public opinion clashed on US relations with Mexico and Nicaragua, MacLeish read Maudslay’s translation of Bernal Díaz’s *True History* and requested a copy of it from a friend. It seems likely, then, that MacLeish’s elegiac description of westering is an attempt to situate historical understanding in
aesthetic or poetic thinking and feeling. The debate surrounding United States-Latin America foreign relations appeared to demand that a poem including history be written not merely as commentary to the political, but as a ground for considering what escapes historiographic narrative as well as polemics. Crucial to this poetic responsiveness is the challenge MacLeish poses to United States culture’s ambivalence in coming to grips with American coloniality. The conquistadors’ incursion upon the New World, exploiting to their strategic advantage the discord among Indian nations, invited comparison with the intrusions that the US government under President Calvin Coolidge visited upon Mexico and Nicaragua. During the advent of the Good Neighbor policy, MacLeish’s poem makes available, for comparison and contrast, past and present forms of coloniality in the Americas. What MacLeish calls “the obvious metaphor of the unknown West” seemed particularly striking in his cultural moment, particularly because the debate over the hemispheric tensions happened to include dissenting voices from outside the United States. While MacLeish was in Paris, a Nicaraguan poet at the Pan-American labor congress held in Washington was protesting the use of force in his homeland:

> Word had been received that more than 200 of his countrymen had died at the hands of United States marines. Tears welled in his eyes as he spoke.
> “I can not feel a hatred for America and its institutions because of this,” Salomón de la Selva said, “but I do hate, and hate bitterly, the militaristic policy which sent the marines in Nicaragua to put my countrymen to death.”

De la Selva was a former American university professor who, upon repatriating to Nicaragua in the 1920s, became a labor leader. His book *Tropical Town and Other Poems*, featuring lyrics written in English and published in the United States, commemorates his stay in New England and his birthplace of Leon, Nicaragua. The obvious irony of human death in the midst of vegetal cycles of regeneration frames the description of a tropical town. “Blue, pink, and yellow houses, and, afar,” the elegiac title piece of the book begins, “The cemetery, where the green trees are.” The culminating line seals the poem in a tight circle, taking up the motif of
chromatic detailing with which the poem begins. The “lonely green trees and the white graves” provide terminal variation with a kind of lexical bleaching. Morbidity, however, shadows this Nicaraguan idyll, as De la Selva observes that in his country, “there are always buzzards in the sky.” Among the lyrics of *Tropical Town* are poems that explicitly point to American intervention in Nicaragua prior to the 1927 crisis. “The Dreamer’s Heart Knows its Own Bitterness” is representative of such protest, with its parenthetical title, “A Pan-American Poem on the entrance of the United States into the War.” De la Selva writes:

> On a day I saw, as I raised my eyes,  
> The Condor and Eagle in epic flight;  
> Their wings were black, and over the skies  
> They cast a sudden prefigured night.  
>  
> The sky of peace they rent in two:  
> Taloned with hatred, clawed with threat,  
> They sprang at each other athwart the blue:  
> They had heard the Past’s “Lest ye forget!”  
> But I flung my dreams and, as they flew,  
> My swift song caught them as in a net.

“The Dreamer’s Heart Knows its Own Bitterness” tries to account for historical violence in terms of organic fate. However, because it is “the Past” that prompts the condor and eagle to “epic flight,” the creatures become allegorical not of nature of but Nicaraguan history. These creatures augur the repetition of the US-occupied nation’s grief. The speaker responds to the omen by flinging his “dreams,” as if in propitiation, petitioning for the renewal of song as well as of nationhood. But the tenuous pronoun antecedence in these lines makes room for the opposite meaning, which sabotages the power of the wish. “They” and “them” circle *dreams* but also around *condor* and *eagle*, which are locked in aerial combat. Historical allegory dents the invocation. The net of song snags both the futurity of national aspiration and the predatory talons of the past.

Whether MacLeish appreciated de la Selva’s 1918 poems or read them at all is indeterminable. And yet in de la Selva’s yoking of political violence and the idyllic, prior to
MacLeish’s poem, we find a shared responsiveness to the ecological surround. The “green light through the leaves” (C 84), and other ecological images throughout MacLeish’s poem, recall de la Selva’s topographic references. This likeness no doubt owes to what Fletcher observes as a rule of descriptive poetics, in which the object is “seen to exert a binding control over the forms and pieces of the description.” In the case of de la Selva and MacLeish, the binding control is likely an effect of the kind of geopolitical imagining that dissolves political borders gathered under the sign of the American tropics. It mirrors the tendency in 1920s United States exceptionalism to lump Nicaraguan and Mexican sovereignties with the rest of Latin America. We see this tendency even in a writer who is deeply sympathetic to the plight of the Greater South. Carleton Beal writes in *The Nation*: “The United States Government looks toward Mexico while it kicks Nicaragua.” Here is the passage from the sixth book of *Conquistador*, echoing de la Selva:

Ever before us lay vast earth secret with
Sun with the green sound with the singing of the grasshoppers:
The earth was still against our living feet:

No man of us all that knew that land nor the
Way of the trees in it: neither were waters known:
Neither the customs of the wind: our shadows

Entered the silent shadows of the stones:
And the mouse cried in his tongue: the cricket answered:

Ah but the mark of a man’s heel is alone in the
Dust under the whistling of hawks! (C 61-62)

The Spanish explorers look upon the town of Cempoala. What are we to make of this music? The conquistadors’ topophilic gaze finds itself suddenly altered. Elegiac feeling shifts the tone that begins the passage from pleasure to alienation. The illegibility of the landscape repels Díaz. Although the description begins with an elevated perspective, it goes on to reflect on the meagerness of human scale when set against the horizon. The enchantment of westering falls prey to an intimation of mortality. The irregular meter sings of such mobility, with lines that start with a beat and thereafter proceed with double, even triple, offbeats to compensate for the
frequent enjambments. Against this effect of lyric murmuring, one line stands out for its iambic familiarity: “The earth was still against our living feet.” This line’s acoustic stability is ironic, as it occurs just where the poem hails the landscape as an entity capable of alienating the conquistadors, “No man of us all that knew that land.” Ambivalence within the colonizer’s subjectivity disturbs the plenitude of the frontier vista.

It is tempting to think that the splitting of colonial subjectivity is the sole provenance of the colonized in his or her simultaneous identification with, and antagonism for, the colonizer. But this notion of colonial ambivalence is inadequate. As Homi K. Bhabha reminds us, identification and alienation divide the subjectivity of the colonizer, as well; the voice of empire never “functions productively as incitement and interdiction.” The colonizer’s narcissistic attachment to the non-totalizable image of power is just as threatened as that of the colonized. Working through incitement as well as interdiction, coloniality thus divides even its privileged agent. In MacLeish’s poem, the melancholy of Diaz’s lyric ghost is evidence of such split. As if to echo the imperial chagrin represented by the Ozymandina wasteland, the “lone and level sands,” MacLeish plunges the reader into the grief of the colonizer, looking upon “the silent shadows of the stones.” It visits upon the United States audience of poetry the plaint that we find in de la Selva’s “The Dreamer’s Heart.” Although De le Selva did not intend the phrase “epic flight” to refer to US military technology used in Nicaragua in 1927, reading both poems in light of that context, what we perceive in MacLeish’s reference to flight is the sensation of being subject to aerial surveillance, “Dust under the whistling hawks.” Holding up an image occurring further back in hemispheric history, Conquistador may be said to mirror the American use of force in Latin America during the 1920s. As The Washington Post reports:

Diving full speed the 110 miles intervening, despite a tropical storm, [squadron of five bombers] swung low across the attacking lines, raking riflemen and machine gunners with point-blank fire. [...] Ocotal has the appearance of a big graveyard. The authorities are cleaning up the city as rapidly as possible, fearing an epidemic. Flocks
of great vultures reached the bodies, which were at some distance from Ocotal, before the burial parties could arrive on the scene.99

The bombing in Nicaragua could not have failed to revive Europe’s recent memory of its own waste lands. It is not too farfetched to suppose that the image of the Nicaraguan waste land forced MacLeish to keep an eye towards the tumultuous US-Latin American relations in the 1920s. This possibility is suggested by an interview towards the end of his life, in which he expresses impatience over novelist Macolm Cowley’s blindness to the transnationalism of 1920s Paris. He notes, in particular, the presence of “every kind of Latino,” countering Cowley’s valorization of the North American expatriates there. “To understand Paris, when we were there,” MacLeish says, “you have to talk about things that Malcolm apparently never saw. Paris was full of the young from Africa, from Eastern Europe, from Asia, the Swedes, the Norwegians, the Finns, the Latinos, every kind of Latino.” MacLeish goes on to speculate on a “kind of vacuum” that this international gathering filled after the Great War: “The youth of Europe had been slaughtered.”100 What fascinates us about the sheer resemblance, then, between de la Selva’s tropical scenes and the MacLeish’s Mexican landscape is the fidelity of lyric to the surround. Such fidelity obtains a counter-image to frontier violence.

**Shards of coloniality**

The reference to the condor and eagle in De la Selva’s 1918 poem “The Dreamer’s Heart” now seems oddly prophetic of the clashes between US marines and the Nicaraguan revolutionaries in 1927. The air siege on Ocotal lasted forty-five minutes in contrast to the four-year war in Europe the decade before. But in the image of a city or a landscape brought to ruin, individuals and places become substitutable. Writing about the way the Great War transformed modern elegy, Sandra Gilbert invokes a German memoirist recalling “the dumb, black stumps of the shattered trees which still stick up where there used to be village. [They] stand there like corpses upright. Not a blade of green anywhere round.”101 The shadow of the Great War, hence, loomed across the charge of imperialism made by critics of US maneuvers in Latin America. In
Ocotal, amid a tropical storm, bombs were dropped from the five DeHaviland biplanes only where there were concentrations of Sandinistas, and machine guns—two in each plane, with twelve hundred rounds—were used to attack the rest. “Through it all, the Marine airmen scrupulously avoided bombing civilian residences,” writes Neill Macaulay of the attack. In de la Selva’s 1918 poem, the sky “rent in two” inadvertently foreshadows Nicaragua’s experience of aerial warfare. MacLeish, on the other hand, having the vantage of hindsight, projects this experience onto Mexico’s frontier past. What results may well partake of the larger US culture’s attempt to distance itself from the contemporaneous violence at Ocotal. But through such distance, ironically, there also emerges a politically charged comparison between Nicaraguan trauma and the wasteland into which the Old Mexican frontier turned in the sixteenth century. The kind of violence that the American government sought to prevent from resurfacing in the hemisphere became closer to home.

The link between historical knowledge and lyric, however, are hardly evident in Conquistador. The poem, as Tate laments, “does not in any point emerge as criticism of the avowed purposes of ‘conquest’; and so, instead of a classical irony, we get something like sentimental regret on the part of Bernal, whose anger rises at the failure of the official histories to recreate the sensuous correspondence to his own part in the action.” Tate’s objection corresponds to his complaint regarding the historical obscurity in the work and perhaps echoes the anti-imperialist outrage over the Nicaraguan crises. Even if the poem recalls the founding of coloniality in the Americas, no narrative concatenates the old and new empires. Something else takes place, however. Reading MacLeish’s lyric-epic in 1932, another critic takes a different stance from Tate. “First of all ‘Conquistador,’” Horace Gregory writes, “is not a narrative poem but is perhaps one of the best equivalents for a narrative that has been subjected to a modern technique in poetry.” Addressing Wall Street, his review ends thumping: “You are Conquistadors, marching into Mexico (forget the oil fields for a moment), look at the girls, look at the horses! . . . Enjoy them all—but remember they are dead, and the Conquistadors, once
heroes in the less important records of our history, they, too are dead.” However bemusing Gregory’s histrionics may be, his statement nonetheless suggests that the apparent refusal in *Conquistador* to offer an interpretation of the conquest, or of its vestigial repetition in modern American quests, may not have been a simple evasion of history. If Tate suggests that the poem’s main achievement is its sheer lyricism, its “flashes of recollection,” Gregory’s review underlines the critical possibilities offered by the restraint placed on narrativization: “again and again we are reminded that we are looking backward, not with a clear perception or with true historical perspective, but with a broken memory.” The statement directly echoes the beginning of *Conquistador*’s tenth book:

And the life goes out of us leaving the chucked sherds!

Leaving an old man’s memories to leach
Like a cock’s jewels of gravel and worn thin
With the sleepless caul of the heart and hard and clean:

Leaving within the eyes behind the fingers
Back of the soft lid and the scarlet vein
The harsh flash of the steel where the light lingers!...

Leaving the slag in us.... leaving us those days.... (C 83-84)

Horace Gregory’s review invites us to meditate on the possibility of having a supplement to narrative, providing not only the poem’s sweetness but also its instruction. The equivalent of narrative, it may be argued, is the drift of lyric description. The poem’s fidelity to describing the surround provides an affective experience of coloniality. It mimics the conquistador’s apparent resistance to historical knowledge. At the same time, this descriptive fidelity allows the text to be saturated with the knowingness that comes after violence, as well as with the regret that accompanies frontier longing. Does the absence of narrative, then, particularly one that strains toward an argument against empire, represent a disavowal of empire? Not quite. For this absence of narrative allows us to read the imaginary gap between the Spanish conquest of Old
Mexico and the US disruption of modern Latin American sovereignties. Colúa stands for the originary American frontier and the colonial grief over the attempts to regenerate versions of the frontier in the early twentieth-century. Descriptive fidelity to the imagined Mexican frontier, alongside its underlying attempt to mourn it, constitutes an attempt, as Mignolo might put it, “to conceptualize ‘modernity/coloniality’ as two sides of the same coin and not two separate frames of mind.” Translating Mignolo’s double density through Conquistador’s commitment to lyric, we may say that modern poetry not only hails the conquistador’s ghost as a kind of exterior to which the authorial voice is immune. Modern poetry, rather, also binds the specter’s tongue. It makes apparitional—and hence, available for critique—modernity’s own divided recognition of the violence with which vestigial frontier wonder in the twentieth century is complicit. Punctured by the ghost’s frontier nostalgia, we come to grips with the coloniality of “the world’s wonder,” the present world rapt in Americanity.

Lyric description initially seems resistant to history. In his recent collection Sestets, Charles Wright quips that description is “of all the arts the least appreciated.” The lines comes from “Homage to What’s-His-Name,” a jokingly metaphysical poem. Description “is just this and it’s just that and nothing other,” Wright goes on. The attention to the physical surround participates, without belonging, to narrative representation: “From landscape to unsuppressed conjunction, it’s only itself.” The account of description aptly speaks to MacLeish’s work, particularly the repeated use of “And” all throughout his elegiac epic. Wright’s tongue-in-cheek metaphysics yields a hyperbolic gloss on descriptive fidelity: all that the descriptive art breeds is perceptual interest, with the crude tenacity of conjunctions. And yet the word “And” is precisely the vector of narrative in MacLeish’s lyric-epic. It runs through different American landscapes, tracing the rough synchronicities across time and making change apparent. In Conquistador the corrosive effect that lyric has on the narrative of colonial traversal, and the elegy with which the landscape is framed stand for the suffering that such journeying has occasioned. Similarity triggers the memory of contradictory frontier affects, pleasure as well as grief. Paradoxically,
moreover, the fragments that generate resemblance also accommodate the negation of memory. In the opacity of fragments, we confront our amnesia. We come to recognize, at the least, the difficulty of imagining the colonial formations that link the United States and Latin America.

The identification of resemblance allows culture to fall out of geopolitical bounds and to invite appropriation. “Discover, invent a usable past we certainly can,” Van Wyck Brook writes, calling for the search for cultural resources that can be imagined already as America’s own. Frontier traversal is one such usable past. The sensations of westering form part of the generic traits linking the colonial cultures of the United States and Latin America. Waldo Frank’s version of this enterprise in touristic travel in the twentieth century underscores just this appropriative notion of discovery. “If one belongs to a world which has culturally refined its gold, one can leave that world yet take the gold along,” Frank writes. “But if one has had the fortune—good or ill—to be born upon the scarce-scratched surface an unmined Treasure, and if one indeed wants that Treasure for his own—then, it is necessary to get down and dig.” Frank calls not only for the invention but the act of drawing on cultures that already seem to thrive in American culture, what he calls “a multiverse craving to become One.” The commitment to the possibilities offered by cultural appropriation underpins Frank’s sympathy for the expatriate artist. “Should an American artist stay at home? The answer may be left to him.” The answer, Frank suggests, is that expatriation is desirable, even necessary, depending on the kind of creative problems the American artist wishes to engage.

The willingness to wrest artistic form from anarchy is what justifies eclectic cultural appropriation. There is no place that does not offer a usable past for Frank’s ideal artist, or what he terms “the religious artist,” who thrives in the capacity “to bind together what appears confusion, and to make whole what strikes the sense as multiform and diverse.” Hence, in another essay in which he urges Americans to travel to Mexico instead of taking the European grand tour, Frank can maintain that
Mexico is ours. To us all who would live like human beings, rather than like insects or wolves, in the capitalistic Jungle, Mexico is a mother. Although our feet never leave the sidewalks of New York, there is a soil beneath us; and the more perfect the pavement the more urgent our need of contact with the soil. In Mexico live a folk who, for all their terrible confusions, are the incarnate spirit of that soil. 

Frank’s version of discovering the usable past goes against the tendency of modernity to deify the new. It emphasizes the persistence of the old in the new, via the mystical fraternity proffered by soil. How is the usable past to be generative of such fraternity when it implicates specters on whose forms MacLeish casts the artificial of the frontier myth? “Articulating the past historically,” Walter Benjamin writes, “does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.” In the context of the disputes over subsoil rights in Tampico, it seems difficult to miss Frank’s irony in declaring spiritual proprietorship of Mexico. The ascendance of colonial subjectivity in American culture flares up as an image waiting to be seized.

This danger to the U.S. democratic self-image, however, is not always perceived. William Hard asks in The Nation in 1927, “What is the psychological anatomy of the thing we call ‘imperialism’?” Its primary feature, according to Hard, is the “consciousness of kind,” the hierarchical concept of cultural difference. Hard suggests that early in the twentieth century, U.S. officials and businessmen with designs on Latin America were unwilling to see the medium of race as evidence of coloniality. There is “sincere indignation in their breasts when I call them ‘imperialistic,’” writes Hard. “They do not think they are.” Racism hid behind political moralism. As Hard says in the same passage: “They are different. They have no ideals. One of our fellows is in danger. We must rush to rescue him. It makes no difference who he is. He is lofty. They are degraded. Send the marines.”

Conquistador may be re-read as a kind of broken memory of coloniality. In MacLeish’s preoccupation with “chucked sherds” and “the slag in us,” we find the chance for a different recollection of U.S. relations with Latin America. His perceptual style comes to light as the
obverse side to the other processes cast into shadow, processes in which the senses were
shattered not just by the experience of confronting an unfamiliar landscape, but also by the
ruptures of colonial contact. The ghosts in Conquistador loom over the violence of 1927 U.S.-
Latin American relations, suggesting the resemblance between the march across Old Mexico and
subsequent territorializing ventures.

MacLeish’s poem clears ground for radical memory within the frontier myth. Our
responsibility to call acts of empire for what they are often vacillates when we forget the modes
by which we dwell within coloniality. Public debate departs from the project of decolonization,
which presupposes the recognition of coloniality, to those kinds of discussions that sanction,
perhaps even nurture, genteel modes of political evasion. The discussions pertaining to the 1927
Nicaraguan and Mexican crises illustrate this point. Defending US marine presence in the
isthmian nation, the Wall Street Journal obscures the complex political struggles by citing
political greed and the bankruptcy of Nicaraguan nationalism. Another illustration is the
attempt to clip Mexico’s sovereignty as it strove to enforce Article 27 of its 1917 Constitution.
The oil wars rested on the same aspirations that the Nicaraguan revolutionaries shared, not the
reproduction of American institutions of freedom per se but rather, the freedom from dollar
diplomacy. Within the calculus of its racialized meritocracy, however, the US government in the
early part of the twentieth century could all too easily dismiss the anti-imperial protests within
its own borders and deny the recognition due to other nations’ sovereignty. Before this
disavowal of coloniality, “all the history of grief” threatens to vanish.

“In American elegy,” the critic Max Cavitch writes, “the pressures of unavowed mourning
often get figured in the oblique or particularized relations to the genre of the displaced and the
destroyed, of the civilly and socially dead.”14 MacLeish’s work, then, appears exceptional in the
way it clears space for mourning. Like the Turnarian thesis, Conquistador elegizes the
disappearance of alterity. Unlike the Turnarian thesis, however, the poem can barely contain its
grief. This American elegy sketches the resemblance between two kinds of frontier space, and
implicitly laments the repetition of the Old Mexican westering in the long history of coloniality in the hemisphere.

“To embrace Americanity is to dwell in the erasures of coloniality,” writes Mignolo.115 The breaches of epic memory in MacLeish’s poem are symptomatic of the historical erasures Mignolo describes. “A poem should not mean”—to quote MacLeish’s most famous poem again—“But be.” MacLeish offers a simulation of the Spanish colonial experience through lyric. In Conquistador, American elegy illuminates the idea of Mexico with its own frontier longings. Beyond the challenge of poetic tact vis-a-vis territorial disputes between the U.S. and Latin American nations prior to the formation of the Good Neighbor policy in 1933, MacLeish’s poem rehearses the longing for the freshness of perception promised by westward movement. In the same breath, Conquistador seeks to mourn properly the colonial mindset inscribed in the frontier ethos, and so perhaps to relinquish it.

Notes

1 Raymond B. Craib, Cartographic Mexico (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 41.

2 Archibald MacLeish, Conquistador (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932), 1. The work is hereafter cited in this chapter’s body, parenthetically as C.


4 Echoed here is John Carlos Rowe’s observation regarding the contradiction in American self-imaging vis-à-vis its colonial subjectivity, made visible in a body of American prose works. “U.S. writers from the early days of the republic to the present,” Rowe writes at the start of the first chapter, “testify diversely to the imperial heritage of the United States and to a strong intellectual tradition of challenging the imperialism of the United States along with other global powers.” See Rowe, Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.


7 Ernest Greuning suggests as much. Díaz, Greuning notes, “wrote in Guatemala, where he lived the rest of his life. Age had not withered the vividness of his recollections; if anything time had freed him from bias, had given him leisure for reflection, permitted the rounding out of an adventure story which is among the few great epics of the human race.” See Greuning. “Mexico’s Xenophon.” The Nation vol. 127, no. 3299 (26 September 1928): 297-298. The quotation is from 297.


9 The Inferno of Dante, trans. Eleanor Vinton Murray (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1920), 295. The verse in MacLeish’s text is quoted without the translation: “‘O frati,’ dissi, ‘che pero cento milia/ Perigli siete giuti all’ occidente.’”


11 Turner, Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner, 61.


13 This aspect of Quijano and Wallerstein’s account of modernity as coloniality prompts Mignolo to object to its sense of American exceptionalism. But Mignolo goes on to sustain the claim, with only slight qualification: “the fact is that the capitalist economy changed course and accelerated with the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit.” See Mignolo, “Coloniality at Large: The Western Hemisphere in the Colonial Horizon of Modernity,” CR: The New Centennial Review 1.2 (Fall 2001): 24.


16 Brooks’s debt to Culture and Anarchy by Matthew Arnold can be inferred from James Hoopes, Van Wyck Brooks: In Search of American Culture (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 62-68.

Rainey compares the line Job 8:16-17: “He is green before the sun, and his branch shooteth forth in his garden. His roots are wrapped about the heap, and seeth the place of stones.” See Rainey’s note on p. 77. On publication date of *The Waste Land*, see Gallup, pp. 7-8.


20 Eliot, 14. The other quotations in this paragraph are from the same passage. In the contrast I am making between Brooks and Eliot, I hope that what I am bracketing here is apparent. For Eliot the past is specifically literary: “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.” This idea does not preclude a consideration of the past in terms of literature’s extrusions. Moreover, we may now understand differently “the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together.” The timeless is not what transcends history but what survives through writing. I hear the timeless in Eliot’s passage as the spacing that belongs to—without making itself visible in—our concepts of history. “Arche-writing as spacing,” Jacques Derrida writes, “cannot occur as such within the phenomenological experience of a presence. It marks the dead time within the presence of the living present, within the general form of all presence.” Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 68.

21 Quijano and Wallerstein, 551.

22 William Carlos Williams, “The Fountain of Eternal Youth,” *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1925), 39. Immediately prior to this essay is another piece that is likely to have figured in MacLeish’s creative process. See “The Destruction of Tenochtitlan: Cortés and Montezuma,” 27-38.

23 James E. Miller, *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction: Whitman’s Legacy in the Personal Epic* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 35. For the block quotation further in this paragraph, see p. 36.


28 Greene, 192.

29 Derrida, 228.

30 Allen Tate, “Not Fear of God,” *New Republic* 71.913 (1 June 1932): 77.

31 For my usage of the term “performance,” see Derek Attridge’s illuminating work, *The Singularity of Literature*. MacLeish’s performance of epic narrativity comprises one modality for reading *Conquistador*, able to hail its reader as an auditor of epic narration. However, the performance of epic narrativity is not the only way to perform a modern lyric-epic, and more crucial to Attridge’s argument, the temporality of its performance does not merely inhere in the work. To paraphrase Derrida in “The Law of Genres” once more, genericity scripts the reader’s mode of staging the work, of uttering its language in real time. Without the reader, however, no staging of genres can occur. As an event, the genericity of the work poem depends on the subject who perceives the repetition of—the act of performing, counting, and reciting—generic traits, even as the literary work can be said to perform him or her in the act of reading. See Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 95-106.

32 Tate, 78.

33 Jahan Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning* (University of Chicago, 1994), 87. For the succeeding quotation from Ramazani, see p. 3.

34 For a glimpse of the way elegy may have been generally construed during MacLeish’s time, see George Norlin, “The Conventions of Pastoral Elegy” *The American Journal of Philology* 32.2 (1911): 294-312.


36 The key phrase from Fitzgerald’s novel is “the fresh, green breast of the new world,” in *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 180. Thanks to William Gleason for pointing out the allusion.


38 Alpers, 88-89.


44 Cronon, 160.

45 Ibid., 170. Cronon writes in the passages prior to the sentence I quote: “What is striking about all of these proposals [concerning the usefulness or irrelevance of the frontier thesis] is the extent to which they continue to rely on Turner for their direction and sense of synthesis. [...] However much we may understand his analytical shortcomings, we still turn to him for our rhetorical structure.”


49 Simone Weil, The Iliad or The Poem of Force, trans. James P. Holoka (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 44.

50 See Elaine Fatham, “Lament in the Growth and Eclipse of Roman Epic,” Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: the Poetics of Community.

51 For an extensive account on the ontological privilege given to the hand, see Jacques Derrida, On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005). On p. 152 Derrida writes: “At the top are the will to know and the willing subject—the effort. At the top of the senses of effort is this quasi-sense that is touch, the ultrasense. At the top of the organs of touch is the hand, the whole hand, its surface and fingers. ... Now, this hand is the hand of man, the human being as animal rationale. Humans are the only beings who have this hand at their disposal they alone can touch, in the strongest and strictest sense. Human beings touch more and touch better. The hand is properly human; touching is properly human: it is the same proposition.”

52 “Early the next morning,” Diaz writes in The True History, “many Caciques and the chiefs of Tabasco and the neighbouring towns arrived and paid great respect to us all, and they brought a present of gold, consisting of four diadems, and some gold lizards, and two [ornaments] like little dogs, and earrings and five ducks, and two masks with Indian faces and two gold soles for sandals, and some other things of value. I do not remember how much the things were worth; and they brought cloth, such as they make and wear, which was quilted stuff.” See Díaz, 126.
53 Quijano and Wallerstein, 553.

54 Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*, 40. In Turner’s account, Indian alterity—particularly as an object of banishment—is central to the transformations in the United States’ own history of colonial expansion. In the same essay, on p. 41, Turner goes on to write: “The effect of the Indian frontier as a consolidating agent in our history is important. ... The powers of the general council and the officers were, chiefly, the determination of peace and war with the Indians, the regulation of Indian trade, the purchase of Indian lands, and the creation and government of new settlements as a security against the Indians.”

55 Díaz, 120. The practice of rendering human fat to be used as a balm is also noted by Díaz’s chapter on the clashes in the Tlaxcálan frontier. See also Díaz, 230. MacLeish seems to have followed the pattern of this detail’s recurrence. The third book, with its line about larding an Indian, and the seventh book, with the reference to the fat in the conquistadors’ wounds, correspond respectively to Tabasco and Tlaxcálan episodes in Díaz.

56 Tate, 78.


59 MacLeish, *Reflections*, 73.

60 Tate, 78.


62 See, for example, Díaz, 126. In the truce in Tabasco, women’s bodies become a kind of currency. “This present, however,” Díaz writes, “was worth nothing in comparison with the twenty women that were given us, among them one very excellent woman called Doña Marina.” Marina was to become one of the key figures in the conquest; she enters MacLeish’s poem in the third book of *Conquistador*, 41-42.

63 Tate, 77.


66 MacLeish, “Manuscript for *Conquistador,*” 21.

68 MacLeish, *Reflections*, 73.

69 Fletcher, 44.

70 On the pervasiveness of the frontiersman in the twentieth-century, see Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998). It is likely that MacLeish was aware of the violence that came with—as Richard Slotkin writes—the “adaptation of nineteenth-century mythic traditions in twentieth-century mass culture.” Emphasis added; Slotkin, 211.

71 Beals, ““Mexico’s Bloodless Victory,””85.


74 Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 125-49. The quotation on the revolutionaries’ accession to US intervention is from Gobat, 143. See also Chapter 8, which studies the unintended consequence of Nicaraguan society’s militarization, the “blowback” caused by the National Guard. For an illuminating account of the fluid alliances not only between the peasants and Sandino’s revolutionary faction but also between the peasants, the National Guard, and the US Marines, see Michael J. Schroeder, “The Sandino Rebellion Revisited: Civil War, Imperialism, Popular Nationalism, and State Formation Muddied Up Together in the Segovias of Nicaragua, 1926-1934,” in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 208-68.


77 See also “U.S. Oil Firms Stick to Guns in Mexican Fight” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1 December 1926), 16. “All except two American oil companies operating in Mexico,” the article states, “have arrived at an agreement among themselves and, with the American state department, stand pat in their refusal to exchange their fee simple titles for fifty year concessions.”


83 Horn, 463.

84 Quoted in Schoultz, 280. Schoultz’s source is the *Congressional Record* (8 January 1927): 1275.

85 Quoted in Schoultz, 279. Schoultz adds, commenting on the passage: “All this filtered up to senior officials during the 1920s. Undersecretary of State Joseph Grew joked in his diary about ‘revolutions in Central America, the national sport,’” while Secretary of State Stimson noted in his diary that “this makes the seventh Latin-American revolution, six of them successful, since this administration took office. When I announced it at Cabinet there was a general laugh.”


87 Quijano and Wallerstein, “Americanity as a concept,” 551. This essay’s claims about the racialization are comparable to Bhabha’s account of the relations pertaining to formal colonialism, as Bhabha writes in “The Other Question,” 70: “The objective of the colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify te conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.”

88 MacLeish, *Reflections*, 273n1.


93 In 1912, desperate to quell the civil war spurred by Luis Mena’s challenge to his government, Adolfo Díaz officially requested US military invasion. The US marines stayed until 1925. See Gobat, 100-22.

94 De la Selva, 41.
Fletcher, 45.


Beals, Carleton. “Mexico’s Bloodless Victory” *The Nation* (26 January 1926): 85-86. For the quoted passage, see 85.

Bhabha, “The Other Question,” 72. Emphasis added.


Tate, “Not Fear of God,” 78.


Gregory, 655.

*Conquistador* appears to be citing “Ars Poetica” here, as well. Note the syntactical resemblance with the latter:

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—


Charles Wright, “Homage to What’s-His-Name,” *Sestets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 26. All lines quoted from the text are from the same page.

Waldo Frank. “America and the Artist.” *The New Republic* (12 June 1925), 100-01. This quotation, as well as the ones that follow, are from p. 100.
Waldo Frank. “Pilgrimage to Mexico.” *The New Republic* (1 July 1931), 183-84. The passage is from p. 184. Implicit in this review is the ideal of the American artist as a “religious artist” elaborated in “American and the Artist.”

“The fourth contribution of Americanity,” according to Quijano and Wallerstein, is “the deification and reification of newness, itself a derivative of the faith in science which is a pillar of modernity.” Quijano and Wallerstein, 551.


“Can a coal black man drive the Freedom Train?” asks Langston Hughes in 1947. Hughes’s poem refuses to take for granted the dream of democracy as something already fulfilled. For Hughes, democracy is akin to lyric montage. Its cuttings and creases, its articulations, relate a person’s singularity to the influx of the many, to predecessors familiar or unknown, to innumerable companions—bodies moving through words that make and unmake our desires, significations, the personae of skin, and the boundaries of collectivity. Being open to the many, democracy cannot be posited as a given. It is made, set before our sights as if already formed even as it alters, fraying and creasing in the process of friendly dialogue or fierce contention. It has been met—we know regrettably too well—with aspiration and nightmare.

When we contemplate democracy, we bring ourselves to face privation and tingling, just as when a lyric touches the otherness that is our own. Hughes calls that otherness:

A certain amount of nothing in a dream deferred. (MD 73)

Democracy, we might say with Hughes, names the gaps that belong to articulation. Brent Hayes Edwards reminds us that the term “articulation” is “a concept-metaphor that allows us to consider relations of ‘difference within unity,’ non-naturalizable patterns of linkage between strategically disparate societal elements.” There is, then, no one stable signification for democracy. To think of democracy beside the idea of articulation is to recognize its non-unity, which includes material practices realized now as well as the incalculable futurity to which Hughes’s work points. “The word democracy,” Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “seems to contain an
internal barrier to the possibility of a foundational principle.” The lack of closure in democracy reflects the multiplicity and infinite number of persons for which the ancient name stands. We can say that democracy has no ground except the people. And yet Nancy would hasten to add that the proper understanding of “the people” demands an honest look at ourselves as persons who have no shared transcendent destiny, and who therefore share in common the lack of an essence.

It is as a consequence of this fundamental “nothing,” however, that democracy can be articulated across different histories and through many kinds of people. In the United States, perhaps no one in the twentieth century has recognized democracy as a question of making and unmaking more than Harlem. As we learn from the burgeoning literature on the African American intellectual tradition, Harlem no longer refers solely to a famous New York neighborhood. We have to come invoke it by now as a metonym for writers and thinkers bequeathing us the idioms with which to analyze and contest the color line. We have come to link Harlem to the ways in which African American struggles have drawn strength from black internationalist movements. Confronting the thorny paradoxes of the “dream deferred,” in Hughes’s time as in ours, the name Harlem describes a node in a complex of cross-cultural energy transfers aimed at decolonization and an end to racism. By tapping into transnational networks, Harlem strengthened literary innovation alongside local assertions of citizenship, petitioning the state for the correction of grievance. The practice of diaspora that echoed from the world, via Harlem, thereby loosened the bind of national ideologies constraining African American expressions of positive freedom. It enabled acts of making and unmaking the meaning of democracy. For as Hughes suggests in a poem called “Refugee in America,” this linguistic semaphore left much to be desired:

There are words like Democracy
That almost make me cry.
If you had known what I knew
You would know why.
Democracy implies articulation as a process of jointure as well as gaps. “The name democracy covers ambiguities which are so considerable without declaring in which sense it is used,” writes Etienne Balibar. The ambiguities are considerable, as Balibar suggests, in that they provide a way to measure the extent to which democracy still remains grounded on the plural singularities that give collective life its sensible form. Persons comprise a people. They may speak their particular idioms, but they also may relate to each other across altogether different languages. Balibar continues: “In order to change the world one needs to interpret it: which means interpreting its (many) languages.” The meaning of democracy, hence, is constantly subject to the making and unmaking of collective ideals. Common ideals in turn determine the scope of personal actions and signification. To this process of democracy’s altering even within one nation, each and every person adds his or her voice. If the senses of democracy belong to the people as well as to persons, then there is in democracy a vital resistance to a finalized common being. Given such fluidity, hence, democracy calls always for translation.

This chapter studies a book of poems by Nicolás Guillén in the 1930s. *Cuba Libre* collects poems translated into English by Hughes and Benjamin Carruthers, published in 1948. Hughes began translating Guillén’s work in 1930, after the poets had met during Hughes’s trip to Havana. At that time, Guillén was already making his mark as a public intellectual and poet of Afrocubanismo. To Frank Guridy’s recollection, Afrocubanismo evolved from literary tertulías to become a full-fledged social movement. It constituted a kind of black public sphere, giving black Cubans the means to contest a nationalist myth of racial unity, and to demand access to Cuba’s profession and political fields of action. The collaboration between Hughes and Carruthers, then a Spanish professor at Howard University, began much later, circa 1944, when the two discovered they had been translating many of the same texts drawn from various poetry collections by Guillén. Faith Berry suggests that apart from translating Guillén, Hughes worked actively as a translator of Latin American texts throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Some of his
projects during this period were translations of Mexican and Cuban fiction, done in collaboration with the Cuban writer and diplomat José Antonio Fernández de Castro.10

I discuss *Cuba Libre*’s significance for enriching our understanding of liberal democracy. What *Cuba Libre* affirms, I argue, is democracy in translation. My reading is based on the premise that, as Alexandra Lianeri writes, “translation develops as both a product of social realities and a means to make sense of, endorse, or seek to transform these realities.” Translations of the democratic concept, Lianeri adds, “delimit the space in which social agents can understand, defend, justify, control, but also criticize historical social structures and relations, and pursue alternatives for them.”11

If democracy is a principle that does not exhaust its meaning and therefore demands constant translation, then what do Guillén’s poems convey about the ways in which democracy has been understood in the twentieth century? Is the way in which *Cuba Libre* translates Guillén significant to the dispensations of the democratic principle implicit in the original work? How do the original poems, as well as their translations, speak to our moment? In other words, how do they shed light on our contemporary understanding of democracy as a constant tension between competing ideals of collectivity? These are the questions I seek to answer in this chapter. In the pages that follow, I present a reading of *Cuba Libre* in conjunction with poems originally written by Hughes, as well as with some texts responding to debates regarding the democratic principle.

**The one, the many**

At first glance, my claim about *Cuba Libre* as “democracy in translation” may seem too broad. For the moment, an abbreviated historical review here at the outset justifies my claim. Louis A. Peréz, Jr., argues that since the nineteenth century, “ties of singular intimacy” have linked the United States with the Cuban people. Peréz has elaborated these connections initially in terms of linked protectionist economic and political interests. The concept of a free Cuba—or
“Cuba Libre,” a slogan born out of independence struggles against Spanish empire—was the consequence of José Martí’s profound engagement with the political culture of the United States in the nineteenth century. Peréz advances his inquiry to include cultural and identitarian formations in another work, documenting the process by which material as well as political goods and economic institutions traveled from the United States to Cuba. “As the pursuit of Cuba Libre stretched across decades and over generations,” Peréz writes, “susceptibility to North American ways deepened.” From the turn of the century to the middle of the twentieth century, “becoming Cuban” entailed the process of appropriating the signs of U.S. modernity and aligning them with Cuba’s national form. *Cuba Libre*, in this regard, may be read as an affirming version of “return to sender.”

The original texts, as well as the translations in *Cuba Libre*, take the path of poetics as a means to think through Cuban and Africanist claims on democracy’s significations. *Cuba Libre* translates democracy. But how exactly? At the heart of modern democracy, Chantal Mouffe argues, there is an irreconcilable conflict, an “agonistic pluralism” that reflects actual human relations in spite of the parameters laid out by social formations. In view of such potential divisiveness, “any social objectivity,” writes Mouffe writes, “has to show the traces of exclusion which governs its constitution.” The phrase “Cuba Libre” or “Free Cuba” is one name for a social objectivity. How does this name alter its significance upon being disseminated by Hughes and Carruthers’ translations? Does *Cuba Libre* help us locate not only the place of lyric in democratic questions, but more urgently, in black intellectual contributions to the divided meanings of the political? What does *Cuba Libre* teach us about the heterogeneity that democratic dispute must ensure? As my questions imply, the subsequent sections in this chapter act to parse the specific contours of my overall claim. My close-readings of *Cuba Libre* aim to deepen not only the understanding of Hughes’s work as a translator and the insights proffered by Guillén, but also seek to enhance the ongoing task of thinking through our democratic paradoxes.
Mine is not the first attempt to trace the relays between democracy and poetry. Angus Fletcher discerns in the spatial concerns of American lyric an aesthetic parallel to democratic social objectivity. In a book subtitled *Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination*, Fletcher traces a tradition of lyric making since Walt Whitman, in which poetic description acts to relate singular bodies to a heuristic image such as the horizon, or to relate non-momentous incidents to the long arc of diurnal rhythm. To read lyric description is to explore an environment in which both reader and poetic speaker, rather than contemplating their isolate freedom, explore the relational character of the human. American poems offer a kind of rehearsal space for democratic etiquette. They cultivate a keen “sense of scale.” They allow us to imagine bounded shapes—or models of coherence—that also open out to singular beings and test the limits of the concept “the one from the many,” *E pluribus unum*.

But who counts among the many? Who among the singularities that populate a nation rightfully belong to the demos? And how do persons relegated to the many, while being counted as minor to the *unum* of a national sum, interpret democracy? The poet from Harlem and the poet from Havana are both divided and joined by this common perplexity. This problem of course is not the exclusive burden of blacks in “Nuestra América.” It is urgent for anyone who seeks to move away from the violent logic harbored by old conceptions of the human. As a work of poetry, *Cuba Libre* articulates the question of distinguishing who counts and who does not just as a political dispute, but as an eidetic problem. It is the question of the *eidos*, as Allen Grossman gives us to understand that term, “the shine” of the universal, “by which the person is seen to be present.” Poetics rephrases the query above: Who counts as the rightful the human image? In reading the slogan *E pluribus unum* of democratic modernity, is it still proper to rely on one image for persons? Is the proper image of the human still that of the one?

“Struggles to claim universality for black people,” writes Nikhil Pal Singh, “have challenged not only particularism masquerading as a universalism, but a universalism distorted by its long monopolization against blacks.” In relation to Guillén and Hughes, I explore the
implications of Singh’s powerful statement for our understanding of lyric. What role do black poets of the Americas play in shaping the intelligibility of persons? The study of American lyric—and not the least, American democracy, would be incomplete if we neglect the intellectual province of black resistance against disqualification from the imaginary substance of the universal.

In *Color and Democracy*, W.E.B. Du Bois recalls to us the experience of black Americans, which is also the experience underpinning *Cuba Libre*’s gestation. Du Bois gestures to it by restating the goals articulated at a “Negro youth” conference sometime in 1945. These goals included “the unrestricted right of franchise,” and “the security of jobs with adequate pay and opportunity for advancement.” To remedy the scarcity implicit in these demands, Du Bois ponders the role that democratic institutions ought to play:

> If, on the other hand, the United States, seeing the movement of the stars in their courses, realizes that *American industry has got to be rationalized and controlled*, that profit-making must be made absolutely subordinate to the general will, then it can join with the new order in any economy carried on for the benefit of all the people.

Du Bois touches on the democratic paradox, weighing the freedom of all persons in sum as “the general will,” beside the liberty of private interests from the state. *Color and Democracy* is a part of a corpus often read warily as the work of a man who, struck by socialist rhetoric, has seen galaxies open. But a close-reading of the passage just quoted reveals the contrary. Du Bois points out the race problem as a threat to the United States’ self-fashioning as a world leader, a contention well under way even before America formally declared war against antisemitic powers in Europe and Japanese imperialism in Asia. There is little talk of communism—except perhaps if we pluck “general will” out of context. It is more judicious to read Du Bois here, as referring to a collective responsibility to refashion democracy from the unsavory aspects of its nineteenth-century development. Private interests per se are not harmful. It grows worrisome only when its sole focus is profit at the cost of the freedom shared by ordinary persons. Du Bois
here is suspicious toward the lingering traces of colonialism, as when the decisions pertaining to
the “general will” fall prey to white politics.

**Muted trumpet**

Historically, we place the writing and translation of the poems collected in *Cuba Libre*
after the golden age of Harlem, between the 1930s and 1940s. This period also spans the decade
just before the war against Hitler, and the decade overlapping with the start of Cold War culture.
Met with these temporal coordinates, we often take for granted the great difference between two
contemporaneous processes: the emergence of black social struggles in Cuba and the United
States, and on the other hand, the juridical enshrinement of white politics in antisemitic Europe.
This profound contrast seems to lend credence to the affirmations of democracy’s vaunted
resilience. For its most ardent champions, democracy offers a kind of wedge between these
parallel developments. And yet one scene familiar to African Americans begs more unflinching
recollection. In the 1949 collection *One-Way Ticket*, Hughes returns us to that moment:

Pull at the rope!
O, pull it high!
Let the white folks live
And the black boy die.

Pull it, boys,
With a bloody cry.
Let the black boy spin
While the white folks die.  

“Lynching Song,” whose first two stanzas I have just quoted, describes “a scene of subjection.” I
borrow the phrase from Saidiya Hartman, recalling the traumatic history out of which Hughes’s
questions of democracy emerge. Among Hartman’s many insights into that history is this lesson:
“Not only were the rights and privileges of white citizens undergirded by the subjection but,
moreover, that enjoyment in turn defined the meaning of subjection.” Enjoyment here refers to
the privileges afforded by property. Possession and self-ownership generate a composite
pleasure by themselves. But nineteenth-century American conceptions of freedom organize the juridical terms of liberty and property around a phenotypic social schema. It is racism, in other words, that allows the enjoyment of rights to codify the enjoyment derived from subjecting blacks to labor, suffering, and death. Hartman’s more crucial point is that the white provenance of liberalism scripts “innocent amusements,” even if they apparently bear no direct link to rituals of subjection.\textsuperscript{21} Subjection and the enjoyment of freedom, hence, form a mutually constitutive dynamic, shaping the liberal notion of the individual.

In light of Hartman’s account, “Lynching Song” is striking, given its enunciation in a putatively modern era of democracy. Hughes drags onto the scene of the modern the violent history of amusement. Specifically, what Hughes’s genius uncovers in the ritual of lynching is its logic of blackface minstrelsy.\textsuperscript{22} “Lynching Song” rhymes “bloody cry” with the fourth line, which announces the death of white proprietary claims on the ethical universal. Hughes trusts listeners to remember liberalism’s violent past as something intolerable. At the same time, by framing lynching with structures of song performance, Hughes paradoxically breaks what Hartman describes as the link between sadistic enjoyment and the claims of liberal subjectivity. “Lynching Song” is a form of counter-blackface.

The quotation from “Lynching Song,” in fact, bears the structure of blues lyrics. Rewritten as couplets, Hughes’s stanzas reveal what Michael Tate describes as the common blues formula. The blues couplet is organized semantically, not metrically; it observes no specific pattern of stressed syllables. Usually, a caesura divides each line into two sets of “predication,” thought unified in a sentence, clause, or prepositional phrase. Falling on the other side of the caesura, the second predication—faithful to the couplet structure—features rhyme, whereas the first predication has no rhyme requisite.\textsuperscript{23} Here is how Hughes’s text would look as blues stanzas:

\begin{verbatim}
Pull at the rope! O, pull it high!
Let the white folks live and the black boy die.
\end{verbatim}
Pull it, boys, with a bloody cry.
Let the black boy spin while the white folks die.

Hughes’s ear for song suffers no contradiction beside his ethical commitment. And his lyrics are nowhere more graced with listening as a kind of responsibility, than in their allusions to performance culture. “Song is a strong thing,” writes Hughes in his 1927 poem “Spirituals.”

Hughes’s profound interest in practices like the spiritual and the blues—religious and secular, respectively—suggests an intention to foreground performance as a way for African Americans to reclaim their enjoyment. In “Lynching Song” especially, Hughes channels the blues’ capacity to unmake prior meanings of liberal individualism. In their place, it strives to posit black freedom as the enabling condition by which we can create more freedom, consonant with everyone else’s unfinished democracy.

Another poem by Hughes, “Song for Billie Holiday,” figures poetic listening as a kind of responsibility. There Hughes responds to the history of black subjection implicit in “Strange Fruit,” the 1939 music track made famous by Holiday, and the perceptions enhanced but also altered by television. Restaging the classical encounter between poet and muse, “Song” is not an ode. It preserves an individual’s name, but does not enshrine celebrity. Holiday captivates the speaker with song and with the “dust in her eyes.” Implicitly, the speaker is just a television viewer, sorting out a perplexity with a nameless companion, perhaps no other than the reader.

Hughes writes:

What can purge my heart
But the song
Of the sadness?
What can purge my heart
Of the sadness
Of the song?

... 

Voice of muted trumpet;
Cold brass in warm air.

Bitter television blurred
By sound that shimmers—
Where?
Arnold Rampersad notes that the poem “was written after her first incarceration for possession of illicit drugs.” The comment is not inaccurate: narcotics police had been trailing the blues singer since 1945, eventually arresting her in Philadelphia in 1947. My sense, however, is that tethering Hughes’s poem to Holiday’s biography risks missing its allusive texture. The popularization of “Strange Fruit” may be read as a critique of blackface. The tension between authorship and performance in “Strange Fruit” marks a shift away from minstrelsy. In a biography about blues singers, Buzzy Jackson writes that lyricist and composer of the Lady Day classic was:

a white Jewish man. Given the dismal state of black civil rights in the late 1930s, however, only a white artist could expect to write a song like “Strange Fruit” without suffering serious consequences. Even though Holiday was black, the fact that a white person was responsible for the song’s composition made her performance easier to swallow for whites and certainly safer for Holiday, since the performance was an alliance between blacks and whites rather than simply an anti-white tirade.

Setting Jackson’s account beside “Song for Billie Holiday,” we seem to hear the bard of Harlem commenting on the tension between white authorial composition and black performance authorship. Recalling “the song of the sadness,” Hughes locates “the sadness of the song” not only in the memory of lynching but also in the history of black performance. The chiastic phrasing is significant. “Strange Fruit” is no longer minstrelsy proper, Hughes quietly suggests, because of its collaborative wellspring. And yet while it testifies to black-white integration in the music industry, Hughes takes care not to assimilate it into a consensus myth, which appears to be glossed as “bitter television.”

Holiday’s voice and Hughes’s ekphrastic reply sing openly of pain so as to call for a more vital enjoyment of hard-earned freedom. This imaginary dialogue between the singer and the poet draws the reader into the kind of imagination capable of thinking “sound that shimmers.” The phrase, to my ear, is a metaphor of democracy as a problem of imagining. Hughes responds to that sound by asking at the poem’s ending: “Where?” The query aptly comes after a
compulsive refrain: not any sadness but “the sadness,” not any song but “the song.” New phrases interrupt the pattern, opening the ear to music without clear origin: “muted trumpet,” a voice, “cold brass.” Then the query appears. The effect is striking, for it echoes but also completes the break away from a prior sequence of repetition. I do not wish to belabor the point. Instead I turn to “Beale Street” as a final example on Hughes’s poetics of listening, from his 1947 *Fields of Wonder*:

The dream is vague  
And all confused  
With dice and women  
And jazz and booze.

The dream is vague  
Without a name  
Yet warm and wavering  
And sharp as flame.29

**Banal democracy**

In Anglophone poetry, according to Paul Bauschatz, rhyme is based on phonological similarity; it is not based chiefly on phonetic repetition.30 This way of telling what counts or not as rhyme suggests rhyme’s tension with syntax. Not only does rhyme make the rhythm within a line apparent. It also bounds the segmentation of a sequence of lines. It allows us to register more clearly the boundaries set up by the stresses within a line, and to mark the end of the line itself. John Hollander underlines this feature of rhyme upon which critics do not often comment:

A rhyme can stop a line, or it can tell  
The sentence to go on and do its best  
Till, at the next line’s end, it comes to rest.31

Rhyme disrupts or punctuates the “flow” of syntax. Recently, Susan Stewart has also written about rhyme’s bounding and binding properties. Rhyme takes attention away from semantic progression by emphasizing sound texture.32 Hearing rhyme via phonology lets us perceive the
way Hughes plays the blues. The free verse lineation of Hughes is deceptive. Hughes divides the blues line into different lines, while holding on to the oral folk template designed to take up the space provided for the singing voice in blues music.

Blues knowledge may account for the probing tone of “Beale Street.” In the first stanza, “confused” and “booze” do not yield a blues rhyme. The former emends the slight fricative in “confuse” with the d consonant, foreclosing symmetry with “booze.” What pairs the first stanza’s terminal words is simply assonance. Interestingly, it is in second stanza where the blues arises. In the second stanza, the movement of sound encodes an insight into the shaping of ideals. “Beale Street” conveys the disappointment of democratic aspiration, but it is also an affirmation of a continual search. The title alludes to blues performance itself, whose lines repeat and rhymes punctuate, but whose surprising turn comes at the terminus. The blues singer wins a kind of release into a new phrase, paradoxically by fulfilling the demands of a vernacular compulsion. Hughes’s deferred rhyming mimics the way an ideal informs purposive action, which in turn recalibrates that ideal vis-à-vis the trial of experience. As the blues arises in the second stanza, rhyme opens a space of choosing between the immediate banality and something “without a name.” The arrival of rhyme, “sharp as flame,” marks the upsurge of feeling as well as an anti-mystical sense of “the dream deferred.”

Beale Street in Memphis seems an unlikely setting for Hughes to dream of democracy. The “confused” perceiver is met with disappointment in the first stanza. The second stanza revises the first with a renewal of bearings. The act of surveying and judging turns into that of searching, as the clearer blues articulation occurs alongside clarification of the dream—more accurately, with the search for a proper name. “Poetry by contrast to theory,” Allen Grossman writes, “is a form of constructed ignorance.” In “Beale Street,” hence, it is possible to read not only democratic longing but also a comment on lyric action. Hughes presents “the dream deferred” as a challenge to the imagination. Recently Grossman has continued his meditation on poetry's knowing-unknowing previously found in “Summa Lyrica.” In True-Love, he writes:
At any given moment in history, poetry puts language as the instrument or tool of most general application in the service of human community precisely at the point of the absence, failure, or desuetude of other means, including religion, medicine, philosophy, rationality, or speech itself.  

The crux of Grossman’s important study is the concept of the *eidos*, the human image. Persons carry no essential blueprint; there is no inherently human substance that founds the person. What manifests the human is eidetic construction. The techniques for manifesting the image, in political representation as well as in poetry, are concerned to found intelligibility and value—in sum, the idea of the person. In our economy of images, we can choose to circulate the image as widely as possible, thus promoting recognition of the greatest number of persons. But we can also subject the image to scarcity, thus creating “disqualifications” and unfreedom. Grossman is right to contend, hence, that the “problems of race and class are like poetic problems.”

Hughes’s poems constitute an eidetic practice staked beyond those images complicit with racial disqualifications. Thinking through constructed ignorance, imagination resorts to poetry when received images of the human no longer suffice to grant intelligibility. What Hughes’s poems yield, then, is a testing ground for imagining democracy. They suggest that in the din of contention, including voices that do not champion democracy, there seem to reside other idioms yet to be grasped, responsive to new aspirations. Powerful though democracy is as an eidetic concept, its capacity to grant intelligibility to all kinds of persons appears to Hughes woefully inadequate. In “Refugee in America,” Hughes remarks:

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There are words like Democracy
That almost make me cry.
If you had known what I knew
You would know why.
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Hughes’s lyrics compete with—but also borrow from—a familiar language for shoring up the *eidos*. For the bard of Harlem, the eidetic resource has not lived up to its name, which promises capacious forms of valuing as many persons as possible. Democracy inspires ardor in America.
But for the certain kinds of American it also has left much to be desired. We ought to sum up our discussion so far. Across three poetry collections, from 1947 to 1951, we have seen Hughes engage the disputed custody over an eidetic concept.

What sort of language did this disputatious state of affairs produce, then, among the deemed custodians of the concept? Three of Hughes’s contemporaries help us glimpse a certain montage of banal democracy. It is not enough, however, merely to place side by side the disparate statements on democracy. Thus, although I focus on these three, my reading dives into other texts which are not contemporaneous with them or with Hughes. Before turning my attention to *Cuba Libre* and the way translation relates to democratic practice, I devote some time in the two subsequent sections to the conflict between the formalization of collective powers, and the singularities that make up a community. Democracy is out of joint. Its idealization of the people as a unity often does not coincide with anarchic variety implied in valuing as many persons as possible. The two figures to which democracy answers countervail each other.

**Joint traces**

Our first sample from a large discursive quarry, which space allows us to read only selectively, is an essay by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Written in 1948, “Democracy; What Does It Mean?” opens the concept to past and future signification. To dispel any vagueness, Schlesinger anchors American democracy in national experience. He places equal emphasis on the freedom of the *demos* and on individual liberty. For the moment, I withhold discussion on these key terms. It is enough to note that Schlesinger’s view of history guards against relegating American democracy to dream-work:

> I share our national mistrust of essences and absolutes. I fear that a definition of democracy in metaphysical terms would produce only a verbal formula with doubtful relevance to the actualities of America’s past or of the world’s future. I would rephrase the question—not “What do we mean when we say...
Indexing national memory gives Schlesinger occasion to cite the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. He then identifies them with struggles fought “to make sure that the government of the people, by the people, for the people would not perish.” America’s past yields a record of striving to make these freedoms cohere around the power of a communal body. This meaning is not bound to “a verbal formula,” however. Democracy’s semantic unfolding does not foreclose other usages outside the temporal zones of American nationalism. The Cold War oppositions have not yet hypostatized at the time of Schlesinger’s writing, allowing him to say:

> If we remain true to our conceptions of democracy, we must support those throughout the world who share our belief in democratic government and in individual freedom, whatever the nature of their economic institutions. It means that we must understand clearly that the defense of democracy and political freedom is no monopoly of that select but small group which still lives under the capitalist system.

Schlesinger’s hospitality to “the world’s future” is commendable. Resisting the use of “formula” and “metaphysical terms,” he avoids treading into American exceptionalist rhetoric. His words stand in glaring contrast to Henry Luce’s writing earlier in the same decade. In 1941 Luce recasts the question “whose Democracy?” into a kind of formula: “Is there no sort of understandable program?” he writes, “A program which would be clearly good for America?” The program Luce seeks to propose, as it turns out, is one that aligns American democracy with the “right to go with our ships and ocean-going airplanes where we wish, when we wish and as we wish.” This suturing of democratic idealism and the claim to America’s exceptional status is well known. For the purpose of this chapter, I offer only marginal glance at Luce’s text:

> The vision of American as the principal guarantor of the freedom of the seas, the vision of America as the dynamic leader of world trade, has within it the possibilities of such enormous human progress as to stagger the imagination. Let us not be staggered by it.
Luce’s imperialist rhetoric speaks to the wartime policy that Franklin Roosevelt promoted with the heading “arsenal of democracy.” The phrase, according to historian David M. Kennedy, describes a military strategy dependent “not on masses of manpower but on maximum possible firepower, mechanization, and mobility.” The result, unfortunately, is the massive loss in civilian lives at the target zones. We may draw from Kennedy the insight that Luce’s vision of democracy is founded specifically a kind of death-work. The “arsenal of democracy” entails biopolitical governance. It metes out “hyperpower” upon as many un-American persons as possible with the least cost to the champions of freedom, who are also the living laborers of war. In this light, Hughes’s anti-war poems emerge not only as protests against the “arsenal of democracy.” It also questions black participation in the war effort. Similarly, Guillén ponders the cost of human life in “Soldado, Aprende a Tirar,” a poem addressing as brothers the fascist troops deployed in Ethiopia. Hughes and Carruthers translate the poem as follows:

Abajo estoy contigo,        Soldier, I’m down here
Soldado amigo.               with you, friend,
Abajo, codo con codo,        shoulder to shoulder,
sobre el lodo.               down here with you in the mud.
Para abajo, no,              Don’t shoot down,
que allí estoy yo (OP 154)    I’m here! (CW 105)

In naming finitude, “elbow to elbow” rhyming with the word “mud” in the Spanish text, “Soldier, Learn to Shoot” refuses to hold the lines of battle. Its significance for democratic claims emerges when we read it beside the joint traces that survive military conflict.

In a 1949 essay called “Overloaded Democracy,” we find the third resource (after Luce and Schlesinger) for our montage on democratic dispute. Gerald Johnson writes: “Democracy has no more to do with lynching than steam radiators have, or chewing gum, or be-bop.” Johnson’s topicality sets the reader up for a “proper” definition of democracy, as against populist understanding. Key to Johnson’s text is an attempt to align state policy with liberal
individualism, neglecting the basis of state power in the collective sphere of persons. “Above all,” Johnson writes:

American democracy is not, never was, and never can be a guarantor of equality. On the contrary, it is a guarantor of essential inequality, for its function is to release the talents with which men are endowed; and the moment talents are allowed full play men become unequal.

The emphasis on individual liberty is reassuring only up to a point. We can agree with Johnson that the freedom of persons comprising the political form is indeed a matter of letting individual “talent” have “full play.” This concept gains clearer articulation in Hannah Arendt, writing about a decade later: “Is it not true that the smaller the space occupied by the political the larger the domain left to freedom?” The task of politics, for Arendt, is to secure the field of action. It is to uphold the public thing less as a realm of state power than as the space of appearance. Political action consists in protecting that space of appearance against incorporation either into the state or into individual will. The political is at work whenever individuals freely enter the space of appearance to build a world or to display what Arendt calls “virtuosity.”

**Freedom’s dissonance**

Schlesinger, Luce, and Johnson each strive to clarify as an eidetic political concept. Juxtaposing these three, we move closer to the dissonances reverberating across Hughes’s work. Democracy is not just a problem of deciding between valorizing popular will and limiting it. This dichotomy in fact misses the point, as per Arendt: “If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.” But let us suppose for a moment that freedom coincides with liberal sovereignty, and that collective power is based on the idea that the individual is “sovereign over himself, his talents, and his property” and, moreover, “is at once the basis of limited government.” If so, the kinds of sovereignty Johnson and Luce champion become
contiguous, differing only in the direction of their application. Luce’s mode of foreign relations is that kind of paternalism about which T.S. Eliot grumbles in his 1943 *Four Quartets*:

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The whole earth is our hospital
Endowed by the ruined millionaire,
Wherein, if we do well, we shall
Die of the absolute paternal care
That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.49
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The colonial presumption Eliot laments extends to our era, as when, according to Gayatri Spivak, “the rogue state is disciplined by fear and pressure—the stick—with the promise of economic partnership—the carrot.”50 This model of foreign relations is evident in Luce, for whom promoting American freedom means driving over the sovereignty of other nations. In the case of Johnson, the sentimental attachment to “paternal care” is not demonstrable. What is clear, however, is his attempt to disjoin equality from a “collective entity within which [the] power sharing [among individuals] is organized and upon which it is exercised.”51 By taking equality off the to-do list of democratic governance, Johnson weakens the sovereignty of Americans themselves.

“Overloaded Democracy” is deeply ambivalent toward the *demos*. Johnson sincerely decries “lynching, anti-Semitism, and the persecution of individuals.” What is problematic here is not Johnson’s benevolence toward victims of rights abuse. It is, rather, his attempt to rescind the concept linked to the equal sharing of inalienable rights. The laws that promote “equality of opportunity” aggrieve Johnson.52 Following the liberal path, we suddenly find ourselves guarding the entry into the field of action. This point signals the fracture. But as an attempt to diminish the scope of collective will, “Overloaded Democracy” pairs up with Luce’s foreign policy, translated for domestic ends. Johnson’s opposition to equality overturns his own notion of democracy, whose purpose, in his liberal formulation, is to remove artificial barriers.
Johnson is laudable where, like Arendt and Schlesinger, he seeks to limit state power over the *individual* field of action. In a hypothetical state with the broadest room for the political, we can imagine a multiplicity of tributaries or portals linking public and private domains. Securing both openings and boundaries, however, does not happen on its own. It entails the sanctioned use of force. Part of state obligation, while restraining its ubiquitous power, is to protect the field wherein anyone or everyone would wish to appear and take part in world-making. According to Johnson, however, “democracy is not a system of law-enforcement. It is simply adhesion to the theory that the social order is best served by removal of artificial barrier from the path of character and ability.”

“Overloaded Democracy” guards against the state’s tendency to hinder performance and talent. But Johnson contradicts himself where, in the name of this same virtuosity, he deems it just to limit the entry into the field of political action. The allergic reaction to equality exposes Johnson’s somewhat aristocratic claim on democratic freedom: “There *are,*” Johnson stresses, “inferior men.” The feudal notion of decorum re-enters modernity, quite prepared to disqualify those persons who cannot be numbered among the specialists in the arts of governance. Johnson writes:

> At the ballot box, yes. Before a court of law, yes. But voting and litigation are tiny fractions of the total activity of a man ... and the honest workman wants a better man than he is in the great offices of state—*better, that is to say, in brains, in ability, and perhaps in basic integrity.*

Jacques Rancière offers much help in countering this sort of thinking. Rancière argues that the sabotage of equality is not simply as a way to make room for free play. Rather, it is an attempt to fix “social ranks on the model of animal species.” The lack of dissension which equality guarantees turns the field into a game preserve, rearranged by territorial marking and savage competition. Democratic civility then prevails only in name, attached to “that government of wise men which is alone fit to administer the unharmonious harmony of
proliferating focuses of satisfaction.” In such a world, there are those who have a part and those who have none. But hijacking democracy with such neat division does little to tame the properly agonistic relations among persons or groups, each with interests that are at variance. It simply transforms their disputatious cacophony into a contest of might, “in brains, in ability, and perhaps in basic integrity.”

What then becomes of democracy? The outcomes projected by imagination fall prey to an illusory realism. Instead of making room for possibility, instead of letting the focuses of satisfaction multiply our efforts toward making the world more shareable, the world itself becomes scarce. We limit the goals we set. We relinquish to cynicism the desirability of a world satisfying the greatest number of persons. The means for acting on the possibility of world-sharing also become scarce. Displaying virtuosity ceases to be the main political act. What takes over is the need to tear apart the coherencies set up by social zoologists. And if desperate struggles ensue, these conflicts can be used to justify even more severe constraints on the field of action. It is this situation—as my chapters on Brazil and El Salvador show—that plagues nations whose state officials obsess over the repression of peoples striving for equality.

“Overloaded Democracy” is blind to grim scenarios. Johnson’s optimism allows him to believe that two of democracy’s formal mechanisms for equality are all that we need: equal representation in the courtroom of grievance, and one vote per person for choosing specialists whose “basic integrity” we simply must assume as being “perhaps better” that ours. Unfortunately, for those who have seem to have no part in state or economic institutions, the game preserve cannot but look rigged—given the limited number of openings for actors to exhibit not only their talents but also their ability to secure the space of appearance for themselves. Hughes’s query is entirely reasonable: “Can a coal black man drive the Freedom Train?” The skepticism of black enlightenment is surely more preferable to Johnson’s nonchalance in severing equality from democracy. Hughes shifts the gears of our imagination,
from amateur zoology to the matter of work, mobility, and the opportunity to take part in leadership.

**Race and place**

Hughes’s poems are often acts of staging democratic inquiry—as in the famous poem “Harlem.” The poem opens with the question: “What happens to a dream deferred?” Towards the ending, it morphs this query into worried speculation over the inequalities created by scarcity in the field of action. “Maybe,” says Hughes, the dream “just sags.” Then the poem ends formally where it seemed to begin: “Or does it explode?” Hughes traces a formal circle while preventing the closure of thought. This kind of going around the same anxiety seems to parody the sequestration of equality under the pretext of asserting individual freedoms. Once more, I wish to stress that the misstep which liberalism tends to make is not its reliance on rights discourse. Rather, it is the notion that rights somehow can remain inalienable without the civic mechanisms for curtailing—or in the least, managing—the monopolies that breed inequality. *Cuba Libre* illuminates the problem vividly with a poem such as “Cane.” Guillén writes:

```
El negro
junto al cañaveral.

El yanqui
sobre el cañaveral.

La tierra
bajo el cañaveral.

¡Sangre que se nos vos! (OP 115)
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Negro
in the cane fields

White man
above the cane fields.

Earth
beneath the cane fields.

Blood
that flows from us. (CW 89)
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Translating “Cane” permits Hughes to remind fellow Americans about the hazards of selective liberalism. What is worth contemplating here is not so much Guillén’s protest against the fixing of rank, as the gauging of inequity beyond his use of racial terms. Spatial thinking is the caliper for such measurement. Shifting prepositions trace the action of relating self to the
world. At stake in the stark contrasts is the allotment of personhood through the degree of immersion in the material space involving human action. Much depends on whether or not a person ties his or her being “together with” or “in” the fields, as well as “on” or “above” the cane. This tension between distance and proximity to the object of labor either grants or reduces the visibility of persons, as distinct from “la tierra,” the earth instrumentalized.

The words of “Cane” well may fit a postcard. The description is tellingly abbreviated. It almost leaves out the tropic heat but for its intense segmentation. Barely any thought completes itself; we read phrases instead of sentences. The describing resists its own action, as if to cope mimetically with the immersion in matter, woody grass, soil, and metal resisting human hands—all of which may yield taut musculature but may not cultivate the kind of strength founded on minimizing the risk of somatic or psychical fraying. Poetic thinking here is faithful to something incommensurable to thought. Focusing on the spatiality of persons and objects, Guillén allows us to note a word ironically withheld by the act of naming. That word is work.

As Elaine Scarry writes, work is that “piece of language used—in many different languages—at once as a near synonym for pain, and as a near synonym for created object.” Guillén contrasts work as pain to the work of mediation, seeking to accompany both the being “above” the cane and the being “in” the fields. The lyric abstains from characterizing the specific action associated with these spatial positions. Such reticence allows us to note the incommensurable senses of work. Left out and consequently untranslatable, work names the social relation put to task in organizing the vista framed by Guillén’s anti-postcard. It lets us perceive not just the different ways of intending work’s meanings. It also exposes the act of looking, defining the places of work and the valuation implied in such placement.

“Cane” comments implicitly, hence, on the work of imagining the way social mediations work. It unearths the materially constituted operations that construct identity differences. Work is both named and unnamed by the degrees of somatic immersion the poem describes. The attention to place also represents the imagination at its task, relating selves to each other and to
the world through the inequities of class and race. Another poem in *Cuba Libre*, “Wash Woman,” takes into account the place of gender in identity-mediation. Guillén describes a woman at laundry, breaking into song. Called “Lavandera” in the original, the poem implicitly contrasts the idea of cleanliness and the effects of work on the laboring body:

```
Lavando, al sol,
bajo el disparo del mediodía,
la negra muerde su canción de mamey.

Olor y sudor de la axila;
en el cordel de la voz
la ropa blanca está tendida
junto con la canción.  
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Under the explosive sun
of the bright noon-day
washing,
a black woman
bites her song of *mamey*.

Odor and sweat of the arm pits:
and on the line of her singing,
strung along
while clothes hang
with her song. (*CW*, 86)
```

Song arises alongside the chore. The implicit contrast between work and play makes apparent the tension between the perceptibility and concealment of gendered labor. The apparent inconsistency between labor and song no longer points to another time when these two spheres met in team-coordinated tasks. Guillén names the woman strictly in relation to her labor. The “gunshot of noon,” or “el disparo del mediodía,” implies the pain of erasure paired ironically with the individual’s excessive visibility. Countering such cancellation is Guillén’s move to limit the ocular. “Lavandera” records the action via other senses, noting labor’s residue. It is as if the poem and the singer it portrays were anticipating the personal aesthetic of Cornel West: “I must unapologetically reveal my broken life as a thing of beauty,” West writes. “I try to give heart to intellect by being true to the funk of living.” Such vivid sensing tries to undo habitual perception. A wash woman often appears solely through the thing that she accomplishes in the domestic realm. Consequently, our awareness of her place in routine living is elusive, much like our fleeting willingness to engage her subjectivity. The laborer’s corporeal being, however, is not all there is to the person.
“Lavandera” restrains visual sensing. Olfaction and kinaesthesia come to the fore along with audition. The figure of song is as important as the other kinds of image. Although the fantasy of encounter Guillén stages does not cross beyond lyric overhearing, the song we do manage to hear nonetheless bears witness to the wash woman’s singularity. The figural song in lyric is no other than rhyme. In the first stanza, Guillén also makes use of internal rhyme: *lavando* and *disparo*, *muerde* and *mamey*; *olor* and *sudor*. End-rhyme is prominent in the second stanza, where phonemic repetition grows percussive in the third line, and where the aural outweighs the visual. The word *axila* or “armpit” couples with *tendida*, derived from *tender*, “to hang.” Manifesting end-rhyme while recalling white clothes or linens hanging, Guillén strings out the vowel. The second stanza tangles our listening with a kind of hyper-assonance, swathing us briefly in the aural fabric of its third line.

In Hughes’s translation, this lyric sensing is not enacted mainly through rhyme. There is neither metrical nor rhythmic regularity in Hughes’s translation. And yet knowing Hughes’s attunement to the blues couplet, we cannot but notice the way the enjambment after *noon-day* in the first stanza rhymes with *maméy*. Scansion in fact indicates that “noon-day” works as a kind of formal hinge; it divides a set of four beats and a set of five, respectively, before and after the enjambment. The sum of nine beats not only makes up the first stanza, but the second, as well. This feature is too much of a coincidence. In the other stanza, the hinge is strictly not part of a rhyme but something similar: “singing” and “song” form a lexical couple. Using the word “singing,” instead of translating “la voz” as “the voice,” generates five beats in the first stanza, followed by a set of four. The result is a kind of sonic mirror, reversing the distribution of the same number of beats.

Is this formal grouping still part of the blues? The blues template disappears, ravished perhaps by Guillén’s kinaesthetic rhyming. “Wash Woman” matches similar effects with the movement of syntax, rearranging the line sequence of Guillén’s first three images to comment implicitly on the idea of cancellation. Hughes’s lineation is particularly suspenseful in the third
verse, which courts misreading but for the comma after “washing.”

The ominous undertone of the syntax alerts us to an ambiguity in the last line: does the woman rip out into song, or does her singing break? The next stanza, of course, sorts out the ambiguity. The woman sweats, working as the heat hits harder. And she keeps on singing.

Hughes seems alert to the unwanted scenario of erasure when he leaves one word untranslated. It is reasonable to bet on two reasons why Hughes leaves the name of a fruit alone. The Cuban word strikes up a rhyme. Paired with noon-day, the vowel gives the first stanza’s last line a slightly skewed type of feminine rhyme.

Second, maméy simply has no counterpart north of the tropic lands managed once by United Fruit. Intriguingly, Cuban folklore links the maméy to the 1762 British invasion on Havana. As one travel historian writes: “When things get tough, one can say ‘Que ha llegado la hora de los mameyes’ (literally, the time of the mameyes has come).” By trying to hold “Wash Woman” to Guillén’s chief technique, Hughes deforms the host language with something less translatable than exotic produce. Here then is an instance of lyric going through a “trial of the foreign,” a trial in which the source text yields its unconscious force through translation. The untranslated word in Hughes’s translation intercepts, as well as enables, new lyric effects that tie both the source text and its host in English to a kernel of wounded national memory.

**History rhymes**

Poems like “Cane” and “Wash Woman,” brief though they may be, present to us democracy’s overload. Like the other poems discussed further in this chapter, they are portraits of subjects whose role in political decision are often doubted or entirely overlooked. Guillén brings to our ken the voices of those who have no part. In Cuba, a large part of their social invisibility was the white paternalism of nationalist rhetoric. Independence from Spain did not seal the gap presented by a diverse population whose relations, formed in colonial history, were mediated by race. Cuba sought to seal the rift between the universalism based on white politics
and the inclusiveness promised by the ideology of Cuba Libre itself. “Equality,” Alejandro de la Fuente writes, “was vaguely defined in formal terms and tied to questions of merit, virtue, patriotism, and education.” It was assumed, however, that Cubans of color owed their liberation to white folks, sustaining the notion that “the republic could be unequal and ‘for all’ at the same time.”

It was only toward the middle of twentieth century when the ideology of “free Cuba” began to have any purchase for black Cubans. Two important factors beg our consideration here. One factor was the failure of the state to ‘whiten’ the demographic constituency of Cuba, in spite of its attempts to increase the influx of European immigrants. Without the pretext of having a white majority, the national question returned, exposing democracy anew to its open-endedness. The second factor was the rise of Afrocubanism. Black Cubans began to overturn the notion of equality as “a white concession.” They began to assert their rightful place, bolstered by the historical fact that their “participation in the wars of independence had made la patria possible.”

The high tide of Afrocubanist dissent takes us back to North American dispute noted earlier, concerning the problematic claims of the laissez-faire liberalism. Referring to the inequities of the American polity, Johnson writes: “What can democracy do about that? The answer is, nothing, except recognize it.” Johnson’s attitude seems baffling. It conveys, at once, defeatism and smug contentment. The perplexity fades when we reconsider the other semantic traces of liberalism—those significations which Saidiya Hartman, Nikhil Pal Singh, and other critics have pondered in the evolution of modern democracy. Whatever the failings of the laissez-faire usage may be, however, there has not been a fixed or formulaic way to inhabit the tensions of liberal democracy.

In principle, what energizes liberal democracy is “the space of a paradox whose effect is to impede both total closure and total dissemination.” Chantal Mouffe, author of the sentence just quoted, refers here not only to the stabilization of democracy’s meaning but also of the
people’s identity. Liberal democracy cuts both ways. It goes against the grain of a valorized totality, and against the tendency to refuse shared struggles in a community defined by individualism. The disagreement between the two aspects of liberal democracy itself, as Mouffe suggests, is the source of vitality for this modern principle.

In 1948 Schlesinger gives us a preview of Mouffe’s insight. “When the question is surveyed in the light of history,” Schlesinger writes, “we see the indispensability to our conception of democracy of this double faith in the freedom of the individual and the democratic control of political and economic life.” I would add that this “double faith” is consonant with Hughes’s poetic experiments. As mentioned earlier, Hughes deletes the word “democracy” and writes “liberty” in what Rampersad considers the definitive version of “Refugee in America.” The poem’s different versions put the democratic paradox to the test, presenting readers a decision involving two names for the freedom of persons.

Hughes’s hesitation over which word to enshrine and mourn is an attempt to name a collective substance. Both “liberty” and “democracy” keep at bay, however, what poetic indecision pries open. Hughes peers through these words, into the abyssal texture of an imagined national unity. “The objective of unanimity and homogeneity,” Mouffe writes, “is always revealed as fictitious and based on acts of exclusion.” What poetic vision affords, which in its own way Guillén’s Cuba Libre also grants, is exposure at that limit which black persons recognize, unable to see themselves in the identity implicitly valorized by the American universal.

The first half of the twentieth century saw alongside the propagation of American power the kind of human classifications with which colonialism is well equipped. Hughes’s trip to Havana in the 1930s is a case in point. Frank Guridy recounts how black travelers repeatedly faced “structures of racialization that pervaded every corner of the transportation industry from Havana through the Jim Crow South to the southeastern United States.” For this reason, Hughes initially failed to obtain tickets for passage to Cuba. Steamship companies excused
themseleves by stating that Cuba itself issued the ban against “negroes, American citizens or otherwise.” In Cuba, according to Peréz, Hughes was refused entrance to a cabaret and “a beach leased to U.S. tourist operations.” De la Fuente’s account on club membership sheds light on this incident. When a site was marked “truly private,” discrimination became legal.

Among the black intellectuals of this period, no one more cogently defined the contours of colonialism, as well as the racial subordinations that it came with, than W.E.B. Du Bois. In his 1945 *Color and Democracy*, Du Bois brings to our attention two aspects of an occluded history: first, the economic foundations of capitalism in the transition from old to new imperialism; and second, the class and racial lines linking old and new colonialisms. It was the concept of “racial inferiority,” according to Du Bois, which allowed the “government and economic organization” to build “a tremendous financial structure.” Moreover, the manner in which America subordinated raced subjects mirrored the exclusions found in colonial territories. “The colonial system is a part of the battle between capital and labor in the modern economy,” writes Du Bois. Organized around race and class, subjections occur in the most mundane aspects of living—in terms of work, domicile, mobility, sexual relations, and association.

A decade earlier, in 1935, John Dewey stated in similar terms the limits of the liberal conception, in spite of its emphasis on rights. According to Dewey, laissez-faire liberalism furnishes “the intellectual system of apologetics for the existing economic regime, which [liberals] strangely, it would seem ironically, uphold as a regime of individual liberty for all.” As if to preempt Johnson, Dewey challenges liberals to think about institutional means for promoting liberty in material ways. Dewey notes that the legal protections cherished by laissez-faire liberals, more often than not, operate as “a justification of the brutalities and inequities of the existing order.”

These contrasts between Dewey and Du Bois, on the one hand, and Luce and Johnson, on the other, alert us to the character of their era. Coupled with recent historiography on U.S. foreign relations with Cuba, the composite portrait formed reveals a time when the democratic
principle seemed exhausted by state-sanctioned racisms. It depicts a time when liberals paid lip service to the *demos*, only to hold everyone to the white universal. The fluid significations of liberal democracy, however, already should have given clue to the fact that neither persons nor people possess a determinable, finalized essence.

**Translating democracy**

At the outset, this chapter has suggested two main lines of argument. First, translation belongs to democracy, and second, *Cuba Libre* offers us a way to think of democracy in translation. From the foregoing discussion on “Cane” and “Wash Woman,” it is proper to ask: what does democracy translate via the poetry of Guillén? The sense of democracy which Guillén interprets—and which his translators in Harlem in turn convey to America—is the meaning of equality.

When equality seems to become a foreign word, democracy necessitates translation. To go back to a previous example, Johnson’s understanding of democracy seeks to repress the fact that persons are *not* inferior simply because they have no estate to show, no “heritage” accumulated after years and hours have roughened their dark hands. When equality is deemed superfluous, the inequality is naturalized. Johnson, for instance, states that democracy “permits the superior man to build up a relative invulnerability to attack which the less able cannot hope to attain.”

He looks askance at the persons of the *demos*, who seem threatening in their clamor for equality. The language of equality works to de-naturalize the line drawn between superiors and inferiors. There is nothing natural about this boundary; it is politically constituted. To speak of equality is to render visible the changeability of eidetic processes and, hence, of the human image.

At this juncture, it seems right to query where in *Cuba Libre* the egalitarian principle is expressed. The task at hand is less about reading how a poem thematizes equality, than about observing how the virtuosity of poetic action makes the principle manifest. One poem by Guillén
adeptly showcases the *formal* character of lyric’s free action: “Palabras en El Tropico,”
translated as “Words in the Tropics.”81 The poem articulates an apostrophe—“Tropico, con tu luz
viva,” Tropics with your living light. It displays “vocation” par excellence, as Jonathan Culler
would put it: that kind of vocation which “calls in order to be calling, to dramatize its calling, to
summon images of its power so as to establish its identity as poetical and prophetic voice.”82
Even in translation, however, the theme announced by apostrophe seems to resist to the
signifying power that words promise. There are no words *in* the tropics except what the poem
“Palabras” itself grants to the place.

The poem appears mainly to describe a region where certain kinds of produce grow.
Guillén names them: mangoes, sugar cane, coconuts. And yet the tropic’s words, the utterance of
the personified addressee, never materialize. The title suggests a purely formal conceit—poetry
as environment, as per Fletcher—until this possibility opens: might Guillén be withholding
certain words from the legible surface? Is one of them the word *persons*? The tropics’ intelligible
form, as well as Guillén’s lyric formalism, is realized only when the object of apostrophe—“yo te
saludo, Trópico!”—yields the human image. It is possible to trace the unsaid between these
lines:

| Te veo las manos rudas | I see you with rough hands |
| partír bárbaramente las semillas | boldly sowing seeds |
| y halar de ellas el árbol opulento, | and from them tearing opulent trees: |
| árbol recién nacido, pero apto | new-born, yet ready |
| para echar a correr por entre | to break and run through |
| los bosques clamorosos! (OP 121) | the clamorous woods! (CW 111) |

The synecdoche interrupts the pure-apostrophic sense of the verse. That is to say, the poem’s
calling does not quite resonate formally until the object gives ways to the subject. The human
other interrupts the formalism of apostrophic speech, barely unheralded, and grants the place
apostrophized its intelligibility: “Te veo las manos rudas,” “I see you with rough hands.”
Through the human image, the being addressed ceases to be a being incapable of reply. More
important, what interrupts the generalization of tropical *costumbrismo* is this metonym of work, “rough hands,” the work done by one who “barbarically” scatters seeds, having shaped the tropics with ploughshares, with the image evoked by versification.

Is another word perhaps *equality*? No matter the meekness of his or her livelihood, the worker remains a being for whom Guillén’s words find their proper destination. The worker’s labor shapes the space and imbues it with meaning. Voices resonate in the text, as the Virgilian allusion indicates (“the clamorous woods”). Capable of receiving another’s words, workers are persons. Persons, not the names for endemic vegetal species, are the true referent of Guillén’s heading. Lyric action interrupts its own principle to suggest, as one name for eidetic construction, the equality that remains unnamed, founded on the sharing of words that do not appear in spite of poetic articulation. The poem grows all the more suggestive of that other principle, the parity of speakers, where the poem ends:

```
te debo, oh Trópico,
este entusiasmo niño
de correr en la pista
de tu profundo cinturón lleno
deriendo sobre las montañas y las nubes,
miéntras un cielo marítimo
se destroza en interminables olas
de estrellas a mis pies! (OP 121)
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```
To you, O tropics, I owe
this childish enthusiasm
for racing around the track
of your mighty sash of yellow roses,
laughing on mountains and on clouds,
while the sea-blue sky at my feet
dashes itself to pieces
in unending waves of stars. (CW 111)
```

Laborers in the fields do not necessarily become poets when they enjoy moments of *otium*. But in this difference between poetic action and farm work, in the difference created by the sharing of a language divided and inscribed within each of these singular modes of *subjectivity*, there obtains the parity that Guillén seeks out to prove. “Palabras” proves it at that point in which apostrophe gives way to description and speech is ceded to laughter. The terminal image is akin to the translation effects described by Wai Chi Dimock: “Unfamiliar words spring up on the horizon and slowly filter in, changing the shape of the common tongue and recombining it on a different terrain.”

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Reading Guillén, we may add to Dimock’s insight that the mutability of speaking and reception is also what defamiliarizes even those words endemic to a particular topos. In “Palabras,” common themes—equality, persons, the love of country—hover and recede through the images that realize terminal form. Apostrophe abandons itself for the world, as if to echo another American poet: “Earth’s the right place for love,” writes Robert Frost in 1916. As Guillén’s poem touches its formal edge, the act of calling in order to call also reaches its limit and breaks off from the purely semantic. The human is now nothing more, nothing less, than the resonance of a subjective power to vocalize, dispersed, propagating a vista likewise shattered and flown.

**True-love’s equal**

Why should human finitude and the common world speak to the claims of equality? Guillén suggests their relevance in “Words in the Tropics” and the other poems discussed here, particularly, “Cane.” In the two poems named, the terminal edge occurs right where the lyric opens to an “Earth” whose oneness signals leave-taking and division. Just as “blood flows from us,” denuded by labor, so the maritime heaven parts from its unity “in endless waves of stars at my feet.” There is only one scarce world, resistant to manifold ways of bringing about “the shine” of the person, as Grossman puts it. Human value consists in the equality of worth; a person is his or her own value. This view opposes equality to substitution and equivalence on our limitedly habitable ground. But paradoxically, in consequence of its scarcity, there can be no world that is not at once divided, in parity, among the many. Collective being interrupts singular beings and vice-versa.

Equality may be a barbaric word. It may be the commonest of translations alien to liberal democracy. But is democracy not the better for it? In *Cuba Libre*, the basic principle guiding poetic action is the truth of the person held up as the highest value. As Grossman puts it, the principle is “true-love.” The forms of true-love arise from, but also found, institutions whose
inner consistency is as mutable or contingent as any human image. Guillén’s poems show how lyric speaks directly to liberal democracy as an eidetic problem, because our images of the human are built on the implicit knowledge of our primordial exposure or nudity. Contemplating this kind of knowing-unknowing is the poem “Madrigal,” which is perhaps the most intimate piece featured in *Cuba Libre*:

De tus manos gotean las uñas, en un manojo de diez uvas moradas.

Your fingernails drip from your hands in a bunch of ten purple grapes.

Piel, carne de tronco quemado, que cuando naufraga en el espejo, ahúma las algas tímidas del fondo. (*OP* 108)

Your skin, flesh of a burned tree trunk drowned in the depths of your mirror gives back smokily the timid sea-weed of your being. (*CW* 123-24)

Save for the etymological femininity of *madrigal*, the addressee’s gender seems ambiguous. Racial articulation bears a light touch until we reach the second stanza. Initially looking at fingers as “purple grapes,” the speaker caresses “a burned tree trunk,” then plunges into an imaginary retrieval of the other’s interiority. Skin makes the “you” manifest. But skin also appears to conceal the being desired. The other’s inner sea harbors a “shipwreck,” as the adjective *naufraga* suggests, that no mirror apparently can fathom. This tension is repeated in the translation, giving us words and voices not altogether traceable to the original—as the phrase “gives back” illustrates. If the original speaker were a seafarer implicitly pining for the mother, apart from the present addressee, that speaker resurfaces in Hughes’s translation somewhat as a philosopher, waxing ontological in a woman’s boudoir.

The addressee’s subjective interiority, we trust, is manifest to the speaker. “Madrigal” thrives on coquettish tact. Describing a caress, Guillén refuses to press on, or to figure the other with more imagistic sentences than required. It is enough, it seems, to invoke one of lyric’s most
archaic themes, that of love. Guillén’s archaism, moreover, gestures toward myth. The mirror and sea, respectively, are metonymic of Yemayá and Ochún, sister deities in Santería. And yet neither we nor the lover nor the addressee has total access to the mythic surplus of the non-mythic other. The origin of the “you” eludes mimesis. Praise in “Madrigal” moves by way of the other’s superficialities, revealing but also making secret the other’s enigma. Guillén figures the inner substance of the subject as a kind of remainder.

The abyss into which the singular being recedes is a function of desire. It is not willed or fabricated by the lover. “Madrigal” suspends the other in mythic time—then interrupts this myth, touching the finite (“flesh of a burned tree trunk”). The image of a mirror in the second stanza signals the touch of the figural. It occasions release and submersion. Hughes here is wise to follow the linear syntax of the original. At the limit of touching neither self nor other, Guillén describes neither a fantasy nor a reality of inwardness. There is only the unsaid and the said, the other's silence and lyric speech. Tellingly, Hughes chooses to conclude the poem with “your being” instead of a faceless image. Trusting in the translator's irretrievably secret choices, we might ask: why this alteration?

As a translator, Hughes implicitly understands that, while “Madrigal” is indeed what it declares itself to be—celebrating the singular value of the beloved—it also links the true-love relation to other singularities. From the first stanza’s tactile body to the fluid imagery in the second, translation spans an interval. In that traversal, though only the lover speaks, Guillén and Hughes seem to inscribe other voices—those of a seafarer, a philosopher, lyric ancestors, myth-tellers, deities, past lovers, mothers. These singularities, finite and often unknown, disturb the mythic depth into which the human face recedes. The speaker and addressee are bound to the play of language and withholding, finite surface and faceless depth. Communion in “Madrigal” recalls an underwater landscape, strewn with living and drowned things.
The problem of equality in *Cuba Libre* is a problem of valuation. True-love’s equal is the incommensurable value of the person, the truth of all human images. But behind this truth, there is nothing to see, or at least, nothing that the concept of the universal either grants or withholds. “Valuation seems precisely the act of conferring (or depriving) existence and also ‘truth,’” writes Grossman.\(^91\) Interestingly, this statement of poetics is deeply resonant with Singh, whose intellectual history chronicles the black critique of democracy. We return to Singh’s statement quoted at the start of this chapter: “Struggles to claim universality for black people have challenged,” Singh writes, “a universalism distorted by its long monopolization against blacks.”\(^92\)

The black intellectual tradition retrieves two figures from the depths of liberal-democratic faith. First, it brings to the fore the way the way the forms of valuing in liberal democracy have not been rigorously given their due sense. Referring to class and race at once, W.E. Du Bois has called this problem “the problem of color line” in capitalist culture.\(^93\) The color line makes world-sharing and personhoods scarce. Second, the black tradition follows the color line as it cuts across national borders so as to challenge it. It re-frames the subordination and racialization of labor as colonialism redux. *Cuba Libre* writes to Harlem what the black American knows as intimately as the Afrocubano, namely, that racial exclusions justified by liberal democracy rest on claims about the truth and value of persons, the claims founded on nothing too certain.

**Against scarcity**

“The authority of true-love, as of poetry, is always,” Grossman states, “a generative contingency—both origin and consequent presence—of institutions that true-love founds and that then bear it as an alien logic across time.”\(^94\) This statement is astonishing in two respects. Grossman suggests that any claim about the true-love of persons (truth and valuing at once), including racial classification, gains authority or traction only because it stems from our
fundamental need to ground the identity of persons in something intelligible. This gloss stresses the “generative” aspect of true-love. Racisms are not simple misrecognitions; they are attempts to make sense of a world, to build it, even if one of their ironic consequences is more scarcity in what is already limited ground.

Second, there is the aspect of “contingency.” Because humans are finite, neither the communities nor the institutions that persons maintain are immutable. Subject to wear and dying, the images of persons and of collectivities are in constant need of re-founding. Against the imposed certitude and scarcity of the human image in racial regimes, Grossman implies that any challenge to the institutions found wanting—instututions unable to value as many persons as possible—begins with a challenge waged in terms of true-love. It begins by exposing anew the secret of institutions: the making and unmaking of images.

Poetry is more than adequate to wage spiritual combat, given its association, as Grossman writes, “with the prehistoric on the ground of its specific difference—archaism—from of the kinds of language.” The archaism of poetry has to with “not with communication, but with orientation in the human world.” In describing what we find in poems as a “fundamental legislative inscription” establishing differences as well as coherence, Grossman restates the idea of the institutional knowledge that poetry supplies. Founding a human world is one of poetry’s venerable offices, performed at the limit and therefore irreducible to the institutions with which it is contiguous. Because institutions depend on eidetic construction, any medium defining whomever we choose either to recognize or not—or any form of knowledge, for that matter—can be contested through poetic means.

The relevance of Grossman’s insight to Cuba Libre, I trust, is clear. Poetic speech generates institutional cohesion, as much as it is mediated by them. But it also conserves the memory of our primordial exposure to non-meaning, the abyss that our eidetic forms conceal. By articulating true-love speech, Cuba Libre keeps open the paradoxical space of liberal democracy. It leads us to recognize, at the limits of the institutional languages Hughes and
Guillén confront: *E pluribus unum*, the singular-plural image of the people shared by persons who have nothing in common but the shared lack of a common substance. Disseminated via Harlem, Guillién’s poetry speaks to the whole that is not whole, in the United States as well as in Cuba.

Liberal democracy is a refusal of homogenous collectivity as well as of the domination of one particularism over others. According to Rancière, democracy consists in giving persons whose inferiority we take for granted the space in which to disown such putative lowliness, to prove their worth in parity with ours. The space for dissent, which it is democracy’s obligation to secure, makes room for the proof "that those demanding equality have a perfect right to it, that they can participate in a common world where they can prove ... the necessity for the other to recognize it." If democracy is what grants persons access to the world they do not rule but over which they possess an inalienable claim, then equality adequately translates democracy.

Democracy promotes equality when it resists subjecting the elements of the *demos* to equivalence or substitutability. The emergence of a person signals an extrusion from the common lack to which the need for community bears witness. It is the extrusion of an action wrested from lack as well as from the imposition of an identitarian unity.

The break from the image of the whole, which is also an exposure to indeterminacy, allows us to affirm the singularity of persons. The act of staking a claim on the shared world, like birth and death, repels substitution on account of the ways in which persons interrupt not only that world but also the image with which human indeterminacy is concealed. What arises in this ebb and flow of the universal *eidos*, the making and unmaking of beings and of their world, is unique. It happens each time a person appears. In light of these singularities, the demand for equality imposes itself on us, every time a person negotiates his or her image, translating from the *eidos* of the whole and performing a rightful share in its construction or alteration.
When experts like Johnson try to found a democracy without equality, what results is something unintelligible. Selective democracy operates with the logic of scarce manifestation. The situation it creates installs a vicious circle with serious material consequences not just for the construction of images but for mundane life itself. It blocks the multiple forms of access to the universal, driving more deeply “the noncongruence of economic and political privilege in liberal society,” as Grossman writes. Shedding light on class and race as poetic problems, Grossman continues on the same page:

The politically “equal” are not humanly equal as long as they are economically oppressed. The parallel of image life and economic life calls attention to the intimacy of eidetic value and scarcity and to the high degree of likelihood that material wealth and eidetic privilege are versions of the same substantial value.\(^97\)

This insight gives us occasion to return briefly to “Overloaded Democracy,” read against the grain alongside the other texts on democracy we have constellated around it. By withholding equality, Johnson engages a chiasmic reversal of a verbal formula posited across the Atlantic. If for Johnson equality sounds like a foreign word, Carl Schmitt asserts that liberalism is the interloper: “The equality of all persons as persons is not democracy but a certain kind of liberalism,” writes Carl Schmitt, “not a state form but an individualistic-humanitarian ethic.”\(^98\)

For Schmitt, liberalism prevents unity. As Mouffe contends, his notion of equality is based on a prerequisite that “citizens must partake of a common substance.”\(^99\) When a nation is unable to assimilate diverse civic identities into a unitary image, unstable relations between persons who rule and persons governed persist. On the other hand, when the people are homogenous, equality would appear to have better odds of survival. The liberal conception of equality, hence, threatens democracy. It prevents a clear division between those who belong and those who must be excluded. The egalitarian liberalism, in other words, hinders the founding the people as a principle of totality that Schmitt believes is needed for democratic rule. Erring on the side liberalism, democracy is likely to fail. The solution that may be inferred is a secularized
version of ritual banishing. Outside the *demos* is where the inassimilable elements should be. Inequality remains out there, and appears no longer to exist in here, where the people have the same identity.

**Dispensations**

Clearly, the “equality” Schmitt proposes does not deserve its name. It thrives on scarcity, abstracted from a series of demarcations and banishments. Writing on nineteenth-century translations of classical democracy in England and the United States, Alexandra Lianeri traces this sort abstraction to white mythology. Liberal democracy posited the universal human, putatively stripped of particular traits. The “individual,” however, was not the abstraction it was imputed to be. It was subject to implicit criteria. It demanded the “ensuing qualification of these individuals,” writes Lianeri,

> as cultured, educated, Western European, white, middle-class, and male subjects. What followed was the ability of these subjects to judge political matters “better” than the rest of the people, have a rationally justified political authority, and impose... “liberty, equality, and estate”... as the indisputable “democratic” values of humanity.¹⁰³

This view of liberal democracy provides almost no exit from eidetic scarcity. In the case of Schmitt, the eradication of inequality is something akin to the formula “out of sight, out of mind.” It refuses to acknowledge the unlivable character of nations closed off from the world, as of persons reified into a single brand of self-production. When democracy is assimilated into one image, instead of being parceled out, violent erasures promptly dovetail exclusionary processes. The problem lies not simply in the idealization of collective form, but rather in neglecting the common lack to which the eidetic construction of persons is a response: the impossibility of an essence.

Here we may forward Grossman’s insight to Jean-Luc Nancy as well as Rancière. In democracy, according to Nancy, the “aspiration to envelop and sweep up all forms declares its
truth only when it opens itself up to their multiple developments and allows inexhaustible
diversity to proliferate.” Democratic truth means the valuation of as many persons as possible,
in parity. We may also forward this conversation to Rancière, providing us with a counter-
statement to Schmitt: “The *demos* might well be nothing but the movement whereby the
multitude tears itself away from the weighty destiny which seeks to drag it,” writes Rancière,
“into the image of the whole.” Working to manifest the principle of the *demos*, singular
existences interrupt the hypostatic conception of the whole. It is this dispersal of the image—
wrought especially by persons with no part in the management of collectivity—that enables
democracy to remain true to its opening.

In an earlier section of this chapter, I have suggested that, read with our memory of the
1930s and the 1940s, *Cuba Libre* speaks to the racism’s forking paths in the Americas and in
Europe. It would be naïve now to continue giving sole credit to the governments of the Americas
for avoiding the death-work across the Atlantic during that period. The homogenization of the
people gives racism unlimited access to state forms of regulating the *demos*. The alternative
view—which Nancy, Rancière, Mouffe, and Grossman each demonstrate—argues for a persistent
need to interrogate the fictions of unity. Community, if it is to retain the meaning of democracy,
must question the idea of the common. Such questioning begins with an honest confrontation
with the truth of incompleteness—in particular, the indeterminacy underpinning concepts of
totality and human essence. What follows from neglecting this incompleteness? As we know, the
rest is history. On too many occasions, when the human image is abstracted, purified, and
sequestered or monopolized, the *eidos* goes up in flames.

At this juncture, it is apt to consider that white benevolence by itself cannot explain why
the relentless exclusion of blacks, as well as of other persons of color, did not lead to conditions
of genocide in the Americas. In history of hemispheric relations, the mindset which Eliot
euphemistically described as “absolute paternal care” was fairly widespread. Lest there be any
misunderstanding here, my intention is *not* to state that Americans took it upon themselves to

invigorate the dying colonial mindset. Instead, I mean to suggest that U.S. designs on the world have never been separable from the long process by which European institutions changed, and were changed by, the American hemisphere. As we have seen Du Bois argue, colonialism in the Americas is the basis of our modernity. The period in which blacks parsed through democracy’s language coincides with the period in which America exerted power in the world, playing host to the racisms developed under prior conquests.

The black contribution to combating the fascist uses of the democratic principle is too often downplayed. It seems remarkable that state-sanction violence against people of color did not occur in the Americas, particularly when we hark back to Dewey and Du Bois, as well as to De la Fuente and Singh. Countervailing the monopolization of liberal democracy, the voices we find in Hughes and Guillén’s respective oeuvres seem altogether crucial: Hughes’s famous “I, too, sing America” as well as the wash woman’s voice, ripping into song in Guillén. A clearer view of democracy’s torsions in the twentieth century brings to the fore the active role played by rough hands.

As Brent Hayes Edwards suggests however, these tensions have not arisen as purely homegrown. They have entailed detours, paradoxically, outside the body politic whose character black citizens seek to reconstitute. Crossing boundaries has allowed them to redefine the meaning of persons. It is the mode of black contestation itself, as Edwards writes: “Black radicalism is an internationalization.” The need to transform the internal consistency of a nation necessitates transnational engagement. The disfranchised take transnational paths in order to bolster their claims within their respective communities. Writing on Guillén and Hughes, Guridy contends that “diasporic linkages” not only helped reshaped their nations’ conversations about citizenship. The linkages formed by black actors continued to alter, generating “a new set of politicized relationships that drew upon the networks” created by transnational citizenship.
It is no exaggeration, then, to say that the resilience of white mythology’s hold on the identity of the people could not be stabilized, precisely because of black struggles and their intellectual articulation of civic ideals. White mythology was interrupted precisely in the name of democracy, with meanings that could not be settled once and for all—or more accurately, with translations that provoked constant engagement and questioning. In *Cuba Libre*, what Guillén and his translators in Harlem express is the truth of singular persons in tension with the identity of the *demos*. This process of contesting liberalism—in its own terms but also in excess of their meanings—renewed democracy as an eidetic resource, during the most trying times of the democratic principle.

This view should not be understated: transnational black struggles ensured democracy’s survival in the American hemisphere. They did so, not simply by letting the meaning of the *demos* undergo trial of the foreign that translation presents. Rather, as generating more exacting forms of translating democracy, transnational black struggles put liberal democracy to the test of true-love.

**The final profile**

The democratic paradox, according to Mouffe, is ineradicable. “Modern democracy’s specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order.” Rather than stabilize democracy by fixing consensus, it seems more practicable to conserve the space of paradox in which persons and communities are bound together, and through which they might articulate the freedom to disjoin themselves when necessary. As earlier shown, Rancière thinks of the democratic principle in the same way, as an attempt to disperse the image of the whole so as to secure not only the access to what Arendt calls “the field of action” but also the space for dissent. For Rancière, the key concept is equality, understood as the capacity of persons or groups, who are not particularly favored by social arrangements, to break away from fixed hierarchies. The claims of equality are attempts
to prove that persons who have not part in governance—the poor, in particular—have as much right as any to define the field of action.\textsuperscript{107}

Challenging the color line, working toward its abolishment, is an excellent case in point. What cuts through the color line is precisely the joint trace between liberal and egalitarian claims on democracy. To echo Mouffe, this joint trace defines “the space of a paradox whose effect is to impede both total closure and total dissemination.”\textsuperscript{108} It is a dispute that runs through the discursive massif of modern democracy from the nineteenth century to the present. In terms of national spaces, both the color line and the struggle to abolish it, in the name of liberal democracy, exceed political borders. And like the forces of tectonic shift, both consist in mutually contradicting efforts to render the world intelligible, and to allocate the human \textit{eidos} more widely—or negatively, to limit subjectivity only to a few, and to render the world more scarce than it already is.

Translating equality, \textit{Cuba Libre} also interprets democracy in terms of hemispheric citizenship. The idea of citizenship in excess of state boundaries seems to make no sense. At first glance, it would appear that only the state has the power to grant persons the privilege of citizenship as well as to demand the responsibility of citizens. Foregrounding the latter field of action, the term “hemispheric citizenship” usefully describes black struggles in the United States and in Cuba.\textsuperscript{109} Comparative insights and political experimentation come to re-define the meaning of political action and the fundamental relations between governments and their peoples. The excursion into other kinds of national experience exposes the fictions of state homogeneity qua fictions. This recognition of the community as \textit{imagined}, as the result of eidetic construction, resets the levers of thought. Viewing their respective collectivities through the detour across other peoples, the \textit{demos} of persons confronts anew the proper incompletion of community.

Before closing this chapter, I wish to take one more focused look at \textit{Cuba Libre} by reading a 1931 poem called “Llegada.” Hughes and Carruthers translate this long poem as
“Arrival.” The collaborative nature of the translation repeats the poem’s thematic bearings:
“Here we are,” or as the original puts it, “Aquí estamos!” The poem describes collective being in the second stanza as a group walking “in file.” The translators alter “nuestras filas” somewhat by saying, “our numbers,” implicitly begging the question of the body but also of division, the body count. The roads is “too narrow” for this overloaded figure of democracy. It is not easy to determine in advance the specific character of the “we” in the poem. Reading the poem or speaking with Guillén, we find it is too early to tell whether or not the order of the crowd and its sheer size are a threat to the city the “we” is about to enter.

In the fourth stanza, Guillén offers what is perhaps the most quotable passage: “We bring our mark”—here Hughes and Carruthers break the line—“to the final profile of America.” The excess of definition in the second predication is significant, even in the Spanish version whose lineation is cut differently: “Traemos,” Guillén says, dividing the sentence into two lines, “nuestro rasgo al perfil definitivo de América.” The referent of proper name is largely a matter of situating the act of reading, either in the United States or in other parts of the hemisphere. But another substantive noun concerns me here.

“Arrival” evokes the founding of community. It sets forth boundaries. We may read the word perfil in Spanish as referring to “the whole of peculiar features that characterize something or someone.” If that is the case, then the entire phrase “el perfil definitivo,” represents an overemphasis. Because of the other motifs in the poem—motifs in stanzas I am about to quote shortly, the modifier keeps at bay the other meanings of the common noun: “the definitive profile of America.” The modifier, already in surplus, acts to withdraw the substantive noun’s remaining strata. But the effect is paradoxical because “Arrival,” being a poem, invites interpretive excess.

The substantive perfil names both an incompletion and an ornament. The posture of someone in profile renders the features of something or someone partially, only half the figure and not the whole. Alternatively, perfil names ornamentation, delicately traced at the edge of an
object or a human shape. Guillén intuits the conflicting senses implicit in the substantive noun, whose contradictions do not quite disappear even when the translators of “Arrival” try to stabilize the ambiguity of its peculiar marking. In a strictly aesthetic sense, the “final profile of America” suggests the darkening of an outline. The tracing of America demands a gesture of excess, necessitating withdrawal from—as well as the division and halving—of the whole. At its very founding, Guillén traces the limits of community. “Arrival” defines an edge where the putative essence fades in the act of foregrounding its definitive traits. The first stanza is already suggestive of this paradox:

¡Aquí estamos!
La palabra nos viene húmeda de los bosques,
y un sol enérgico nos amanece entre las venas.
El puño es fuerte y tiene el remo. (OP 103)

Here we are!
Humid from the forests come our words
and the strong sun rises in our veins.
Our fists are strong, they guide the oars. (CW 108)

The opening imagery is striking because, like the phrase “perfil definitivo,” it carries the reader into a paradoxical movement. The gestures of beginning here are simultaneously acts of departure. The plural speaker reflexively points to a movement of words drawn from somewhere else. In the source text, the words in fact are not so much borne by the speaker as they are borne to the “we.” The translators attribute possession to the “we,” rather than to the forest.

In the second line, the speaker promptly declares the place from which its speech takes leave: “La palabra nos viene húmeda de los bosques,” “Humid from the forests come our words.” Though the line lends itself well to primitivism, Guillén also seems to echo Virgil. The allusion is more palpable in the 1934 poem “Words in the Tropics.” The two texts form an unwitting pair, as if one anticipated the other. Reversing the chronology of their publication, however, we trace a passage from apostrophic speech to another sort of articulation. “Arrival” preempts “the clamorous woods” in “Palabras en el Trópico.” The translators’ decision to render the singular “el remo” as “the oars”—and likewise, “la palabra” as “our words”—exacerbates an originary
ambiguity. Understood in relation to ownership or appropriation, the limit establishing the beginning of the voice and the arrival of the “we” is at once at issue.

Although the sun-infused bodies seem to bear a mystical valence, Guillén describes them as being caught up in human exertion. The *eidos*, the shine of personhood, divides itself into the components of linguistic as well as somatic articulation. To recall Edwards, articulation refers to the “non-naturalizable patterns of linkage between strategically disparate societal elements.” At the very outset of “Arrival,” the gesture of founding a community immediately gives way to the disparate and incomplete. “Arrival” begins at the limit where the “we” stands exposed. A subsequent stanza is even more telling:

Bajo el sol nuestra piel sudorosa reflejará los rostros húmedos de los vencidos, y en la noche, mientras los astros ardan en la punta de nuestras llamas, nuestra risa madrugará sobre los ríos y los pájaros. (OP 103)

Under the sun our sweaty skins will reflect the damp faces of the conquered, and, while stars burn on tongues of flame, through the night our laughter dawns above the rivers and the birds. (CW 108)

The words that evoke the coming community straightway break from the mythic. The poem offers a vision of community that is made by the very unmaking of a unity. The world divides the “we” into which the poem carries and scatters the speaker’s words. In this regard, “Arrival” also translates democracy from the future in which we are reading this lyric of democracy. Ours is a moment in which Nancy can demand, rightly, “a thinking of democracy that follows the impossibility of incarnating the essence of democracy and of representing its figure, alongside the necessity of keeping ‘democratically’ open this impossibility.”

“Arrival” ends by presenting a dispensation of democracy that is also a dispersal. The boundary is set on a place described as fluid, exposing the “we.” The collective emerges at the limit, at the site where the non-human impinges on the human. Several contact zones of democracy in translation are brought to the fore all at once: the one and the many, making and
unmaking, the identity of the whole and the vitality of division, advent and leave-taking, the infinite deferral of totality and the parity of worth divided among finite persons. The plural speaker affirms unnamed human capacities in relation to spaces which only the constructed ignorance of lyric can gather up for thought, capacious as rivers, stars, and the endless dark. Framed by the democratic ethos, the question of dwelling no longer resides in the discourse of communion.

Notes


4 Jean-Luc Nancy, “Finite and Infinite Democracy,” Democracy in What State, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 65-66. Nancy’s essay in this brief but pithy collection is particularly worth noting in its attempt to provide an alternative to “consensus,” a term that has become the by-word of current liberalism. By asking us to recognize the anarchic principle of “the people” as the bearers of democracy’s meaning—that is, its absence of signifying closure—Nancy demonstrates that democracy may have something more in common with unrealized communality than models built on consensus. Cf. Wendy Brown in the same book, 45-46. Brown writes that the term democracy “carries a simple and purely political claim that the people rule themselves, that the whole rather than a part or an Other is politically sovereign. In this regard, democracy is an unfinished principle.”

5 Edwards, op. cit., 111 and 187-225; Jahan Ramazani, A Transnational Poetics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 122-140; and Anita Patterson, Race, American Literature and Transnational Modernisms (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 93-129. These scholars seem to take up the gauntlet thrown by George Hutchinson in The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard, 1995). Though early in his text Hutchinson acknowledges “details of cultural border-crossings” via Harlem (2), he also challenges theorists of literary cross-culture with the statement that “premature attempts to deconstruct or ‘transcend’ national boundaries too easily become self-deceptive gestures by which national ideologies take on unacknowledged forms” (447). We find in Ramazani, Edwards, and Patterson a counter-argument to Hutchinson. These other scholars demonstrate the necessity of Harlem’s turn to transnational routes in order to unmake and re-fashion the meaning of democracy in a world that in Hughes’s lifetime, was being
eclipsed by U.S. economic and military influence. The kind of transnationalism cultivated in Harlem, to say the least, cleared the space for recognizing and critiquing American colonialist tendencies morphing into current globalized forms. I will return to this matter when, further in this chapter, I discuss *Cuba Libre*’s discursive relation to the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, the debates on democracy, and U.S. diplomatic history after the Second World War. For a recent assessment on the afterlives of colonialism, see the endnote—a bibliographic essay disguised as a note—in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 516-20n57. For an historiographic account that ties Harlem to internationalist activism, see Penny von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 45-65 and 70-95.

6 Arnold Rampersad notes that this second stanza, the 1943 version published in the *Saturday Evening Post* offers the fifth line, with “democracy” as the line-ending subsequently replaced in 1947 with the word “liberty.” See *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 655. I have chosen to present a composite of the 1943 version while retaining the rest of the poem appearing in *Fields of Wonder* 105. I do so with some wrenching, not merely to be in keeping with my theme, but historiographically, to point to the larger debate taking place during the years when translations for *Cuba Libre* were being prepared.


13 Louis A. Peréz, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 64. Peréz argues that the process of borrowing religious, governmental, pedagogical, and quotidian social modalities (11-13) continued well into the 1950s. These appropriations included not only value systems and class hierarchies (52-54), but also the taste in sports—chiefly, baseball (78-81)—as signs of modernity.

14 Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). The key concepts drawn from Fletcher inform my foray into the issues raised by other thinkers and by Hughes and Guillén in this chapter. But I do not quote them explicitly. For readers interested in Fletcher’s ideas on the person or individual in relation to the many, see 4-9. On a “sense of scale,” and its relevance to the social relation defining the (heroic) individual and the community, see respectively 54-56 and 137-39. Regarding diurnal knowledge, 90-93; and finally, on coherence and the open, see 236-38. The other relevant study I have in mind is Robert Penn Warren’s *Democracy and Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,
1975). Warren does not seek to clarify the connection between the disputes of liberal democracy, though his work is steeped in the liberal concept of the individual (xvi). Rather, impinged somewhat by the Cold War anxiety over totalitarianism, he protests the obsolescence of individualism (3-7, 29-30, 58-59) as reflected in contemporaneous poetic texts. He contemplates tension between the collective and the individual, and mourns the decline of individualism in American poetry (32-33, 72-74).

15 Allen Grossman, True-love: Essays on Poetry and Valuing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 86. Grossman points out the fact that this “manifestational skin of the human other” arises from construction. These terms suggest not only that the truth and value of the human entail acts of manifestation, but also that the institutions which promote the worth of persons are also manifestational technologies, even if poetry itself is irreducible to institutional power. See the subsequent note on true-love below.


18 Ibid., 98. Emphasis added. The statement is comparable to another liberal argument a decade prior: "Organized society," Dewey writes, “must use its powers to establish the conditions under which the mass of individuals can possess actual as distinct from merely legal liberty." In Liberalism and Social Action, 35.


20 Langston Hughes, One-Way Ticket (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949). Lynching is described by W.E.B Du Bois in 1947 as a kind of “mob violence which results in the death of a man whose guilt has not been judicially ascertained.” This violence, Du Bois notes, often goes unpunished. Du Bois also extends the concept as a metaphor for unjust legal procedures: “the judicial lynchings—the rapid, unfair trial and railroading of men to prison or to the gallows.” In Du Bois, “Race Relations in the United States 1917-1947” Phylon 9.3 (1948): 235-36.


23 Michael Taft, The Blues Lyric Formula (New York: Routledge, 2006), 33-36. We often identify the blues stanza as being made up of three lines: the second line repeats the first, and the third features the terminal variation. But this form, according to Taft, is simply a common variation (11-12), given that the first two lines are usually the same: “The textural definition of the blues stanza, therefore, must be broadened to include any number of variations on the basic rhymed couplet AB.” Taft is wise to streamline his model, lending focus to a dizzying range of examples.
Ibid., 17. The sacred-profane distinction, Tate suggests, is an important one: “As a secular, lyric form, the blues could comment on an incredibly wide range of social issues [such as] poverty, drunkenness, racism, gambling ... almost any aspect of everyday life.” A chief topic is love: “faithfulness, jealousy, adultery, sexuality, lust.”

Hughes, One-Way Ticket, 47. Interestingly, the motif of a muse de-created by modernity—by television, in Hughes’s case—also occurs in Anna Akhmatova’s 1924 poem. “The Muse” ends just when the muse appears, prepared to broadcast the words of hell. In Poems of Akhmatova, trans. Max Hayward and Stanley Kunitz (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 79.

Rampersad, The Collected Works, 352. Rampersad does not offer key dates, most likely because his relation to popular lore is one of trust—trust in the historicizing ear, which teachers of poetry need to revive when reading Hughes.

Buzzy Jackson, A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 116. This book is my source of the dates relating to “Strange Fruit” (115) and Holiday’s arrest (125-26). Citing NAACP reports, Jackson states that there were “more than 100 lynchings over the course of the decade” after 1939. With lyrics and music by Abel Meeropol, “Strange Fruit” circulated among radical Village venues before being catapulted to fame by Holiday’s rendition. For details, see Jackson, 112-14.

Hughes’s implicit gloss on Holiday as author becomes more apparent when we turn to Angela Y. Davis writing on the Lady Day classic. Davis resists the domestication of antiracism in “Strange Fruit” when it is read solely as an art object. My account of Hughes reading Holiday echoes Davis’s insight into the song’s proprietary instability: a gray zone between the genius of composition (which tends to downplay the agency of performer on account of gender and race) and the genius of performance. See Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (New York: Vintage, 1999), 181-87.


Though there is no way to verify a poet’s intention, I do not believe Hughes would not have entertained other formulations for him to arrive at rhyme. One alternative, for example, would have been to phrase “the dream” in the plural, then say, “They all confuse,” generating further in the poem other sorts of notions about plurality and incoherence. But clearly, Hughes has made a creative choice to hold at bay phonological similarity.

Hollander, 44-45. Arguably, the blues repetition frees imagining. Imagination hums in the background with decisions and calibrations, simultaneously with the singing. Like his other examples, Hollander’s mode of explication demonstrates the same effects as his object of study:

Make up your mind, while the next line gives you time,
Make up your mind, yes, while this line’s giving you time,
Then your train of thought comes running after you rhyme.
This blues lyric is as we commonly know it, according to Taft. Hollander’s verse describes how the blues singer seems to weigh the options for the third line, before breaking away from lexical repetition to produce a line with a new rhyme word and create terminal variation.


36 Grossman, True-love, 116. Italicization spans the entirety of the passage in the original. Meditating on Kantian aesthetics, Susan Stewart seems to echo Grossman when she writes: “The phrasing of ‘a sort of schema for the supersensuous’ seems to refer to the imagination presenting a schema for something that can’t be understood.” In Stewart, The Poet’s Freedom, 137-38. Italics added.

37 Grossman, True-love, 134-35. My understanding of the eidos is based on pp. 84-86 of this text. On pp. 101-03, where Grossman links eidetic scarcity to the “reciprocal disqualifications (expressed as race, class, ethnicity, etc.) such as arise in the struggle to maintain fixed, mutually exclusive self-constructions in the visible (manifest) world.” Grossman’s insight informs my other chapters, as when I reflect on property in Elizabeth Bishop’s work; and when I discuss Forché’s engagement with traumatic effects of the shift from class struggle to geopolitical warfare.

38 Not without wrenching admittedly, but for reasons clarified further in this chapter, I offer a composite of the 1943 version while retaining the rest of the second stanza in Fields of Wonder, 105. Rampersad notes that in the Saturday Evening Post, in 1943, the stanza ends the first line with “democracy.” In 1947, Hughes replaced it with “liberty.” See The Collected Poems, 655.

39 Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 186-90. Roberts touches on the specter of anarchy among the American founding fathers, whose reading of ancient Athenian and Roman governance set to motion “an aristocratic theory of politics was couched in sufficiently democratic language.” This theory maintained a hierarchy of worth, opposing men of property to men without estate (as well as men deemed property). It thus limited the suffrage rights, repressing “awkward questions” not only about the commons but also, more crucially, about who should govern and who should be ruled (or owned). The result, according to Roberts, was “that democracy could be billed not as majority rule but as chaos.” Emphasis added. More recently, Jean-Luc Nancy imparts the lesson gleaned from conflicts witnessed in the last century, between avowedly democratic states and their peoples. A certain kind of “chaos” may be crucial to democracy after all: “The demos, can be sovereign only under a condition that distinguishes it from the sovereign assumption of the state and from any political configuration whatsoever—that is the condition of democracy.” Meditating on the dissolution of the sovereign figure, Nancy writes further: “democracy equals anarchy.” In The Truth of Democracy, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 20 and 31. Emphases added. See also the “proliferation of figures” on pp. 26-27; and on pp. 40-41, the “break from the theologico-political,” questioning the hold of politics over “the identity and destiny of the common.” Cf. Chantal Mouffe on democracy as “the locus of tension” between liberal individualism and the democratic unity, in The Democratic Paradox (London: Verso, 2005), 5, 44, and 101.

40 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. “Democracy; What Does It Mean?” Vital Speeches of the Day 14.13 (15 April 1948): 401. The interpretive character of Schlesinger’s statement comes to the fore, when we read other possible readings of this same history. In the same period, with a slightly different recollection of the history Schlesinger cites, see W.E.B. Du Bois, “Reconstruction, Seventy-Five Years After” Phylon 4.3. (1943): 205-212. Du Bois writes to recall an occluded aspect of that history: “The part of the Negro in abolition just as his part in the Civil War has been intentionally and systematically played down until today it is not simply neglected but nearly forgotten” (206). See also Alexandra Lianeri, “Translation and
the Establishment of Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-Century England: Constructing the Political as an Interpretive Act,” in *Translation and Power*, ed. Maria Tymooczko and Edwin Gentzler (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 11. “Despite some general appeals to classical antiquity,” writes Lianeri, “the founding of the United States of America manifested a self-distancing of republican thought from ‘purely’ democratic affiliations, on the grounds that the exercise of political power by the commons would violate the principle of mixed government and endanger individual liberty and rights.”

41 Schlesinger, 402. For the reification of Cold War thinking, see the sources cited in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, on El Salvador and Carolyn Forché.

42 Henry R. Luce, *The American Century* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1941), 36. The other quotation is from page 21. Further, on page 39, Luce declares: “It now becomes our time to be the powerhouse from which the ideals spread throughout the world and do their mysterious work of lifting the life of mankind from the level of the beasts to what the Psalmist calls a little lower than the angels.” We stagger before such metaphysical terms, especially when we use montage to survey the century’s remaining span after 1945. Luce mentions the name *Dong Dang* on page 21, alluding to France and China warring over nineteenth-century Vietnam. The question “whose Dong Dang? whose Democracy?” seems thoroughly uncanny—read, for instance, beside the poems of Yusef Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).


45 Gerald W. Johnson, “Overloaded Democracy” *Harper’s Magazine* 199.1192 (September 1949): 83. Though it seems strange to exclude from democratic culture the aesthetics of bebop, we leave counter-argument aside. In this area, the poet Nathaniel Mackey remains our best advocate. For Mackey, the jazz virtuosity depends on a communal aesthetic of “discrepant engagement,” a term describing the implicit dialogue between musicians and audience, as well as the tension between individual style and a repertoire familiar to both. See the title essay of *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). On bebop improvisations of pop tunes, see Gary Giddens and Scott DeVeaux, *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 296 passim; and Salim Washington’s essay in *Uptown Conversation: the New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Fara Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 31-33.


47 Ibid., 40-41. The insight rests on two convincing claims, first, that “the sovereignty of political bodies has always been an illusion,” and second, that equating freedom with the realization of any kind of will—making an illusion non-illusory—necessitates violence. My sense is that Arendt refers to the decay of the auratic sovereignty of kings. Likewise today, we understand that the sovereignty of national borders is a fiction founded on the sacralization of laws, whose becoming non-illusory in turn requires not only broad international agreement but also the use of force to materialize borders. As for individual will, I take Arendt’s reference to Christian freedom in this text to suggest that no person or human artifact can embody the supreme figure of the will: divinity. Beyond sacred figuration, the human part is “a freedom that is not an attribute of the will, but an accessory of doing and acting.” We locate our freedom, in short, in the field of human action. To be human is precisely not to have the will of a god. To be free, one has to give up the illusion of godhood, and therefore to strive for freedom and justice infinitely—not according to the theological-political models of sovereignty but within the realm of human finitude. See Jean-Luc Nancy, “Dialogue on the Philosophy to Come” *The Minnesota Review* 75 (Fall 2010): 77-79.


51 Quoted from Wendy Brown defining sovereignty as the people’s rule, in “We are all Democrats Now…” *Democracy in What State?*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 49.

52 Gerald W. Johnson, “Overloaded Democracy” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 1949, 84. This notion of equality is tied to the debate around anti-discrimination laws, giving more leverage to all kinds of workers. As William Green states: “Equal opportunity for all men in a community to enjoy the full fruits of their labor and through their productive contribution to earn a better standard of living, without regard to race, religion, color or national origin, is a sacred principle, inseparable from the true practice of democracy in a free society.” William Green, “Discrimination: Threat to Our Economic Strength,” *New Leader* 30.27 (5 July 1947): 2.

53 Johnson, 83.

54 Ibid., 85-86; emphases added. The statement on “inferior men” comes after the ff. assertion: “The slaves were ignorant… in the sense of having had no experience in the art of self-government—an art ‘so long to lerne’ that Englishmen had mastered it very imperfectly in the five hundred years since Runnymede.” Why does this sound familiar? The colonial ethos remains with us, particularly when we judge ourselves so learned. Part of colonial violence consists in the displacement of indigenous eidetic concepts, by new modes of relating the self to the world. This transformation has its advantages, but it also comes at a cost. Subordinated peoples pay that cost each time they confine themselves to one dominant idiom of “self-government,” defined by one group—even if that particular group can be just as recalcitrant to the arts “so long to lerne.” Hence, under the terms set by the One, which refuses to take into account deleted or untapped idioms of the person, the One can keep stating assuredly that the subjugated are forever in need of tutelage. For an antidote to such presumption, see Spivak, “Righting Wrongs,” 549-50.


58 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 82. In work, “the human creature is immersed in his interaction with the world,” writes Scarry. “In contrast, the very nature of play requires that the person be only half submerged in the world of his activity … able to enter and exit from it freely.”
Scarry, 169. Emphasis in the original.

Nicolás Guillén, “Lavandera,” in the Langston Hughes Papers, box 443, folder 10399, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven. That the translation is by Hughes is noted in Cuba Libre, typescript, box 2, folder “Literary Translations,” p. 20, Benjamin Carruthers Papers, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.


The metaphor of percussion is apt because as noted earlier, in relation to Hollander and Stewart, rhyme tends to interfere with syntactical “flow.” Rhyme cuts the progression.

If we read the first stanza without the comma, the “noon-day” would take the “black woman” as the grammatical object. A corollary effect of this misreading is that the act of “washing” the woman becomes the grammatical subject that “bites” her song.


Alfredo José Estrada, Havana: Autobiography of a City (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 64. Estrada accounts for the association by observing that mameyes have “bright red flesh and black seeds, matching the crimson uniforms of the redcoats, with shiny black buttons.”


Alejandro de la Fuente, A Nation for All: Race, Inequity, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 29. The most telling document De la Fuente cites is from “La nota el dia,” La Discusion, September 23, 1908: “There is no country in which the white has done as much for the black. [...] Blacks by themselves never would have become free.” For other discussions on the ambivalence of “Cuba Libre,” see Peréz, Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy, 77-81. Peréz foregrounds how José Martí explicitly promised inclusiveness, as against racial segregation, in his vision of “a Cuba for Cubans.” Cf. Antoni Kapcia, Cuba: Island of Dreams (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 39-47.

De la Fuente, 33.

Johnson, 85.

I hasten to add here my agreement with Alan Ryan who observes that among the many conceptions of liberalism, there are those kinds that deem democracy, or the rule of the people, a threat to liberalism. Reading Singh and Hartman, however, I also tend to doubt that liberalism’s emphasis on “estate” is powerful enough to interrupt what Ryan calls “the advantages of monopolists.” Excused as a matter of private opinion, forms of demarcation based on class, gender, or race persist, even as egalitarian contestation is given its due in a liberal state. Ryan cites the examples of the United States and the United Kingdom. See Ryan, The Making of Modern Liberalism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 39-40. The challenge that liberalism faces, then, continues to be the need of its own revision, closer to the
spirit of John Dewey writing in 1935: “Its present need is recognition that established material security is a prerequisite of the ends which it cherishes, so that ... individuals may actively share in the wealth of cultural resources that now exist and may contribute ... to their further enrichment.” Dewey, Liberalism and Social Action (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000), 62. Emphasis added.


72 Schlesinger, 402.

73 See note 19 of this chapter. Writing over “democracy” with “liberty,” Hughes seems to have grown wary of the former. On May 31, 1947, for instance, Hughes writes in a newspaper column: “Four Hundred Million Dollars to the anti-democratic governments of Greece and Turkey to help them build ‘democracy’ when poor white folks who can’t pay their poll tax and poor Negroes who can’t pass for white are denied the vote in large portions of our country.” See Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture, 1942-1960, ed. Christopher De Santis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 33.


75 Peréz, On Becoming Cuban, 324.

76 De la Fuente, 159-60.


79 Johnson, 85. The word “heritage,” implicitly referring to lines of succession in ownership, occurs on 84.

80 Chantal Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox (London: Verso, 2005), 49. Similarly, for Rancière, what enables democracy is the contestation of naturalized divisions. “Equality is the power of inconsistent, disintegrative and ever-replayed division which tears politics away from the various figures of animality: the great collective body, the zoology of orders justified in terms of cycles of nature and function, the hate-driven rallying of the pack.” On the Shores of Politics, 33.


85 The sense of departure is evident in “marítimo.” Carruthers neglects its nuance with “sea-blue.” Roberto Márquez and David Arthur McMurray avoid such painterly interference, in *Man-Making Words: Selected Poems of Nicolás Guillén* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 141. Their translation lets the concluding stanza describe the tropics as:

> laughing on the mountains, in the clouds,
> while a seafaring sky
> destroys itself in endless waves of stars at my feet.

86 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 77. “The singularity of the singular being,” writes Nancy, “endlessly divides Being and beings, or rather divides the Being of beings, which is only through and as its division into singular common.” Earlier in this text (27), Nancy is unequivocal about the finite character of the singular being: “The singular being, which is not the individual, is the finite being.” All emphases indicated here are in the original.

87 “The authority of true-love, as of poetry, is always,” Grossman states, “a generative contingency—both origin and consequent presence—of institutions that true-love founds and that then bear it as an alien logic across time. (Indeed it cannot be stressed to emphatically that neither love nor poetry are, strictly speaking, institutions.) *Institutions such as church, state, nature, law, two-factored logic, et cetera, supply the historical object of value that true-love (subject) consciousness intends.*” Emphases in the original. Grossman, *True-Love*, 25.

88 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “madrigal.” Etymology links the Spanish word *madrigal* in the sixteenth century to the Latin *matricalis*, “maternal, simple, primitive,” as well as to the English word *matrical*, “relating to the womb.” The first entry defines *madrigal* as “a song for one or more voices with essential instrumental accompaniment.” The second entry records a now-rare usage referring to “a short lyrical love poem.”

89 The paradox implicit in Guillén’s portrayal of singularity is that it harbors religious citation. “Madrigal” configures a kind of visual portmanteau, fusing iconographic traces associated with Yemayá and Ochún. These two *orichas*, David H. Brown writes, “are related to water and are regarded as ‘mother’ and ‘daughter,’ or older and younger ‘sisters,’ respectively. Yemayá ‘owns’ the oceans (*agua salada*), while Ochún is the owner of ‘sweet’ inland waters (*agua dulce*), good fortune, and beauty.” In Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 171. In the *textus* of “Madrigal,” the word *piel* or “skin” marks the poem’s division into two aspects of female divinity. The stanzas share out the “you” between the *agua dulce* of Ochún’s “ten purple grapes” and the saline waters of Yemayá, but they also suggest interplay. The *agua salada* of the second stanza, Yemayá’s textual space, lodges Ochún’s *espejo* or looking glass. “Beneath the surface of the waters, there is always another Ochún. Her famous gaze in the mirror puns on this two-facedness,” writes Joseph M. Murphy, in “Yéyé Cachita: Ochún in a Cuban Mirror,” *Ọṣun across the Waters: A Yoruban Goddess in*

90 Guillén seems to anticipate Nancy, The Inoperative Community, 37. “Of course, lovers speak,” Nancy writes. “But their speech is ultimately impotent, excessive in that it is excessively poor, a speech in which love is already mired.”


92 Singh, Black Is a Country, 44.

93 My interest in Du Bois lies mainly in his critique of democracy, as discussed further in this chapter. For the larger scope in the 1940s, I rely on Eric Porter, The Problem of the Future World: W.E.B. Du Bois and Race the Race Concept at Midcentury (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 112-30. In Porter’s timely re-reading, the test that Du Bois presented to liberal democracy was not confined to the Freedom Train within the United States. It gestured towards the fate of Africa in the modern world, whether or not the world’s relations to Africa would help abolish the color line for all former colonies. More specifically, Du Bois raised the possibility that political and economic relations with people of color in the globe, especially in Africa, would depend on the complicity of black Americans in, or their rejection of, laissez-faire liberal democracy. The problem of the future world, as Du Bois saw it, forked the present into three paths: the transformation of capitalist societies for greater justice and economic freedom for all; the shift away from the present system spearheaded by the United States triumphant after the Second World War, toward altogether untried systems; or the reproduction of the forms already established but re-signified, drawn from the eras of slavery and colonialism.


95 Rancière, On the Shores of Politics, 49.

96 Nancy, The Truth of Democracy, 23-24. Without explicitly naming liberal democracy, Nancy suggests that the rise of the individual coincides not only with the commodification of objects, but also with the increasing substitutability of persons. Persons have become a kind of money in modern democracy. The critique of “exchange value,” as well as my understanding of its usage in this text, relies on another study by Nancy, “The Two Secrets of the Fetish,” Diacritics 31. 2 (Summer 2001): 2-8.


98 Quoted in Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, 39.

99 Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, 38. The succeeding paraphrases of Schmitt in this section are likewise indebted to Mouffe, 43-49.


102 The matter in question is, once again, the history of Americanity. See my discussion in Chapter 1, reflecting on Conquistador in light of Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, “Americanity as a Concept, or the Americas in the Modern World System” International Social Science Journal 44.4 (November 1992): 549-57.
For example, when the United States occupied Cuba, the segregation practices Americans brought with them exacerbated what was already active in Spanish colonialism. But a more generalized form of American racism was applied toward Cuban citizens themselves. Writing President William McKinley in 1908, Governor Leonard Wood blames Cuba’s decline on the “mixed blood” on the island. This attitude continues well into the mid-century. Similarly, in January 1946, Henry Norweb of the United States legation in Cuba wrote to the Secretary of State that many Cuban politicians “possess the superficial charm of clever children, spoiled by nature and geography, but under the surface they combine the worst characteristics of the unfortunate admixture and interpenetration of Spanish and Negro cultures—laziness, cruelty, inconstancy, irresponsibility, and inbred dishonesty.” De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 40-41. For other cases, too numerous to cite in the space of a footnote, see Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1998).

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107 Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, 33. I set this reading of *On the Shores of Politics*, beside another text, in which he writes: “The outrageous claim of the demos to be the whole of the community only satisfies in its own way—that of a party—the requirement of politics. Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part.” Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

108 Mouffe, 10.


110 Augier indicates (OP 395) that Guillén deleted the two lines in succeeding versions of the poem, containing the phrase Carruthers and Hughes translate: “nuestro rasgo al perfil definitivo de América.” The editor restores these lines in the version featured in *Obra Poetica*, which I quote here. The collaborative authorship of the translation is indicated in the *Cuba Libre*, typescript, box 2, folder “Literary Translations,” p. 54-55, Benjamin Carruthers Papers, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.

111 *Diccionario de la lengua española de la Real Academia Española* (2005), s.v. “perfil.” The definitions of perfil in my paragraph are all drawn from this dictionary, particularly in the first, second, and fourth entries. These entries are respectively as follows: “Postura en que no se deja ver sino una sola de las dos mitades laterales del cuerpo” [posture in which one is allowed to see only one of the body’s two lateral halves]; “Conjunto de rasgos peculiares que caracterizan a alguien o algo” [the whole of unique or peculiar features characterizing someone or something]; “Adorno sutil y delicado, especialmente el que se pone al canto o extremo de algo” [delicate and subtle ornament, especially one that is traced on the edge or extremity of something]. Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “profile.” The Spanish definition pairs up nicely with the etymology offered, and with the first two entries in English usage.

112 Just as Guillén refers to the coming community as if it were already in our midst, so Hughes and Carruthers resituate the source of the words carried. It is the oldest sense of translation. Cf. the translation of “Llegada” by Marquez and McMurray, in *Man-Making Words*, 142. “The word comes to us moist from the forest.”

113 Edwards, op. cit., 11.
The time of mythic or lyric memory links Guillén’s fifth stanza and Arthur Rimbaud’s *Une Saison en Enfer*. Here I refer the reader to “Adieu,” specifically to a passage nearing the conclusion: “Et à l’aurore, armés d’une ardente patience, nous entrerons aux splendides villes.” See the accompanying translation by Louise Varèse, *A Season in Hell* (New York: New Directions, 2011), 88-89. The translation was originally published in 1945. Obviously, the source text is a century older. Guillén in 1931 seems to write over the individualistic tenor of Rimbaud. “Arrival” stages a scene of contact between the new and the old visions of community, when he describes the elders of the city crown the “we” with “green leaves,” in the stanza that starts with the line: “La ciudad nos espera con sus palacios, tenues como panales de abejas silvestres.” Both poets echo an archaic reservoir of images. Due to space constraints, but also apropos my theme, I relegate these connections to an incomplete sketch.


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CHAPTER 3

ELIZABETH BISHOP’S “GOLDEN SILENCE”

PASTORAL AND THE POOR OF BRAZIL

In a 1964 interview for a Brazilian newspaper, Elizabeth Bishop shares a memory of herself as a cowherd in Nova Scotia. “My dear mother churned butter at home,” Bishop recalls, “and I, a child, steered cows out to pasture.” The poet relates that this fondness for the bucolic inspired her to translate The Diary of Helena Morley, a memoir of girlhood in rural Brazil. The nugget of self-revelation, exceptional for a poet known for her reticence, is worth noting beside “In the Village,” the single prose work in Questions of Travel published in 1965. The story, originally printed a decade earlier, is autobiographical. In one passage, we find the narrator picking up sprigs of mint by a brook:

For a while I entertain the idea of not going home today at all, of staying safely here in the pasture all day, playing in the brook and climbing on the squishy, moss-covered hummocks in the swampy part. But an immense, sibilant, glistening loneliness suddenly faces me, and the cows are moving off to the shade of the fir trees, their bells chiming softly, individually.

The rural imagery, the faintly musical phrasing, the melancholy note of the “immense, sibilant, glistening loneliness,”—these recognizably pastoral traits not only link “In the Village” to Bishop’s childhood anecdote and translation project. The story links the seemingly disparate places in Questions of Travel, suggesting a parallel between the book’s hybrid geography and a kind of generically mixed prose, some of whose sentences could just as well have been written as free verse. Aptly enough, “In the Village” occurs in the middle of the volume. Bishop places it between the first group of poems gathered under the heading “Brazil,” and the second, grouped under “Elsewhere,” based largely on memories of Nova Scotia.

In the poems under “Brazil,” Bishop seems peculiarly drawn to rustic figures. The poet ended up living in Brazil after falling in love with the aesthete and landowner Lota de Macedo
Soares. After almost a decade, traveling through the country and living in the hills northwest of Rio de Janeiro, Bishop writes the poet Robert Lowell in 1960: “I worry a great deal about what to do with this accumulation of exotic and picturesque or charming detail, and I don’t want to become a poet who can only write about South America.” Bishop’s creative dilemma involves the search for poetic means with which to organize her experience of Brazilian rusticity, and to displace the touristic underpinnings of her project. The difficulty is compounded by Brazil’s social landscape. “Dearest Cal,” she writes Lowell in 1963, “Carnival comes next. The songs are already being sung:

Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And so great a number poor?
’Tis a land of poverty.4

Bishop’s interest in destitute Brazilians appears significantly to stem from her identification with her bucolic childhood. This chapter examines the relation between Bishop’s representation of poverty and pastoral poetics. My study focuses on poems published between 1951 and 1965, most of which have been collected in Questions of Travel. The years mark her arrival in Brazil and the publication of the book. They correspond, moreover, to the decade marked by intense social transformation in Brazilian rurality. My close reading of these poems considers the formal elements of lyric in relation to Bishop’s thematic concerns. Relevant to those concerns is a consideration of the tangents between the poems, her letters, essays, and unpublished material, and accounts of United States-Brazilian relations.

Bishop’s most persuasive commentators often establish her pastoralism by way of the picturesque. Thomas Travisano, for example, calls our attention to her “choice and handling of simple, apparently innocent subjects” as the chief trait that “places her poems firmly in the pastoral tradition.” Referring to North and South (1946), Travisano views pastoral as “a genre that calls for the moral understanding of things overlooked and undervalued.”5 Helen Vendler
also observes that the Brazilian landscape in Bishop’s work offers “yet another pastoral, harsh in a different tropical way.” These observations, I believe, beg to be revisited and elaborated further. To examine Bishop’s pastoralism as well as its ethical implications is to deepen our understanding of what James Longenbach calls her “social conscience,” and on a broader level, of the transnational contours of twentieth century United States poetry.

My study proceeds along two lines of argument. First, it elucidates the centrality of Virgilian pastoral aesthetics in Bishop’s representation of Brazilian rusticity. As a maker of lyric forms, Bishop is not strictly bound to address the ethical, political issues of inequity. Her interest is to translate her Brazilian experiences into poetic language, that is, to reanimate objects, scenes, and human figures long after their initial allure has faded, beyond the sites of origination. The remarkable thing is that representation is also what makes Bishop susceptible to the situations she records, enabling them to be remarked as experience and transformed into writing. The perceptibility of people and places, and the poet’s responsiveness to their emergence and vanishing depend on a specific provenance in lyric mimesis. Since *The Eclogues* by Virgil, pastoral has concerned itself with dispossession, with figuring poor herdsman as bearers of exemplary speech. It is through pastoral that questions of class rise to legibility within lyric domains.

Second, this chapter argues that Bishop’s response to the demands of configuring inequity hinges on the ambivalent spaces found within pastoral. The spaces of ambivalence are what I wish to characterize as the “golden silence” of the mode, quoting Bishop’s phrase in “Questions of Travel” (*CP* 94). The legacy of Virgil is not just an exit route through the creative anxiety over the task of organizing “the charming detail” of her Brazilian experience. Bishop’s comments about Brazilian impoverishment suggest that the mode also needs reworking if it is to speak faithfully to the “land of poverty” Bishop experienced. Questions of class prompt the poet to reconstitute the mode. Bishop’s version of pastoral is fraught with discontent and at the same time filled with mute affirmation. It configures the present with a view toward ideals of
collectivity and tact through which class tensions are negotiated, and against which conditions that give rise to dispossession are critiqued. This ethical project has implications on the understanding class in American literature, and more broadly, on the interplay between otherness and communality in the American hemisphere.

For Raymond Williams, pastoral records the dialectical relays that link and transform urban and rural spaces. “The division and opposition of city and country,” Williams writes, “industry and agriculture, in the modern forms, are the critical culmination and specialization of labour, which, thought it did not begin with capitalism, was developed under it to an extraordinary and transforming degree.” The mode of production described by Williams underpins the history of pastoral, “the basic process of most of what we know as the history of the country and the city.” It testifies to the ways in which country and city has changed, in the continual relay of ideals, labor, and material resources flowing between them. This traffic has also changed us. “In its final forms of imperialism,” Williams writes, “it has altered our world.”

A literary work is pastoral depending on the extent to which pastoral speakers discursively inform it. Paul Alpers usefully suggests that pastoral is defined by the receptive attitude of a text toward meek life, which may or may not have to do with what is strictly rustic. This receptivity is inseparable from simple eloquence that usually comes in the form of statements about our material reality and our place in it. “A pastoral speaker,” Alpers writes, “is one whose mode of utterance and strength relative to the world derive from the literary shepherd, but who is not represented as a herdsman or similar humble figure.” These lines echo William Empson. Alpers’s pastoral speaker evolves out of Empson’s literary shepherd. In Some Versions of Pastoral, Empson writes:

The essential trick of pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (felt as the most universal subject, something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way). From seeing the two sorts of people
combined like this you thought better of both: the best parts of both were used.¹¹

For Empson, what inaugurates pastoral is the appearance of “simple people” in a literary work, who memorably articulate emotions that all persons share. Depending on the persuasiveness of literary construction, we do not question the expressivity of these figurative shepherds or their origins in artifice. Pastoral process entails “putting the complex into the simple.”¹² The amalgamation of rusticity and urbane sophistication is created to “reconcile two sorts of people” divided by class lines. This combinatory figure in Empson undergoes a kind of soul migration in Alpers’s account, where the pastoral speaker no longer needs to be a rustic. Tone for Alpers is all: conveying “strength relative to the world,” as quoted earlier. Pastoral is, hence, a literary mode that acknowledges the creaturely; it seeks to reconcile us to our finitude in the face of the real.

Depending on its political usage, as Williams demonstrates, pastoral functions either to ignore and obscure class lines, or to imagine cross-class solidarity and make these distinctions legible as the effect of social mapping. What must the world of inequity and class distinctions be like when poetry represents it? In Questions of Travel Bishop confronts her perceptual struggle with class through dramatic situations that crystallize around property and labor. Bishop’s version of pastoral signifies an important phase in the development of twentieth-century pastoral, which recognizes the huge constraints of simulating “a beautiful relation between the rich and the poor.”¹³

The term class in this chapter refers to both social relations and representation. “Class does not refer,” Schocket writes, “to the objects within the visual frame; it refers to the act of framing, to a set of social relations and ideological processes through which these objects come into signification in the first place.”¹⁴ We regard class as though it were sensate residue inhering in a particular group or individuals. It is in fact mimesis that allows class to consolidate identity. Following Schocket, I think about class as the regulation of access to resources and social
mobility, and as “class process,” the process by which representation situates us persuasively in relation inequity and power.\textsuperscript{15}

Shira Wolowksy, Betsy Erkkilä, Margaret Dickie, Adrienne Rich, and Longenbach have demonstrated Bishop’s sustained engagement in social questions.\textsuperscript{16} Dickie writes that “as the literary debates of the 1930s about the link between literature and politics eased into the 1950s dismissal of proletarian writing and a concomitant elevation of aesthetic concerns, Bishop herself turned to more and more social and political subjects.”\textsuperscript{17} Erkkilä demonstrates that Bishop’s work, even before her Brazilian residency, already nurtures “a vague yearning for communality and an alternative social order.”\textsuperscript{18} How does class process intersect with pastoral process in Bishop’s work?

“In the Village,” as earlier shown, locates pastoral between home and estrangement. Bonnie Costello calls this dialectic “excursive vision,” which continually strives “to adjust the inherited constructions of reality” upon contact with the world, surprising the sense yet always eluding conceptual frames.\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Questions of Travel} rehearses this dialectic, an imaginative suppleness that tries to hold together the solace of the familiar and the appeal of the other, whose indeterminacy disturbs us. This suppleness is why Bishop’s lyric poetry can bear witness to the consequences of power even without thematizing them. They occur in “the gloaming almost invisible” (CP 64), in the deceptively trivial details of discrete life. The concerns of pastoral poetics are configured in that realm. Read historically at the intersection with class process during the period we have bracketed, they can also be shown to be excursive and transnational in “deep time,” with its questions of dwelling, property relations, and communality.

In Wai Chee Dimock’s study of transnationalism in American literature, “deep time” is a codicil for the “set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric.”\textsuperscript{20} It accounts for the indebtedness that gives literature its possibility. The
vitality of any literature is founded on difference, and on the overlaps between cultures. Deep
time, hence, also impinges on, and transforms, those events that occur at “contact zones,” what
Mary Louise Pratt calls the “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with
each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.” Pastoral
constitutes the fold of deep time in Bishop’s work. It recollects social tensions along with the
cooperation and interchanges commemorated even in the oldest examples of the mode.

Bishop’s example shows that a commitment to pastoral poetics—or poetics in general, for
that matter—is not inconsistent with social conscience. Strong poetry wields its own kind of
rigor, displacing social correctness with a kind of tact ruled by invention and surprise. By
aspiring to distance itself from “tract,” poetic can clear the ground for observing or touching
the way power’s interpellative effects discretely fade into the quotidian. “In the Waiting Room,”
for example, as Longenbach argues, “turns on the realization that there is no ‘inside’ world safe
from this exterior violence—not the warmth of the waiting room, not the security of the
individual consciousness.” The political in Bishop’s work is traceable to those moments when
the quotidian offers up for reading the otherness installed in the self. The poems that attend
upon such moments allow us to glimpse the processes by which social boundaries are
assimilated into subjectivity, giving selfhood its definition, and subjecting it without thoroughly
determining the capacity for decision and transformation.

Because social boundaries also articulate geopolitical borders, it is important to consider
what these poems on Brazil would look like if we contextualize Bishop’s pastoralism in American
hemispheric history. How does pastoral representation in Questions of Travel, as well as the
other poems about Brazil published after, negotiate the tension between transnational
collectivity and the problem of class? Class process cannot be reduced to Brazil alone. In the
period that concerns us, transformations in its social landscape—the contestations over land
reform and the rights of workers—lodged the country in the purview of United States interests.
Bishop’s pastoral may be read in counterpoint to the travails of the Cold War.
Tourist as pastoral speaker

“Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?” Bishop asks in the second stanza of “Questions of Travel” (CP 93-94), a poem that catalogues the sightings of a tourist. The thrill of displacement wanes with the speaker begins to long for home, a vantage point from which to long for another place. This disorientation prompts the speaker to weigh the desire for another vivid reality beside the desire for the real to remain imagined. The tone of alertness in the first strophe gives way to hesitation in the second. Beyond the imperative start, “Think of the long trip home,” the latter strophe unfolds entirely as a series of questions. “Must we have our dreams,” Bishop writes, “and have them, too?” Contact with the desired object denudes the landscape of fantasy, exposing travel as a form of spectatorship, a form of mobility inseparable from representation:

Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
Where should we be today?
Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
in this strangest of theaters?

The poem goes on to elaborate the memory of sightseeing as a “childishness” pursuit of images: “the tiniest hummingbird in the world” and “one more folded sunset, still quite warm.” Chasing after an impossible authenticity, “the tourist may believe that he is moving in this direction,” Dean MacCannell writes, “but often it is very difficult to know for sure if the experience is in fact authentic.” Travel thrives on the idea of plenitude, but as Bishop notes in “Arrival at Santos,” it merely disappoints our “immodest demands for a different world” (CP 89). What often greets the tourist is “a meager diet of horizon” and “frivolous greenery,” a world that seems beggared by touristic mediation.

The poem turns the idea of the travel catalogue on its head. Bishop’s list of sightings creates a sense of immediacy and sensuousness, but also estranges them with the conditional mood in which they are adumbrated: “But surely it would have been a pity/ not to have seen the
trees along this road” (CP 93-94). What we find is a kind of priamel, a descriptive device in classical pastoral that is predicated on loss. Momentous experiences skew the nomad’s spatiotemporal grammar. Bishop reinforces this idea by recording irretrievable auditory sensations: “the sad, two-noted wooden tune/ of disparate wooden clogs/ carelessly clacking over/ a grease-stained filling-station floor”; “the less primitive music of the fat brown bird”; and the sound of rain, “so much like politicians’ speeches.” The sensuous immediacy competes with transience, whose perceptibility heightens with the collection of irretrievable fragments. The collector grows especially pensive towards the end of the stanza (CP 93):

—Yes, a pity not to have pondered, blurr’dly and inconclusively, on what connection can exist for centuries between the crudest wooden footwear and, careful and finicky, the whittled fantasies of wooden cages. —Never to have studied history in the weak calligraphy of songbirds’ cages.

“The relativist bravado of the wandering point of view,” Caren Kaplan writes, “approaches the touristic discourse of collecting experiences.” Attenuating our sense of somatic limits and geographical distances, Bishop’s traveler conveys strength relative to the world. The question of home, thus, intensifies in its repetition at the close of the poem: “Should we have stayed at home,” Bishop writes, “wherever that may be?” As nomadist euphoria gives way to a keening sense of displacement, so does the appropriative gaze pass into uncertainty about the properties of selfhood as well as of things. Analogous to the second stanza’s “inexplicable and impenetrable” stonework (CP 93), the clogs and birdcages elude the epistemological aspect of touristic acquisition. Bishop’s speaker eagerly studies the “connection [that] can exist for centuries” between crude and refined objects. Seizing these objects as monads, however, can reveal history only “blurr’dly and inconclusively” at best. Home and selfhood, Bishop suggests, can no longer be imagined as sites where knowledge and possession are asserted.
What does it mean, then, to characterize Bishop’s traveler as a pastoral speaker? In striving to write a lyric faithful to her experience of Brazil, Bishop focuses on the problem of cognition at the scene of encounter between different cultures, given its underlying relations of power. Bishop writes at the “contact zones” Pratt describes, as noted earlier, zones that bear the history of “asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.” Apart from the finitude of human knowledge, or what Costello calls Bishop’s “limited mastery,” the mediations of power tend to obscure our historical relation to places and people. If the pastoral speaker conveys “strength relative to the world,” the traveler rehearses the clash between the autonomy of cognition and susceptibility to the asymmetries of class. *Questions of Travel* proffers a record of this tension.

The problem of historical legibility is charged with *gravitas* when we note the position of “Questions of Travel” in the book. The third poem in the collection, it appears right after two other poems about movement: “Arrival at Santos,” a poem that carries the italicized date *January, 1952* after its terminal line, and “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” a poem about the Brazilian conquest. Bishop deems it necessary to date different points of arrival. The dates are significant. Robert von Hallberg remarks that the first two poems in the collection function “as the coordinates of Brazilian history” and that their juxtaposition “is meant to implicate Bishop herself in the appropriation of that territory.” The dates invite us to ponder what connection could exist between our traveling and the old scramble for new lands, the Januaries of empire as of modernity. In “Arrival” Bishop notes in passing the “frivolous greenery” greeting the traveler along with Brazil’s “self-pitying mountains”(*CP* 89). “Brazil” begins with similar imagery:

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Januaries, Nature greets our eyes
Exactly as she must have greeted theirs:
every square inch filling in with foliage—
big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,
blue, blue-green, and olive,
with occasional lighter veins and edges,
or a satin underleaf turned over . . . (*CP* 91)
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The casual strangeness of the word *underleaf* alerts us to the problem of historical memory. Pastoral fantasy is noticed as a kind of screen, concealing the status of modern travel as an afterlife of colonial adventure. “Arrival at Santos,” “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” and “Questions of Travel” form a triptych. The history portrayed in “Brazil,” recalled between the pair of poems about modern nomadism, comments on the history that seems to withdraw from the two other texts. “Arrival” ends with somewhat sinister undertones: “we are driving into the interior.” And “Questions” in turn, and the other poems after, are all about Brazil’s figurative heartland. Bishop offers the opening triptych as a critical frame. Before granting us lyric entry, it makes us aware of our place in the history of travel. If “Arrival” comments on our “immodest demands for a different world,” the poem about conquerors likens our desires to their “old dream of wealth and luxury.” What drives the cupidity of our tourism bears an unwanted resemblance to the colonial violence depicted in the terminal lines of “Brazil”:

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they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
each out to catch an Indian for himself—
those maddening little women who kept calling,
calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?),
and retreating, always retreating, behind it. (CP 92)
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Taking Kaplan’s reading as a point of departure, we may read the lure of domesticity and that of escapism as two poles of the same restive searching in Bishop’s work. “Questions of Travel,” as with the book to which it lends its title, is not interested in “simply destabilizing the notion of home” in order to “answer the historical question of accountability.” It is not the celebration of the exilic but the skepticism toward the “lack of imagination” in travel, that Bishop explores. How can travelers, Bishop seems to ask us, read the objects met in the journey, with reference to the cultural legacies and institutions from which modern selfhood extends? This kind of questioning, implicitly founded on Cold War tensions, colors her Brazilian landscapes.
If Bishop reflected on the ideological differences that fueled the Cold War, she would have found herself in dialogue with Reinhold Niebuhr’s contemporaneous account of United States foreign policy. “Genuine community,” Reinhold Niebuhr writes in 1952, “is established only when the knowledge that we need one another is supplemented by the recognition that ‘the other,’ that other form of life, or that other unique community is the limit beyond which our ambitions must not run and the boundary beyond which our life must not expand.” These lines come from The Irony of American History. Bishop received a copy of it fresh off the press, from Marianne Moore the year after she arrived in her adopted country. By thinking about Bishop’s pastoral poetics in relation to the class processes of Cold War culture, we begin to think about the implications of Bishop’s work on the transnational conception of “genuine community.”

“Questions of Travel” critiques tourism as the spatialization of consumption recollected in fatigue. Sigfried Kracauer maintains that the genre of travelogue “prevents us from penetrating the state of things—the condition in which we live—and thus impedes action, which strives for a change of the conditions concerned.” The tourist’s quest for authenticity ends in frustration. When the query of home recurs in her poem’s final stanzas, the speaker begins to intuit the geopolitical predicament of class. Bishop interrogates it as a problem of freedom. In contrast to the feigned certitude of politicians, Bishop proffers the lyric as a discourse of questioning. The poem concludes:

—And never to have had to listen to rain
so much like politicians' speeches:
two hours of unrelenting oratory
and then a sudden golden silence
in which the traveller takes a notebook, writes:

“Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one's room?

Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
Kaplan chooses to read the final pair of lines as a valorization of the exilic. “Questions” accommodates that reading so long as Bishop may be said to align the wanderer’s self-possession, unequivocally, with touristic acquisition. And yet what close reading bears out is a staging of equivocation vis-à-vis the tourist’s proprietary energies in “the strangest of theaters.” An unintended consequence of travel, Bishop’s questions seems to intimate, is that instead of bolstering individuality, it begins to infuse more doubt than security into the cherished sign of self-possession: the feeling of “home.”

Tourism maps the idea of home, Bishop suggests, along geopolitical lines of class. We note, for example, the difference between Brazil and the developed world to which, in the second stanza of “Questions,” Bishop alludes: “In another country the clogs would all be tested,” Bishop writes, “Each pair there would have an identical pitch.” The technological contrast points to the uneven modernity that stems from what Quijano and Wallterstein call *Americanity*. As discussed in the chapter on *Conquistador*, the term refers to ongoing processes that link our current world-system to the European conquest of the New World, changing it into its own image. Americanity prevails in our modern political, socioeconomic, and cultural institutions, which are indebted to the forms of rule, organization, and collectivity born out of colonization in the American hemisphere.

The “sudden golden silence” in “Questions” is pivotal. Read in isolation, the phrase radiates with *otium*. It marks the speaker’s turn to mimesis, proffering an etiology of the poem and a cipher for the lapsus of pastoral within touristic imagining. The image of silence evolves out of a simile undercutting pastoral fantasy. The silence of writing occurs after a downpour that is “so much like the politician’s speeches.” The image is not just one other item in the poem’s catalogue of the momentous. Silence catches the traveler off-guard, who bends back upon travel, conscious of inseparability between sensate immediacy and touristic mediation. Bishop presents
us “the mind in action rather than in repose.” The last three stanzas of the poem may be read in relation to the distinction Annabel Patterson makes between “a soft or leisured, and a hard or working pastoral.” Soft pastoral refers to the fascination with rustic retreat, which the latter type countervails by attending on rustic labor “to endorse its necessity and to insist on its dignity.” Patterson excavates the deep time of pastoral, commemorating struggles with the political force exerted on the dream of Arcadia.

The whole triptych that culminates in “Questions,” rather than valorizing the exilic, comes to acknowledge the concept of “home” as an ideologically fraught signifier. Immediately after “Questions,” for example, is a poem called “Squatter’s Children,” a lyric about the problem of shelter. The interior stillness that triggers writing is also the site of emergence for pastoral disquiet. Bishop makes explicit a type of mimesis that belongs to tourism, framing the landscapes we cross in our own “whittled fantasies.” From this point onwards, the sequence on Brazil can no longer be read without recalling the “sudden golden silence” of writing. The touristic pastoral speaker’s discontent with power fosters ironic distance from our acquisitive modes of cognition and feeling. Bishop calls it simply “imagination.” If imagination is a kind of cognitive surplus that reconfigures subjectivity through fantasy, travelers run the risk of lacking imagination by repeating colonial routes and tending to dissimulate them.

At the end of “Questions,” Bishop generates another brief list: “Continent, city, country, society.” It is difficult not to hear in the medial phrase of Bishop’s line the fundamental coordinates of pastoral ideology. The urban and the rural are in fact medial spaces. They are places where we have “stayed at home,” secure us from the opposing extremes of wastelands and wilderness. They mark resting places in the endless traffic that changed in our world. They are also, Bishop reminds us, categories of class: “The choice is never wide and never free.” What Bishop repudiates in travel is an apparitional mastery not our own, covetous of the journeys we take.
Dispossessions of the lyric

After the triptych of poems about class process at work in travel, Bishop presents the reader a lyric about destitute children. “Squatter’s Children” (CP 95) is set in Samambaia, Petropolis, in the environs of the house Bishop celebrates in “Song for a Rainy Season.” There Bishop and Lota de Macedo Soares lived, even if they also kept an apartment in Rio de Janeiro.

The children in the poem are the son and daughter of their tenant, the subject of “Manuelzinho,” another poem about the Soares estate.40 “Squatter’s Children” is divided into four stanzas, eight lines each. The poem opens with spectatorial distance remains, which the lyric eventually distorts in succeeding stanzas. Here the sun dominates the contours of the landscape the way stage lights flood a theater set:

On the unbreathing sides of hills
they play, a specklike girl and boy,
alone, but near a specklike house.
The sun’s suspended eye
blinks casually, and then they wade
gigantic waves of light and shade.
A dancing yellow spot, a pup,
attends them. Clouds are piling up […]

The speaker’s eye, like the surrealistic sun, blinks on the page. The lineation and the imagery persuade us to take notice of the mediating frame. The poem unfolds as if to parse its own language, underscoring the line as a unit differing from the temporality of the sentence. Almost all the lines in the first stanza (the first, fourth, and fifth are the exceptions) carry a four-beat rhythm as the metric norm, allowing us to register the high degree of variation in succeeding stanzas. The immediacy of the surround depends not only on the imagery organized by the syntax but also on lexical repetition, alliteration, and the occasional rhyme reinforced by the general pattern of four beats per line. Why should the lyric, we might wonder, account for itself in representing destitute children at play? Why should Bishop make us aware of the role that lyric mediation in our apprehension of the sensuous? To ask these questions is to hear anew
Bishop’s social conscience: “Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theaters?” Bishop’s vantage point seems to repeat that of Virgil’s Eclogue I:

Never again will I, stretched out at ease
In the mouth of some mossy cave, see how, far off,
Browsing you seem to hang from the high cliff side.
No longer will I sing my songs . . .

The speaker in these lines is a dispossessed herdsman. In being both a representation of poverty but also a tribute to play, Bishop’s poem is comparable to Virgilian pastoral. Her attempt to rework the mode is also consistent with Virgil’s reflexive awareness of a generic predecessor. In his study of the lyric, W. R. Johnson writes that *The Eclogues*, “deliberately imprecise imitations of pastoral form, figures and subject matter, recall their origins in order to destroy them.” *The Eclogues* begin with the experience of dispossession and dwell on the recuperative powers of song. In Eclogue I, a shepherd is forced to leave Arcadia because Rome has given his farm as a reward to a soldier. Meliboeus airs his plight to Tityrus, whom he meets resting in the shade. Tityrus is spared from the same predicament by a “god” in Rome. The dispossessed herdsman laments:

Never again will I, stretched out at ease
In the mouth of some mossy cave, see how, far off,
Browsing you seem to hang from the high cliff side.
No longer will I sing my songs . . .

Responding to the other shepherd’s lament, Tityrus offers him food and shelter. Tityrus’s hospitality is no less meaningful for being humble and fleeting. The quotidian aspects of Arcadian life seem heightened by the mood of impending exile resulting from property seizure. Images of sustenance resolve into the vista Meliboeus is about to relinquish:

Nevertheless, tonight you might stay here
And rest yourself awhile on these green fronds;
The apples are ripe, the chestnuts are plump and mealy,
The image punctuating the eclogue soothes but also mutely iterates the other dispossessed herdsman’s grief. The crepuscular landscape brings to mind Meliboeus’s vulnerability to the powers that be, his loss of land, exile and nostalgia. It also portends the other losses in successive poems: the death of Daphnis in Eclogue V; love’s disappointment in the second; and in the ninth, another case of state expropriation.

In “Squatter’s Children,” the Brazilian countryside enters the lyric as space akin to, but also different from, Virgil’s hypothetical Arcadia. Bishop at the outset limns her vista as “unbreathing sides of hills.” Bleached with light and then dimmed by rain clouds, the site of the idyll is drained of pastoral aura. Borrowing the term from Walter Benjamin, I use “aura” in referring to the synaesthetic qualities associated with a work of art (a landscape in this case), with its power to return the viewer’s gaze. The aura is the “unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be.” Benjamin illustrates the concept with images drawn from nature: “To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch.” This language of beholding forgetfully hears the deep time of pastoral mimesis. Subject to mediation, “aura” is not tangible mystical residue eventually lost in reproduction. The perceptibility of auratic landscapes depend on the breath of pastoral citation.

Bishop’s lineation theatricalizes the turns in the lyric construction of landscape. Upon the recognition that our image of Samambaia is an effect of mediation, the closest we come to the real is the exposure of the image as such. The “unbreathing” landscape sheds off the aura of pastoral, avoiding the temptation to “see all sugar and no pill,” a tendency that Lawrence Buell identifies in the many American versions of the mode. What Bishop’s auratic loss gains is a kind of sensuousness that, as in Virgil, no longer requires—or at least, minimizes—our naive
participation in the idyll. The “sun’s suspended eye” presents the aura as an imprint of pastoral memory. The lyric is unable to undo complicity, but the estranging capacities can suspend, at the very least, habits of cognition and force us to examine them. In this poem, Bishop defamiliarizes the landscape by shifting the perspective almost abruptly as the sun fades. The poem draws the figures closer than they actually care, focusing on details of play in the second and third stanzas:

a storm piles up behind the house.
The children play at digging holes.
The ground is hard; they try to use
one of their father’s tools,
a mattock with a broken haft
the two of them can scarcely lift.
It drops and clangs. Their laughter spreads
effulgence in the thunderheads,

weak flashes of inquiry
direct as is the puppy’s bark.
But to their little, soluble,
unwarrantable ark,
apparently the rain’s reply
consists of echolalia,
and Mother’s voice, ugly as sin,
keeps calling to them to come in.

Bishop’s sympathy for the children is unequivocal. Her yearning for the idyllic is evident in the metrical stability of the second stanza, setting iambic tetrameter as the rhythmic norm. The stanza pulses with a four beats distributed across the line, in units of an offbeat followed by a beat: \(o B o B o B o B\). This discretely song-like rhythm works as kind of sonic \textit{locus amoenus}. Bishop varies the meter only in the fourth and eighth lines. The fourth line, “One of their father’s tools,” carries only three beats, an initial inversion plus an iamb: \(B–o–B o B\). In the eighth line, “effulgence in the thunderheads,” the meter is ambiguous. If we promote the beat on \textit{in} and heads, the ideal rhythm rises: \(o B o b o B o b\). If we speed through them, suppressing the insistence of prior lines, the result is a two-beat phrase: \(o B ~o~ B ~o~\) (an iamb followed by a triple offbeat, a beat, and a double offbeat). The hesitation of tetrameter is significant. It signals
the beginning of metrical irregularity in the poem’s remainder: in the third stanza, where the
thunderheads tumble into “weak flashes of inquiry,” and in the concluding stanza, where the
storm pours in earnest.

After the second stanza, iambic tetrameter virtually disappears. And it vanishes in what
appears to be a stanza about pastoral ruination. Children, Walter Benjamin observes, “are
irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or
carpentry.” Discarded materials allow children to “recognize the fact that the world of things
turns directly and solely to them. In using these things they do not so much imitate the works of
adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a
new, intuitive relationship.” In Bishop’s third stanza, the broken tool the children “can scarcely
lift” allows us to infer their father’s line of work, gardening and the making of trails. Sheer
physical limitations preclude the children from a pure mimicry of labor, and what results is
something indeterminable. The poem zeroes in on an artifact of play, the “unwarrantable ark.” It
no sooner describes the “little, soluble” object than the object withdraws, taking up only half the
occupancy of tetrameter. Bishop counts the ark, nonetheless, as a singularity. Isolating the
phrase lends form to what is strictly intangible. Eluding the senses, the ark exists for as long as
we give credence to the metaphor, transferring the children’s vision to the speaker.

What “Squatter’s Children” encodes is a kind of destitution that belongs to lyric.
Yearning for the idyll and coming upon the experience of the poor in Brazil, the modern lyric
strains the traditional capacities of the mode. In contrasting ways, the second and third stanzas
echo the motif of song exchanges in Virgil. The synaesthesia in the second stanza turns
laughter into a kind of radiance, just as lightning spreads in thunder’s wake. Bishop gathers
sound motifs—issuing from the children, storm, and puppy—into an impossible conversation.
Although Bishop personifies nature in the third stanza, the trope she uses refers to a form of
pathological speech. The word “echolalia” undercuts the dialogue between the children and the
storm, draining nature of the imagined capacity to reply. The figural *locus amoenus*, carved out
of sound, breaks as the language of disenchantment troubles the potency of play, the perceptual mode sustained by a landscape, and the promise of convening.

The fate of dialogue fares no better among the human figures in the same stanza. As the storm pours, the mother calls her children back to the house. They do not heed her. Formally, rhyme and meter in the third stanza reflect this thwarting of ecologic structure. This stanza, as mentioned earlier, features the highest degree of metrical variance. Only three of its lines conserve the norm: tetrameter drives the rhythm of the second, seventh, and eight lines. An irregular trimeter jangles across the rest of the stanza with the murmur of double, even triple, offbeat. (In the third stanza, double offbeat articulates the first and third lines, and triple offbeat, the fourth to sixth lines.) The second line, “direct as is a puppy’s bark,” rhymes with one of the metrically shortest lines. It scans with a triple offbeat: \( o B \sim o \sim B \). Pairing “sin” with “in,” lines seven and eight likewise exhibit rhyme. “To some extent, the idea of rhyme,” Bishop writes in an unpublished manuscript, “must be, or must have been, superstition: the idea that if two things \textit{sound} alike they must also be alike and that there is therefore some mysterious connection between them.”

The coincidence between rhyming lines in the third stanza and their return to the metrical norm figuratively enact the erosion of the poem’s links to Virgilian pastoral colloquy.

The seventh line, “and Mother’s voice, ugly as sin,” blunts the reassertion of iambic tetrameter. The comma in the middle of the line, signaling a virtual offbeat, emphasizes the terminal inversion: \( o B o B [o] B \sim o \sim B \). The eighth line likewise suppresses the metrical norm. It misses a beat and echoes the terminal inversion with \textit{promoted} beats cleaved by double offbeat: \( O B o b \sim o \sim b \). In terms of sonic structure, the eighth line is thus a faint version of the seventh. It is hard not to interpret such wavering poetic music as an auditory likeness of the effect that the mother’s voice has on the idyll. The coincidence is remarkable: after dispossession haunts the figuration of the lyric voice itself, the “ugly” parental voice breaks through the specklike house and interrupts play. Bishop presents the children’s \textit{locus amoenus} in tension
with the house, as a constraint on the realist mode of class representation. The site of play gives rise to another kind of refuge, infinitely capacious but also hypothetical and fragile. What adequate form of response can the poet then offer the idyll of the dispossessed?

**Mansions for the poor**

Snapshots of tropical rainfall conclude “Squatter’s Children.” Once again the lyric plays with perspective. Despite the obscuring weather and distance, the speaker addresses the children—apostrophizing them, imagining their play continue without regard for the mother’s voice, and lingering over tactile minutiae impossibly seen from a distance. Bishop takes up anew the motifs seen earlier. The lineation repeats the earlier parsing gestures, mutely glossing on the turns of metaphor. The surrealistic conceit of the theater likewise resumes. The storm moves like a stage set “dissolving to leave the ground underneath.”49 As though to compensate for the exposure and contingency that the poor know only too well, the first line of the last stanza invokes the language of dwelling. Towards the end, however, the class process girding the title comes into focus:

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Children, the threshold of the storm
has slid beneath your muddy shoes;
wet and beguiled, you stand among
the mansions you may choose
out of a bigger house than yours,
whose lawfulness endures.
Its soggy documents retain
your rights in rooms of falling rain.
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If the third stanza’s “unwarrantable ark” foreshadows the inundation portrayed here, that phrase also finds its metrical echo in the line “whose lawfulness endures.” Both generate the same rhythm: \( o \, B \sim o \sim B \). The parallelism is worth noting. To “warrant” is to conjoin the idea of refuge with legal discourse pertaining to estate or land.50 The metrical likeness, hence, bears out a sense of contradiction as Bishop elicits the compensatory work of pastoral song. The imagery of the storm as refuge displaces the meanings we associate with it. Because apostrophe...
foreshortens the textual voice, attributing “lawfulness” to the storm makes the trace of artifice wholly apparent. Poetry, Bishop suggests, requires the artifice it works to conceal. She calls it “pretense” in a 1930s essay on Auden:

the contemporary language is not equivalent to the contemporary fact; there is something out of proportion between them, and what is being said in words is not at all what is being said in “things.” To connect this disproportion a pretence is first necessary. By “pretending” the existence of a language appropriate and comparable to the “things” it must deal with, the language is forced into being.54

There is no doubt about the ethical dangers incurred by “Squatter’s Children.” As one poet reviewing Questions of Travel writes, “the better off have always preferred their poor processed by style.”52 Aestheticizing the poor risks distortion and minimizes our complicity in the systemic aspects of suffering. It even tends to valorize the usefulness of hardship, with the notion that poverty tests our resourcefulness. Without ignoring these risks, what if we take Bishop at her word? Or for that matter, that of the poet she admired as the “founder of the ‘forsaken factory’ school of literary landscape painting”?53 In 1942, in his much-anthologized poem “Canzone,” Auden says:

Whether we meet in a majestic world
Of solid measurements or a dream world
Of swans and gold, we are required to love
All homeless objects that require a world. 54

The dream world of pastoral attests to things for which the language has no equivalence, to the unhomely, breaking through us with effulgence and pain. Conveying “love,” Peggy Kamuf writes, entails “the declaration of the other at my address.”55 Despite all the odds that realism foregrounds (the somatic limits of cognition, spatial and class distance, the susceptibility of human wishes to power)—the decision to affirm the idyll leads Bishop to turn her poem directly to the children. What kind of space does the poetic act force into being? It is striking that as Bishop portrays a landscape obscured by rain, she also invites us to think of nature as the
children’s proper home. And yet nowhere else is the poem invested in the symbolic economy of property. From the fourth stanza’s fourth line onwards, “Squatter’s Children” plays host to questions of lawfulness, rights, and writ of possession.

The stanza strives to allay the threat of the children’s eviction. It suspends one of the most vital categories of class process, within one of most resilient pastoral fantasies. The idea of dwelling, we might say, seizes the concept of property. Once more Bishop seems to remember Virgil, particularly the *limen Olympi* in the elegy of Eclogue V: “Radiant Daphnis wonders at heaven’s threshold,” Menalcas sings, “Seeing the stars and clouds beneath his feet” (*E* 39). A biographical gloss, if proven accurate, brings out the valence of elegy. The poem “may have been Bishop’s response to a storm” in 1956, when “a family of seven was wiped out in a landslide.” There may be a nod here toward the Bible: “In my Father’s house are many mansions.”

The stanza may also look past Christian eschatology and refer simply to dwellings that—in the eyes of metaphor—seem immanent in the physical surround. Purchasing no mortgage on the afterlife, Bishop imagines nature dispersing the power of the law. The idea is consonant with what Williams calls “the separation of spirit,” standing in opposition to the view that maps the world in terms of property:

> There is a separation of possession, a control of land and its prospects. But there is also a separation of spirit: a recognition of forces of which we are a part but of which we may always forget, and which we learn from, not seek to control. In these two kinds of separation the idea of nature was held and transformed.

For Bishop, nature is the “bigger house” that enables all forms of refuge. The proper relation to things in nature and things wrested from it is to dwell with them. If nature as dwelling supersedes the idea of property, then it is nature itself that validates the claims made by persons denied their rights to the places they labor to build. To access this spatial modality in nature, the speaker adopts childlike vision. “The children play at digging holes,” Bishop writes, “The ground is hard.” Responding to this scene, the speaker tries to elude the meaning of
possession in the eyes of the law. Of course, the notion that playing, like song and poetry, can
restore us to our innocence is a pastoral conceit. Describing the storm as though it gave rise to
mansions for the poor, Bishop is harking back not to liberation theology but older, to the myth
of a world where no distinctions partition the living. It is for such a world that Virgil longs in
Eclogue VI, where the herdsman Tityrus commemorates Orpheus:

He sang of how the newborn orb of the world
Began to coalesce, and how the ground
Began to harden, and how it was that the rule
Of the god of the sea was confined to the sea, and how
The earth looked up in wonder at the new
Light of the shining sun, and how from clouds
The rain came down in showers; then woods arose,
And living creatures wandered on the sides
Of mountains unaware of what they were. (E 47)

This idea of natural dwelling in Virgil’s text harbors an irony. Appearing to recede behind
the historical emergence of property, the mythic world shines against the shadowed reality we
have already seen in Eclogue I: “No more will I sing my songs,” mourns Meliboeus on his way to
exile. The land confiscations in Arcadia cast into doubt the efficacy of song in the wake of social
upheaval. Likewise, in Eclogue IX, Lycidas and Moeris each struggle to recall songs as they
stride to town with goats to be sold. The innovation of Eclogue IX, as David Meban elucidates,
consists in “the articulation of the instability and the fragmentation within the framework of
memory loss and the silencing of the bucolic community.”58 The animals being herded by Moeris
are no longer his; his farm has just been seized and given to a war veteran. “What can music do,”
Moeris says, “Against the weapons of soldiers?”(E 71)

Through the evicted shepherds, Virgil dramatizes the link between collectivity and
music. Just as communal memory ensures the perpetuity of songs, so do songs restore social
coherence by recalling shared experience. Upheavals not only warp collectivity. They also strain
the commemorative links the group needs to interpret its losses and endure. This is why the
figure of Orpheus, who can summon the immemorial, gains urgency for pastoral speakers. As Moeris tells his young friend:

Time takes all we have away from us;
I remember when I was a boy I used to sing
Every long day of summer down to darkness,
And now I am forgetting all my songs. (E 75)

The herdsman in Eclogue IX relegates his loss of song to entropy. Although his attitude breeds sanity and fortitude, it also tends to naturalize the aspects of suffering that arise from institutional violence. Weakened song prowess, the case of Moeris suggests, afflicts pastoral speakers with a kind of historical amnesia. What moves Virgil to commemorate Orpheus is a trepidation that runs two-fold. The threat of eviction goes hand in hand with the anxiety over the fate of song and social memory.

Bishop inherits this stance with greater unease. The disruption of ecologic exchange and metrical irregularity, as shown earlier, reflect her suspicion toward compensatory song. Her comportment within the mode, as John Kinsella says of “radical pastoral,” involves a “metacritical awareness of the absurdity of idyllicising anything at all.” Bishop questions pastoral spatiality for implicitly ethical reasons. It is one thing to speak of nature as refuge, and quite another to view landscape in terms of real estate. The last stanza’s “rooms of falling rain” seek to harmonize—if not merely contain—the clash between our desire to dwell with nature and our attachment to property.

In The Irony of American History, a book Marianne Moore sent to Bishop in 1952, Reinhold Niebuhr summarizes “the communist dogma” as a kind of pastoral ideology. According to him, communists believe that “the institution of property” corrupts us, and that “the abolition of this institution guarantees the return of mankind to the state of original innocency which existed before the institution of property arose, a state which Engels describes as one of idyllic harmony with ‘no soldiers, no gendarmes, no policemen, prefects or judges, no
prisons, laws or lawsuits.” Niebuhr bodes the violence of land confiscation upon the rise of communist regimes in Asia and in the Americas. Bishop’s pastoral falls under the shadow of this hypothetical communist take-over.

The Cold War finds its way to Brazil via the fierce contestations over land tenure and the rights of peasants in latifundios or fazendas. “The hand of the Communists is in every corner,” one Brazilian military official says in 1952, “and we must cut it off.” These immense tracts of land, managed and controlled by an elite minority, reflect colonial afterlives in modern organizational structures. “The horrid facts about the conditions of Brazil,” as Bishop puts it in one of her letters, is often blamed on the feudalistic nature of the latifundio system. The poet’s reading of Niebuhr is left to surmise. But her Cold War anxiety is unmistakable, particularly in her letters. In 1956, the year in which “Squatter’s Children” first saw print, Bishop writes May Swenson about Samambaia. She informs the fellow poet that her companion Lota owns a big tract of land, ... left her by her mother, and the ancient Fazenda of Samambaia (a ‘national monument’ now), down below us, was her home when she was little. The land down below, near the highway, is being ‘developed,’ which is her source of income, but she’s kept a couple of square miles here at the top where we live, so it will always be protected from neighbors.

Lota, whose generous companionship allowed Bishop’s to live in Brazil, was not a traditional landowner. According to the Brazilian novelist and biographer Carmen Oliveira, “Lota said that her father had bought Fazenda Samambaia when she was eight.” When Bishop began living with Lota, the fazenda was no longer purely agricultural property. It was a real estate project. Lota’s “profession, apparently, was to be from an illustrious family,” writes Oliveira. “She walked around her vast property, inventing the beautiful things that would be in Samambaia one day, and the beautiful people who would buy lots to build their magnificent houses there.”

To say that Bishop’s poems condescend to the poor is to misrecognize their ambivalence. It puts to rest the kind of questioning at the crux of her pastoral project, what Patterson might
call “the hard pastoral of the mind at serious work.” It is not apparent in “Squatter’s Children,” for example, that using the sonorous metaphor of nature as refuge can disperse the seductive lure of possession. Neither should we suppose that the language of reformism can generate a response equal to the experience of someone else’s dispossession. Bishop’s pastoral gambit is to fuse incompatible discourses into a singular voice that affirms our imaginative spaces while disclosing the unease out of which our need for them emerges. Otherwise the affirmation would seem effete and shockingly improper in the face of the inequity Bishop records. Its effects are tragic and far-reaching, extending even beyond the “unbreathing sides of hills” where Bishop lived. As Bishop writes:

    On the green hills of Rio  
    There grows a fearful stain:  
    The poor who come to Rio  
    And can't go home again. (CP 111-18)

These lines conclude “The Burglar of Babylon,” a poem about the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Whereas “Squatter’s Children” elicits compassionate spectatorship, “The Burglar of Babylon” interpellates the gaze of “Rich people in apartments,” watching “through binoculars” (CP 115) as the thief eludes the soldiers in hot pursuit. Bishop admits being one of these voyeurs. The poem’s frisson partially derives from the restoration of order predicated on disruption. Micuçu is the hyperbolic figure of rupture in discourse of property itself. His identity protrudes from illegitimate sites of domicile, sites that accumulate surplus labor of peasants migrating into Rio. It dominates the space of poem, like unofficial place names spreading “a fearful stain” on the rationality of a city map. Micuçu brings to an extreme the possessive urge. This urge links rural and urban processes. It is propagated in latifundios and crystallized in the centers of a modernizing state.

The burglar embodies the unruly remainder of our attachment to property. For this reason, during the larger part of the ballad, Bishop cedes the rich people’s viewpoint over to the
focalization of Micuçu, playing foil to our desire for order. But the law must liquidate the thief. Dying from a gunshot, Micuçu hears “the babies crying/ Far, far away in his head” and “mongrels barking and barking” (CP 116). This belated return to innocence also happens to echo “Squatter’s Children,” the pup beside the girl and boy. This likeness begs us to glance at yet another correspondence between the two poems—occurring before the thief’s capture, when Micuçu interrupts a seaside idyll. There, like but also unlike the “sun’s suspended eye” in Samambaia, another sun (CP 115) appears:

The yellow sun was ugly,
   Like a raw egg on a plate—
Slick from the sea. He cursed it,
   For he knew it sealed his fate.

He saw the long white beaches
   And people going to swim,
With towels and beach umbrellas,
   But the soldiers were after him.

Light shines equally on these class-riven figures in this seaside idyll. But rules of signification can only accommodate the briefest pastoral reunion. It must halt the movement between the poles of our voyeurism, between the law imposing order and the thief eluding death. “Micuçu dashed for shelter,” Bishop writes, “But he got it, behind the ear.” According to Adorno and Horkheimer, “poverty as the antithesis between power and impotence is growing beyond measure, together with the capacity permanently to abolish poverty.” Bishop ends the ballad with the suggestion that this violence occurs practically everyday in Babylon, Kerosene, the Skeleton, and Astonishment.

In “Squatter’s Children,” the tone of closure is persuasive because the final lines mark the return of the familiar. As the idiom of property articulates the ending, the metrical ideal resumes. A hesitant iambic rhythm forms the first half of the terminal sentence, “Its soggy documents retain”—after which iambic tetrameter rounds off poem—“your rights in rooms of falling rain.” Barbara Herrnstein Smith observes that “the terminal repetition of an initial
element ... always tends to have a closural effect.” Bishop’s ending fosters reserve. What obtains, alongside the economic partitioning, is the distance wrought by the symbolic economy of class. Bishop’s pastoral aesthetic grazes the heart of idyllic disquiet. There is no need to aggravate it, only to notice the conscience of an American expatriate living close to destitute neighbors.

There seems little promise, then, in rehearsing bucolic exchange by “crossing boundaries” in the name of solidarity. “We like to like the poor,” Schocket writes. “It allows us to experience our own fragility, our own position within the relations of exploitation.” The wish to transform poverty into an expression of dwelling seems entirely consonant with the wish for nature to guarantee the proprietary claims of squatters. But their seamlessness, beyond the law’s asymmetry with nature, is founded on a contradiction. Widespread impoverishment necessitates the sanctity of property. Bishop exposes this absurdity in the way her affirmation of the dispossessed enunciates the affirmation of possession. The last stanza plays on knowledge that we often persuade ourselves to forget. Among the mansions we may choose, the choice is rarely wide or free. Fittingly, Bishop’s closure secretes the tears of things.

Virgilian tact minimizes the pathos, the grief incurred by sympathizing with the poor and laying bare our complicity as strength relative to class process. Such reticence makes it more urgent to “overhear” the lyric, to warrant the little that counts, in the ambivalence of any affirmation. The apostrophe is spoken not only to the poor, or solely on their behalf. Removing them from the locus of hearing and reply, it also calls to us—and past us, to others in the future, whom we may no longer imagine but to whom we are responsible. It disturbs what Niebuhr terms our “claims of innocence,” challenging the potencies of our will. It addresses to us the piercing of otherness. Nearing golden silence, what does the end of the poem conjure outside class? If we can picture any retreat past the symbolic economy long settled within the idyllic, “the threshold of the storm” betrays nothing. Bishop trusts us to be knowingly beguiled.

“Squatter’s Children” pretends to a fictive world whose vitality pastoral conserves, a kind of
freedom that poetic language can configure only provisionally, inconsistently, as the liquidation of boundaries.

**Private cloud, barbed-wire**

The tension between property and dwelling recurs in two other contrasting poems about houses: “Song for the Rainy Season” (*CP* 101-02) and “Twelfth Morning; Or What You Will” (*CP* 110-11). In 1952, Bishop writes to the Barkers that Lota “is in the middle of building herself a large and elegant modern house on the side of a black granite cliff beside a waterfall.”71 “Song” commemorates this house, “protected from neighbors,” as noted earlier in her letter to Swenson. Far from the hill of Babylon, soft pastoral fills up the opening stanzas: the “rainbow-ridden” rock close to the house, “the lint of waterfalls” clinging, “familiar, unbidden.” The most exquisite stanza is ostensibly the second. Bishop coaxes us into a verdant soundscape:

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In a dim age
of water
the brook sings loud
from a rib cage
of giant fern; vapor
climbs up the thick growth
effortlessly, turns back,
holding them both,

house and rock,
in a private cloud.
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The first line sets the tempo for the rest of the lines. Though enjambed, it slows down with the demoted beat on the penultimate syllable. Brief nominatives with alternating short and long vowels nurture the air of ease amid the surprising turns of an irregular meter. So much life thrives here: the intimacy between built space and the environment; the love mutely affirmed by the phrase “them both,” which Bishop immediately qualifies as “house and rock”; the contrasts in texture, stillness, and fluid movement. The luxuriance of the natural surround deflects the prying gaze away from the fazenda’s interior.
This tone changes dramatically in the conclusion, which envisions “a later era” of drought. *Et in Arcadia Ego*. The rock becomes “unmagnetized” and “bare” under a “steady sun.” The foreshadowing of loss echoes Moeris in Eclogue IX. But the poem has already suggested such obsolescence at the outset, with the permeability of the house to silver fish, bookworms and big moths (CP 108). Though this might be the case, however, the security of property associated with Fazenda Samambaia staves off the fate of all dwelling. It heightens, moreover, the value of privacy. Intrigue and tact conspire with a premonition of loss. The delicate allusion to lesbian intimacy inside the house, “maculate cherished,” is a sign of both fecundity and decay.\(^72\)

In both “Song” and “Twelfth Morning,” as in the poem about squatters, Bishop describes the frame of her description at the outset. Bishop makes visible what Schocket would call, in relation to photographs of the poor, “the ritual of unveiling.”\(^73\) Around the house in “Song,” the “fat frogs” are “shrilling for love” as they “clamber and mount.” Mildew invades. Its “ignorant map” spreads on the walls, growing because of the “warm touch” of its human occupants and their “warm breath” as “maculate cherished.” External fecundity alludes to the kind of domesticity it conceals. Bishop exteriorizes hidden life as if the inwardness of Fazenda Samambia were in excess of its frame. The metonyms linking nature and the house are what make the notion of retreat wholly seductive. They permit us to take for granted the link between property and privacy. This is not the case with the poor shelter in “Twelfth Morning.” Set in the coastal town of Cabo Frio, the poem begins:

> Like a first coat of whitewash when it's wet,
> the thin gray mist lets everything show through:
> the black boy Balthazár, a fence, a horse,
> a foundered house,
>
> —cement and rafters sticking from a dune.
> (The Company passes off these white but shopworn dunes as lawns.) “Shipwreck,” we say; perhaps this is a housewreck. (*CP* 110)
Around the shack of “Twelfth Morning,” however, nature leaves little for the idyllic to cast its aura around the concept of property. It “lets everything show through.” Unlike the inwardness of the mountain retreat in Samambaia, the signs of domesticity in the Cabo Frio prevent us from going further than the superficialities of a “housewreck.” In a letter written on Good Friday, 1953, Bishop writes about ugliness:

> now after living here I see how everything is wretchedly made, unfinished, and that for so long only the rich with good taste could have anything better, and of course then it was always English. The same thing is true of looks—... the general level of looks is rather low, I’m afraid—and the ugliness of the “poor people”—I don’t know what to call them—is appalling. Nobody seems “well-made,” except some of the Negroes.74

The ugliness of poor dwelling, their being wretchedly made, seems to result from a peculiar imbalance. “Twelfth Morning” illustrates unregulated space, the outside occurring in excess of the inside. Such ugliness disperses the aura that grants a proper house its inwardness. The secure status of Fazenda Samambaia as property is at the same time the basis of its idealization and concealment. Porous boundaries are cause for its song. In contrast, the land parcel in Cabo Frio is not-quite-property. The “housewreck” there exhibits physical diminution and meager inwardness disproportionate to its surplus exteriority. Bishop studies this imbalance further in the fourth and fifth stanzas:

> The fence, three-strand, barbed-wire, all pure rust, three dotted lines, comes forward hopefully across the lots; thinks better of it; turns a sort of corner...

> Don't ask the big white horse, Are you supposed to be inside the fence or out? He's still asleep. Even awake, he probably remains in doubt.

Whereas the fog in “Song” traces a fluid concatenation of environmental detail, the mist of “Twelfth Morning” unveils disarray, irregularity, and exposure. Bishop’s italicized query
underscores the secrecy surrounding the meaning of “The Company.” The second stanza fences that allusion with parentheses. We cannot quite tell what “The Company” represents. Is it a residential project for wage laborers, managed by an agricultural estate; or perhaps, a government-run institution for affordable housing? We can gainsay this much: the eponymous phrase and Bishop’s use of parentheses appears to signal another sort of intrigue, radically different from the “maculate cherished” in Samambaia. The prospects in Cabo Frio seem grim, but the speaker parries the accusatory tone of social realism with insouciant humor. What gives class process away is the rehearsal of Virgilian reserve. Alternatively perhaps, Bishop is remembering Empson: “The feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so, is at home with most versions of pastoral.”

In spite of good-natured mockery in “Twelfth Morning,” a trace of grief cuts through the tone of restraint. “It is impossible to live in the midst of poverty,” Patrick Greaney writes, reflecting on the beggars in the work of Benjamin, “because the wounds of poverty cannot be covered up. The exposure of the poor makes them vulnerable and wounds the passerby.”

The punctum in “Twelfth Morning” occurs in the third stanza. There, as with the opaque reference to “The Company,” the sounds of a sandpiper encode yet another allusion, scarcely heard but wholly relevant to the theme of meager dwelling:

The sea’s off somewhere, doing nothing. Listen.
An expelled breath. And faint, faint, faint
(or are you hearing things), the sandpiper’s heart-broken cries.

In contrast to the unobtrusive enjambment in “Song,” the penultimate line features a steep cut, tripping up the rhythm. The line break forces us to dwell on the semblance of an ecologic situation. The speaker asks us to “Listen.” In parenthetical sotto voce, Bishop asks us: “are you hearing things.” As though to compensate for the surplus exteriority of Balthazár’s shack, Bishop invites us to overhear the privacy of the lyric, the textuality at the heart of its sonic
motifs. Viajando para o interior: “We are traveling to the interior.” And what we hear of course, apart from bird noises construed as grief, is the allusion to another poem in Questions of Travel, in the section titled “Elsewhere.” In this other seaside poem, as in “Twelfth Morning,” prosopopeia weaves the intertextual strands around questions of cognition. Set in a North American landscape, “Sandpiper” (CP 131) describes the waterline from the creature’s point of view:

The world is a mist. And then the world is minute and vast and clear. The tide is higher or lower. He couldn’t tell you which.

“Sandpiper” depicts a tactile sort of vision, “Poor bird! he is obsessed.” Its terminal stanza zooms in on the minutiae that absorb him: “millions of grains ... black, white, tan, and gray,” as well as the “quartz grains, rose and amethyst.” Beyond the shared fascination with surfaces, “Twelfth Morning” lays bare cognitive processes by proffering a resonant seascape. The idea of sympathetic nature draws us into the pathos that Bishop disguises with comic bravado. But as with the thunder in “Squatter’s Children,” Bishop tethers her pastoralism to disenchantment: “The sea’s off somewhere, doing nothing.” De-auraticized nature places the onus of responsibility on the personae gathered around the site of dispossession—poet as well as reader. A mute plea occurs on behalf of the poor. What would it mean for the lyric to recognize Balthazár, to warrant his subjectivity and register his voice? Equally urgent, then, is the challenge Bishop poses regarding the adequacy of our perceptual frames, and the fidelity of cognition before a world that is sometimes “a mist” and only rarely “vast and clear.” In spite of our capacity to peer into its materiality, class process obscures relations of power, as Bishop illustrates with the opacity of “The Company.”

The anxiety over interiority and its communicability propels the speaker of “Twelfth Night” to keep returning to surfaces. Bishop enacts an obsession with exteriority and boundaries, “all pure rust,” unable to safeguard the propriety of a land parcel. The unregulated
space points not only to tenuous ownership. It also makes visible the fundamental cipher with which class embeds itself in the mimetic frame. We note, for example, the speaker feigning obtuseness with the horse, “bigger than the house.” Is it “inside the fence or out?” Exaggerating asymmetry between inside and outside, class process tends to diminish the inwardness of the poor. “Twelfth Morning” thus ends by reproducing the consolations of pastoral. With a flicker of self-consciousness, Bishop limns the shadows of a Virgilian rustic singer:

But a gallon can
approaching on the head of Balthazár
keeps flashing that the world’s a pearl, and I,
I am

its highlight! You can hear the water now,
inside, slap-slapping. Balthazár is singing.
"Today's my Anniversary," he sings,
"the Day of Kings."

Beyond Virgilian song, there is also the shade of pastoral mimesis peculiar to Christianity. Balthazár’s birthday falls on the Feast of the Epiphany. The date commemorates the magi’s visit to the infant Christ. The gospel of Matthew, the only text narrating the visit, mentions no manger. Iconographic tradition records a pastoral scene, nonetheless, to cite the trope of the shepherd-messiah. This textual surplus—extruding from Virgilian and Christian pastoral to shape the locus of privacy in the poem—breaks into the disenchanted realm of Balthazár.

Admittedly, we hear echoes here of “the myth of the happy peasant” in Romantic pastoral. Frank Kermode recalls the transformation of this figure, from “the happy peasant or shepherd” of the Renaissance to “the true natural man of the New World,” prevalent in Romantic poetry. Bishop’s poem is hard pastoral. Here is a boy fetching water for a house which apparently, has no plumbing. As the speaker studies the uncertain markings of the lot, the boy’s destitution blurs the distinction between ordinary and festive time. His birthday begins
like any other, with work necessitated by want. Bishop prepares us to register this irony, with our memory of the sandpiper’s faint music from far off piercing the boy’s song.

Bishop deliberately makes the lyric speaker’s voice partly occlude the soundscape, like the mist in the opening stanzas. Previously melancholy, the natural world in the final stanzas becomes “a pearl” (of great price, perhaps) on whose surface the boy declares himself to be “its highlight.” The last two stanzas countersign the idea of a distant, sighing sea, with the image of water churning out percussive music, “slap-slapping” in a recycled can. “You can hear the water now,” as opposed to asking, “are you hearing things.” The pastoral affirmation consists in this secular epiphany, the emergence of another voice, announcing that the day as “the Day of Kings.”

The troping of skin and vocal rhythm is not so much racist as racially marked. In earlier stanzas, Bishop notes Balthazár’s hue beside the fence, cement, rafters, white dunes, and the horse, initially white but later, “pewter-colored.” The boy’s singing is “well-made” vocalization in the sense Bishop uses in her letter: “Nobody seems ‘well-made,’ except some of the Negroes.” The terminal stanzas of “Twelfth Morning” try to suspend our obsession with exteriority. They (appear to) forget what Fanon calls the “epidermal schema.” No, we are not merely hearing things. What we find in fact is a kind of graphematic parody whose bête noire is the self-affirmation apparently coming from the boy. Our skepticism toward pastoral tempts us to think that the voice of Balthazár ultimately has been appropriated, and that the linkage between surplus exteriority and poverty is reinforced. But the text preoccupied with boundaries says otherwise, no less than in the transitional space between the concluding stanzas.

The fragmented image of vocalization there emphasizes tonal variance. The italicized lines break off from the speaker’s sentence. It emphasizes the way the boy is being fed the boy lines, as it were, a projection that functions the way class highlights the exteriority of destitution. Brian W. Breed maintains that Virgilian pastoral “seems to want to define itself through a powerful orality, only to emphasize the fundamental inability of the written text to embody that
Bishop, in contrast, makes productive use of such inability, specifically, the superficialities of textual features. The mockery directed at the “housewreck” now coils into the bravado of egotism. The italics separates what “You can hear” from what only the speaker perceives in situ. The lyric upholds music as the privileged sign of interiority by marking off the boy’s voice, distinguishing the speaker’s parodic intonation from the singular, indeterminable tone of what “Balthazár is singing.” It conserves, in short, his privacy.

**Cold War pastoral**

Altered by historical necessity, pastoral is the shifting ground of Bishop’s social conscience. In “Manuelzinho,” the mode allows Bishop to comment, almost directly, on property relations in Brazil. The poem, spoken in the voice of a landowner, describes a tenant, and in Frank Bidart’s estimation, carries “the whiff of noblesse oblige.” Without commenting directly on the geopolitics of the Cold War, Bishop inscribes class difference at the very outset. Manuel Alvez is “Half squatter, half tenant (no rent).” The landowner characterizes him as “a sort of inheritance”(*CP* 96), living close to the house celebrated in “Song for the Rainy Season.” The scenario localizes the “class war” which according to Niebuhr, “has become the dominant pattern of international relations.”

The landowner in “Manuelzinho” is Lota, whom Bishop does not name in the subheading: “Brazil. A friend of the writer is speaking.” Lota’s exasperation with her tenant, “the world’s worst gardener since Cain,” is comparable to Bishop’s own complaints about Brazil in her letters to North American friends. Writing to Pear Kazin in 1954, Bishop complains: “I must decide what I’m going to think about it if I live here for good and all. As a country I feel it’s hopeless—not in the horrible way Mexico is, but just plain lethargic, self-seeking, half-smug, half-crazy, hopeless.” The moralism here seems consonant with the discourse of political meritocracy discussed early in relation to *Conquistador*. MacLeish’s epic poem implicitly critiques U.S. designs on Mexican and Nicaraguan sovereignty, and the justification made by the
condescending rhetoric of U.S. relations portraying these nations as inept, requiring tutelage in democratic governance. What is striking in “Manuelzinho,” however, is that alongside the resemblance between the Bishop’s attitude toward Brazil and her friend’s stance toward the tenant, divergences in tonality nonetheless exist. We see it, for example, in when Bishop renders Lota’s apprehension of her tenant. Manuel likes to paint, “heaven knows why,” the exterior surface of his headgear: “the outside of the crown” as well as the “brim of [his] straw hat” (CP 99). Lota views his labor, too, is viewed in terms of the picturesque:

Titled above me, your gardens
ravish my eyes. You edge
the beds of silver cabbages
with read carnations, and lettuces
mix with alyssum ... (CP 96)

The garden recalls the opening lines of “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” the poem about the Portuguese conquistadors. “Nature greets our eyes,” Bishop writes, “exactly as she must have greeted” the eyes of the conquerors: “every square inch filling in with foliage” (CP 91). The description of landscape in “Manuelzinho” allows us to recognize the relays between colonial culture and the property system in Fazenda Samambaia. Dramatic irony creases the overlap between the speaker of poem and the authorial voice.

The memory of clash hovers over the fertile landscape. Lota manages the anxiety of violence with acts of naming. Comparing the tenant to Cain acknowledges the class rivalry but the moniker, “Little Manuel,” infantilizes him. Drawing from the tropes of soft pastoral, Lota tolerates her tenant’s petty thieving and opportunism. She underwrites the cost of his father’s funeral. She provides him “a shot of penicillin” and “Electrical Baby Syrup” (CP 97). Manuel, for his part, turns his vulnerability into emotional capital,

sniffing and shivering,
hat in hand, with that wistful
face, like a child’s fistful
of bluets or white violets, 
improvident as the dawn. (CP 97-98)

Soft pastoral, in this case, lets Bishop engage the question of sympathy. The poor suffer. Sociable, poetic knowledge of this sort is discomforting when the poor happen to be our neighbors—when we know their names and see their faces, when we speak with them, when they work for us. “Sympathy is not simply a mark of a good guest in someone else’s home,” Marilyn May Lombardi writes, “it is the only protective barrier between the poet and the poet’s worst instincts.” And yet sympathy in the case of “Manuelzinho” also gives rise to another difficulty: what does the suffering of the poor have to do with our discomfort? The complexity of this social space is not likely to have gone unnoticed, expressed through the “golden silence” of living in Brazil with an aristocratic lesbian lover during the Cold War, and of shuttling back and forth between a fazenda in the hills and an apartment in the city, with memories of travel across the discrepant time zones of Americanity. The deep time of pastoral should give us pause.

Williams would call this as charity: “An ideal of charity [has to coexist] with the harshness of labour relations in both the new and the old modes.” Bishop’s poem is consistent with the sociological portrait of the dependency and non-monetary exchanges between landowner and tenant. A benevolent landowner is expected to perform acts of charity and nurture personal relations: “giving medicine to the workers, taking the sharecropper’s wife to a hospital when she gives birth to a child, paying doctors’ bills or becoming godfather to a worker’s child.” These acts, however, only cement the landowner’s autocratic power. Inequity remains, a disjointure around which class struggle and social harmony ambivalently spin. The landowner’s tolerance and the tenant’s dependency foreclose the dialogue and negotiation over the configuration of property and labor systems in Brazilian rurality. This is why Bishop can depend on the pastoral fiction of mutuality to give “Manuelzinho” a feeling of resolution:

You helpless, foolish man,  
I love you all I can,  
I think. Or I do?
I take off my hat, unpainted
and figurative, to you.
Again I promise to try. (CP 99)

The conclusion sounds plainspoken and sincere. The terminal variation, producing the sense of poetic closure, is generated by linguistic reduction. The final stanza is the shortest in “Manuelzinho,” with some of the poem’s briefest lines. Bishop plays on the stark contrast to the verse paragraphs earlier, with lines built out of lengthy sentences. But as with “Twelfth Morning,” Bishop dents the resolution with irony. The doffed “unpainted” hat gives away the pastoral gambit, suggesting that the mutuality is “figurative.” Read beside the history of contemporaneous peasant struggles, the politics of “Manuelzinho” is remarkable. Its original publication in May 1956, and later in Questions of Travel, in 1965, coincides with a decade of Brazilian rural unrest.  

When the North American poet arrived at Santos in 1951, Brazilian peasants and rural workers had yet to formalize their alliances. “The rural underprivileged had no weight in the political process,” writes Thomas Skidmore. “No major political figure in 1950 proposed any radical changes in the land system.” The peasants believed, Jan Knippers Black maintains, that the “effort to organize in pursuit of class interest would be dangerous and futile.” It also stemmed from sheer financial want: “Illiterate majority of the peasants lacked even the minimum fee for membership in the patrimonial political system.” This situation inhibited peasants from consolidating their stakes in reform.

After 1950, however, the industrializing countryside, the increasing cost of land, and the unstable position of rural workers bred unrest. These changes mobilized landless tenants and the poor working in large farm estates. They began to see a common stake in agrarian reform. In May 1956, recently elected to the presidency, Juscelino Kubitschek delivered his first message to the Brazilian congress. He decried the sluggish rate of industrialization. He blamed the “disequilibrium between the small number of rural landowners and the large number of those working on land they do not own.” But no decisive change in the land system actually took place.
Kubitschek may have been only mollifying the restless underclass. His speech nonetheless legitimated organizations like the Peasant Leagues, whose national influence by the 1960s and association with the Cuban revolution became a threat to landowners.

The specter of Communism haunted Bishop. In May 1960 Francisco Julião, lawyer and leader of the Peasant Leagues, visited Cuba. “Apparently impressed by that country’s agrarian reform,” as Mallon recalls, “he returned in 1961 for a longer visit accompanied by one hundred League militants.” A month after Julião’s trip to Cuba, Bishop writes Robert Lowell about a fête to entertain the Chinese Trade Commission:

I tried talking to one of [the Chinese guests] whose English was very limited and when he told me ‘Castro-strong-strong’ shaking his fist, and ‘Batista bad-bad’ ... for the first time, I think, a really cold shudder of fear and horror of Communism went down my spine. They were dreary, ignorant-looking little men, their eyes burning with righteous passion.

In September that same year, the Cold War funk affects Bishop once more: “The whole of [South America] could perfectly well curdle—to communism—like a bowl of milk, I think—and it is half Brazil’s fault and half ours.” Bishop’s reaction was not altogether unfounded. Around this time, a plane crashed, one of whose passengers was the president of Cuba’s national bank. Documents were found tying Cuban funds to the Brazilian Peasant Leagues’ militant arm. The dominant opposition tried to use the discovery to set off a Red Scare, but Brazilian public reaction was minimal.

With the election of João Goulart as president in 1962, the anxiety over communism gained more urgency. Goulart showed leftist sympathies to rally populist support. It also appeared to pique the interest of U.S. observers. After visiting Brazil that year, an American journalist reports that pamphlets on agricultural reform “exhort the peasants to follow the example of the Cubans, to seize ‘a piece of land for every man.’” This report came two months after Goulart’s May Day speech. The new president demanded, according to Skidmore, “an amendment to the constitutional provision requiring that owners of expropriated land be paid in
The following year, in 1963, Goulart argued for land reform “on grounds that an archaic system of rural tenure blocked any further increase in agricultural production.” The president’s projection of a leftist image disturbed conservative Brazilians. It also worried Bishop, who wrote to Lowell in May 1963:

All the communists, students, Goulart-ites, nationalists, etc. shriek about “Agrarian Reform”—as if anyone in his right mind isn’t all for agrarian reform in Brazil. But what *they* mean by it is some really terrifying changes in the constitution that would give Goulart dictatorial rights. … And look how absurd—there’s no lack of land in Brazil, for God’s sake!

A military coup deposing Goulart culminated the period we have bracketed as the decade of “Manuelzinho.” About a month before the coup in 1964, *The New York Times* reports: “The Brazilian Government is expected to order the seizure of valuable private land and oil refineries. The twin moves are seen here as quickening Brazil’s shift toward leftist nationalism.” At a rally on March 13 that year, Goulart’s speech appeared to vindicate the alarmist tone of the *Times* report: “Goulart had finally turned to the radical left for his policies,” Skidmore writes. “He had begun by attacking the principle of private ownership in both the industrial and the rural sectors.” In April 1, backed by a civilian mass demonstration, the military led by General Castelo Branco overthrew Goulart. Branco allegedly gained support from U.S. covert operatives in Brazil. Philip Agee in his diary, *Inside the Company*, ties the ouster to “the careful planning and consistent propaganda campaigns dating at least back to the 1962 election operation.”

Although the ouster signified the failure of democratic process, it impressed Bishop. In her view, the coup led by Branco and “a few brave generals,” as she called them, was politically legitimate. She writes her physician Anny Baumann about the “anti-communist parade” that turned into “a victory parade” after the coup. The parade had “more than a million people in the pouring rain.” To Bishop’s compatriots, the Goulart ouster looked like a MacCarthyist purge. Their reaction infuriated the poet. On the day Bishop wrote Baumann, she also corresponds with Lowell, sending him pictures of the ouster. She tells him about “the communists on the
run,” and the “really spontaneous” demonstration: “they couldn’t all have been the rich reactionary right.\textsuperscript{105}

Unknown to Bishop, the reactionary right was in fact on the move. In a study following \textit{Politics in Brazil}, Skidmore writes that the Brazilian military “arrested activists on the left, such as student leaders, labor union leaders... and rural union and peasant league organizers.” There were hundreds “jailed in Rio, with many confined to a makeshift prison ship in the harbor.” In the Northeast, the coup led to extreme measures, events that became mere episode in what was to become the state of emergency plaguing Latin America throughout the remainder of the American century. It foreshadowed the kind of political trauma studied in my next chapter, in the poems Carolyn Forché and Claribel Alegria wrote about El Salvador. Skidmore goes on to recall that “some peasant organizers simply disappeared, the victims of summary execution. Others suffered torture, usually at the hands of the Fourth Army.”\textsuperscript{106}

The stance Bishop adopted in Brazil is unexpected. Before she arrived in Brazil, United States militarism under the Truman presidency made her nervous. Her trip to Latin America might have been an escape route from the political atmosphere that later fueled the anti-communist campaign. In “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress”(\textit{CP} 69), Bishop critiques Washington’s triumphalist culture after the Second World War.\textsuperscript{107} The poem was written in 1950, after Bishop worked as the Library’s poetry consultant. It depicts an Air Force band whose music, though “hard and loud,” is muffled by “the trees that must intervene” and by the “little flags” that “feed their limp stripes into the air.” Like a cloud of omen, the sound grows louder in the terminal stanza:

\begin{verbatim}
Great shades, edge over,
give the music room.
The gathered brasses want to go
\textit{boom—boom}.
\end{verbatim}

It was in Brazil, ironically, where geopolitical tensions unraveled for Bishop. And yet her skepticism in Washington did not translate into critical distance from the “bad-bad” Red Scare.
It did not prod her to consider the way the Cold War framed land reform movements as wholly communistic. These political groups were not even unified under a Marxist agenda. The idea of “a uniform peasantry fighting for land reform,” bolstering communism in the Americas, not only served Brazil’s powerbrokers or its landowning class. It also justified the pressure that the United States government placed on Brazilian sovereignty, influencing the latter’s economic and political decisions to suit United States anti-communist policies. Bishop’s impatience with politics led her to be wary of Brazilian nationalists and their “shriek” about reform. But it also inclined her toward unwitting complicity with the Cold War campaign.

**A map of misreading**

“A working country is hardly ever a landscape,” Williams writes. “The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation.” In Bishop’s poems about Brazil, we continually meet a speaker looking at rural poverty from afar, dependent on a spatial vocabulary of class representation. Like “Squatter’s Children,” “The Burglar of Babylon,” and “Twelfth Morning,” the poem about the tenant features a perceptual struggle with tropes of distance. Spoken by Lota de Macedo Soares and addressed to Manuel Alvez, the poem frames the landscape with two simultaneous spatial modes. One is organized around the idea of work. The other unfolds under the gaze of leisure:

I watch you through the rain,
trotting, light, on bare feet,
up the steep paths you have made—
or your father and grandfather made—
all over my property,
with your head and back inside
a sodden burlap bag,
and feel I can't endure it
another minute; then,
indoors, beside the stove,
keep on reading a book. (*CP* 96)

Bishop maps the hillside as readable surface. These textual furrows anticipate a kind of virtual, geopolitical encounter with the Brazilian tenant, exposed to the weather like his children
in the other Samambia poem. Bishop presupposes an Anglophone reader whose interpretive horizon the landowner mirrors in the Cold War. Lota is reading not just a book but beyond it, the stratum on which Manuel is preoccupied his version of writing, cutting into the soil a genealogy of labor as well as dispossession. The “steep paths” bring to the surface a mode of production founded on coloniality. The implications are not altogether different from that of *The Eclogues*: “For strangers,” Virgil writes, “for others, we have farmed our land”(*E* 9). Lota’s reading is an instance of “cosmopolitanism in the periphery”—to echo Pratt—“which is also the heart of the neocolonial order.” The likeness between moving across words and working along furrows recalls the structure of exchange in pastoral. But they also signify incommensurable lines to power. What the landowner verges on deciphering is a topology whose significance she “can’t endure,” preventing her from fully enjoying the pleasure of retreat.

At the level of reception, the reader undergoes discomfort analogous to that of Manuel and Lota. The stanza proceeds out of a single sentence that strains the syntactical capacities of prepositional modification. Tracing two simultaneous modes of spatiality, the end-stopped lines invite us to read with care as our focus shifts from the speaker to the tenant and the tenant yet again. Where the tension mounts for Lota is also where the end-stops cease, giving way to steep enjambment. The sight of poverty, “a sodden burlap bag,” becomes intolerable. The paths on the hill and Manuel’s garden furrows commemorate tenancy reaching back to at least three generations. Bishop tellingly isolates the line stating Lota’s proprietary claim, “all over my property,” at exactly the point where its ethical warrant is undermined by the tenant’s historicity and dispossession.

The mutuality that both landowner and tenant cultivate in Bishop’s poem is an exceptional case. Mallon’s historical account of the 1950s gives us a more precarious picture: even without a radical political agenda, a tenant’s protest can incite violent response. Whereas landlords control the local power structure, peasants lack both economic and political clout. The landowner in Bishop’s poem is a benevolent one. This is why Little Manuel, borrowing
Erkkilä’s words, can refuse to “play the landlord’s game of mine and yours” as well as to “submit to the master’s demands for order, boundaries, and control.” Lota’s mockery of Manuel domesticates the possibility of his revolt.

In the sixth stanza of “Manuelzinho,” where the figures portrayed in “Squatter’s Children” reappear, Bishop alludes to the volatile social scene. The narrative of clash grazes the fiction of tolerance nurtured by both landlord and tenant. Approaching Manuel’s children, Lota notes how they “scuttle by” her or “crouch behind bushes.” They avoid her “as if [she] were about to shoot them!” Through the image of wary innocence, Bishop obliquely indicates the ubiquity of social confrontation. The stanza, in fact, significantly occurs right after Lota alludes to the issue of land reform. Lota and Manuel meet “to settle/ what [they] call [their] ‘accounts’” toward the end of the fifth stanza. Bishop raises anew questions of reading to stress the inequity but also implicitly to condone Manuel’s cheeky negotiation with power:

You’ve left out decimal points.
Your columns stagger,
honeycombed with zeros.
You whisper conspiratorially;
the numbers mount to millions.
Account books? They are Dream Books.
in the kitchen we dream together
how the meek shall inherit the earth—
or several acres of mine. (CP 98)

Reflecting our hermeneutic space once more, Bishop brings tenant and landlord face to face in a moment of misreading. The aristocrat mocks the tenant’s near-illiteracy, his mnemonic failure, and pretense at record-keeping. She jokes about his purported aspiration to ownership, even if this aspiration is never explicitly stated on the tenant’s part. Lota simply assumes it, foreseeing herself at the losing end of land reform. The instance comes close to pastoral exchange. But the economic relation taints the promise of reciprocity—as when Manuel brings “a mystic three-legged carrot,” or when Lota pays for his father’s funeral (CP 96-97). In the latter instance, Bishop frames Manuel’s voice with the kind of ventriloquistic gambit in “Twelfth
Morning,” inviting our misreading. The landowner purports to echo faithfully the tenant’s attempt at mourning:

The family gathers, but you,
no you “don’t think he’s dead!
I look at him. He’s cold.
They’re burying him today.
But you know, I don’t think he’s dead.”(CP 97)

“The Roofwalker” by Adrienne Rich offers an interesting contrast to the scenes of misprision in Bishop’s poem. In Rich’s 1961 poem, the speaker observes laborers on a roof at sunset, “Giants” silhouetted as if “on a burning deck.” There seems to be little hesitation in identifying with these figures: “I feel like them up there,” Rich writes, “exposed, larger than life,/ and due to break my neck.” The claim to solidarity prepares us for the shift in point of view towards the conclusion: “Was it worth while to lay/—with infinite exertion/—a roof I can’t live under?” The question opens the terminal stanza. Rich’s speaker goes on to project the lyric voice onto the laborer, to rouse our social conscience and body forth our scruples with class:

I’m naked, ignorant,
a naked man fleeing
across the roofs
who could with a shade of difference
be sitting in the lamplight
against the cream wallpaper
reading—not with indifference—
about a naked man
fleeing across the roofs.

The pathos of the ironic reversal tempers the accusatory tone. The self-repudiation seems too calculated, aimed at the class associated with literate pleasures. But the mea culpa yields a surplus of pleasure. It is difficult to ignore the appropriative tendency operating alongside Rich’s genuine political aspiration to cut through boundaries without advocating radical change. Like Bishop’s poem, “The Roofwalkers” enacts change in terms of the changing tenancy, replacing the figure of reader with a representative of “covert pastoral,” Empson’s term...
for proletarian literature. It sets into motion a device of containment. We may even say with Empson that “the word sympathy here is suspicious; it may range from ‘able to imagine what someone feels and so understand him’ to ‘prepared to be sorry for him because you are safe and superior.’”\textsuperscript{114} The roofwalker, the speaker assumes, wishes to flee into the reading room. In this fantasy of altered occupancy, what is wished for is that the roofwalker read—“not with indifference”—about his double, fleeing into the reading spaces escutcheoned within the act of reading. The loops of reversal require “infinite exertion.” But they leave the symbolic economy intact, thriving in what Rich purports to be the worker’s aspiration to become a lecteur parsing the ironies of a lambent room.

The tenant Bishop portraits, on the other hand, is hardly a figure of dignified labor. The kind of work we find in “Manuelzinho” makes it difficult for us to assimilate the agricultural tenant into the conventions of hard pastoral. The heroism of “The Roofwalkers,” by contrast, is founded on our valorization of productivity. Ironically, because Rich’ poem is invested in the idea of sacrifice—that of building a house the worker cannot inhabit, “The Roofwalkers” strips the builders of the very agency that Rich seeks to monumentalize. “Fleeing across the roofs,” and dissociated from their labor, the “roofwalkers” become no more than “naked, ignorant” figures.

“To understand poverty,” Greaney writes, “we must persistently read this naked surface just as it reads and wounds us.”\textsuperscript{115} Manuel in Bishop’s poem is as exposed as the roofwalker but not as naked. Manuel’s nakedness consists in the fact that he cannot bequeath us any evidence of labor. His garden is inassimilable to the productivity scaffolding Rich’s poem. It is as fleeting as the other dwellings represented in Questions of Travel, which parry with the ethnographic fascinations João Cabral de Melo Neto deflates in a poem Bishop translated:

—Every hut becomes
the kind of ideal refuge
highly thought of by
the sociologists. (CP 239)
Like the “housewreck” in “Twelfth Morning,” Manuel’s burlap raincoat and his mended clothing are crude defenses against nature. “Anomalous, fanciful, undependable,” David Kalstone writes, Manuelzinho is “from any practical point of view, a disaster.” The images of his gradual ruin both captivate and repel. There is, of course, the other option of looking away. This point of saturation is central to Bishop’s poem about a beggar in Rio. If the crisis of dwelling in “Squatter’s Children” meets its extreme in favelas shown in “The Burglar of Babylon,” we find a similar tie between the threadbare tenant and the beggar in “Going to the Bakery.” Bishop contrasts the beggar’s permeability to the speaker’s regulated economic solvency:

a black man sits in a black shade
lifting his shirt to show a bandage
on his black, invisible side.

Fumes of cachaca knock me over,
like gas fumes from an auto-crash.
He speaks in perfect gibberish.
The bandage glares up, white and fresh.

I give him seven cents in my
terrific money, say, “Good night”
from force of habit. Oh, mean habit!
Not one word more apt or bright? (CP 152)

Bishop avoids domesticating the paralyzing effect of the encounter, as happens when the surface of lack exceeds our perceptual frame. The third stanza of “Manuelzinho” further illustrates the way Bishop stages the problem of historical recognition. Lota yells at her tenant, asking him to “fetch those potatoes.” The tenant leaves them at her feet, and disappears, to assume his work “of fairy prince somewhere” (CP 97). The response of the tenant is realistic, managing the confrontation with deliberate fumbling. Portraying Lota’s recourse to fairy tale imagery is one of Bishop’s devices for maintaining our spectatorial distance. The device reminds us of the gap between interpretation and historical emergence. Lota method of containment
challenges our sense of realism. It draws our attention to other possibilities of historical memory that do not align with Lota’s misrecognition of tenant labor.

The misprisions on the part of both landlord and tenant recall to us yet another hermeneutic boundary. Bishop allows us to take for granted the simultaneous legibility and concealment of her poetic negotiation. Portuguese vernacular fades from the scene of landlord-tenant exchanges as from the cross-cultural encounters shown in the other poems. Yet an invisible translation maps them just as the geopolitics of class often eludes our senses. Elsewhere, Bishop discloses class process through motifs of ruin: inundation in “Squatter’s Children,” and drought in “Song,” disarray in “Twelfth Morning.” In all of them Bishop presupposes the remembrance of pastoral colloquy: “Singing for someone,” as Alpers might put it, “is fundamental to these poems.”

**Other than ruin**

The poems in *Questions of Travel* essay pragmatic versions of pastoral. Glossing the closing lines of “The End of March,” Helen Vendler observes that Bishop “is too much of a realist to give herself completely to fantasy; she also has too much imagination to ignore its presence.” This is also true of the poet’s stance toward pastoral fantasy. Virgil relegates the alternate world either to the mythic past or to futurity, with the coming birth of a benevolent ruler, as in Eclogue IV, or as Eclogue IX suggests, with the return of a singer whose memory is unsurpassed. Bishop inherit like yearnings. But her pastoral, confronting the specific character of modern destitution, resists nostalgia as well as fatalism. A negative effect of her realism is that *Questions of Travel* portrays ruptures in the project of solidarity. The difficulty of generating images of communality runs across deep time. Pastoral dwelling has never quite come to pass, even as our yearning for it continues to break through a wide range of semblance inspired by Arcadia. This absence haunts the most lyric stanza in “Manuelzinho”:

Twined in wisps of fog,
I see you all up there
along with Formoso, the donkey,  
who brays like a pump gone dry,  
then suddenly stops.  
—All just standing, staring  
off into fog and space. (CP 98-99)

This time Lota does not look away. Fog encircles the idyll as though to tie the tenant family to the landscape as well as to the idealization of pastoral social belonging. Bishop curtails the scene, however, from becoming an eclogue. Rising above the topological record of tenant labor, the idyll is framed by power. No exchange occurs between the Alvezes and the landowner who somewhat oddly, is describing the tenant family about themselves. Silence emanates from the hill like a form of communicative destitution. The gambit of personifying nature runs it course when Formoso yields no semblance of vocation, just the sound of “a pump gone dry.” Something queer happens to class process. The lyric makes noticeable the tenant’s vision exceeding Lota’s gaze and ours.

The donkey “suddenly stops” braying. Bishop appears to ritualize this new instance of “golden silence” in Questions of Travel, prompted by whatever seems to be compelling the tenant family to stand still and stare into the distance. Their stillness affects the landlord’s speech. Lota begins a new thought and leaves it incomplete, rendering illegible something in the distance, nothing more than “fog and space” perhaps but nonetheless irreducible. These figures might simply be worn out—in somatic and generic senses. With the slag of pastoral figuration, the lyric diminishes its scope. Appropriately, Lota watches the Alvez family, or perhaps tenant alone,

coming down at night,  
in silence, except for hoofs,  
in dim moonlight, the horse  
or Formoso stumbling after.  
Between us float a few  
big, soft, pale-blue,  
sluggish fireflies,  
the jellyfish of the air . . . (CP 99)
Bishop shrouds the idyll in a nocturne. She does not so much repudiate pastoral fantasy as exhaust its capacity to represent the poor. Like the conclusion of “Manuelzinho,” The yearning for pastoral minimizes Lota’s loquacious tone, which quite rarely gives space to Manuel’s voice. According to Alpers, the development of pastoral since Wordsworth traces “a shift from direct vocalizing to the more inward ways of meditating.” Lota’s contemplative mood implicitly remembers Eclogue I. While Tityrus verbalizes his hospitality, there occurs within Lota a gesture of welcome left unsaid. The instability of the “beautiful relation” is tactfully and yet vigilantly observed. The dramatic irony holds in check our identification with the landowner. But neither does Bishop extend unequivocal sympathy toward Manuel. Bishop’s intuitive, realistic sense of agricultural capitalism’s origins in coloniality precludes the idealization of landlord and tenant. The ending casts retroactive significance on the idyll on the hill. Our awareness of the failure to meet the pastoral ideal exposes the operational turns of class as the mode strives to overcome it.

Another way to view this dialectic is to read pastoral’s discrepant relation to class frames. “Under the Window: Ouro Prêto,” the poem which concludes this chapter, serves as illustration of this movement. Bishop sketches the town in a letter to Lowell: “gardens away up in the hill—level after level—and water running down through a marvelous set of aqueducts, tunnels, fountains, stone tanks, ... overgrown with ferns and moss.” Pastoral figures gather around a spring below her house. The spring flows out of “an iron pipe where there used to be a fountain—and everyone stops, always, to have a drink there—dogs, donkeys, cars.”120 Ouro Prêto lies in the state of Minas Gerais, a state is celebrated for its baroque architecture and, though less well-known, the Inconfidentes. As Bishop herself notes, the Inconfidentes were a group of writers who while “dreaming of independence” from empire between the late 17th and 18th centuries, wrote “imitative Arcadian poetry.”121 The town’s radical history, we might speculate, permits Bishop to invoke Virgilian conceits with tempered irony. The poem begins with a scene redolent of bucolic exchange:
The conversations are simple: about food, or, “When my mother combs my hair it hurts.” “Women.” “Women!” Women in red dresses and plastic sandals, carrying their almost invisible babies—muffled to the eyes in all the heat—unwrap them, lower them, and give them drinks of water lovingly from dirty hands, here where there used to be a fountain, here where all the world still stops. (CP 153)

Bishop separates the speaker from this pastoral revival. The ideal of communality is rehearsed midway between secrecy and full articulation. The poem’s title already inaugurates that dialectic. Divides the locus of lyric speech and the site of encounter, the colon forms a kind of transparent layer between Bishop’s place of concealed observation and the gathering of women carrying “invisible babies—muffled to the eyes.” The dialectic is likewise inscribed by an elusive translation: “black gold” refers to the iron composites encasing the more expensive mineral. The town’s name, whose Anglophonic equivalent Bishop silences, might also refer to the image of pedestrians, “soiled and thirsty”(CP 154), surrounding the pleasance “where all the world still stops.”

Despite exclusion from this colloquy, the speaker’s delight is palpable. Like the typographical sleights in “Twelfth Morning,” Bishop uses figures of voicing to simulate dialogue. As the word women sloughs off the quotation marks, moving from reported speech to descriptive utterance, the lexical repetition enacts a virtual eclogue. “All have agreed for centuries” that the spring is “cold as ice,” so much so that nature, too, gets chatty. In the sixth stanza, prosopopeia summons Orphic creatures: “Donkeys agree, and dogs, and the neat little/bottle-green swallows dare to dip and taste.” Suspended in pastoral fiction, the spatiality of class thus becomes permeable.

Bishop’s pleasure, it seems, is derived less from the idealization of a contact zone than from the revaluation of pastoral as transcultural tact. The gesture recalls Niebuhr, as already
mentioned: “that other unique community is the limit beyond which our ambitions must not run and the boundary beyond which our life must not expand.” The appeal to “genuine community” retrieved through otherness flows through Bishop’s lyric thresholds. From stanza to stanza, the lines of “Under the Window” progress “lovingly,” with the grace of women scooping water with “dirty hands.” A sense of expansion relieves the phenomenological intensity. Alongside the perceptual style, alliteration and the five-beat, four-beat lines imitate the play of motion and rest. Sonic structure reinforces the idea of the locus amoenus. Later in the poem, a pastor actually appears, trailed by a boy resembling the singer of “Twelfth Morning”:

Here comes that old man with the stick and sack, meandering again. He stops and fumbles.
He finally gets out his enameled mug.

Here comes some laundry tied up in a sheet, all on its own, three feet above the ground.
Oh, no—a small black boy is underneath.

Six donkeys come behind their “godmother” —the one who wears a fringe of orange wool with wooly balls above her eyes, and bells. (CP 153-54)

The deictic insistence here is worth noting—alongside its recurrence in other stanzas, “here where there used to be ...,” “here where all the world still stops,” “HERE I AM FOR WHOM YOU HAVE BEEN WAITING.” It grounds the pleasance in the time of our receptivity. Bishop, however, transforms the Virgilian conceit. The spring flows between public space and a place of hiding. Like the other poems about property and privacy, “Under the Window” invokes the notion of dwelling, in excess of the forms we recognize.

In at least three ways, the Ouro Prêto poem repeats the theme of Et in arcadia ego in Virgil’s Eclogue IX, and in Bishop’s poems about houses. First, Bishop sets up a contrast between the donkey herder and the boy carrying laundry. Additionally, there is the sense of cultural obsolescence in the fifth and sixth stanzas, in the poem’s single allusion to Ouro Prêto’s baroque architecture. Bishop notes that the water from the spring “used to run out of the
mouths/ of three green soapstone faces.” The sculpture is now “patched up with plaster” and stored “in the museum.” In contrast to made objects, Bishop describes the “strong ropy stream,” flowing from “a single iron pipe,” remaining pure “for several centuries.” Just when we might wish to idealize nature as immutable, however—and here we come to the third aspect—Bishop furnishes the lyric with signs of contamination. “A big new truck, Mercedes-Benz, arrives,” with an “older truck” soon after, “in a blue cloud of burning oil” (CP 154). The machine enters the garden—as Leo Marx might put it, writing contemporaneously about American pastoral.122

The truck drivers appear to be interlopers, encroaching on the otium of the town locals. Bishop’s anatomizing language, however, suggests that they are just as vulnerable as the other figures around the spring. “The driver and assistant driver” wash “their faces, necks, and chests … their feet,” and “their shoes” (CP 154). Bishop proffers a discrete representative anecdote of Americanity: “NOT MUCH MONEY BUT IT IS AMUSING.” The virtual eclogue at Ouro Prêto plays host to bodies that hardly govern their own labor, subjects of regulated mobility in the world-system that Bishop traversed and that also remains to be ours. Just as “Song” concludes with the image of a dry, barren landscape, so “Under the Window” ends with a sense of ecological peril as well as with the increasingly economic register of ecologic conversation. The ending of “Under the Window” makes resonant the contradictions of modern pastoral enunciation:

“She’s been in labor now two days.” “Transistors cost much too much.” “For lunch we took advantage of the poor duck the dog decapitated.”

The seven ages of man are talkative and soiled and thirsty.

Oil has seeped into the margins of the ditch of standing water

and flashes or looks upward brokenly, like bits of mirror—no, more blue than that: like tatters of the Morpho butterfly. (CP 154)
The gathering place is defined by openness, even to the point of risking impurity and shattering. To read Bishop’s poetry in deep time is to recall the way pastoral longings cut across ancient communities to modern state regimes. “Deep time,” Dimock writes, “is denationalized space.” But the deep time of pastoral also secures no decisive image of communality, only a form of waiting. Neither our current notions of property nor the concept of natural dwelling now offers a just model of idealization. This ambivalence lies at the zone of ambivalence in Bishop’s affirmation of cross-cultural, cross class-encounter. All Bishop identifies are signs of an ideal—fragments of a hypothetical collectivity yet to be imagined in ways that may not fit prevailing concepts of social belonging.

The closure of Bishop’s Ouro Prêto poem suggests the splintering of a titular window, a synecdoche of privacy and property. The “bits of mirror” yield a lyric supplement to the enigma at the end of “Squatter’s Children.” Adrienne Rich in “Rural Reflections” gives us a comparable image of generative disquiet: “You have never found,” Rich writes, “a cloud sufficient to express the sky.” Recognizing that the world is a place of inequity and grief, Bishop also remembers that despite itself, it is also a place hospitable to questioning and reinvention. Her pastoral lyrics cut through the ambivalent spaces of power, the reified syntax of feeling, and our covetous forms of refuge.

Notes

1 Interview with Leo Gilson Ribeiro, Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1996), 17. Reprinted from Correio da Manhã, Rio de Janeiro (13 December 1964): 6. The interview was prompted by the award recently conferred on Bishop, by the Academy of American Poets.


3 Bishop to Lowell, 22 April 1960, Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, ed. Thomas Travisano (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 317. Ironically one of the early commentators on Bishop’s relation to Brazil, Candace Slater, hails the poet as a Brazilian expert: “Elizabeth Bishop
is the only major contemporary poet with a deep firsthand knowledge of Brazil” (34). Bishop’s poetry on Brazil, moreover, is lauded for its “sympathy for the oppressed” but also as portraits of a picturesque people (35). Candace Slater, “Brazil in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop” World Literature Today 51.1 (Winter 1977): 33-36.


5 Thomas Travisano, Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 57 and 67. Cf. Conversations, 100-01: “I have a great interest and respect for what people call ordinary things. I am very visually minded and mooses and filling stations aren’t necessarily commonplace to me.”


9 Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (New York: Oxford UP, 1973), 304. On the first page of this text, Williams enumerates the specific valences through which class consciousness operate through the opposition of the country and the city. “On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.” Robert Coleman reads Virgil with the similar opposition in mind: “Throughout the Eclogues, the city represents a constant threat to Arcadian values.” Coleman establishes skepticism toward the city as “a vehicle for moral criticism.” See Vergil: Eclogues, ed. Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 32. Without neglecting the ambivalence of the mode, Williams emphasizes the cooptation of pastoral by regimes of power. For a similar account, focusing on the social protest within the mode, Annabel Patterson’s work is invaluable. See Pastoral and ideology: Virgil to Valéry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).


Ibid., 25. Empson uses the phrase “pastoral process” on 49.

Ibid., 17


Schocket, 17-21.


Dickie, 53.

Erkkilä, 286. Writing on “New England Ancestry,” Erkkilä is specifically interested in the “ambivalence about class struggle that would inform Bishop’s verse.”

Costello, *Questions of Mastery*, 139.


Bishop, in an interview with George Starbuck, *Conversations*, op. cit., 90.


27 See my discussion on priamel in Chapter 1, based on Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 88-89. Alpers draws on Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *The Green Cabinet: Theocritus and the European Pastoral Lyric* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 338, 22n. Reflecting on Bishop’s pastoral filiations lets us read the poem as a critique of touristic perception, what Benjamin would call *Erlebnis* in his famous essay on shock in Baudelaire’s poetry. Shock fragments experience, modalizes our subjectivity, making us overly invested in the “momentous.” *Erlebnis*, however, absorbed by involuntary memory, also provides the conditions of possibility for arriving at an unpredictable constellation of the real. This is consonant with Costello’s observation regarding elements of Bishop’s catalogue: “the postcard, the travel notebook, dashed-off first impressions.” They constitute “the lists [that] have the desultory and formless appearance of random observations culled from memory.” For *Erlebnis* in Benjamin, see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2006), 338-47.


29 Pratt, 7.


31 Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 185.


33 Kaplan, 7.


36 Sigfried Kracauer, “Reisen, nüchtern,” *Frankfurter Zeitung* Jg. 76, Nr. 510 vom 10.7.1932; 2. Morgenblatt; Literaturblatt Jg. 65, Nr.28, S.3. I am grateful to Martin Burke for helping me translate the following: “Ablehnung ist, wo nicht ihr Ziel, so doch
eine ihrer Funktionen. Und die Gefahr der durch sie bewirkten Entiremdung besteht
eben darin: daß diese uris an der Durchdringung der Zustände erhindert, in denen wir
leben, und so das Handeln erschwert, das einer Veränderung der betreffenden
Zustände gilt.”

37 Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, “Americanity as a Concept, or the
Americas in the Modern World-System” International Social Science Journal 44.4

38 Interview with Ashley Brown, Conversations, 26.

39 Patterson, Pastoral and Ideology, 279; 281.

40 Brett C. Millier, Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It (Berkeley:

41 Virgil, The Eclogues of Virgil, trans. David Ferry (New York: Farrar, Straus and
Giroux, 1999), 9. Henceforth cited as E followed by the page number, unless a longer
footnote is necessary. “After the battle of Philippi in 42 BC,” Wendell Clausen (30n4)
writes, “large tracts of land were confiscated throughout Italy and granted as a reward for
service to the soldiers of victorious Triumvirs.” Katharina Volk summarizes the accounts
on Eclogue I as being “programmatic for the collection as a whole,” a reading I echo
further in this section of my chapter. See Volk, ed. Vergil’s Eclogues (New York:
Oxford University Press, 2008), 10. For my understanding of pastoral as social protest in
twentieth-century poetry, I rely on Seamus Heaney, in “Eclogues in extremis: On the
Staying Power of Pastoral,” in Volk, op. cit., 245-60; John Marsh, “Thinking/Of the
Freezing Poor: the Suburban Counter-Pastoral in William Carlos Williams’s Early
Poetry” William Carlos Williams Review 27.2 (Fall 2007): 97-117; and an extensive study
on Heaney by Sidney Burris, The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the
Pastoral Tradition (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990). This sample list would be
incomplete without the section of an article by Alpers on the work of Hungarian poet
Miklós Radnóti—whose pastoral poems, begun in 1937 and continued in a labor camp,
were recovered from a mass grave in 1945. See Alpers, “Modern Eclogues,” Triquarterly
116 (Summer 116): 31-35.

42 Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility,” Second Version,
Selected Writings, vol. 3, 104-05. Emphasis added. My understanding of “aura” benefits
from the following studies: Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura” Critical Inquiry 34
(Winter 2008): 336-375; and Eduardo Cadava, Words of Light: Theses on the
Closer to poetics, Robert Kaufman investigates aurtic loss and its reconstitution in lyric
as “critical aurtic distance.” The radical potential of “lyric aura” consists in the poem’s
capacity to repeating and displacing the aura of cultic as well as fetishized objects.

43 Lawrence Buell, “American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised” American Literary
History 1.1 (Spring 1989): 12. “American texts are particularly susceptible to [naive
pastoral] because of the ease with which dissent can get co-opted as an aspect of
consensus.”
An initial inversion is a rhythmic figure that starts off a line with two distinct beats spaced by a double offbeat. The system of scansion used here follows Derek Attridge and Thomas Carper, *Meter and Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 2003). See particularly 80–82, on inversion. Attridge and Carper’s observation pertaining to song-like meter should be noted: “Almost all song lyrics use these four-beat meters” (58). Dickie in “Race and Class” (55) characterizes the iambic tetrameter in Bishop’s poem as having a “lulling” quality, suggestive of a desire for order in nature. My study slightly modifies Dickie’s claim by putting a pressure on our affective investment in the *locus amoenus*, the hypothetical refuge in nature, and on the contradictory effects of such investment. Although the pleasance wards off the external world, this site in fact depends on the incursion of the real, “whose danger must be acknowledged” (Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?*, 149), for it to operate well. The political consequences of this idea, I hope, are demonstrated by this chapter.


“Unwarrantable ark,” the fourth line made up of two beats, is one of the shortest in this stanza. The other brief lines are the first (“weak flashes of inquiry”) and the sixth (“consists of echolalia”). Beat demotion on “weak” in the first line is required by the stronger beat on the successive syllable.

Bishop seems to allude to the structure of dialogue in Virgil’s idylls and to the idea of responsive nature in Eclogue I: “tu, Tityre, lentus in umbra/ formosam resonare doces Amaryllida siluas” ("You teach the woods to echo 'Amaryllis’"); and in Eclogue X: “non canimus surdis, respondent omnia siluae” (“The listening woods are echoing all our music”). See *The Eclogues*, trans. Ferry, 2–3; 78–79.

Elizabeth Bishop, holograph of an essay draft, “In the Money,” undated, Elizabeth Bishop Papers, series IV, folder 54.4, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York. Emphasis in original.


*Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “warrant, v.” The verb’s first definition is “1. trans. To keep safe from danger, to protect”; and its second, “2. Law. a. To guarantee the security of (land, possessions to a person),” and “c. to give warranty of title to (a person). Also with the land as obj.” Cf. the noun, s.v. “warrant, n.” The relevant entries are: “I.2. A safeguard, protection, defence”; and “I.3.a. Security or safety from one’s enemies; also a place of refuge, shelter. Obs.” The likeness is perhaps ironic. The metrical figure shared by the two phrases underscores the asymmetry between nature and law. It is tempting to formulate the irony as follows: While nature can annul what laws secure, the law can dispose of what nature conserves. Of course the meter by itself warrants no such meaning.


57 Raymond Williams, 127. Conferring utopian value on nature’s alterity is part of the cultural function of pastoral. In an American context, Charles Altieri suggests that such value may be found in the mode’s uncertainty. Referring specifically to the pastoral traces in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers*, Altieri writes that “the price of moral certainty is the loss of flexibility necessary to preserve hope and to pursue new directions required by changing social and technological situations.” Altieri, “Professing Pastoral,” *American Literary History* 1.4 (Winter 1989): 937.

58 David Meban, “Virgil’s *Eclogues* and Social Memory” *American Journal of Philology* 130.1 (Spring 2009): 110. Clausen (266-68) maintains that Eclogue IX was the earliest formed, closest to the time of the confiscations, and reads the conclusion with a good dose of realism: “Poetry fails in the end. Moeris has forgotten so many songs; it will soon be dark and rain threatens; when will Menalcas come?”

59 John Kinsella, *Disclosed Poetics: Beyond Landscape and Lyricism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007), 3. What Kinsella says of “radical pastoral” (6) may be used accurately to describe many poems in *Questions of Travel*: “Where the pastoral is a model of fetishized nature, radical pastoral is identifying the nature of these fetishes.” Though I would avoid using the term “radical pastoral,” Kinsella requires it to emphasize the tension between periodizing the eras of “conservative” pastoralism and, as Annabel Patterson marvelously does, tracking the persistence of social protest across periods. There are pastoral revivals that indeed fetishize nature and forget the social in pastoral and its status as mediation. But they also can be said to have neglected Virgil’s poems as being works that, to use Kinsella’s words, are “conscious of the ironies of its own literary production.” Ferry offers precisely this reading of Virgil: “The Eclogues are a radical instance of what is always true of poetry: our vivid consciousness of the artifice of its forms makes us vividly, radiantly, consciously of our experience of its meanings” (xiv).
Niebuhr, 19.


Bishop to U.T. and Joseph Summers, 17 September 1952, *One Art*, 247: “Against all the correct theories of escapism, exile, and the horrid facts about the conditions of Brazil, I like living here more and more.” Later sections in this chapter, on “Manuelzinho,” explore the topic further. The study made by the Pan American Union reports that the size of the *latifundio* “includes a very wide range of farm sizes (say, from 100 hectares to 100,000 hectares).” It also notes that “the latifundio-minifundio complex is ever-present throughout the entire country, regardless of geographic region,” and that “this hypothesis finds strong support in the data showing the distribution of farms and of farm land in 1950 and 1960 for various states and regions of Brazil.” Inter-American Committee for Agricultural Development, *Land Tenure Conditions and Socio-economic Development of the Agricultural Sector: Brazil* (Washington: Pan American Union, 1966), 81-85.

Bishop to May Swenson, 8 February 1956, *One Art*, 317.


Patterson, 278.

Bishop, Introduction to “The Burglar of Babylon,” in *Elizabeth Bishop: Poems, Prose, and Letters* (New York: The Library of America, 2008), 718. Bishop notes rural-urban relays contributing to the rise of the slums, writing that “the poor people who live in the slums of Rio have usually come from the north or northeast of Brazil.” In 1967, written by the poet but heavily edited by Time-Life, *Brazil* describes the slums: “The thousands upon thousands of shacks pile up against the hills, or stretch out to the north over the filled land to the city’s dumps…. The *favelas* are natural breeding grounds for disease, crime and social unrest. Elizabeth Bishop and the Editors of Life, *Brazil* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1967), 56. The notes on numerous emendations made by the Time-Life editors are found in the unpublished correspondence. See Oliver E. Allen to Elizabeth Bishop, 19 January 1962, series II, folder 43.11, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oakland: Stanford University Press, 2002), 30. In Brazil, during the 1960s, the large-scale equivalent of disciplining the criminal was the occasional razing of the slums to make landfills—as when Bishop’s companion Lota became an urban planner. Hired by the governor to oversee the development of a city district called Gloria, Soares worked for free and valiantly led the transformation of a new landfill into a park, the Aterro of Flamengo. The soil used for the fill originated in one of the city slums. Soares herself points out that the Gloria fill was directly the “result of the razing of San Antônio Hill.” Oliveira, 65-67.
Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 53-54. Emphasis in original. Before the resumption of iambic tetrameter in the last line, Bishop reminds us of the metrical norm with the occasional iambic or tetrametric lines, specifically: in the third stanza’s second line (four beats, wholly iambic) and its seventh (four beats, iambic up until the phrase “ugly as sin”); and in the fourth stanza’s second verse. The penultimate line is iambic in that the triple offbeat in “documents retain” can give way to beat promotion, generating an ambivalent tetrameter: o B o B o b o B.


Niebuhr, 4. For his critique of the claims to innocence by “communist dogma” and by American hegemony, see 31-38; 42; 109.

Bishop to Ilse and Kit Barker, 7 February 1952, *One Art*, 234.


Schocket, 8.

Bishop to Kit and Ilse Barker, Good Friday, 1953, *One Art*, 258.

Empson, 95.


Beatriz Schiller, “Poetry Born Out of Suffering,” *Conversations*, 77. Schiller writes glosses a line from the title poem of Bishop’s 1965 collection: “Viajando para o interior” is common Portuguese. In English, and especially for Elizabeth Bishop, who always lived near the sea, it takes on a different meaning of a journey into the self, as well as into the country.”


Lota’s former cook recalls the tenant’s full name as Manuel Alvez. Another interview, with Mary Stearns Morse, notes the gardener’s activities on the estate: “There were a lot of poor people...who would take animals and vegetables to the fair to sell. Manuelzinho was one of Lota’s favorites.... Lota liked him as a person, so she let him stay on a piece of land right near her house. He didn’t work for Lota. He worked for himself, and he was just on a piece of her land, hoping he wouldn’t be put off.” Millier views Bishop’s poem on the gardener as a politically conservative text: “The poem does not question deeply the paternalistic system; rather, it examines anecdotally the thinking of one of its participants.” In *One Art*, 272. Travisano, whom I echo, differs from these readings. “Condescension,” he writes, “is the implicit but central issue of the poem.” See Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development*, 146.

82 Niebuhr, 109.

83 Travisano notes that Bishop identifies Lota as the speaker in a letter to Marianne Moore. *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, 146. See also 215n14, citing the original source: Bishop to Marianne Moore, 27 February 1956. Rosenbach Museum.

84 Bishop to Pearl Kazin, 22 February 1954, *One Art*, 288.

85 Lombardi, 149.

86 Williams, 45.

87 Inter-American Committee for Agricultural Development, 147-148.

88 For the original publication date, see *Words in Air*, 178n6.


90 Jan Knippers Black, *United States Penetration of Brazil* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 125. Black characterizes the process in terms of “attempts of the central government to expand the paternalistic corporatist system from urban laborers to their rural counterparts.” The failure of political mobilization during this period seems partly explained by the inefficacy of modernization itself.

91 Florencia E. Mallon, “Peasants and Rural Laborers in Pernambuco, 1955-1964” *Latin American Perspectives* 5.4 (Autumn 1978): 49. This process began mainly in the North where landowners “evicted tenants who had cultivated their land for decades and, in an effort to compete with the more capital-intensive agriculture in the South, cut costs by firing high percentages of their permanent wage-labor force.”

University Press, 1994). Maybury-Lewis (5-6) writes that after “the breakdown (and/or reorganization) of the traditional fazenda, [rural workers] found themselves more and more ideologically divorced from the means of production, the large landowners and their patrimonial world, and the rural Church. ... Various categories of rural workers began to consider themselves as ‘political classes’ distinct from other social classes. As a result, in the mid-1950s [workers] founded or joined the organizations that appeared capable of defending their social, economic, political, and ideological interests.”

93 Mallon, “Peasants and Rural Laborers,” 55. See also 60-61, on the formation of the Communist militia after the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. Peasant League leaders believed that “a destruction of Cuba by the United States was not only possible but likely,” and that “the destruction of all governments friendly to Cuba, including the Brazilian one,” seemed imminent. Cold War paranoia led to the formation of Peasant League’s militant arm. It did not find a proper place, however, within the existing alliances among various political groups, including non-Marxists fighting for the interests of the rural underclass.


95 Words of Air, 379.


97 Nathan A. Haverstock, “Brazil’s Hungry Millions” The Saturday Evening Post (28 July 1962): 78. The subheading highlights the geopolitical register: “Latin America’s Number One trouble spot is Northeast Brazil, where starvation threatens 23,000,000 peasants. The U.S. is helping, but it may be little too late.”

98 Skidmore, 217-18. For the succeeding quote, see 237. In Skidmore's view, Goulart was calculating his odds: “The emphasis in this rationale for reforms was on the relevance for further economic growth, rather than redistribution of income.” The dictatorship that replaced Goulart after 1964 copied his tactic. According to Jose de Souza Martins, “when the military took over the state, it promulgated a Land Bill which, for the first time in Brazilian history, defined what kind of land could be expropriated and redistributed[.] The intention behind this policy, however, was the realization ... of national security as defined by the military dictatorship: namely, to guard against the possibility of a revolutionary transition to socialism.” See “Representing the peasantry? Struggles for/about Land in Brazil” Journal of Peasant Studies 29.3 (2002): 322.


101 Skidmore, 289.
Quoted in Black, 47. Cf. Skidmore, 299-309, for an account emphasizing the actions taken by Brazilian political stakeholders in the ouster. Skidmore—writing in 1967, it should be noted—maintains that “there is no evidence to support the claim that the military conspirators were directed by the United States government” (324—25). For a well-documented account on Brazilian military collusion with alleged U.S. covert operations, see Leacock, 197-214.

Bishop to Anny Baumann, 7 April 1964, One Art, 424-425.

Millier, 354.

Bishop to Lowell, 7 April 1964, Words in Air, 525. Emphasis in original.


Camille Roman, Elizabeth Bishop's World War II-Cold War View (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 115-131; 138-145. Questions of Travel is only a marginal part of Roman’s study. Bishop’s jab at phallocentrism (“little flags,” “limp stripes”) is repeated in “Brazil, January 1, 1502.” On the latter Costello writes: “Bishop reduces the phallic brutality of the Conquistadors (‘hard as nails’) to a diminutive pomposity, ‘tiny as nails’” (148).


Williams, 120.

Pratt, 224.

Mallon, “Peasants and Rural Laborers,” 50.

Erkkilä, 299-300.


Greaney, 168.


Alpers, 81. For Johnson (4), the self-other relations seems to primordial to lyric: “The most usual mode in Greek lyric (probably) and in Latin lyric (certainly) was to address the poem (in Greek, the song) to another person or to other persons,” Susan Stewart offers an extensive account of intersubjectivity in lyric in Poetry and the Fate of the Senses (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

On restraint, see Alpers, *Pastoral* 271. From the same page, I draw the quote featured in my succeeding paragraph. A pastoral speaker’s “moral authority,” Alpers observes, “derives from the simplicity of his perceptions and statements and is thus coextensive with his powerlessness and vulnerability. Irony may be inherent in speaking through such a figure, because the conscious humility and simplicity suggests that the poet holds something in reserve.” Emphasis added.

Bishop to Robert Lowell, 19 September 1965. Quoted in *Edgar Allan*, 333. See also Millier, 369, quoting a letter to May Swenson, 21 May 1965: “‘there is also as small water-fall right under my bedroom window…. and I lean out and eavesdrop on their conversations—mostly talk of sicknesses, funerals, babies and the cost of living.” The poem was written in October 1965 and featured in Christmas issue of *The New Yorker* following year. Two letters Bishop wrote to Lowell give us such dating, on November 1965, on the forthcoming publication of “Under the Window”; and on May 3, 1967. *Words in Air*, 596; 614.

Bishop and the editors of Life, 100.


Dimock, 28.

“No coffee can wake you,” Elizabeth Bishop writes, “No revolution can catch your attention.” Bishop never finished the poem drafted with these lines in 1970.¹ That year, Denise Levertov pondered the question of “revolution or death,” a slogan used by Latin American activists and revolutionary guerrillas.² While Bishop turned inward to grieve the suicide of her Brazilian lover, Levertov sought to turn the lyric outward, fusing advocacy and poetic vocation. After Vietnam Americans like Levertov were longing for a new path back to idealism. Human rights opened such a path, translating the revolutionary ethos into “the last utopia,” as the historian Samuel Moyn writes. In Latin America, the clamor for rights resounded with gunfire.³ Even poems took up arms, as represented in the following verse of an anonymous Salvadoran poet:

I took long verses
by the rifle butt
aiming at the dictator
and his buddies.⁴

The combination of rights language and the kind of militancy found in the verse above was a thorn in the side of United States diplomats. For Americans critical of U.S. policies in the region, rights discourse signaled a chance to break through ideological barriers. “Americans wanted no more Vietnams,” as one historian notes. This desire, however, did not settle the debate “over just what the phrase ‘no more Vietnams’ meant.”⁵ Human rights suffered this same impasse of meaning. While the American government wanted to restore US prestige in the wake of Vietnam by adopting the ethos of rights, it did not wish to grant political recognition to the revolutionary movements that deployed rights language differently. Washington, in fact, tolerated
authoritarians in Latin America to ward off revolution. Rights advocacy in the hemisphere, hence, found itself at loggerheads with the bipolar logic of Cold War. Carolyn Forché’s *The Country Between Us* emerged in this context of utopian longing and contradiction.6

Nearly half of the poems in the volume are devoted to El Salvador. Forché dedicates her book to “Cuzcatlán,” the name Pipil Indians called their country before Spanish conquest.7 The poet first visited El Salvador in January 1978 to work as a journalist investigating human rights violations for the humanitarian organization Amnesty International. The last time Forché went back was in March 1980, only a week before the murder of Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran archbishop who became the most internationally visible critic of the regime.8 Released in December 1981, Forché’s book was both praised and disparaged. The Academy of American Poets awarded it the Lamont Poetry Prize. But its political topic raised eyebrows. The criticism ranged from questions regarding the suitability of Forché’s subject for lyric representation, to insinuations regarding the alleged fabrication of events recorded in the book.9

This chapter investigates the implications of Forché’s poetry for the “lyric hemisphere,” a term I use to map transnational relations posited but also questioned by poets who dwell on the ironies of American history. Praise for *The Country Between Us* underscores two main strengths. The first is its ability to communicate the singular character of Salvadoran suffering, without rehearsing the traumatism associated with exhausted modes of confessional poetry.10 The second is Forché’s capacity to meet the demand for aesthetic rigor, fretfully invoked when poems take on political coloring. I do not cast doubt on these strengths. Yet there is another way to understand the significance of Forché’s work beyond its expediency during a time of crisis. *The Country Between Us* explores the way lyric and rights advocacy occur beside, and in tension with, what Geoffrey Hartman calls “the Philomela project,” the problematic attempt to restore “voice to inarticulate people.”11

For Louise Glück, the power of Forché’s poems on El Salvador stems from disenchantment, the “willingness to sabotage the self’s astute stature.”12 My study follows
Glück’s lead by showing how Forché’s work dwells on the adequacy of lyric to provide restitution and grant intelligibility to dehumanizing pain. It places lyric in the service of rights advocacy, but it also confronts the ambivalence of an emergent discourse for securing the worth of persons. It opens for reflection the violence implicit in acts that strain to interpret the voiceless so as to refurbish familiar notions of the human. These problems of lyric and political form-giving allow us to revisit the historical upheavals recorded in *The Country Between Us* as a struggle over the construction and distribution of human worth outside theological models and nation-states. These are not questions confined solely to the Cold War. They continue to be the core problematic of lyric, transnational studies, and human rights.

For Allen Grossman the poet’s chief vocation is that of valuing. Valuing, or interest in mutual recognition among persons, is necessarily tied to the *eidos*, “the form or fashion,” Grossman writes, “by which the person is seen to be present.”  

The difficulty is that behind the form, no substance by itself authorizes human value. Without the *eidos*, stripped of the face or the voice, nothing else remains but the opening or exposure to formlessness, something unintelligible. This open ground renders equivocal the systems of eidetic construction on which valuing depends. Jean-Luc Nancy presents the matter thus: “Individuation detaches closed off entities from a formless ground, whereas only communication, contagion, or communion constitute the being of individuals.” When we peer into the “formless ground,” we arrive at this limit: “There is nothing behind singularity.”

Rights language and the language of lyric are fundamentally linked. For their shared concern is the exposure to the obscurity that lies prior to the *eidos*, whose construction it is our interest to build through art, religion, or political means. The formlessness sealed in the *eidos*, unraveled by dehumanization as well as by poetry, has not been the focus on commentary on Forché. The discourse of trauma in prevalent readings of her poems, however, often point to the eidetic problem. When the legitimating claims over the *eidos* clash, the crisis in authority reflects the exhaustion of the means for conferring worth. Human indeterminacy becomes
visible anew, and the search for the basis of personhood resumes. In extreme situations, poetry and the clamor for rights are both addressed, as Grossman says, to "the one question to which poetic vocation always responds: Who represents and therefore supplies the form of the person? In whose interest? And in accord with what rules?" Forché's epigraph in *The Country Between Us* points us to these questions regarding the making of the *eidos*. “Caminante, no hay camino,” Forché quotes Antonio Machado's poem, “Se hace camino al andar.” The epigraph comes from the third and fourth lines in the following translation:

```
Walker, your footsteps
are the road, and nothing more.
Walker there is no road,
the road is made by walking.
Walking you make the road,
and turning to look behind
you see the path you never
will step upon.
Walker, there is no road,
only foam trails on the sea.
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Machado's poem can be read as a meditation on the formlessness behind human faces and voices. The epigraph Forché draws from Machado frames the Salvadoran trauma as the site of eidetic destruction. Forché's awareness of dehumanization in El Salvador began in 1976, when she translated the work of Claribel Alegría, a Salvadoran poet in exile. In Spain, where Alegría sought asylum, Forché met other Latin American writers who, Forché writes, “were tortured and imprisoned, who had lost husbands, wives and closest friends.” Two years later, Forché went to El Salvador. There laborers in cities, agricultural workers, priests influenced by liberation theology, and student activists were moved by the ideals of social justice, and horrified by the increasing scale of exploitation and poverty in their country. Forché’s book ends with a poem whose conclusion echoes the phrase that haunted Levertov a decade earlier:

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There is a cyclone fence between
ourselves and the slaughter and behind it
we hover in a calm protected world like
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netted fish, exactly like netted fish.
It is either the beginning or the end
of the world, and the choice is ourselves
or nothing. (CBU 59)

“Ourselves or Nothing” draws from a tradition in which lyric inwardness never quite rids itself of political interest. Bishop’s exploration of class representations through pastoral finds its complement in Forché’s critique of the “cyclone fence” dividing radical and conservative interests. Echoing Levertov more than Bishop, Forché’s citations are multiple. Her line writes over Auden’s famous dictum: “We must love one another or die.” Her image of “netted fish,” moreover, recalls with darker ink Robinson Jeffers’ poem about civilizational doom, “The Purse- Seine.” The ominous tone Forché adopts is justified by the fact that the “slaughter” in El Salvador was no exaggeration. In an essay for a book of photographs on El Salvador, Forché reports that in 1980 alone, rights advocates recorded 10,000 civilian deaths; the toll rose to 13,000 the following year. In an essay published shortly before her book of poems appeared in 1981, Forché pointedly asks the questions of human worth:

What does “90% malnutrition” mean? Or that “80% of the population has no running water, electricity or sanitary services? I watched women push feces aside with a stick, lower their pails to the water and carry it home to wash their clothes, their spoons and plates, themselves, and their infant children. ... What does it mean when a man says “it is better to die quickly fighting than slowly die of starvation”? And that such a man suffers toward that decision in what is now being called “Northamerica’s backyard”? How is the language used to draw battle lines, to identify the enemy? What are the current euphemisms for empire, public defense of private wealth, extermination of human beings?

Forché’s stance is clearly partisan. But reading her poetry, it must be emphasized, is not a pretext for recrimination. This caveat is necessary because rights advocacy leads Forché to confront the hand that US foreign policy played in the Salvadoran crisis. Cold War thinking framed the insurgency with which campesinos chose to gain access to the eidos as a shift toward new citizenship spaces inimical to Washington’s economic and political interests. Forché is
mindful of the fact that the fate of El Salvador was tied to America’s concern to maintain its dominant status. It is equally important to recall the present history to which Forché continues to speak. The matter of rights during the Cold War became a rivalry between communist governments, where restructured property relations appeared to sacrifice individual freedom; and democracies where individual freedom often lost priority beside the interests of economic and political institutions wielding great influence in nation-states and hence, in the prevailing systems or means for generating human worth.

Rights language has diversified since the 1970s, but its ambivalence persists. The difficulty is that rights depend on the institutions mediating worth and distribute it according to certain rules of image-construction. These rules determine the conditions under which the proper individual and collective form is perceived. Forché’s work thus still speaks to us as a call to question the “conciliatory habits” of thought, as Avital Ronell puts it, and to “saturate itself with the feeling of the damaged.” It speaks to the continuing need for skepticism regarding the benevolence of our current systems of valuing, systems continuous with Cold War transformations but reconfigured to avoid traumatic costs. What can we learn, then, not from experiencing trauma per se, but from tracing the limit of human indeterminacy? What wakes us in the space emptied by the vocalic shattering? How does Forché revisit the questions of depersonalization and of granting intelligibility to the human in the face of the inhuman? What remains accessible to lyric in the feeling of the damaged?

The voice of speech has a chiefly eidetic function. It is not to be confused with the epicenter that is the object voice articulated imperceptibly in human speech. Drawing on Mladen Dolar, I use the word “vocality” interchangeably with “the object voice” to name the interval between phonation and language. Vocality is that soundless grain in the voice, a hinge and cut between sonic material and meaningful articulation, bodies and communities, formlessness and recognition. Like rights language, lyric can evolve past its claim to have restitutioal powers, and attest to what poetry can and cannot do. In Forché’s poems, vocality
is crucial to both lyric representation and rights advocacy. More accurately, Forché brings the poetic interest in the human voice to bear on questions regarding the vocality of suffering, and the way abjection demands a shift in our understanding of the speaking subject as the subject of rights.

The poems discussed in this chapter appear in a loosely chronological sequence in the first section of The Country Between Us. The dates appended to them give sign to the historical qualifiers, of which two parallel storylines guide my inquiry. The first relates the escalating violence in El Salvador to the contestations surrounding rights discourse in the United States. Cold War attitudes set the terms of the dispute between U.S. officials and their critics. As a consequence, it became difficult to sort out whether or not the human rights claims of Latin American social movements could be dissociated from Communism. This misrecognition parallels Forché’s skepticism towards the capacity of lyric to “give voice to the voiceless.” The second narrative, as already noted, is about disenchantment. The poem “The Island” foreshadows it, describing Alegria’s predicament:

As she walked through her village
The sight of her opened its windows.
It was simple. She had come
To flesh out the memory of a poet
whose body was never found.
Had it changed? It was different.
In Salvador nothing is changed. (CBU 11-12)

Forché describes an attempt to compensate with a lyric memorial one poet’s failed search for another’s remains. “The Island” suggests, however, the impossibility of accomplishing that errand in a place where everything appears “different” though “nothing is changed.” By suggesting Alegria’s inability to keep “simple” the tasks tied to commemoration and return, Forché liquidates the aura of the Philomela project. Much of this chapter is devoted to the kind of disenchantment found in “The Island,” tracing Forché’s use of poetic means to question the restitutions claimed by rights advocacy and assigned to lyric itself. The Country Between Us
examines how writing in the aftermath of torture interrupts habitual modes of eidetic construction—in poetry as well as in advocacy—with the task of thinking in the face of the inhuman.

**Eidetic borders**

To poetize is “to mediate decisively between mind and world.” This mediating activity, Grossman contends, is the most archaic function of language. It goes back to the prehistory of species recognition. This language before the time of speech does not require communicative structures even if it continues to underpin our use of language as communication. It is this archaic function we access when in times of representational failure. “Poetry is,” Grossman writes, “the civilizational means of last recourse.” Poetry is a privileged site because the archaic function lies closer to its surface. 27 This same process occurs when the nation-state creates subjects and accords them human value apart from poetic and sacred models. Historian Samuel Moyn describes the state as “the spaces of citizenship in which rights” are “accorded and protected.” Throughout this chapter, I follow Moyn in referring to the spaces of citizenship alternately as citizenship spaces or nation-states. In *The Country Between Us*, the poem “San Onofre, California” brings to mind the indeterminacy of human value and citizenship by summoning for us the violence entailed by eidetic borders defined by the Cold War. It brings together questions of vocality and of worth by invoking a hemispheric notion of citizenship. What comes into visibility “beyond here,” as Forché imagines a world mapped by rights beyond the guarantees of a citizenship space? Forché writes:

> We have come far south.  
> Beyond here, the oldest women  
> shelling limas into black shawls.  
> Portillo scratching his name  
> on the walls, the slender ribbons  
> of piss, children patting the mud.  
> If we go on, we might stop  
> in the street in the very place  
> where someone disappeared ... *(CBU 9)*
“San Onofre,” dated 1977, loosens the notion of selfhood “apart from others” (CBU 20) by taking up the cause of human rights. As the borders of the poem extend further south, the degrees of abjection deepen. Forché transports the reader to the site of violence. In its opening lines, the poem courts our ethnographic gaze, rehearsing what the critic Eliot Weinberger disparages as “the genre of revolutionary tourism.” But the ethnographic trace, though once a colonial instrument, is directed toward a different end, that of securing our empathy for an anonymous, powerless figure. The poem ends:

... the words Come with us! we might hear them. If that happened, we would lead our lives with our hands tied together. That is why we feel it is enough to listen to the wind jostling lemons, to dogs ticking across the terraces, knowing that while birds and warmer weather are forever moving north, the cries of those who vanish might take years to get here. (CBU 9)

The terminus of the poem records a two-fold disappearance. It withholds the suffering from view. And it lets abject vocality fall away, illustrating lyric’s inability to convey traumatic calls in their specificity. Contrast “San Onofre” with a poem by Margaret Atwood, the Canadian writer who after being moved by Forché’s poems, found a publisher for The Country Between Us. Responding to Forché, Atwood writes:

Just this: I think of the woman they did not kill. Instead they sewed her face shut, closed her mouth to a hole the size of a straw, and put her back on the streets, a mute symbol.

“San Onofre” withholds tragic spectacle. Atwood provides the missing image in Forché’s poem. Taking the risk of voyeuristic fascination, Atwood shows the way dehumanization wounds
language. But it is in Forché’s poem about the desaparecido, imagined from afar, at a place where pain resists the speaker’s longing to penetrate what spectacle paradoxically hides: the groundlessness of the human image emptied out onto wounded language. Forché comments on another kind of disappearance on the level of official cultural memory. This is why “San Onofre” takes pains to mark the locus of speaking—why disappearance in another country and its missing are figured as having their proper addressee in the “we” that listens in the poem. Forché appears to naturalize vocalic loss by linking it to the thermal shifts and birds “forever moving north.” Yet even this naturalizing device is citational. Forché marks the American identity of “we” by alluding to ”To the Roaring Wind,” a famous gnomic poem by Wallace Stevens:

What syllable are you speaking,
Vocalissimus,
in the distances of sleep?
Speak it.\textsuperscript{31}

The deportment of Forché’s speaker politicizes the link between the “cries of those who vanish” with the wind’s impossible voice. The world and the disappeared are inarticulate but for the fiction of calling that we bestow on them. Forché relies on the intimacy of canonical lyrics to make familiar the foreignness of the traumatic call, as well as to cross the gap between the Salvadoran crisis and the place of listening. This ethical unsettlement can be described in phenomenological terms: “The call does not leave me intact,” Jean-Louis Chrétien writes, “it surges only opening a space in me to be hearer and therefore shattering something of what I was before I felt myself to be called.”\textsuperscript{32} As Forché’s poem ends, the shifter “we” is no longer strictly bound to the claims made by nation-based eidetic construction. “San Onofre” brings the project of mediating between self and world to situate the listening “we” before a hemispheric narrative about the determination of spaces for valuation and citizenship.\textsuperscript{33} It undoes the notion that the disappearance of persons “beyond here” has little to do with the rivalry over the proper shape of humanity or freedom as dispensed by the nation-state.
The interest in the production and distribution of worth locates poetics thoroughly in political contestation. The name Grossman provides for such contestation is “eidetic warfare,” understood as “the struggle to fix or establish a determinate form of the self—individual and collective—by means of the violent usurpation of predominant power of description in the scarce space of manifestation.”

Forché never ceases to remind us of the violence involved vying for control over the rules for manifestation:

There is no list long enough
For a selective service card shriveling
Under a match, the prison that comes of it,
A flag in the wind eaten from its pole
And boys sent back in trash bags. (CBU 45)

Forché’s reckoning portrays the Cold War as a geopolitical version of eidetic conflict. The spaces for manifesting the human form require violence in the name of citizenship, linking “flag” with the slight occlusion of the tragic in the phrase “trash bags.” The struggles opposing “communism” with “democracy” and the logics of “revolution or death” are struggles for granting intelligibility to persons and the world—waged in order to settle “the country between us,” the spaces of indeterminacy, with the citizenship space for manifesting the proper individual and collective eidos of the human.

**Freedom elsewhere**

The year Forché wrote “San Onofre,” rights language rose to prominence in the United States. In January 1977, after a campaign with human rights as its core message, Jimmy Carter was sworn into the presidency. Since 1933 Washington relied heavily on economic and military instruments to wield global influence. Its clout in Latin America went hand in hand with the “clear understanding”—the historian Walter LaFeber writes—“that given Washington’s needs and reliance on military means, the dictators were its best bet to maintain the system.”

Carter’s born-again image seemed refreshing: “We cannot look away,” he said on September 1976, “when
a government tortures people, or jails them for their beliefs.”36 During his inauguration, Carter famously stated:

Because we are free, we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. Our moral sense dictates a clear-cut preference for those societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights.37

Carter’s message inspired American activists. The emergent discourse of rights offered them a new way to redirect their idealism. Amnesty International received the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1977. For Washington, human rights offered a chance to reclaim prestige or “moral transcendence” with which to clear the whiff of napalm.38 For the rest of the planet, it offered an exit out of the narrow terms of an eidetic conflict over the political and economic space of citizenship.

In El Salvador, eidetic warfare waged in terms of competing state forms had become intolerable. In the 1970s the sharply decreasing number of tenants or colonos went hand in hand with the steep rise in the number of landless people.39 As the oligarchy shifted toward modern export-oriented agriculture, the feudal system gave way to a system of wage labor. The colonos turned into even more destitute mozos. A hired laborer or mozo, according to Forché, was paid four colones a day: “With four colones you can buy a few tortillas and a little beans or rice. You can barely feed yourself on that.”40 The situation could no longer be ignored. It spurred activism inspired by teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Initially, the opposition was based on grassroots movements that embraced liberation theology, a re-interpretation of the Gospels as a guidebook for social justice.41

Liberation theology posed challenges to landowners. Landowners controlled the Salvadoran citizenship space, because they enjoyed the support of the military and of U.S. anticommmunist programs. Forché reports that from 1946 to 1979, the Salvadoran military received U.S. aid amounting to $16.7 million, making their army “a formidable force in Central
Latin American regimes developed what historian Hal Brands calls the “National Security Doctrine.” The doctrine declared any opposition to the status quo as a threat to the American hemisphere. Brands maintains that Washington was not responsible for the doctrine that “enabled state terror.” It only exploited the doctrine to defend U.S. interests.

In 1977 the primary role of the Church in the Salvadoran opposition was not an obscure fact. The New York Times that year reported that priests were working with the poor “to campaign for land reform” and “to teach them ‘human dignity’ through social consciousness.” But there lay the rub. Given the tightly constrained space for political disagreement and dialogue, activists turned from peaceful means to guerilla combat. Salvadoran dissent became increasingly armed “only as the government’s repression intensified in the late 1970s.” The fusion of theology and the discourse of liberation lent itself well to the narrative of Soviet contagion. Reacting to the Salvadoran left’s turn to insurgency, the protectionism that tied United States to the interests of local rulers distorted the Salvadoran clamor for human dignity, even if that call might have resonated with Carter’s avowed commitment to human rights. Alegria alludes to this cognitive dissonance in hemispheric terms:

A slab of pained stone.
Its grasses, its trees, its voices
grow, spread, overrun
niches of sterile rock.
America is a green, a living stone.
America is difficult.

What foreign policy historian Lars Schoultz describes as “a bipolar mentality that left no room for noncommunist insurgents” hastened the petrification of human meaning. This mentality prevailed in spite of the “uncontrollable American impulse,” as historian Arthur Schlesinger puts it, “to demonstrate sympathy for suffering people in other lands.” It cast Salvadoran radicals and their U.S. sympathizers, in the respective roles of deceivers and the duped. “Because left-wing revolutionaries invoke the symbols and values of democracy,” the
conservative political scientist Jeane Kirkpatrick wrote in 1979, “they are again and again accepted as partisans in the cause of freedom in democracy.” This illusory clarity generated confusion over the role of Soviets in campesino struggles. 49

Salvadoran security and paramilitary forces proceeded on much surer footing. “In the summer of 1977,” Bonner recalls, “pamphlets circulated throughout the country: ‘Be a Patriot! Kill a Priest!’” 50 American officials were not unaware of the repression. Speaking before the congressional committees in 1977, a former mayor of San Salvador reported that “any idea or activity, based on social justice, whether it comes from political, social, or religious sectors, is immediately branded as Communist.” 51 The weight of such misrepresentation fell heaviest on the campesinos. They were often the victims of the sacrificial logic carried out by the National Security Doctrine in El Salvador. In November 1977, the Salvadoran regime legalized repression. Through the “Law in Defense and Guarantee of Public Order,” it decreed imprisonment for Salvadorans who:

propagate orally, in writing or by any other means within the country or who send abroad, news or information which is tendentious or false, destined to perturb the constitutional and legal order, the tranquility or security of the country, the economic or monetary regime or the stability of stocks and public bonds: those who give access to such news and information in the mass information media and those Salvadoran citizens who while outside the country divulge news and information of this nature. 52

The suspension of the law—decree by the law itself and in the name of upholding civic institutions bound to the law—led not only to unjust arrests. In the next two years, separate delegations formed by the Organization of American States and the British parliament reported torture and disappearances. 53 Even after the “Law in Defense and Guarantee of Public Order” was revoked in 1979, Amnesty International continued to detect a pattern of “systematic persecution of peasant farmers and their labor and religious leaders,” “widespread torture and detention without trial,” and “immunity from lawful prosecution” for members of the paramilitary and security forces committing abuses. 54 Washington put pressure on the
Salvadorans to curb repression. But it remained deeply ambivalent. The prospect of radicals in power left Carter vacillating between “the fate of freedom elsewhere” and friendship with dictators eager to stamp out revolution.

**Traumatic awakening**

Forché attends upon a kind of vocality whose shattering is intolerable to hear. The narcissistic identification with pain—what Dominick LaCapra calls “vicarious or surrogate victimage”—is never far from Forché’s poetry. In framing moments of abjection, testimony entertains complicity with the violence depicted. This risk of complicity forms part of Forché’s study in the constraints that testamentary language places on lyric. For Cathy Caruth, the problem with testimonial commemoration is that it threatens to displace “the event’s incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding.” Testimony’s impossibility stems from the fact that dehumanizing pain foils our retroactive attempt to bring it into frames of meaning. In a poem dedicated to Forché, Atwood conveys rather baldly the potential exhaustion that bearing witness to singular instances of trauma can incur:

> We count them like beads,  
> we turn them into statistics & litanies  
> and into poems like this one.  
>  
> Nothing works.  
> They remain what they are.

From these accounts of testimony, a contradictory plea emerges. In giving voice to what no longer has a voice, the poem must call to mind an impossible fidelity to the originary wound. “San Onofre” offers an example of this contradiction. The poem calls attention to the speaker’s surrogate abjection in hearing “Come with us,” the command a desaparecido would have heard. “San Onofre” offers little more than this imperative. The poem recreates the scene of abduction while maintaining the opacity of the desaparecido’s experience beyond hearing his or her captor’s voice. Forché’s preoccupation with opacity illustrates what Caruth calls the “traumatic
awakening,” the inability to reach into the singular character of another’s trauma. To undergo a traumatic awakening is to recall a perceptual and cognitive failure, the act of missing. Forché’s poems enact such awakening with the imperative to “tell what it means not to see,” as Caruth writes. In “The Island,” a lyric portrait of Alegria, Forché repeats this idea of missing with motifs of voice and wind found in the previous lyric:

I am xaloc, a wind
from the southwest as far away
as my country and there is nothing
to help me in it or out of it.

Carolina, do you know how long it takes
any one voice to reach another? (CBU 12)

The Stevensian wind in “San Onofre” gives way to the xaloc whirling across Mallorca in “The Island,” the place where Alegria was exiled. “The Island” marks Alegria’s vantage away from her homeland. Measuring the distance with wind and inaudible voices, “The Island” reminds us that in conveying the abject, lyric calls up the hierarchy between the sovereign subject and the dehumanized. The poem locates the testimonial poets between both positions. Forché’s trope for translation—voices touching, carried by wind—is an impossible image. And its impossibility underscores the contradiction of witnessing as a form of traumatic recognition. The recognition, caught up in both knowing and unknowing, is what the penultimate lines of “The Island” suggest, where the exiled poet says:

To my country I ship poetry instead
of bread, so I cut through nothing.
I give nothing, so you see I have
nothing, according to myself. (CBU 12)

Forché’s refrains from supplementing lyric action for the other modes of political agency. Beyond the generic constraints of the testimonial genre, there appear to be two reasons for this refusal. First, leaving unsaid the sufferer’s plea is a more effective way of bearing witness. The
plea has to emerge within the reader, as if on its own, enacting the kind of “literary reading” that according to Gayatri Spivak works “to rearrange desires noncoercively.” It opens the reader to other kinds of intersubjective relation that poetry cannot substitute. “That is why we feel”—as Forché writes in “San Onofre,” cutting the line—“it is enough to listen.” The cut signals the tenuousness of vicarious affect, inviting us to reflect on our lyric reading, whether or not we read to soothe our recrimination, or more hazardously, to reconcile another’s pointless suffering to our need for signification.

Second, if Forché’s “we” taps into a sense of “surrogate victimage” only to make us confront its impropriety, might it not also be said to loosen the Cold War’s psychical bind on poésie engagée? Lyric and rights language, after all, are not exempt from the logic of “cultural forms” that “transmit some thoughts and themes, and disable others.” Forché’s “we” can be read as a shifter tied not just to cultural forms but also to the rivalry over spaces of citizenship. This tie makes the idioms of freedom that we speak susceptible to ideological usages. During the Cold War, there was one kind of freedom whose sacrificial logic was justified by the need for “security.” And there was another kind that took on the grim face of revolution. In the name of this or that freedom, eidetic warfare provoked a return to the inhuman. The clash between these kinds of freedom put the idea of the human at risk, either to refashion the human or to perpetuate its familiar themes. Forché comments on this game of risk in “Selective Service,” particularly in the opening and concluding sections:

We rise from the snow where we’ve lain on our backs and flown like children, from the imprint of perfect wings and cold gowns, and we stagger together wine-breathed into town where our people are building their armies again, short years after body bags, after burnings.

... We’ll tell you about fractions. Half of us are dead or quiet or lost. Let them speak for themselves
We lie down in the fields and leave behind
the corpses of angels. (CBU 45)

Forché begins with a winter scene evoking a wishful return to innocence. As the poem ends, however, the human outlines on the snow become figures of the inhuman. The terminal image recalls not just the “body bags” mentioned in earlier lines, where Forché laments how militarism has prevailed only “short years after” Vietnam. It also underscores the shift from the “we” speaking in the opening section, to the co-mingling of spectral and living voices in the last two lines. It is the latter “we” describing its collective trace as “the corpses of angels.” Beside the ironies modulating the lyric, “Selective Service” weighs the innocence political institutions feign when reminded of the violence constitutive of the human. In the face of such traumatic origins, lyric tends to equivocate when staking out claims regarding the eidos. Our receptivity to lyric convictions depends on the degree to which poems make us alive to our mutability and history. Our political institutions, in contrast to lyric, tend to conceal eidetic violence to conserve the integrity of our images. To illustrate this tension between lyric and political tendencies, we need only recall Kirkpatrick’s defense of authoritarian rule in 1981. For Kirkpatrick, authoritarians were defenders of freedom insofar as they followed anticommunist doctrine, never mind the abject conditions that dictators created:

Traditional autocrats have in place existing allocations of wealth, power, status and other resources which in most traditional societies favor an affluent few and maintain masses in poverty. ... Because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope [and] acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for survival in the miserable roles they are destined to fill. Such societies create no refugees.

Forché’s work may be read as a response to the warped history Kirpatrick marshals in defense of Cold War valorizations of freedom. “Selective Service” puts pressure on the search for other means to intervene in the crisis of valuing. Forché seems deliberately to incite the displeasure of civic-minded auditors for whom acts of reading are no substitute for struggles against injustice. This noncoercive ethical demand, however, begins with recognizing the indeterminacy, which
Agamben describes as “the fracture between the living being and the speaking being.” A similar demand takes place in “The Island,” when Forché finds herself reflected in the face of Alegria:

When we look at someone, we are seeing someone else. When we listen we hear something taking place in the past. When I talk to her I know what I will be saying twenty years from now. (CBU 11)

Forché responds to the haunting of the damaged by uttering a kind of promise to a spectral future. Testimony renders the project of recuperation necessarily incomplete. It holds out for a restless ear, alert to the gap between listening and response, between the sphere of meaning and the voice of the dead. “The Island” suggests that vanished cries need our commemorative relays if they are to arrive at a proper hearing. It bears witness to the dead by lending an almost-tactile quality to what is neither outside nor inside the face and speech. There is “something taking place” besides the human *eidos*.

**Lyric’s object voice**

The memory of inhuman suffering is irretrievable. And yet this irretrievability founds the possibility of testimony—of speaking by subjects removed from dehumanization in place of the dehumanized. Agamben proposes, in fact, that the true subject of testimony is not a subject. This aporia in testimony can be understood in terms of vocality: “No one can bear witness from the inside of death, and there is no voice for the disappearance of voice.” Dehumanization removes the self’s chief traits through a contradictory process: it displaces the identification with the body by reducing subjectivity to the zero ground of sentience, the residue of voice. Atwood, in another poem on torture, describes a union leader who is

wired like
an odd zoological diagram:
if you don’t keep your mouth shut
they’ll choose the noise
you emit.
Torturers often use the most ordinary objects to inflict pain. Elaine Scarry’s account of torture sheds light on the scenes of abjection Atwood and Forché record. Scarry seeks to account for the way torturers use the nomenclature of everyday life to classify their methods. What takes place, Scarry writes, “is a process externalizing the way in which the person’s pain causes his world to disintegrate.” The sufferer is dispossessed of a familiar world. The process corresponds to the degradation of speech to bodily signals until pure phonic substance is itself abolished. “The translation of pain into power,” Scarry writes, “is ultimately a transformation of body into voice.” In using torture, an oppressive regime turns the voice signaling pain into a sign of the ruler’s power. In the “inside of death,” the place where the voice is reduced to pure acoustic residue and thereby destroyed, what is it that allows torturers to perform their treacherous alchemy? Scarry and Agamben teach us that dehumanization puts to the fore the founding categories of the human as categories of difference. The difference between subjectivity and embodiment corresponds to the interval between the phonemic and the phonic. In extreme situations, a zone of indeterminacy opens. The self turned nonhuman becomes little more than a body; its world, no more than corporeal or animate being; and the promise of language, no more than an acoustic capacity. We come to the point where vocality is exposed and the human stands mute.

Our literary and political understandings of subjectivity rely on the *eidos* of the voice. “The voice,” Adriana Cavarero writes, “subjectivizes the one who emits it, even when it is an animal.” To become a subject on and off the page is to submit voice to language. Likewise in poems, as Grossman writes, the speaker is “always a person” and “always definable in social terms.” For politics, subjective emergence also entails the passage through vocality. Jean-Francois Lyotard maintains that a person’s juridical being depends on interlocution, the capacity to convey something “not by bodily signals but signs” to another. Lyotard stresses the fact that this “signification is addressed.” The speaking voice is one of our primary means by which the polis grants the individual membership in a community.
The distinction Lyotard makes between bodily signals and signs comes to us through other names: phonation or phone, on the one hand, and language or logos, on the other. Both humans and animals, using the organs of appetite and breathing, possess sonic capacities. Animals produce sounds that fall short of grammar and address—at least from the human point of view. Bare phone does not cross into interlocution. Only in human beings does the phonic go on to become the phonemic. Aristotle still remains the most useful source for understanding these distinctions. Where animal phone ends, language or logos begins. The promise of interlocution separates the voice from mere sound. Aristotle writes:

Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice [phone] is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the information of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and an association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.

Language and phonation, logos and phone, organize the semantic and the sensate as different kinds of experience. It is the signifying community that allows us to transition from creating signals for pleasure or pain, to telling the difference between what harms the human sphere and the need to conserve it. To trace the vocalic limit is to proceed along two currents of division: between human and natural acoustics; and second, between animate life and the life elected to membership in the body politic. “The citizen,” Lyotard writes, “is the human individual whose right to address others is recognized by those others.” Political subjectivity coincides with the moment phonation becomes language. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as human phone. “The voice does not carry language,” as Paul Zumthor and Marilyn Engelhardt write; rather, language “passes through the voice and leaves no trace.” The Aristotelian provenance of this statement is evident in the way it figures speech as the destiny of the voice. The cry of pain is
subjectivized as a call, something phonemic. Language assimilates the phonic, erasing vocality’s passage and translating it as a plea.

Speech takes hold of the voice. The phonemic shapes it to such a degree that its phonic material is no longer heard. And yet this unheard thing remains as a substructure. It is this vocalic element within speech that preoccupies Mladen Dolar: “Inside the heard voices is an aphoniac voice.” Human voices bury this ambivalent structure, which Dolar names “vocality.” Vocality or the object voice is the resonant surplus that at the same time falls silent when we speak or when our voices are reduced to cries of pleasure or pain. Dolar’s account gives us to understand that voice cannot be independent of phonation and speech—and yet nonetheless it cannot be confined to either. To understand why vocalic motifs pervade Forché’s poems about El Salvador, Dolar’s concept of vocality allows me to trace how poetics and the political overlap. The object voice “is precisely the voice that holds bodies and languages together,” writes Dolar. “It is their missing link, what they have in common.” It translates the inhuman cry as a form of human calling.

The distinctions Dolar inherits from Aristotle recall the means by which we either regard the speaker as a subject of rights, or exclude him or her from the eidos of the human. While appearing initially to be a distinction between sounds of nature and human sounds, logos and phone are in fact political concepts. The problem with this distinction is that the insistence on the phonemic leads us to neglect the voice as mere possibility and to exclude from the object voice—in its muteness and nonintelligibility—the eidetic function. From “the cries of those who vanish,” what survives is not just spectral, imaginary call but a drastically reduced linguistic possibility. By Lyotard’s own account, the cry cannot be reduced to phonation simply because it is addressed, even if it broadcasts no meaning. We hear it as an intent to convey pain even when it communicates no sense. As Dolar puts it: “scream retroactively turns into appeal, it is interpreted, endowed with meaning, it is transformed into speech addressed to the other.” The signal, assimilated not as voice but as vocality, survives long after the keening fades, cut off from
perception but also from mishearing. In Blue Hour, published more than two decades after The Country Between Us, Forché implicitly comments on vocality in a poem about fragments, written in fragments:

matchbooks flaring in a blank window
matinal, mirage, mosaic
meaning did not survive that loss of sequence 

The line-fragments unfold without semantic linkage. Only alliteration and rhythm supply the semblance of coherence, patterns that call to mind the subvocal material in poetry without being able to access the object voice. Lyric remembers our passage into language. As David Appelbaum writes, lyric lets “the body display itself,” often in a disruptive relation to the sovereignty of meaning. “The acoustical form serves as a directive against the repeated inauguration into speech.” Lyric acousmatics draws on the pulse of vocality, imprinting the phonemic functions with spacings that elude assimilation into speech. Insofar as lyric opens the lacunae of speech, then, it also can be described a kind of death-work. In “poetic dictation,” as Agamben writes, we hear “language in the instant it sinks again, dying, into the voice, and at which the voice, emerging from mere sound, passes (that is, dies) into signification.” Once more the implicit figure is the vocality felt in rhythm. Through rhythm, poetry speaks the somatic surplus, suffering the same fate as the body and closing off the propagation of meaning beyond death. Lyric rhythm unsettles the vaunted durability of poetic dictation. Although received as a kind of speech, lyric’s phonemic aspects recall to us the object voice, the surplus that does not quite belong either to the body or to language.

Sovereignty and torture

“Poetry,” Mutlu Blasing writes, “exploits the affective qualities of sounds, remembering the history of the production of speech sounds.” For Susan Stewart, lyric is the repository of that history, midway between somatic drives and the rhythms of language. “Through lyric,”
Stewart writes, “the human voice both reenacts the conditions of its emergence from silence and wrests that silence into the intersubjective domain of made and shaped things.” Stewart’s essay “Letter on Sound” gives the upper hand to signification, and yet in her description of lyric complements Dolar’s notion of vocality as well as Lyotard’s account of interlocution. The lyric action of wresting silence into intersubjectivity parallels the passage from phonation to addressing, as a traversal that is not reducible to sense. The object voice, Dolar writes, is precisely “the material element recalcitrant to meaning.” Something in the voice, in soliloquy as in the interlocutory polis, traverses speech without adding anything to what it says.

In Forché’s work, it is this preoccupation with aphonic remainders that sutures together lyric vocation and rights advocacy. These remainders are the concern of eidetic construction, in the shapes that lyric gives and in the subjectivity that political inclusion grants to speakers. Yet vocality in lyric also bears a relation to abjection and suffering, at the limit of signification where the human image meets the inhuman. “Return,” “San Onofre,” and “The Island,” like the other poems on El Salvador, enact how, although it seeks to transmit shattered vocality, lyric can miss it: “Do you know how long it takes,” Forché writes, “any one voice to reach another?” The Country Between Us dramatizes our relation to the ambivalent destiny of the sufferer’s cry. The vocality of pain is what lyric address excludes. Forché recalls such voicing not as phone or logos, but as something on the margin of poetic and citizenship spaces.

If vocality in lyric approaches but also defers meaning, it is possible to say that this same subvocal voice is what we find in the emergence of the political subject, the subject of interlocution. Subjective emergence as well as its destruction pivot around the appropriation or exclusion of the object voice. As Dolar maintains, vocality is both hinge and cut between the body politic and individual embodiment. What mediates lyric and rights language also occurs between phonation and speech. Note what vanishes from these lines found in “Return,” the Salvadoran sequence’s longest poem:
You know the mix
of machetes with whiskey, the slip of the tongue
that costs hundreds of deaths.
You’ve seen the pits where men and women
are kept the few days it takes without
food and water. You’ve heard the cocktail
conversation on which their release depends. (*CBU* 17)

Forché places in stark contrast sheer abjection and the treacherous use of interlocution. The individual voices of sufferers themselves leave no imprint. The same may be said of the traumatic cries in parts of the passage where the vocabulary of sight takes over, the detention cells where political prisoners are kept. Articulating the description, lyric insinuates its untimely rhythm: hard consonants interspersed with labials, short and long vowels alternating in the four-beat rhythm of song form. The rhythm is almost iambic. Lyric and politic are no longer contraries here, where faint music underpins Forché’s indictment of power. The kinds of talk Forché describes and the poem itself excise what both linguistic and political usages reveal; the assimilation of the object voice into sonic pattern, anecdotal meaning, and “conversation” keep the traumatic call at a safe distance from the domains of speech.

Forché’s poetry is important, then, not simply because it has made rights advocacy poetic or because activism in poetry can “make it new.” Its ambition, rather, is to show the continuity of lyric to the very processes against which it tries to define itself, as it grasps after disappeared voices. It probes the ways in which poetic autonomy might be more usefully conceived as lyric sovereignty, in a broken continuum with political institutions. It exposes the intimacy between language and sovereign power. Forché’s attention to the object voice brings to the fore such intimacy. Vocality both joins and disjoins poetic and political uses of speech. It is worth asking, then, what happens when the voice already made aphonie by language turns up in lyric.

Sovereignty according to Agamben presides over the difference between *bios* and *zoe*. It pries apart *bios*—the kind of life humans share—from *zoe* or animate being. And it assimilates only the former to the sphere of interlocution. Animate being or “bare life” never simply fades,
however. Subjectivity depends on body and voice as much as on community and language. “The living being possesses logos by suppressing and retaining in its own voice,” Agamben writes, “just as it inhabits polis by letting its own bare life be excepted by it.”\(^8\) Vocality relates to bare life at the limit where bios turns into political being. When we hear Lyotard talk about speech as “the most fundamental human right,” we bear witness to the object voice’s exclusion from subjectivity. To have rights is already to have entered interlocution. It is to interiorize bare life as well as vocality, that which speaking purports to banish. “Let us take it,” Lyotard says:

\[
text{that the capacity to speak to others is a human right, and perhaps the most fundamental human right. If the use of this capacity is forbidden, ... a harm is inflicted on the speaker thus constrained. He is set apart from the speech community of interlocutors. To no one is he any longer someone other, nor is anyone now his other.}\(^8\)
\]

Voice and the human overlap with the nonhuman in the caesura presided over by sovereign power. Language is to the life of citizen (bios) what phonation is to animate being. The process of division and expulsion defines speech’s interiorization of vocality.\(^8\) Cast as a remainder, vocality nonetheless gives language its sonorous flesh. In the case of depersonalization, the object voice falls into a state of doubled abjection, entirely cut off from the possibility of speaking. To experience humanity in the abject is to inhabit within one’s body the cut made by sovereign power, undoing our emergence into intelligibility.\(^9\) Torture is an extreme manifestation of that power.

Forché speaks of torture in “Return.” The poem takes shape as a conversation between two North American rights advocates. Forché presents their voices in two sets of alternating strophes. One voice belongs to the journalist Josephine Crum, who observes the events in El Salvador from a distance and yet speaks in the longer strophes, the second and fourth. The shorter strophes—the first and third—frame the voice of the speaker returning from El Salvador. The poem points to torture in the second strophe:
Go try on
Americans your long, dull story
of corruption, but better to give
them what they want: Lil Milagro Ramirez,
who after years of confinement did not
know what year it was, how she walked
with help and was forced to shit in public. (CBU 17)

Crum’s grit and candor in these lines is a double-edged sword. Forché illustrates the speaker’s susceptibility to the kind of erasure achieved by torture-language. In spite of Crum’s empathy, her statistical language crowds out any room for the individual history of Ramirez.91 A few lines prior, Forché recalls “men and women of good will” who study “torture reports with fascination” (CBU 17). The allusion is to W.H. Auden:

It lures us; all: even the best
Les hommes de bonne volonté, feel
Their politics perhaps unreal
And all they have believed untrue.

“It” in Auden’s poem refers to “the Minotaur,” a trope allegorical of the violence in the 1930s.92 Forché maps Auden’s memory of fascism onto our scene of reading. The problem is not just that torture reports have inured us. More disturbing, Forché shows us how the testimonial imperative, as well as the modes of reception it elicits, tends to move along the same path as sovereignty. While sovereignty excepts the human from himself in the name of community, torture wrests objects and words from themselves, to destroy their world-making function.93

What shocks in Forché’s lines about Ramirez is the apparent transparency of torture-language. Crum takes for granted the legibility of words whose character torturers already have altered. The second strophe continues:

Tell them about the razor, the live wire,
dry ice and concrete, grey rats and above all
who fucked her, how many times and when. (CBU 17)
Torture-language, like poetry, is a reworking of a code. It estranges the familiar and wrests the familiar into the strange. This is why it fascinates the lettered city, the enclave of the liberal subject. Torture-language easily bears out a homology to the literary, as well as to “the bond of inclusive exclusion” that sovereignty and language hold in relation to bodies and voices. “Return” treads the line where ordinary speech meets the torturer’s otherness. By necessity the language of witnessing casts off the traumatic call. When the poem translates the incoherence of abjection, the strange thing is that only torture-language remains, with its vocabulary of the everyday world.

**Missing sovereignty**

“The voice is structurally in the same position as sovereignty,” writes Dolar. As a consequence, it “can suspend the validity of the law and inaugurate the state of emergency.” Dolar underscores the disruptive capacities of the object voice by highlighting the way sovereignty crucially depends on that which it simultaneously interiorizes and excludes. The object voice thrives precisely in the impossibility of telling phonation apart from speech. This zone of indistinction, muting the object voice, is none other than the zone of the sovereign cut. The sovereign exception occurs when, as Agamben writes, “the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law.”

The sovereign exception lays out an ambivalent topology. Like language and the object voice, sovereignty and bare life are both suspended within its zone. However found within the same topology, they are not indistinct. They constitute a polarity within the zone of exception. Agamben sheds light on a hierarchical configuration when he says: “Language is the sovereign who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language and that language is always beyond itself.” In the vocalic interval, as the object voice falls silent in the transit to the phonemic, language is aligned with power. “To speak, in this sense, is always to ‘speak the law,’” Agamben writes further. It is language—not the voice on its own—that holds
more weight than the object voice for constituting our understanding of the human. Missing the voice, hence, is revealed to be a structural consequence of sovereignty. In the vocalic interval, inside and outside the boundary where persons attain dignity by being subject to sovereign power, the semantic and the phonic traverse formlessness.

In light of sovereignty, we come to see that Forché’s attention to vocality is an attempt to dramatize “the missing of the trauma,” the phrase Caruth uses to describe the “complex relation between knowing and not knowing.” It strives to hold up to ourselves our inability to recognize the act of missing as a structural component within political institutions, its aphasic tendencies determining life or death for others. The recognition of such missing is where our engagements ought to have begun. What compels recognition in Forché’s work, by contrast, is the injunction found in “Ourselves or Nothing,” a memorial to the twentieth century as an age of genocide:

... in Salvador,
where the blood will never soak
into the ground, everywhere and always
go after that which is lost. (CBU 59)

Our prevailing modes of political recognition, however, are not founded on “that which is lost,” or for that matter, on the object voice. Speech, not vocality, is what matters to our juridical and literary understandings of the human. On this issue, another poem in The Country Between Us depicts how the voice to which lyric deems itself accountable is not the same voice required by politics. In “Joseph” Forché describes a telephone conversation with an old friend from her Midwestern girlhood. The force of the poem’s conclusion stems in part from the way lyric responsibility disrupts interlocution:

Now this feel of knife for fish,
of bullet for something racing through
the darkness, your voice
slung on the wires that lapse
scalloping the cold length
of the country between us.
It is another voice that calls me
after all this time.
It has nothing to say to you, Joseph. (*CBU* 44)

Mourning lost identifications, the poem thinks through interpellation and communal membership. The speaker affirms sameness, even a kind of kinship: “You walk where my father walked” (*CBU* 42). The country the former soldier and the poet now share, however, is “the country between us,” a space of indeterminacy. Earlier in the text, Forché alludes to Vietnam: “After ten years you/ want so fervently to talk about the war” (*CBU* 43). The contrast here goes deeper than that between military interpellation and poetic vocation. The closing lines suggest another kind of split—namely, the split between the identifications Forché shares with Joseph, and that voice which, with its indeterminable “nothing,” gnaws at the eidetic borders of patriotism.

Class inflects Forché’s poem like wires “scalloping the cold length” linking and distinguishing its interlocutors. The poem dramatizes its *non serviam*, refusing certain kinds of hailing but also displaying its complicity with class divisions. It is the last line, however, that undercuts the speaker’s self-aggrandizing stance. Relying on the convention of lyric overhearing, Forché stages an interpellative act by marking a turn *away* from the explicit addressee: “It has nothing to say to you, Joseph.” Apostrophe, whose main work normally is to foreground interlocution—ends up producing interference. Here the poem “Joseph” cuts itself off, allowing us to dwell on a stubborn muteness amid vocal frames. We hear the telephone conversation as delimited by lyric, the poem itself as bounded and bound. And yet these *termini* and restrictions nonetheless compel us to hear something else. Sovereign and subjected, something on the underside of hailing rises to perceptibility, with the power to suspend interlocution and to end the poem. Lyric appears to displace its own eidetic designs, locating the basis for recognition not in the voice of addressing but in something other within speech.
**Hinge and cut**

The resonance of lyric paradoxically stems from a chthonic subvocal element, the indeterminacy of the object voice. It plays off signification against the grain of vocality. It enables intelligibility as well as exposure. The object voice, however, is not finally identical with the abject voice, which marks the dissolution of semantic possibility in suffering. “The meaning of pain,” Grossman writes, “is precisely the unincludability of the experience of pain—and therefore the experience of history—in the instituted canons of human value.”

To keep abjection at bay, the valuing of persons necessitates the *eidos*, just as interlocution in the political sphere needs to misplace the object voice even if that object voice continues to reside within language. Yet whereas the object voice falls silent no sooner than we strain to hear it in signification, traumatic vocality loses its character upon being translated into speaking. The abject voice thwarts every moment of speaking altogether, in the present of extremity and in the promise of belated restitution. It unsettles the intersubjective relations of the polis, which holds sacred the eidetic powers of the speaking voice, its capacity to emerge from abjection transformed.

Given our eidetic interest, our need for intelligibility, it is tempting to confound vocality and the disappeared, abject voice. When lyric gives space to the inhuman, the assimilation of vocality to the realm of the living is predicated on vocality’s semantic destiny. Allowing for such transformations is the fact that vocality is a partial object: “an entity which,” says Dolar, “cannot be met in the full sonority of an unambiguous presence but is not simply a lack either.” It enables lyric and political signification even if it adds nothing to it. That is to say, it adds nothing but the inappropriable pulsation of something that is neither a lack nor a substance. As somatic material whose grain is not quite in the body, vocality makes mishearing almost inevitable beside the abject voice. Unlike the voice of depersonalization, however, vocality is always what is capable of being transformed. By contrast, as Grossman writes, the abject voice contains “all the pain there is,” repelling attempts at including the sufferer’s cry in the translation into speech.
“There is no voice for the disappearance of voice.” Agamben’s maxim bears repeating. The muteness of abjection is as subject to excluded inclusion as the object voice. But there in that radical homology is precisely where we observe their fateful divergence. The disappearance of the object voice gives rise to speech. The abject cry, on the other hand, signifies only the erasure of the person, the ruin of vocality.

In Forché’s poetry as in Grossman’s meditation on the classical sculpture, depersonalization reveals “the capacity of the human body subjected to extreme experience to communicate human presence.” But it also comes up against “the always previously untested adequacy of representation to transmit such a communication.” The problem is not that our inability to communicate or perceive pain, but that something in pain’s communication also prevents its perceptibility. This is why the traumatic cry generates a great deal of anxiety where political and lyric representations are concerned. Robert Pinsky alerts us to the occasion for mishearing when he writes that “only the challenge of what may seem unpoetic, that which has not already been made poetic by tradition, can keep the art truly pure and alive.” But abjection, no matter its uses for renewing artistic and political idioms, unsettles knowledge and threatens signification. Forché’s “Return” interrogates this problematic. Its motifs point to vocality as both hinge and cut, a partial object midway between representation and irreversible loss. Looking out for vocality in “Return” is the closest we come to registering the traumatic cry—or to the recognition of having missed it. Forché presents the direct observer as a bearer of shattered knowledge found in traumatic awakening:

Josephine, I tell you
I have not rested, not since I drove
those streets with a gun in my lap,
not since all manner of speaking has
failed and the remnant of my life
continues onward. (CBU 19)

The poem’s fiction of dialogue—an ironic rehearsal of eclogic exchange in pastoral—dramatizes what Caruth describes as the missing recognition that nonetheless bears inarticulate knowledge.
The language of witnessing, the speaker who addresses Josephine, is wrecked with paranoia, frustrated with the unfulfilled recuperative promise of communication. Forché’s feverish enjambments are consistent with the speaker’s exaggerated radical fervor (“a gun in my lap”). These elements beg the question of credibility, which plagued The Country Between Us with controversy, as noted earlier. They bring to bear on the act of reading “Return” the kind of reality-testing prevalent in juridical and philosophical thought. The skepticism that witnessing incurs affects our receptivity even to Crum speaking in the second strophe:

Tell them about retaliation: José lying on the flat bed truck, waving his stumps in your face, his hands cut off by his captors and thrown to the many acres of cotton, lost, still, and holding the last few lumps of leeched earth. Tell them of José in his last few hours and later how, many months later, a labor leader was cut to pieces and buried. Tell them how his friends found the soldiers and made them dig him up and ask forgiveness of the corpse, once it was assembled again on the ground like a man. (CBU 18)

Josephine’s unflinching capacity to name the abject seems founded as much on compassion as on a sense of power afforded by distance. The plausibility of that charge is reinforced by the tone, a menacing vehemence. We hear it in the sibilance emphasized by enjambment: “his/captors” and “once/ it was assembled.” We hear it in the pun on “leeched.” The image of soil, not “leached” but fattened by mutilation, a rewriting of Neruda. We hear it, finally, in the variations of “Tell them,” which culminate in Crum’s note on how the “friends” of the slain “made” the soldiers “ask forgiveness of the corpse.” The testimonial imperative devolves into this forceful “made them,” grasping after the allegory of mimetic violence to make sense of retaliation. What Crum rehearses, in sum, is the tragic awareness found in “Joseph.” The passages drawn from the second and third strophes of “Return” confront us with our “politics
unreal,” as Auden says, weighed beside the specious morality of the gun: passive dissidence versus the theater of “revolution or death.” This slogan in El Salvador, however, was written literally in blood. Forché reflects on the cost of such militant ardor. Its aftershocks are felt across the voices in dialogue, each vulnerable to distortion and missing.

The first and second speakers in “Return” perform different orders of testimony. One conventionally invites the scrutiny of reality-testing. The other, to quote Ronell once more, relies on “a memory without prosthetic or technical support.” It is significant that Forché assigns the speech recalling the details of trauma to Crum, the distant observer, and constrains the voice (and textual space) given to the direct witness. Unlike Crum, the latter is prone to stuttering and mnemonic failure: “I strained to remember,” Forché writes in the first strophe, “things impossible to forget” (CBU 17). We are not yet in the scene of compulsive enjambment, but these two lines already preview a key passage from the third strophe, where the witness tells Crum:

And when I speak to American men,  
there is some absence of recognition:  
their constant Scotch and fine white hands, many hours of business, penises hardened by motor inns and a faint resemblance to their wives. I cannot keep going. I remember the American attaché in that country: his tanks of fish, his clicking pen, his rapt devotion to reports. (CBU 19)

Forché echoes the feminist caricature of phallocentricism we find in Bishop’s poems about coloniality old and new, “Brazil, January 1, 1502” and “View from the Capitol.” But what strikes here is the enjambment Forché wields to query the precarious character of lyric as a medium for rights advocacy: “I cannot,” Forché cuts the line, “keep going.” In Josephine’s strophes, enjambment occurs less steeply, less frequently. Here the constant evasion of the caesura sensitizes us to testimony’s object voice, its tremor of non-language. It lodges the poem’s traumatic awakening at the level of the line.
For Agamben, the versura or the line’s turning-point is at the core of lyric, “reducing it to the one single element that still allows one to recognize it as such.”\textsuperscript{110} Evading the caesura prominently displays the line as a unit working rhythmic discord against the semantic unit of the sentence. Enjambment accentuates the traits seized by the feminist caricature, linking the “lack of recognition” among “American men” to male anxiety: “white/ hands,” “a faint/ resemblance to their wives,” an “American/ attaché,” and “his rapt/ devotion to reports.” Once more we enter the lettered city and traffic among people of “good will” (\textit{CBU} 19) portrayed earlier in the second strophe of “Return.” Forché at the end of the poem tries to warn the reader of the misrecognition built into traumatic knowledge, giving the last word to Crum:

\begin{quote}
Your problem is not your life as it is in America, not that your hands, as you tell me, are tied to do something. It is that you were born to an island of greed and grace where you have this sense of yourself as apart from others. It is not your right to feel powerless. Better people than you were powerless.
You have not returned to your country, but to a life you never left. (\textit{CBU} 20)
\end{quote}

Forché exposes the discrepancies of lyric sovereignty. With two speakers bearing a different relation to Salvadoran trauma, “Return” exposes the seams of an inner disagreement Forché shares with the implied addressees of \textit{The Country Between Us}, addressees who believe in the ethical necessity of testimony but by performing it, also articulate its discrepancies. The poem strives toward a composite image of such addressees, in the sovereign subject whose facets are scattered across the routes of Americanity linking the United States and Latin America. Like the meaning of the abject cry, however, the portrait never fully emerges. Instead what “Return” touches is the interval of vocality in speech addressed to the inhuman: the enigmatic void that resides not outside but within human worth, exposed in the confrontation between rights advocacy and the eidetic warfare waged by states vying for dominance. Forché’s work points to
the intractability of the damaged even in our commemorative transits. It enacts the limit where language touches its exposure, where the missing recognition pierces through our demand for the intelligibility of the real. It reveals in witnessing what Agamben calls “the non-place of articulation.”

**Two eerie visits**

If “Return” dramatizes how in witnessing lyric sovereignty misses the traumatic call, “The Colonel” (*CBU* 16) shows how political sovereignty can create the extreme conditions in which such missing becomes inevitable. “The Colonel,” a prose poem dated 1978, depicts the poet’s visit to the house of a torturer. The Salvadoran security official is hosting a dinner. This show of civility, however, is also a kind of torture in that its purpose is to display power over life and death, to induce fear. By focusing on motifs of addressing and listening, language and the voice, Forché depicts the use of an ordinary social ritual to suspend the interlocution promised by the ritual itself:

> There was some talk of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend told me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, and dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves.

The colonel responds to animal phonation as if it were speech. The performance is implicitly directed at his guests. All “parity in interlocution,” as Lyotard says of reciprocity, is lost. The colonel’s apparent confusion between *phone* and *logos* is consistent with the way he rejects the language fundamental to the polis: the discourse of rights. In the torture chamber, the colonel would have heard the abject cry not as a sign but as a pure bodily signal. The spatiality of his dwelling functions in a similar way by taking the protection of property to an extreme: “Broken
bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man’s legs or cut his hands to lace.” Forché’s poem depicts the variety of ways the colonel warps the world-making functions of dwelling and dining. The sovereign exception, the poem suggests, messes with the proper relations of addressing and listening. The guests are right to withhold their speech; their distressed silence offers an ironic comment on the parrot’s meaningless echo of the voice. The dinner turns more savagely theatrical as the colonel shows off tokens of mutilation. The display of sovereignty pits itself against the other eidetic powers—against rights language and poetic vocation. As the poem ends, it also undergoes a concentration of lyric power:

He swept the ears to the floor with his arms and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

Forché crams her last two sentences with excessive signification. They allude to local idiom, write over a Christian parable about interpretation, and critique lyric making itself, which in giving meaning to the colonel’s question also acquiesces to meaninglessness: “Something for your poetry, no?” Forché’s dense citationality begs some parsing. The repetition of “ears on the floor” implicitly underlines what it excludes. The Spanish word for ears is orejas, a term Salvadorans use for spies. It also performs the parabolic exclusion elaborated by the critic Frank Kermode in The Genesis of Secrecy: “Outsiders see but do not perceive. Insiders read and perceive, but always in a different sense.” Finally, by fusing these two citations, lyric repetition and the use of metaphor work to extricate the poem from its complicity with the torturer. “The Colonel” thrusts itself toward post-catastrophic listening with these semantic layers. It overhears itself as paradoxically as it invites us to listen to the inaudible. It transmits the dead radioing wordlessly and, as it were, spying on successive acts of interpretation.

In the space of the sovereign exception, as Agamben points out, only the person degraded is truly human. Humanity comes to lodge in the sufferer’s capacity to endure the
inhuman. On the opposite end of suffering stands the perverse figure of sovereignty. The torturer is the inhuman who is also human, face and voice intact but no longer intelligible, no longer dependable as a partner for realizing the common interest. The encounter with the monstrous hybrid may account for Glück’s statement, quoted earlier, that “Forché’s willingness to sabotage the self’s astute stature confers on the enemy an eerie humanity.” A form of unrecognizable humanity takes holds of addressing and listening in Forché’s lyric, implicating the defense of rights in the caesuras of sovereign power. To paraphrase Ian Balfour and Eduardo Cadava, lyric advocacy becomes “inevitably entangled with their transgression.”

“The Visitor,” dated 1979, explores further this discrepancy. Two parallel motifs are crucial. Forché’s poem is, first, a study in the narrowing of enclosures coinciding with the destruction of the human. The opening lines refer to landscape. The poem proceeds to record the spatiality of a detention cell and of the prisoner’s memory. Alongside this narrowing of space, Forché presents a set of motifs tracing a hierarchy of vocalic tropes. The poem moves from speech, through singing, wind and breath, to the abject cry. Here is the poem’s entirety:

In Spanish he whispers there is no time left.  
It is the sound of scythes arcing in wheat, 
the ache of some field song in Salvador.  
The wind along the prison, cautious 
as Francisco’s hands on the inside, touching 
the walls as he walks, it is his wife’s breath 
slipping into his cell each night while he 
imagines his hand to be hers. It is a small country.  

There is nothing one man will not do to another. (CBU 15)

The torture occurs, as it were, offstage. Given the prevalently metonymic imagery of the poem, it is not hard to read the representing activity as a kind of dismemberment. Forché recalls the acoustic memory of campesino labor as the “ache” in the prisoner’s voice, confiding his impending suffering and perhaps his disappearance. The images of personhood we are left with, hence, are breath, touch, and the cry of someone who has disappeared. What Forché calls “a
“small country” refers as much to El Salvador and the loved-one’s hand, as to the narrowing of the space allotted for valuing. The scales of enclosure correspond to the diminishing eidetic scarcity to which Francisco is subjected. At the time of lyric recall—that is, when the visitor recalls the character of the lyric as a commemorative representation—Francisco’s voice is gone.

The title of the poem marks the lyric speaker’s position vis-à-vis the prisoner. Excepting one idiom with the use of another, Forché calls attention to the asymmetry between the visitor who speaks and the sufferer whose speech the visitor translates. As the poem carries us further away from the prisoner’s voice in the first line, the acoustic imagery and its transformations assimilate but also interfere with our access to Francisco’s interiority. Forché’s preoccupation with sense memory makes apparent the fact that, the sufferer’s call has long disappeared. The relation between the living and the dead is no longer definable in terms of interlocution. The poem places the lyric at the border it shares with vocality, where the human is inhuman and where voicing becomes susceptible to mishearing and misattribution. Of that strange complicity between representation and sovereignty, the last line is particularly telling. The visitor speaks there, it seems, right after evoking the prisoner’s sense memories. Francisco’s final thoughts point to the somatic elements crucial in recognizing voices and faces, namely, breath and touch. The axiomatic terseness in the terminal line, however, could very well be the effect of some other voice from inside the prison. Forché exaggerates lyric intersubjectivity to the point of contradiction in the last line. As we read this final line, our inability to access the scene of torture inside the prison overturns any notion of access to the prisoner’s inner states. A third voice seems to intrude upon the scene. The effect of this other voice is shown textually. Set a space apart from the rest of the lines, the terminus appears to mark the voice of the inhuman, following a sequence of vocalic alterations and caesuras of power: “There is nothing one man will not do to another.”

“The Visitor” meditates further on lyric sovereignty through its thematic and acoustic preoccupations. Its rural imagery echoes Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper.” It is well to recall,
as Grossman does, that the “historical qualifiers” of this canonical Romantic poem are entirely relevant to the distress of Salvadoran campesinos. Wordsworth’s poem is a response to the depopulation of the Highlands following colonization; and the translation of the foreign into the poem’s mother tongue.\textsuperscript{118} “The Visitor” records sovereignty’s effect on rhythm. Poetry, writes Roman Jakobson, is “organized violence committed on ordinary speech.”\textsuperscript{119} Making non-speech perceptible within communicative functions, poetry articulates the interval between the phonic and the phonemic. Another way to approach this interval is through onomatopoeia, \textit{phone} absorbed into language. Onomatopoeia makes the voice call back to vocality as grammar takes the shape of ungrammatical sound.\textsuperscript{120} In Forché’s poem, there initially appears to be no metrical regularity. Yet scansion does reveal an ideal of four beats to a line, haunting the apparent irregularity.\textsuperscript{121} Rhythm not only absorbs the ungrammatical. It frames traumatic non-speech with lyric structure. By displaying generic traits identified as poetic, Forché seems to provoke a kind of disenchantment with lyric sovereignty.

\section*{The uses of disenchantment}

In the gray zone, lyric sovereignty is protean, capable of declaring thus: “I who stand inside and outside voicing have the power to suspend the voice.” Lyric has always worked to imagine deeply felt intersubjective connections where there is none. Helen Vendler calls this psychical action the “intimacy effect.” We sense its working the most in poems wherein the “the object of intimacy can never be humanly addressed.”\textsuperscript{122} This intimacy effect lends itself to sovereignty’s eidetic functions. If through speech, lyric sets in relief the nonsemantic, nonphonemic surge of the object voice, it can also trace the line where the difference between the human and the inhuman dims. Lyric grants intelligible shape to depersonalization in so far as it conserves the eidetic capacities of speaking—of addressing what cannot be addressed—and at the same time enacts the missing of trauma. And yet on the other hand, lyric also has “the power to decide over the fate of the voice and its sender,” to borrow Dolar’s words on
sovereignty. In Forché’s poetry, the intimacy effect works to assimilate the nonlanguage of abjection to language.

With the space remaining, I close this chapter with two sections describing how Forché’s lyric moves proteanly vis-à-vis the non-language of the damaged. “Because One Is Always Forgotten” is a poem dedicated to a Salvadoran reformist assassinated in 1981. Its use of ventriloquism prevents readers from pinning down the source of the utterance. Staging the intimacy effect, the tenor and meaning of the poem alter depending on the speaker to whom we attribute the lines. Such ambivalence is similarly at work in the other poem. The disenchantment in “Message” hinges on a kind of voicing that, as Jonathan Culler argues, summons “images of its power so as to establish its identity as poetical and prophetic voice.” Dated 1980-81, “Message” is a kind of anti-psalm as much as it is a study in apostrophe.

The appearance of Jose Rodolfo Viera’s voice in “Because One Is Always Forgotten” offers an implicit critique of lyric advocacy. Forché’s method of dating her poems allows us to reflect on the adequacy of merging rights advocacy and lyric as responses to the Salvadoran crisis. Viera, the reformist to whom Forché dedicates the poem, represented El Salvador’s weakened ideological middle. Forché recalls in a report for The Nation, that Viera was the first campesino to head the Instituto Salvadoreño de Transformación Agraria, or ISTA. Drawing monies from aid, ISTA was a government office created to buy tracts of land and parcel them out to the peasants. Viera gained the trust of U.S. officials and dissidents alike. Washington teamed him up with two Americans advisers to work on land distribution. Viera, however, discovered a problem. The military officer previously in office had inflated the prices of the properties ISTA had bought. Profits from the sales were sent to the Salvadoran president who then allocated kickbacks to his subordinates as well as to the landowners. After the corruption was exposed, assassins tied to the Salvadoran military killed Viera.

The reorganization of properties once dominated by the oligarchy was key to the reforms demanded by Salvadoran dissidents. There was also, of course, the immediate problem of state
terror. But reform proved difficult on two levels relevant to Forché. Washington’s aid policy, first of all, contradicted its avowed human rights stance. This inconsistency proved fatal for freedom elsewhere. On March 17, 1980, the army attacked a refugee camp near Rio Lempa, killing about 200 campesinos.\textsuperscript{126} A few days later, on March 24, Oscar Romero, the most prominent Salavaran critic of the regime, was assassinated with a single shot from the church entrance while Romero was on the altar, saying mass.\textsuperscript{127} Then, within two months after the Romero assassination, the Salvadoran military undertook another massacre at Rio Sumpul on May 14, 1980.\textsuperscript{128}

The second obstacle was the atmosphere of mistrust in El Salvador. Despite the rise of inhumanity, Carter placed his bets on military rule by sending the Salvadoran government $5.7 million on April 2, 1980.\textsuperscript{129} Carter also tried to sway left-leaning moderates to cooperate with the military, but they refused, justifiably wary. Their mistrust stemmed from the perception that despite the regime’s glaring abuses, Washington continued to have its back.\textsuperscript{130} The dissidents gained no leverage during the negotiations when the counterinsurgency measures increased and U.S. foreign policy fell in step with the Salvadoran government’s version of the security doctrine.\textsuperscript{131}

Forché’s interest in the eidetic construction underpinning the poetic vocation—an interest shared with humanitarianism and the making of citizenship spaces—leads her to tread carefully on the notion of symbolic restitution. Lyric advocacy turns into disenchantment. It comes to locate the basis of its allure in the Philomela project and to tear its aura. “Because One Is Always Forgotten” and “Message” reflect the aporias of representing and addressing another’s dehumanization. They implicitly comment on the volatility of human rights rhetoric at the time of their writing. More important, they teach us about the unpredictable character of listening vis-a-vis traumatic vocality.

The poem for Viera speaks with more than one voice. Its title presages the ambivalence generated by its polyvocal character. To plead amnesty, as Lyotard says, is to ask that the
prisoner be deemed *amnestos*, forgotten by the law and reestablished as a member of the community.\textsuperscript{132} From the vantage of Viera, however, being forgotten takes on a harshly literal significance. Forché’s poem speaks to us at “the boundary between the place where language intensifies,” as Diana Fuss writes, “and the place where language vanishes.” It is an extreme version of what Fuss calls a “corpse poem,” a poem in which the dead speaks.\textsuperscript{133} After recalling Viera’s burial, the authorial voice in the first stanza gives way to Viera’s words. Two layers of reported speech comprise second and third stanzas. Viera lends his voice to a campesino responding to the statement about sacrifice. The origin of the voice heretofore becomes difficult to pin down. It is best to let the reader experience these changes in voice throughout the whole poem as follows:

When Viera was buried we knew it had come to an end,
his coffin rocking into the ground like a boat or a cradle.

I could take my heart, he said, and give it to a campesino
And he would cut it up and give it back:

you can’t eat heart in those four dark
chambers where a man can be kept years.

A boy soldier in the bone-hot sun works his knife
to peel the face from a dead man

and hang it from the branch of a tree
flowering with such faces.

The heart is the toughest part of the body.
Tenderness is in the hands. (*CBU* 23)

Beyond the sharing of voices in the third stanza, the authorial voice appears to return, describing a boy soldier. That is a logical way to forestall the multiplication of voices. And yet the process of acousmatization can no longer be undone. Tracing the boundary between the living and the dead takes us to another place of breach. Right where language intensifies and then falls silent, we find ourselves crossing the line separating the human and the inhuman. The gnomic statement in the last stanza creates a semblance of stasis.\textsuperscript{134} But the valence of the aphorism there is unhinged, tampering with the way we retroactively hear the previous lines.
Crossing the boundary with the dead offers scant wisdom for the living. The sparseness of the conclusion echoes the impoverishment of hope in the third stanza’s “four dark chambers,” alluding to the heart as well as to the space described in “The Visitor.” Who speaks the ending of “Because One Is Always Forgotten”? Conveying either useful knowledge or something perplexing and dark, the voice there belongs to the inhuman. Ventriloquism in the poem makes audible sovereignty’s effect on witnessing. The lyric enactment of maimed speech is such that the way we lend our ear to the poem’s main claims becomes contingent on where we anchor our listening in relation to speaking positions within the poem. The other plausible speaker is not just the “boy soldier” fulfilling his terrible errand but also more likely, a desecrated corpse. Lyric sovereignty insinuates itself through the scene of mutilation. And in the last stanza, we hear its irony at work alongside Forché’s ethical concern to undo dehumanization.

In the years 1980 and 1981, the validity of the reasons for revolt as well as diplomacy with Salvadoran radicals eluded Washington. Robert Pastor, for example, recommended U.S. actions “toward curbing government violence rather than trying to coopt the guerillas.” Pastor’s recommendation depended on the notion that the regime ultimately called the shots at the ground level of counterrevolution. Traces of this view echo to this day in the argument that the relation of U.S. policy to Latin American militarization was one of overlap, not of causality. But Robert White, former ambassador to El Salvador in 1980 and 1981, differs. The relays, White suggests, were causal. It is important to stress that Washington, however disapproving of revolution, did not conceive its aid policy with malice. Carter’s plan, dangling a carrot to encourage reform or curb violence, was benevolent. The massacres and perpetuation of torture were not the intended goal. They were simply the unintended outcome.

**Solidarity effects**

Picking up where Carter left off, president-elect Ronald Reagan reinforced the bipolar stance from 1981 onwards. Observers sympathetic to the victims of state terror objected to
U.S. support of the regime. Reagan ignored their pleas. Early in his presidency, an official working for the Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, John Bushnell, complained to reporters that news about El Salvador was “running about five times as big as it is.”

Counterrevolution prevailed in policy decisions. Bushnell said in defense of the security program, “It is not the U.S. which took the initiative to gear up the situation in El Salvador and make it a much more military situation—it is the communist side that did it first.”

Humanitarian language all but crumbled with the resurgence of containment rhetoric and the increasing fervor of the guerillas.

In “Message,” we read the impact of Cold War representation on the lyric of rights. The poem at first glance appears saturated with nihilism and despair. A voice cries out de profundis, like that of a prophet embittered by thwarted restitution. For no “message” is borne by the poem’s thrust toward utopian futurity: “You will fight,” writes Forché, “and fighting, you will die” (CBU 21). These lines are found in the middle section. There Forché enumerates the means (ritual, development projects, and revolt) by which Salvadorans strove to take hold of the citizenship space and transform the way their nation-state allocated human worth. The regime fought against such changes. It defended its goals, serving political interests exerting pressure from the outside. Salvadoran security policy allowed Washington to maintain the prestige of the “free world,” if only in name, as a hierarchical organization of collectivity capable of distributing the worth of persons and at the same time, making it scarce. The poem’s opening lines abbreviates this narrative of eidetic warfare:

Your voices sprayed over the walls
dry to the touch by morning.
Your women walk among champas
with baskets of live hens, grenades and fruit.
Tonight you begin to fight
for the most hopeless of revolutions. (CBU 21)

More a heap of steel and wood than a proper dwelling, the champas or shacks are metonymic of the spaces revolution tries to alter. And yet nowhere else than in “Message” does
Forché seem eager to recognize the moral grounds of armed dissidence and at the same time to despair of advocacy. Such ambivalence has its fair share of dispraise. Weinberger, for instance, reads “Message” as a showcase for “the liberal side of colonialism.”[^143] It is well to heed this critical thump, particularly because its focus on Forché’s claim of solidarity with revolutionaries countervails the initial reading about despair. Weinberger focuses on the linguistic excess with which lyric, by figuring lost voices as traces on walls, mounts a defense against traumatic non-language. But he leaves unexamined the working of lyric sovereignty.

Confounding the metonym of voice with the synecdoche of blood, “voices sprayed over the walls” is an impossible image. Its location in the poem marks a threshold for skeptics, turning over the chief trope of advocacy to the poetics of disenchantment. “Message” thus begins by installing a kind of *Caveat lector*. The use of apostrophe in this regard is decisive. Forché adopts a mode of address peculiar to staging lyric’s intimacy effect. The speaker turns toward damaged others while signaling the working of mediating trope that, as Culler writes, “knows its own fictive nature” and stresses the “optative character” of addressing the dead.[^144] Apostrophe underlines the space of retrieving meaning from non-meaning as a space of fiction. Forché allows us to regard the intimacy effect as such, as the product of mimesis. The gesture mimics, as well as countervails, the fate of right claims—the actual claims that U.S. relations toward El Salvador affirmed and yet in the same breadth, made apparitional. “Message” responds to this historical irony by staging, in imaginary domains, the claim of being intimate with revolution. By apostrophizing insurgents, by figuring their voices as stains on walls, Forché offers a reminder that we can converse with the dead no more than we can touch vocalic residue. The result is a paradoxical situation. It brings to the fore what Alberto Moreiras contends is the structure around which testimony is built, “the experiential distance between enunciators and receptors.” It seems apt, then, to bear the opening lines as a caveat when we proceed toward the poem’s conclusion. Forché writes:
Link hands, link arms with me
in the next of lives everafter,
where we will not know each other
or ourselves, where we will be a various
darkness among ideas that amounted
to nothing, among men who amounted
to nothing, with a belief that became
but small light
in the breadth of time where we began
among each other, where we lived
in the hour farthest from God. (CBU 21-22)

Exported to the language of transnational politics, the intimacy effect in these lines translates the notion of solidarity into lyric encounter. The affirmation of solidarity is what Weinberger highlights in his reading and disparages. Read as a symptom of colonialism, Forché’s vocative lyric risks the danger of “rhetorical tropology.” The solidarity effect in testimony, as Moreiras argues, often can substitute itself for the more urgent task of responding to the pleas of the dehumanized. What counters this danger is “the function of solidarity to produce a break away from poetics.” Read in terms of apostrophe, “Message” seems fraught, as per Culler, with “commands which in their explicit impossibility figure events in and of fiction.” The possibility of encounter, “Message” suggests, takes place only in so far as the lyric marks the place of address in terms of two markers of the testimonial break that cleaves Forché’s imperative: “Link hands, link arms with me.” First, “Message” reflects on the discursive position of the apostrophizing speaker. It seems deliberately to aim at liberal colonialism and miss it only by a hair’s breadth, leaving the reader to recognize the allusion in the last line: “Tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos.” So far from God, so close to the United States. The quick changes in the poem’s tenses are telling of Forché’s attempt to mind the gap between the time of unmaking and the untimeliness of poetic signification. Thus, especially when we recall the clotted imagery at the poem’s threshold, the poem’s ending no longer simply affirms the kind of solidarity and intimacy that lyric grants. The allusion that takes the poem to its limit—to its terminus, in fact—also brings to mind the irreducible difference between the true
witnessing of the disappeared and, on the other hand, the sovereignty of speaking on their behalf. Read as a message addressed from within the lettered city, the call to solidarity means what it says and says otherwise than it means.

The intelligibility of faces and voices do not arise on their own, but emerge via the processes of eidetic construction. The meaning of the human—and hence, of rights—changes over time, open to disagreement and revaluation. In “Message,” as in the other poems of the sequence on El Salvador, lyric sovereignty blurs the lines drawn by competing communitarian identifications. By placing lyric within earshot of the inhuman, The Country Between Us resets our conflicting ways of imagining the citizenship spaces where the human gathers its significance. Forché’s work focuses anew our dogged questions concerning the worth of persons, as a problem of interpreting the lack of an immutable substance inhering in faces and voices. Behind the human image, there is the open ground with nothing to reveal, out of which our need for intelligibility arises in extreme situations. All of our form-giving actions, though “but small light,” respond to this poverty of human essence. From the vantage of the champas, disqualified from rule, it is also that lack which our prevailing modes of collectivity neglect or refuse to share as a common burden.

This chapter has studied the ways in which Forché renders the voice of lyric and of rights language exposed to the elusiveness of trauma’s vocality. In the process, it has come to gesture toward other untried ways with which to build the human image, means that we have yet to discover or that we have not yet allowed to emerge. Is it possible, for example, to grant the highest value to all persons by recognizing human indeterminacy, instead of relying on membership in a nation-state or in a communal identity to identify the human image? Forché’s poems teaches us not merely to sympathize with the vocalic shattering or to give voice to the voiceless. They meditate on the boundary between the human and the inhuman and, equally important, on the ongoing problem of delineating that boundary. The Country Between Us entertains the possibility of locating human worth not in the domains of coherent speech but
elsewhere, in the sheer intent to signify or to address another—even if this intent remains at the edge of speaking as mere potential, inaudible or unformed.

Notes


2 Denise Levertov, “From a Notebook: October ’68 - May’69,” Relearning the Alphabet (New York: New Directions, 1970), 92. The phrase is the poem’s first line. Levertov eventually provided the blurb for The Country Between Us, praising Forché for “creating poems in which there is no seam between personal and political, lyrical and engaged.”

3 Samuel Moyn, The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). Moyn usefully argues that human rights discourse marks the shift from violent “maximalist” politics to morality-based “minimalism” (42-43, 120-23, 171). Moyn takes exception with Latin America. The use of human rights terms by the Latin American left in the 1970s, according to him, “helped make the fortune of the concept in that region and beyond,” without departing from the “armed” utopia toward the last utopia (140-145). Although Moyn makes no claims regarding El Salvador, it is important to note that narrating the radical movements there in these terms, however illuminating in other contexts, would create distortion—as Forché’s journalism from that period and later histories of the region attest.


7 The dedication page presents the book as being “For James and for Cuzcatlan.” Elsewhere, Forché writes: “It was still believed among the Pipil Indians of the country they called among themselves Cuzcatlan that the earth was a divine being.” In Forché, El Salvador: Work of Thirty Photographers, ed. Harry Mattison, Susan Meiselas, Fae Rubenstein (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1981), 5.


14 Jean Luc-Nancy, 27. See Agamben, Remnants, 134: “The human being can survive the human being, the human being is what remains after the destruction of the human being, not because somewhere there is a human essence to be destroyed or saved, but because the place of
the human is divided, because the human being exists in the fracture between the living being and the speaking being, the inhuman and the human.” Emphasis added.


17 Antonio Machado, “Proverbios y cantares,” trans. Willis Barstone, Border of a Dream: Selected Poems of Antonio Machado (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2004), 280-81. The original poem is as follows:

Caminante, son tus huellas
el camino, y nada más;
caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.
Al andar se hace el camino,
y al volver la vista atrás
se ve la senda que nunca
se ha de volver a pisar.
Caminante, no hay camino
sino estelas en la mar.

18 The tradition of U.S. political poetry is too complex to summarize here. See Cary Nelson, Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left (New York: Routledge, 2001). Apart from Nelson, the most persuasive work on the subject to date is Christopher Nealon’s The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). Nealon argues for a method of reading that expands the category of political poetry beyond the kind strongly identified with Forché: “It is not only the poetries of witness and documentation, or movement poetries, that are worrying over the destiny capitalism is forcing us toward”(35). The relevance of this move to my study has to do with the fact that the crisis of capital within the United States has a flipside in other countries, where capital has exerted itself with much more violence against the coalitional forms of dissent the Cold War sought to undo. For that very reason, the poetries of witness demand our continued revaluation, as complementary to critical endeavor of reading those poetries that advertise no political claims but are nonetheless grazed by capitalist crisis.

19 In 1966, Auden regretted the line and excluded the poem “September 1, 1939” altogether from his collected work. See Aidan Wasley, The Age of Auden: Postwar Poetry and the American Scene (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 168.

20 Forché, El Salvador: Work of Thirty Photographers, 112.
21 Forché, “El Salvador: An Aide Memoire,” 5. For an explanation of the economic conditions creating starvation, see LaFeber, 176-77.


24 William Robinson reads the crisis in Central America in terms neoliberalizing processes, in Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change, and Globalization (London: Verso, 2003), esp. 67-69; 87-88. Robinson argues that Central America’s Cold War was a structural consequence of the tumultuous changes of agro-capitalism in the region reacting to globalization. In El Salvador, the new movers and shakers were turning away from hybrid between feudalism and agro-capitalism dominated by the old oligarchy. The “young Turks,” often educated in business schools abroad, were seeking a more stable place in broader economic circuits. These new players, aided by military means and by their ties to the old oligarchy, projected the hemisphere as a free-market space and foreclosed revolutionary notions of labor and property. Translated in the terms used in my study, we might say that the projection of the Americas in yet another iteration of Americanity precluded the development of new, untested means for constructing the individual and collective human image, whose current scarcity corresponded to the highly constrained class-based valuations of personhood.

25 While the public role of poetry is as ancient as the ode, rights language is a belated invention. See Moyn 7-8; 212-13. The untested character of rights language is more pronounced in literary studies, as Joseph Slaughter and Sophia McClennen contend in “Introducing Human Rights and Literary Forms; or, the Vehicles and Vocabularies of Human Rights” Comparative Literature Studies 46.1 (2009): 9.

26 Arguably, Forché here may be referring to Alegria’s “Sorrow,” a poem Forché translated in Flowers from the Volcano, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 19-43. In “Sorrow,” Alegria commemorates a Salvadoran guerilla-poet by searching for the grave of a more well-known poet from Spain. Alegria meditates on the fact that the unmarked graves of these poets have never been found. The respective poets are Federico Garcia Lorca, the Granada-born poet killed by Spanish fascists in 1936, and the Salvadoran dissident Roque Dalton, a victim of the factionalism dividing Salvadoran insurgent organizations. Alegria’s serial elegy for these two poets implicitly comments on the problems presented by the desaparecidos. While news of death in the case of Lorca and Dalton resolved some of the uncertainty generated by their disappearance, in some cases “the impossibility of establishing whether the ‘disappeared’ person is alive or dead,” according to Amnesy International, “gives rise to administrative, economic and moral problems.” Chief among them is that “it creates a state of uncertainty and fear throughout the entire society.” In Amnesty International, “Torture, Death and Disappearance of Political Prisoners in Latin America,” commission report from a meeting in San Jose, Costa Rica on 11-14 January 1980, p. 3. In series IV.1.3, box 10, folder “Co-Groups –

27 Grossman, True-love, 115-17. Grossman is keen to point out that the eidos as the result of making is continuous with “the artisanal or industrial secrets” (85) found in religion, processes of construction which poets expose as such. One cannot help recalling Agamben’s citation of John Keats as one of the sources for arguing the critical reason that belongs to poetry: “As to the poetical Character … it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character.” In Remnants, 112.

28 Eliot Weinberger, “Reading El Salvador,” Works on Paper (New York: New Directions, 1986), 126. Ira Sadoff echoes a similar view in his essay “Neo-Formalism: A Dangerous Nostalgia” The American Poetry Review 19.1 (January/February 1990), 7. Sadoff writes: “Carolyn Forche’s prose poem "The General" [sic] was written after the poet spent a couple of months in El Salvador, and the poem shows it; its moral certainty privileges the narrator’s superiority and celebrity status … while turning the general into a caricature of evil. […] Ironically, Forche’s view of her experience was insufficiently individuated; she was a tourist to other people's suffering.”

29 Ratiner, op. cit., 158.


33 I have supplied the imaginary space of the American hemisphere as the specific topos for the “projected conditions of reception” through which, according to Susan Stewart, a poem fashions the interlocutory situation. What Stewart describes as “the social work” joining speaker and listener is comparable to Grossman’s concept of the common interest in the mutual recognition of persons. See Stewart, Poetry and the Fate of the Senses, 67. The conception of the voice in terms of intersubjectivity has its provenance in phenomenology. The philosopher Adriana Cavarero, for example, writes: “The voice is not only sound; it is always the voice of someone as it vibrates in symphony with the natural and artificial sounds of the world in which she or he lives.” In For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression, trans. Paul Kottman (Oakland; Stanford University Press, 2005), 148.

34 Grossman, True-love, 86. While Grossman’s focus is the conflict between poetry and religion over the rules of manifesting the eidos, it is now apparent that in the modern age, this conflict has shifted to include the interpellative processes undertaken by nation-states. National ideologies now either enlist or compete with religious ideas to build the eidos. There is no space here to explore an issue best left to social science experts. My clue to this state of affairs began with a comment made by Marshall Sahlins in a 1967 conference speech protesting the cooptation of social science researchers to aid U.S. military strategy. Sahlins characterizes such scholars as “the scholastics of Cold War theology.” In Sahlins, “The Established Order: Do Not Fold, Spindle, or Mutilate,” Culture in Practice: Selected Essays (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 268. A more sustained account on the subject can be found in Anthony D. Smith, Nationalism

35 LaFeber, 112. In Roosevelt’s speech on “Pan-American Day” in 1933, the Good Neighbor Policy was projected to clarify the Monroe Doctrine, and to foster “a sympathetic appreciation of the other’s point of view.” It was treated as a prophylactic against incursion by American hemispheric nations upon each other’s sovereignty, as well as “by any non-American power.” The militarization of the Good Neighbor Policy seemed inevitable in light of Roosevelt’s resignification of a “pan-American doctrine of continental self-defense.” See Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “The Good Neighbor Policy,” in Latin America and the United States, ed. Robert H. Holden and Eric Zolov (Oxford University Press, 200), 141-42.


39 Tommie Sue Montgomery, Revolution in El Salvador: Origins and Evolution (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 27-28; 78-80; 225. Montgomery defines the colono as “a person who works ... for shelter and (usually) a small plot of land on which to grown subsistence crops.”


41 Penny Lernoux, Cry of the People: The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America (New York: Penguin, 1982). On the idea of liberation, see 37-41. Lernoux’s third chapter (61-80) is devoted entirely to the role of liberation theology in the campesinos’ fight for recognition.

42 Carolyn Forché and Leonel Gomez, “The Military’s Web of Corruption” The Nation (23 October 1982): 391. See Montgomery, 178-80. LaFeber likewise recalls: “Between 1974 and 1976, assistance included four Bell helicopters and three Douglas C-47 transport aircraft that gave the Salvadorans greater mobility in their search for guerillas, peasants, and priests.” In Lafeber, 245; LaFeber’s source is U.S. Congress, House Committee on International Relations, Arms Trade in the Western Hemisphere, 95th Congress, 2nd session, 1978, 197. Field reports in the 1960s, according to Stephen Rabe, allow historians to infer that United States played a direct role in militarizing police forces in Central America. Paraphrasing Murat Williams, former ambassador to El Salvador, Rabe writes: “The United States assigned more air attachés to any country than there were Salvadoran pilots. Two Special Forces teams taught counterinsurgency
tactics. In William’s opinion, the size of the mission left the impression that the United States controlled the destiny of the nation.” In Rabe, The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 145.

43 On the National Security Doctrine of Latin American states, see Hal Brands, Latin America’s Cold War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4; 71-74. The phrase “freedom fighters” is quoted in Hunt, 187; its meaning in the Reagan administration is elaborated in LaFeber, 292, and Brands, 212. The doctrine of security defined the Cold War as a “worldwide struggle, a ‘permanent war’ between communism and the West.” It is possible to draw comparisons between the Latin American product and its United States complement in Julian E. Zelizer “Conservatives, Carter, and the Politics of National Security,” Rightward Bound, op. cit. Lernoux, whose work Brands seems to have overlooked, argues that Latin Americans were taught the National Security Doctrine via the U.S.-run military schools. See Lernoux, 162-85. Closer to Forché’s period, see also the emphasis on the Cuban and Nicaraguan threat in Jean Kirkpatrick, “U.S. Security and Latin America” Commentary 7.1 (January 1981): 31; 34-35; 38-39. Regarding the phrase “state terror,” see Brands, 259. Brands urges the need to do away with the morality play casting the United States as a Cold War puppet master (7-8; 258).

While Brands refuses to downplay the catastrophic effects of U.S. policy, some of his conclusions hedge toward American exceptionalism. Two key aspects need to be bracketed. One is Brands’ emphatic disavowal of a causal relationship between U.S. policy and Latin America’s National Security Doctrine (259-61). Brands tries to distance U.S. policy history from the overlapping factors leading to military reaction in Latin America. There is a difference, however, between stressing the fact that Latin Americans required no U.S. prompting to commit violence and, on the other hand, turning a blind eye to the key role of U.S. aid policy. Brands makes both moves. While the former is analytically useful, the latter is tendentiously invested in the notion that all the U.S. really did was hand over the guns, whereas it was Latin Americans who pulled the trigger. And that notion is contradicted by the details Brands himself recalls (117; 159-60). If the point is to analyze the “tangled causality” of the Cold War, Brands’ insistence on a “non-causal” role the U.S. played in laying down the conditions of possibility for repressive governments is of no help toward the “detached narrative” he champions (270-71).

Second, Brands takes a revisionist stance toward the Salvadoran social struggles. According to him, if the oppressed people did not take up arms, military reaction would not have intensified: counterrevolution was “the logical—if exaggerated—response” (127). Brands uses a tautological axiom to stress his point, a statement redolent of counterrevolutionary polemics: “Extremism begat extremism” (97). By portraying the Salvadoran insurgents as puppets of Soviet geopolitics (197-198), Brands traffics in the bipolar narrative he claims to reject. The charge of Soviet influence in El Salvador, which Brands supports, remains open to debate. The other historians I cite here indicate that during the early 1970s guerrilla activity in El Salvador was limited; that the insurgent energy mounted in relation to the increase in repression; and that Soviet involvement was tenuous. If we inoculate ourselves against the vestiges of exceptionalist apologetics in this most recent account on hemispheric history, it nonetheless remains valuable in providing new sources for revisiting the conflict that was not solely Latin America’s Cold War.


Schlesinger, “Human Rights and the American Tradition,” 508. Colonialist entitlement unfortunately competed with bleeding-heart liberalism. If there is any indication of that contradiction, we may recall that in 1978 “polls showed that 78 percent of Americans opposed returning the canal” to Panama. See LaFeber, 273.


Bonner, 66. Cf. Brands, 192; LaFeber, 245-50; Lernoux, 61-76; Sikkink, 141.

José Antonio Morales Ehrlich, quoted in Bonner, 14. See also Woods 8-9. When the United Nations in the 1990s investigated the abuses in Salvador, Woods recalls, it discovered that “activists did not have to be guerillas or to work with the guerillas to run the risk of being ‘disappeared’ or killed.”


Dominick LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 71.


Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Righting Wrongs,” in And Justice for All?, op. cit., 532.

Slaughter and McClenen, op. cit., 10-11.

This theme is explored in detail by Stathis Gourgouris in “Poiein—Political Infinitive” PMLA 123.1 (January 2008): 227. “It is a matter of being attuned to the elusive details of history in the making,” writes Gourgouris. “Making history is the most profound meaning of poiein.” Beside the work of Stewart and Blasing discussed further in this chapter, one could say with Gourgouris that the “elusive details” found in lyric have to do with the long, evolving history of the production of subjects—the deep time of the eidos.

Jeane Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” 44.

Agamben, Remnants, 134.

Ibid., 35. See also 120: “Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking, the inhuman and the human enter a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish the position of the subject, to identify the ‘imagined substance’ of the ‘I’ and, along with it, the true witness.”


Scarry, 41-45.

Cavarero, op. cit., 177.

Grossman, “Summa Lyrica,” 218. It should be clear by now that my interest in lyric voice does not pertain to style, or to “creating a voice” through a specific “use of language,” as
Thomas Ogden puts it in “Questions of Poetic Voice in Poetry and Psychoanalysis,” *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 67.3 (1998): 427. The eidetic motives behind “creating a voice” is part of the problem of valuing or listening to the other, outside the modes of recognition granted by citizenship spaces.


72 The qualification is necessary in light of biosemiotics. As my advisor William Gleason points out in a comment on this chapter, “Biosemiotics argues that non-human existence ... make use of sign systems and processes to communicate.” See Wendy Wheeler, *The Whole Creature: Complexity, Biosemiotics, and the Evolution of Culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2006).


74 Lyotard, 182.


76 Dolar, 73.

77 Dolar, 71. See also 15 on the object voice as that which “does not contribute to making sense,” and voice as “the material element recalcitrant to meaning.”

78 Dolar, 60. Emphasis in the original.

79 Dolar, 27.

80 Carolyn Forché, *Blue Hour* (New York: Perennial, 2005), 47.


84 Susan Stewart, “Letter on Sound,” in Charles Bernstein, ed. *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1998), 38. It must be noted that the similarity with Dolar goes only so far. Stewart elsewhere underlines the semantic, indicating that the frequent use of specific meters in certain modes gathers thematic associations—hence, “metrical allusion.” In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 135-40. The other side of this
argument is the difference between meter as acoustic pattern and meter as a structure embedded in tradition. Perceiving the meter does not grant immediate access to its communal provenance. A certain subjectivization or initiation to a specific literary community is a prerequisite for one’s reception of metrical allusion. I remain, hence, indebted to Dolar’s vocality as a point of departure for a more broadly conceived lyric acousmatics.

85 Dolar, 15.

86 Dolar, 71-73. On the articulation between logos and the body, n.b. 60: “The voice as the object, the paradoxical creature that we are after, is also a break. Of course it has an inherent link to presence, to what there is, ... yet at the same time ... it presents a break, it is not to be simply counted among existing things, its topology dislocates it in relation to presence.”

87 Quoted in Dolar, 106. From Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Oakland: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8. See also 17 and 25-26 in Homo Sacer for the account on bios as the juridical concept of the living being.

88 Lyotard, 184.

89 This schema is traceable to Dolar, who illustrates it with Venn diagrams in which biopolitics and language form the cusp occupied by vocality. See 73, 103, and 121. More to the point, Dolar makes the following claim: “Voice is like bare life, something that is supposedly outside the political, while logos is the counterpart of the polis” (60).

90 Agamben, Remnants, 77. “Humans bear within themselves the mark of the inhuman,” writes Agamben. “Their spirit contains at its very center the wound of non-spirit, non-human chaos atrociously consigned to its own being capable of everything.”

91 Lil Milagros Ramirez is included in the anthology Volcan: Poems from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua (San Francisco: City Lights, 1983). According to Amnesty International, Ramirez was a student when she was abducted in November 1976. Over the next two years, former prisoners reported seeing her in various detention centers. Ramirez was being continuously transferred to prevent her release. In “Extracts from ‘Human Rights in El Salvador,’ a Report of a British Parliamentary Delegation in December 1978” (29 March 1979), pp. 4-5. In series II.5, box 4, folder “Extracts from ‘Human Rights in El Salvador,’” Amnesty International USA Archive, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts.


93 Scarry, 40-41.

94 The lettered city may be said to constitute a polis within the nation-state, with links to a network of other such enclaves in other metropolitan sites. The term comes from Angel Rama, who seeks to rehabilitate the idea of la ciudad letrada as a potential site for border-crossing alliances. Critics, however, have noted the irony that the lettered city has also become a servant of the state, tasked to produce knowledge of the abject. My understanding of la cuidad letrada links it to the interlocutory community and the sovereignty of language, traceable to Rama’s chapter, “The Polis Politicized,” in The Lettered City, trans. John Charles Chasteen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 74-97. For a critical revaluation of Rama, see Alberto Moreiras,

95 Agamben, 21. Derek Attridge makes a similar point about exclusions found within literary language. Attridge writes: “If we could apprehend otherness directly,” Derek Attridge says of literary language, “the shock would indeed be traumatic; but direct apprehension is exactly what is ruled out.” In The Singularity of Literature (New York: Routledge, 2004), 76.

96 Dolar, 120.

97 Agamben, Homo Sacer, 15.

98 Ibid., 21. Elsewhere Agamben refers to subjectivity “in two opposed senses of the phrase: to be subjected and to be sovereign.” The attainment of subjectivity is described further as a movement through a subvocal phase, comparable Dolar’s object voice. “Speaking is a paradoxical act that implies both subjectification and desubjectification, in which the living individual appropriates language in a full expropriation alone, becoming a speaking being only on condition of falling into silence.” In Remnants, 107; 129.

99 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, 3 and 104. The need to configure the voice of pain in Forché’s work is founded on the act of missing precisely the traumatic experience it tries to record. It is homologous the situation Caruth analyzes in Freud’s account of a father who is able to respond to the real only upon “awakening to a call that can only be heard within sleep” (100).

100 “The termini of the poem,” Grossman writes, “are the white portions of the page which constitute the morpheme meaning silence.” In “Summa Lyrica,” 251. What Grossman describes is neither pure silence (it is “morpheme”) nor pure signification (it relays no utterance). At the very least then, the termini of lyric shapes on the page and in performance bear a certain resemblance to the interval of vocality. Citing Max Picard as a source, Stewart appears to be echoing Grossman, as well: ”The silence of listening permeates the poem—it exists in the silences between sounds and stanzas and the turning of the page.” In Poetry and the Fate of the Senses, 101.

101 Grossman, True-love, 92.

102 Dolar, 121.

103 Grossman, True-love, 90-92.

104 Ibid., 74. Emphasis in the original. Agamben concludes not only that such adequacy is untested, but that it is aporetic. Its possibility—the communication of desubjectification can happen—is founded on the event of losing the capacity for communication. “Testimony takes place,” Agamben writes, “where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking, the inhuman and the human enter a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish the position of the subject.” In Remnants, 120. LaCapra objects to this notion, emphasizing the work of proper mourning or moving on. In Writing History, op. cit., 40-42; 64-
69. LaCapra’s model needs some tweaking, I believe. It accounts for testimony’s accountability in terms of the person recalling pain, removed from the event. But it neglects the difference between the living witness and the remnant or the disappeared. Resisting vicarious victimage, testimony still owes a primary responsibility to this remnant, the one whose depersonalization has no voice. Only then, once that primary accountability is upheld, can we properly speak of responsibility among the living speakers, whose task it is to mourn. In poetic terms, Robert Pinsky gives us the handy maxim: “What poets must answer for is the unpoetic.” In “Responsibilities of the Poet,” in Politics and Poetic Value, op. cit., 12.

105 Pinsky, 12.

106 Ronell, 494.


108 “Revolucion o muerte” appears on a wall in a photo of San Salvador, dated January 23, 1980. In Tommie Sue Montgomery, Revolution in El Salvador (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 130. Montgomery recalls that the day before, Salvadoran police fired on a rally held by 200,000 people. Many of the wounded were brought to the cathedral where the picture was taken.

109 Ronell, 498.


111 Agamben, Remnants, 130.

112 Lyotard, 184.

113 Appelbaum, 6. Appelbaum cites Locke: “Parrots, and several other Birds, will be taught to make articulate Sounds distinct enough, which yet, by no means, are capable to Language.” In An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 402. This trope returns in Forché’s later poetry, which continues to allude to the encounter with the inhuman in El Salvador: “a parcel of copper write, plastique and a clock,” Forché writes, “a parrot learning its language from a ghost.” The Blue Hour, 26.


115 Frank Kermode, The Genesis of Secrecy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 144. Parabola exclusion is illustrated by Mark 4:7-9, which features a parable commenting metacritically on the reception of parabolic speech. “Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And others fell on good ground,” the Gospel scribe writes. “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” Kermode close-reads the parable on 28-34.

116 Agamben, 133-34.


Scansion reveals a metrical ideal that we do not immediately sense because of the irregularity in the organization of the beats. The four-part rhythm frames lines 5, 6, and 9. Line 1 hold five beats, followed by three lines each carrying three beats. But note the two other five-beat lines further in the poem. Relative to the four-beat ideal, the excess of one beat in lines 1, 7 and 8 correspond to the lack of a beat in the three lines containing only three beats. In other words, the five beats in lines 1, 7, and 8 are a kind of rhythmic compensation relative to lines 2 to 4. The beat promotions and demotions throughout the poem are partly explained as an attempt to quell the insistence of meter to create the conversational effect of the poem. With its insinuation of meter, in sum, “The Visitor” rehearses lyric’s most recognizable trait: the unit of line organized in phonemic terms, working in tension with the sentence as a semantic unit, as described by Agamben in *The End of the Poem*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Oakland: Stanford University Press, 1996), 109-15. For the scansion method used here, see Derek Attridge and Thomas Carper, *Meter and Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 2003).


Dolar, 80.


Carolyn Forché, “The Road to Reaction” The Nation (4 June 1980): 715. Forché recalls that before his assassination Romero tried to appeal to President Carter not to send further aid to the military government. “The contribution of your Government, instead of promoting greater justice and peace in El Salvador,” Forché quotes Romero saying, “will without doubt sharpen the injustice and repression against the organizations of the people which repeatedly have been struggling to gain respect for their most fundamental rights.” Cf. LeoGrande, 44, 46-47; and Tom Gibb, after examining declassified CIA files, revisits the questions surrounding Romero’s murder in his article, “The Killing of Archbishop Oscar Romero [...] Was the CIA to Blame?” The Guardian (22 March 2000): G2, p. 8.

Molly Todd, Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in Salvadoran Civil War (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2010), 82-83. Todd writes: “As the campesinos at Las Aradas breakfasted on corn tortillas, the ambush began. Barely had someone yelled “Here comes la guardia!” when the ground troops were upon them. The campesinos scattered, attempting to escape, but soldiers knocked them down with kicks and blows, bayonets and bullets. Witnesses later recounted the worst of what they saw: soldiers slicing open the bellies of pregnant women; fetuses and infants thrown into the air and bayonetted; genitals cut off of men and boys; girls and women raped. As these horrors occurred, many campesinos threw themselves into the river and tried to reach the opposite shore, only to be carried away by the swollen current or pegged mid-stream by machine-gun fire from the helicopters circling above.”


LaFeber, 251-55; LeoGrande, 44-47; Montgomery, 19-20, 159-79; and Robinson, 89-90. The timing of U.S. aid was unfortunate. It bred not only mistrust among the Salvadoran left, but also the outrage of U.S. rights advocates. Between February and August 1980, Amnesty International (AI) corresponded with the Secretary of State Edmund Muskie, asking Washington to reconsider the “proposed security assistance to El Salvador.” Washington’s reply arrived only in August. Carter had long signed off on sending equipment and riot control to El Salvador in April, within weeks after Romero’s assassination and the massacre at Rio Lempa. The reply signed by Warren Christopher claims that the first letter AI sent “was unfortunately misplaced.” It then assures AI that Washington “would not continue any assistance which we believed was being used for repressive purposes.” See Amnesty International, “U.S. Military Transfers to El Salvador,” letter for internal circulation (13 July 1981), p. 3. In series IV.1.3, box 10, folder “Co-Groups – El Salvador, 1981-1982,”Amnesty International USA Archive, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts. Christopher’s reply is intriguing in light of the incidents of the regime’s military excess prior to the approval of aid. Though major newspapers exposed the river massacres belatedly in 1981, American church networks and the Agence France-Presse in the midsummer of 1980 already had reported them, as Noam Chomsky recalls in “El Salvador,” The Noam Chomsky Reader (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 341 and 461-62n11.
The Soviets began supporting Salvadoran guerillas in 1980. Brands, 198 and 343n48-50. Brands cites recently opened archives in the former communist block with documents on Soviet arm shipments via Nicaragua and Cuba. The evidence has yet to be examined by other Cold War historians. Just as Brands urges us not to ascribe total agency to Washington, so must we avoid the same narrative pertaining to the Kremlin. The Soviets were at best invested in the decline of American hegemony in Latin America. It is tempting to speculate that victory for the dissidents would have meant the peasants and liberation theologians becoming instruments of Soviet invasion. But as already noted, the dissidents were not monolithically beholden to the communist sublime. The alliance between Marxist and Christian leftists were driven by necessity upon the hardening of national security policies. In Woods, 16-18, 117-18, esp. 135-39; Montgomery, 120-46; and Forché, “El Salvador: An Aide Memoire,” 5.

Lyotard, “The Other’s Rights,” 184.


For my understanding of gnomics, I draw mainly on Angus Fletcher, Colors of the Mind: Conjectures on Thinking in Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 102 passim.

On ventriloquism, I draw mainly from Dolar, 67-71; and Stewart, Poetry and the Fate of the Senses, 13; 121-22.

LaFeber, 249, 254; Brands, 194-95; Diskin and Sharpe, 15-16. The last-named historians write: “U.S. failure to publicly denounce military excesses and defend the civilian and military reformers who were forced out of the government weakened the potential reform coalition.”

Although appearing to advocate for non-intervention, Pastor also writes: “Human rights groups that argue for the United States to disengage should realize that the immediate impact would put the rightists in the driver’s seat, where they would proceed to run over 200,000 people.” A former aide in the National Security Council under the Carter administration, Pastor complains that “the leftist rhetoric continues to be rabidly anti-American.” Overlooking the historical basis for the skepticism of dissidents, Pastor also takes for granted the conjunction between American exceptionalism and bipolar mentality in his views: “It is pointless to dispute the contention that the Cubans and Soviets have a stake in the outcome or a hand in the current turmoil. Because of Soviet financing, Cuba is able to play a large role in El Salvador by financing, training, and advising the guerillas.” Robert Pastor, “Three Perspectives on El Salvador” SAIS Review 1/2.2 (Summer 1981): 35-39.

Brands, 4-5; 71-74. Brands’ account calls the set of ideas underpinning Latin America’s authoritarian policies the “National Security Doctrine.” He also works to downplay the effect of Washington’s geopolitical actions on such doctrine. In my view, the flow of aid points to causality but not with malicious intent. The reader interested in thinking about these issues may begin perhaps with Julian E. Zelizer “Conservatives, Carter, and the Politics of National Security,” Rightward Bound, op. cit. The uses of debate regarding collusion between authoritarians and the U.S. has its merits—reasonability, the liberal ethos. But it also has ideological uses, one of them being the avoidance of traumatic memory in U.S. self-fashioning.


Culler, “Apostrophe” 65.

Moreiras, op. cit., 215. All preceding quotations come from this part of Moreiras’s text.

Culler, “Apostrophe,” 65.

A lament attributed to the Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz, quoted in William Schell, Jr. Integral Outsiders: The American Colony in Mexico City 1876-1911 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001), xii.