Cutting across traditional boundaries between the human and social sciences, volumes in the American Culture series study the multiplicity of cultural practices from theoretical, historical, and ethnographic perspectives by examining culture's production, circulation, and consumption.

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Maria Damon

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In this series of case studies, I argue that the American literary avant-garde comes out of the work of the socially marginalized. In the hands of deterritorialized writers, poetry, itself “antidiscursive” in the modern situation, cannot help but produce a level of vanguard experimentation, a shock of defamiliarization, a resonant disorientation that permits new consciousness. My purpose is not to claim that this or that avant-garde is empirically the true one in opposition to others, but rather that, used with a particular valence that both resonates with and alters more traditional uses of the term, the rubric “avant-garde” or “vanguard” has special and urgent meaning when applied to the work of social outsiders. The term “avant-garde” has several meanings on the continuum from specific to vague, from historicist to aestheticist, in current literary studies; I want to briefly review those meanings only to sketch in a rudimentary background and then, returning to the term’s etymological derivation, I want to sharpen and bring into focus my own provisional definition in order to examine usefully the writings, lives, and subcultures of a range of twentieth-century American poets: Black/Jewish Beat surrealist Bob Kaufman, Robert Lowell and three unknown teenage women writing in a South Boston Housing Project educational program, gay poets Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, and last but first, Gertrude Stein, the Jewish lesbian godmother of exciting American writing.

The most commonly used specific historical meaning of “avant-garde” refers to European developments of the early twentieth century, particularly Dadaism, Surrealism, Fauvism. This specificity with regard to Europe’s literary history, however, is absent from the mod-
ern American scene; there is no clearly defined historical avant-garde. Most of the “high modernists,” whose literary styles might make them appropriate for such an epithet, and who were writing at the same time as the Eastern and Western European vanguards, were either apolitical or conservative, and as such so sharply distinguishable from the European avant-garde movements as to forfeit association with them altogether (with the exception, perhaps, of Ezra Pound’s brief Vorticist days, and Gertrude Stein, who, as I shall argue at some length, belongs more properly in the category of social outcast-writer than in the company of her coeval male modernists).

Different American literary movements have laid claim to or had attributed to them the honorary status of avant-garde: the bohemian leftist intellectual circles of Greenwich Village and the Partisan Review; the Beats’ San Francisco incarnation, which latter has been termed the only “indigenous” American avant-garde; the postmodern male fiction writers such as Donald Barthelme, John Hawkes, or Gil Sorrentino, whose works flirt with sur- and antirealism and stretch conventional writing to absurdity; the contemporary language poets who challenge the tyranny of commonsensical referentiality in the service of liberating language into new phenomenological possibilities. In these cases, especially the first two, the term “avant-garde” describes an ideological position vis-à-vis art-and-society rather than a historically specific artistic movement linked to its European counterparts. In the latter instances especially, the term continues to operate as a formalist category if not as a historical one; the form of the work challenges received conventions of literary art as reflected in either popular or academic literary models, but breaks new ground that will in turn eventually become overtilled by more timid or less imaginative imitators. This kind of formalist argument, however, reinscribes itself in a conservative aesthetic meritocracy: you can tell it’s avant-garde because it is (“probably”) destined to survive on the strength of its transcendent artistic merit, to be recognized by posterity in the sense of “[inspiring] future . . . endeavors.”

In the face of this confusion between the avant-garde as transhistorical formalist orientation and as specific historical category, most literary historians who write about the avant-garde, even the most perceptive and discerning, trace it, if not as a continuous tradition, then as a roster of “great names” and/or movements (as in Charles Russell’s excellent Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud through Postmodernism). There seems to be consensus, though, that the term obtains in instances in which socially critical “attitude” and experimental aesthetic praxis are consciously and necessarily linked and foregrounded. Another underlying and sometimes explicit criterion of avant-gardism is its vehement and principled opposition to mass and popular culture.

Peter Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde, by focusing on art as a social institution rather than as an ahistorical category that opposes the social (à la Kostelanetz), offers a salutary analysis that breaks the impasse separating the formalist avant-gardists from the politicos. Departing from the high modernists’ exclusively aesthetacist orientation, the dadaists, surrealists, and futurists challenged the separation of art from the material sphere. The collage technique especially, in that it incorporated fragments of the material and discursively normative world in contemporaneous juxtaposition, challenges the autonomy of the work of art from the material or social, and also challenges the anti-mass/pop culture stance that is often axiomatic in more naïve definitions of the avant-garde. While the French and German avant-gardes Bürger chooses to examine are explicitly and programmatically political, I believe it is possible to posit this materialist orientation—this consummate worldliness—as well as a lived critique of social norms in imaginative work that is less programmatic, less easily subsumable under the sheltering label of one “movement.”

Given the leeway for difference in this spectrum of approaches, my use of the term “avant-garde” differs but derives from denotations of a formal tradition, a historical moment, and a series of names. I want to argue for the avant-garde as writing that pushes at the limits of experience as well as at the limits of conventional form. While each instance of avant-garde writing occurs in a historical context, there is not necessarily a continuous historical development linking these instances in a seamless teleological narrative. To borrow from Phillipa Sayers (whose title Writing and the Experience of Limits I consistently misremember, in an echo of David Antin’s talking at the boundaries, as Writing at the Limits of Experience) the “discontinuity” of the historical field (of writing) breaks with the “pseudo-continuity of all ‘literary history’” and, in so breaking, reveals its strategic points, its “borders . . . designated by the words: ‘mysticism,’ ‘eroticism,’ ‘madness,’ ‘literature’ (this latter taken solely
in the sense that entails rupture). Normality of discourse is conceived [in Sollers’ “Program”] of as need for a defense (ideology) vis-à-vis these points. While this pronouncement reveals a frankly romantic and subjectivist orientation, it offers an important way to historicize and legitimate antidiscursive modes—“madness,” “eroticism,” poetic language—and by extension social outsiderhood. Who is better equipped to push literature and sensibility to its limits than those dispossessed, those whose material and social resources are themselves constantly strained to or beyond their limits? In a telling and moving anecdote linking poetry and madness, the confessional poet and chronic mental patient Anne Sexton described with the same words her excitement at encountering her spiritual community first in other “sick” people during a hospitalization and then in other poets in John Holmes’s workshop: “These are my people” because like her they “talked Language.” It is in this elision of poetry and madness that I want to locate the embodiedness of poetry; the poets and texts written about in this study embody living critiques of inhumane social conditions not through their separation from but through their immersion in those conditions.

Under the looser rubric of avant-garde as an (op)position one can occupy at any time and whose contours are contextually determined, it becomes possible to claim that the artistic vanguard in America comes from the social margins. Moreover, if we attend to the meaning of “avant-garde” in its original military capacity, it becomes poignantly clear that the vanguard party, sent out ahead of the main forces, ran the greatest dangers of death or captivity—as front-line forayers, they were also, imminently, cannon fodder. The major empires of Europe were known to send their least esteemed denizens (“citizens” would be a misnomer) into the fray first; the Russians sent the Jews—military service lasted twenty years, and the entire shetel would say Kaddish for a boy immediately upon his conscription; the British sent their colonies: Sudanese, Australians, and New Zealanders; the French similarly used the Senegalese; during the Viet Nam war and into the present, “minorities” and working-class boys comprise the bulk of active-duty American armed forces. I don’t mean to overemphasize a relationship between poetic and military activity (modern gender ideology has more often dictated the opposite) although the poets under discussion in the present study could be said to adopt the roles of guerrilla verbalists in their struggle for survival. However, the military sense of “avant-garde” makes possible an insight central to my thesis: the marginalized, ostensibly most expendable members of the American society have produced its truly vanguard literature. Their often neglected work becomes canon-fodder in the construction of a respectable facade of American letters that would erase the indigence and illegitimacy of its vital sources. Thus the avant-garde can include mass and popular cultural texts or can at the very least enjoy a productive rather than hostile relationship to them, and it can include work that may not be formally experimental but breaks social taboos and formalist rules in its attempt to create a new consciousness borne of heretofore inexpressible experience.

Although the commonsensical precepts of Newtonian physics are in question today, we know from Foucault and from experience that, in the cultural and political realm of life at least, for every instance of oppression there is a comparable uppression—even if the form this resistance takes is not always readily recognizable as such. The history of the provisional title of this work, from “Poetics and Resistance” to “... and Marginality” to “... and Minority” to “... and Oppression” to, finally, The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry illustrates some of the ideas and images I’ve had to entertain and reject or at least amend to fit a particular vision of cultural and social life in the twentieth-century United States. The term “resistance,” while appealing precisely because of its Foucauldian pervasiveness, had to cede before strong evidence that many writers who fit into categories of “oppressed” or “marginal” people do not overtly appear to be engaged in any active political resistance. Bob Kaufman, for example, while he embodied a Beatnik-style resistance to convention, was not actively involved in the Black Arts Movement. Though he constantly acknowledged his debt and connection to jazz and other Black art forms, and while Langston Hughes and others expressed concern about him, his immediate community, both artistic and domestic, consisted of the San Francisco Beat scene rather than any circle of Black writers. “Resistance” implies organization and some degree of intentionality, unity, and unanimity.

The word “oppression” suggested itself because, among other things, it lifts the euphemistic veil from words like “marginal” and “minority,” and because it implies verticality rather than lateral dis-
persion: certain aspects of American life are submerged, perhaps (though this aspect is not apprehensible or admissible to some) in a conceptual hierarchy. (In the same sense in which psychologists speak of re-presentation or sup-representation, as a self-destructive containment/denial of certain truths about one’s experience, so op-prent works by forcing down.) The trope of verticality provides an image consistent with the Great Chain of Being, a metaphor that, I argue, underlies most Western poetic texts up through the modernist mode, and begins to recede with the advent of postmodernism’s return to the lateral and cofoundational. Thus “oppression” describes a social and textual relationship that is part of the history of this discussion, and certainly continues to color it, but does not currently evoke the most useful or accurate set of metaphoric relations for talking about vanguard poetry. Somewhat akin to “resistance,” the word conveys a monolithic sense that each poet is responding to the same repressive conditions in the same way—an absurdity for a book that treats both Robert Lowell and Bob Kaufman, for example—and implies a degree of conscious strategizing to counter these conditions. Both of these words could be associated with a misleading teleological agenda, on my part and also on the part of the writers examined here. These particular words, moreover, have a history and a set of associations that to some extent seem incompatible with the styles and sensibilities of the writers under discussion. While Stein could be said to “resist” easy accessibility, Lowell could be “resisting” parental influence in his confessional verse; the wreckage of Kaufman’s and Spicer’s lives and work issues partially from their status as “oppressed” persons; and when the South Boston poets write of “oppressive” conditions, the words connote a realism and a representational flavor wholly uncharacteristic of most of these writers.

“Minority” seems appropriate in that one chapter treats children and teenagers, and the word is often used to describe people of color and other groups traditionally underrepresented in official political process. Nonetheless, there is a troublesome, patronizing ring to the word underscoring the myth that we are powerless, isolated, less-than. Furthermore, although in recent literary studies there has been a redefinition of the term “minor literature” to denote literature produced by “minorities,” the connotation of “second-rate” lingers. Theorists and critics who thus address the issue of “minority” in literature unintentionally contribute to an implicit split between “excellence” and “mediocrity” even while they attempt to foreground and privilege the “minor.” Louis Renz’s work on Sarah Orne Jewett, for example, raises the possibility that Jewett willingly embraced the designation of “regional” writer—that is, minor in the conventional sense of mediocre, unambitious, safe. The conventional sense of the word and the emergent celebratory and subversive sense in which it is used in, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s study of Kafka, come to imply and involve each other in ways as suspect as they are interesting—suspect especially because these champions of “minor literature” are not members of the “minority” groups their respective writers represent. While the final chapter here, the Stein essay, draws heavily on Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, it does not do so uncritically, and I have adopted their concept of a “minority discourse” with several caveats.

Some writers, such as lesbian poet Judy Grahn, who plant themselves firmly outside of the mainstream, nonetheless caution against the term “marginality,” because it contributes to a false notion that there is a “center,” a central stronghold of straight white upwardly mobile maledom or of an ideology and culture supporting such a group, surrounded by different groups of outsiders attacking this center from some vague outfield, outback, or periphery, or parasitically clinging to its edges. Again, the image is of isolation, alienation, and, in a sense, superfluity. No image could be more misleading. Not only are so-called marginal people actually central in terms of their economic position as the under- or unpaid workers on which capitalism depends, but they are culturally central as well. H. Bruce Franklin, for instance, points out that jazz, blues, gospel, and the rock and roll derived from these Black musical styles are generally acknowledged to be America’s unique contribution to world music; he goes on to make a parallel case for slave narratives and prison literature in the literary world. Moreover, as Grahn points out, “we are not marginal to ourselves,” implying that one’s point of reference should not be the mainstream but one’s own fellow and sister outsiders. Marginality, to Grahn, implies cultural outsiderhood in a culture that is so internally heterodox and heterogeneous that, while it may make sense to speak of a “dominant” culture and its relation to subcultures, the image cannot be one of mutual exclusivity or periphery/centrality. These subcultures function inside and beside dominant cultures, challenging more often than subscribing to
them, borrowing from, rewriting and replenishing, always interacting with them. Nonetheless, unlike “minority,” “oppression,” and the like, the term’s etymological origin implies no devaluation or comparative worth. The “border” or “edge” (Latin margo) of a riverbank is not “less than” the river; it forms the necessary condition for the river’s being a river. The border of a fabric keeps it from unraveling, often decoratively calling attention to itself through extra ornamentation. Moreover, its meaning in the context of writing affords a rich set of associations appropriate here. A margin is the “official” space around a printed text, where handwriting either shapes the text (as in a teacher's amendments and corrections) or responds deferentially to it (as in a student’s annotations to him- or herself on a “master-text”). It is a space for response, immediacy, and fragmentation (as opposed to the finished critique or analysis, for example, that will comprise the student’s “official” and public response). It is also, however, the frame that fetishizes the finishedness of a literary product, that announces it as finished. Known also as “white space,” it comes to signify absence and silence, a holy aura surrounding the printed text. (“What does all this white space mean?” is a question commonly asked students in an Introduction to Literature class: silence, the unspeakable, the autonomy of the aesthetic moment.) With the advent of open verse, concrete poetry, and experimentation with the printed page, however, the margin talks back; it is not always so easily definable as negative space with secondary value. Most significant for this study, the margin/border marks a discontinuity, setting up images of contemporaneous disunity that lateralize the last vertical vestiges of the Chain of Being inhering in modernism, undoing the hierarchy and anteriority characteristic of mainstream work. It replaces the Chain with the Street, which functions both as border of exclusion and of access, as a trope of circulation and as a dividing line. As an image of potential pluralism, it also works against an easy equation of different kinds of exclusion. However, the Street as image of dynamic pluralism and contemporaneity should not once again euphemize behind a rhetorical veil of Pollyannaish pseudo-democracy the harsh exigencies of a border life: The Street itself continues to be a devalued image, as in “street people” for the poor and homeless; “street smarts” for untrained but intuitive survival skills; “streetwalker” for prostitute; “street Arabs” (!) for neglected chil-

dren. Hence, because I have wanted to valorize the devalued, the final title: *The Dark End of the Street.*

Furthermore, to be marginal means to be on the cutting edge. The term captures the fragmentation of style and identity that characterizes many of my subjects and their work. The marginal is the avant-garde; as Bob Kaufman writes, “Way out people know the way out.” *15* I would argue that this case could be made even for writers whose work does not correspond to conventional understandings of “avant-garde”—that is, tending toward the nonrepresentational, the disruptive, the inaccessible. For instance, the South Boston poems, though they conform to very clear, arguably outdated, precepts of what poetry is, are avant-garde, marginal, experimental, both in their challenge of middle-class readers’ assumptions about who gets to write what about whom, and in their deconstruction and reassembly of other dominant discourses, a practice currently labeled “postmodern,” but observable in any culture that has relations with other cultures. All writing is experimental, especially for people whose status as writers has traditionally been challenged: women, children, people of color, and members of the working classes. While the radicalism of Julia Kristeva’s conclusions—that all language is “poetic,” is “revolutionary”—has been criticized as ultimately reactionary, undermining the possibility of an effective revolution based on a shift in demographic power, the claim that everyone has access to the tools for transformation is profoundly democratic. *16*

Standing on the threshold of double vision, of the dualities that mark modern culture, the poets whose work I discuss here do, for the most part, play on the borderline of assimilation and difference through stylistic experimentation. Even the “straightest” of the writers, Robert Lowell, who has never been considered part of an avant-garde canon, broke into new terrain when *For the Union Dead* and *Life Studies* inaugurated the confessional mode and its accompanying relaxation of formal structure. This move was experimental for him, and brought him closer to the edge of his own split psyche. Robert Duncan’s “poetics of process” play out and represent the constitution of a poetic community within the gay subculture of the 1950s and 1960s. The work of both Duncan and Jack Spicer mediated the problems of community and isolation, physicality and spirituality, democracy and the self-protective elitism of a cultural ghetto—this last pair politically analogous to the binary accessibility/hermeticism that
faced the classic avant-garde movement, Surrealism. Duncan and
Spicer, members of both Berkeley and San Francisco "Renaissances," explicitly associated gay identity with open serial form, a precursor to contemporary postmodern language poetry. Spicer compares single, discrete poems to "one-night stands filled ... with their own emotions, but not going anywhere, as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath," and argues in favor of communities of poems: "They cannot live alone any more than we can." Paradoxically, his violently agnostic version of Keats's negative capability demands that the poet deny himself the comfort of companionship—indeed, of personality—in order to channel poetic messages from otherworldly realms. This aesthetic conviction bridges the seemingly vast abyss separating T. S. Eliot the traditionalist from experimentalists in poetic language, through its joining of a radically nihilistic "objective relative" to the currently prevalent devalorizing of the author, the speaking subject. Spicer’s hermetic, self-lacerating verse complements Duncan’s Whitmanesque delight in inclusion and eclecticism. The polyvalency of Duncan’s serials and the erotic mysticism he attributes to poetic language celebrate a process of creative self-acceptance, indicating a congruence between the experiments of his life and work.

Bob Kaufman’s work combines the popular aesthetics of his time—the Beat sensibility, the imported and Americanized version of existentialism, the new acceptance of jazz as a “serious” art form—with a harrowing embodiment of modernist and postmodernist possibilities. His poetry is an experimental collage of popular and high-art influences; similarly, he lived his life “under the influence” of street drugs, of “Poetry” as an extreme and exacting ethos of self-denial and self-indulgence, and of the resulting psychic deracination—experimentation with no controls. If way-out people know the way out, way-out people also fall apart, and, as in the case of Jack Spicer and Bob Kaufman (and Lenny Bruce, who comes up briefly in the final chapter), it seems disingenuous to celebrate unequivocally a destruction (as opposed to a deconstruction) of personality when this “dérèglement des sens” has its roots in the self-centeredness of obsession rather than in the release of heavy-handed insistence on a one-to-one correspondence of event to meaning, of signifier to referent. In a true deconstructive mode, the sense of loss accompanying such detachment does not become the governing emotional tone, as it does for Spicer and Kaufman; instead, one would experience primarily an exhilaration of conscientious “detachment of language/body/movement from story framework.” I have tried not to veil despair with the glamor of the doomed maudit, even while acknowledging the charisma of these martyr-figures, and finding much that is useful in their aesthetics of despair. Their resolute refusal of comfort rescues this project from unqualified affirmation of life on the margins.

Gertrude Stein’s compositional experiments scarcely require explanation or defense in the context of a modernist tradition, or, more accurately, a proto-postmodernism. Compared to her literary colleagues Henry Miller, Ernest Hemingway, Anais Nin, and Sherwood Anderson, she is incontestably miles ahead in terms of formal and thematic daring. While the others have their places in American literary history (of her American contemporaries, perhaps only Djuna Barnes, another lesbian in exile, can boast a comparable importance), the vanguardism of Stein’s work instantiates Sollers’s denunciation of “pseudo-literary histories” in favor of a different order of historicity. She could be said to define the terms “avant-garde” and “experimental.” Until recently, most Stein criticism has confined itself to treating Stein as an avant-gardist in the modernist movement, overlooking or downplaying for the most part the possible relevance of her multiple marginality as a Jew, a woman, a lesbian. However, new work on Stein has focused on demonstrating how aesthetic experimentation is rooted in her experience as a marginalized person. An emergent body of feminist criticism explicitly treats the links between these aesthetic experiments and her status as a woman and/or as a lesbian. I have tried to carry this paradigm of inquiry into a discussion of Stein’s Jewishness, attempting to explore the relationship between this particular ethnicity and her radical de-familiarizing of everyday language.

A final note on “quality,” choice, and canonicity: This endeavor has not been an exercise in alternative canon-formation (at least not primarily). Only the chapter on Bob Kaufman is structured as an introduction to a hitherto under-studied poet’s oeuvre. While I hope it affords readers pleasure in acquainting them with Kaufman, this agenda has been secondary to my concern to explore the dynamics of neglect at the level of majority culture, and the concomitant dy-
namics of legend-building at the level of minority subculture. What
cultural work is done and what needs are met by both sets of dynam-
ic at both cultural registers, and additionally by my choosing to
inquire into them? This study has not concerned itself with the ques-
tion of “good” or “bad” poetry (Robert Duncan has claimed that
there is no such thing as good or bad poetry), but with what is aes-
thetically compelling—thrilling—about certain verbal structures,
and how this thrill itself is intrinsic to poetry as social practice. This
thrill can be as minimal and specific as what happens dynamically
between two words: Stein’s “Yet Dish,” for example; or as general as
the blinding quality of agony that pours from Lowell’s reconstruc-
tions of childhood in the discursive “91 Revere Street”; or as startling
as the initial sight of the South Boston poems handwritten in Cheryl’s
notebook. A number of colleagues have suggested that, for instance,
Lowell’s presence in the project was a burdensome concession to
canonical credibility: “It must have been dreadful for you to have to
include Lowell,” or, using the same logic but different values, “What
a smart self-marketing device” designed to prove that I could write
about “real poetry.” Or that the South Boston poets appear here be-
cause of my missionary desire to “give them a voice”: “It’s noble
for you to want to dignify these poems by analysis, but aren’t you
straining a bit?” These poets already have a voice, an audience, and
a sense of themselves as writers; academics tend to exaggerate our
importance by imagining that MLA talks and book publications sub-
stantially change lives other than our own. This observation is not in-
tended critically: changing our own lives is a radical undertaking. My
work on all of these poets has been, like most criticism of most lit-
erature, an attempt to bring myself into communication with some-
one else’s language—to involve myself parasitically with their aesthet-
ic aura by problematizing it. In this way the entire project has
been appropriately egoistic and as pleasurable as one of this nature
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1

Introductions and Interdictions

The Dark End of the Street: Passion, Commitment, and Subversion in Modern American Poetry

Soul Hit: No There There

In 1967, James Carr, who was to sink into the obscurity of poverty, drugs, and mental illness, recorded the greatest version of the "greatest cheating song in soul history," entitled "The Dark End of the Street." The mournful triumphantly ballad of a clandestine love doomed to perish upon discovery has been covered many, many times, by (among others) Aretha Franklin, Ry Cooder and his backup team Terry Evans and Al King, and most recently by the "black" Irish "saviours of soul" in the movie The Commitments. Invoking all the power of a gospel hymn, the lover exhorts his love to walk past him unrecognized, unweep, if they should chance to meet "downtown" during the day. The lyrics and melody recreate the agony of a deep passion that flourishes in the shadows, that feeds on its own shame, that can’t be acknowledged in the world of normative discourse indicated by the alliterative "daylight"/"downtown." Despite and because of their hiddenness and illegitimacy, the few nocturnal moments stolen away to meet "at the dark end of the street" frame the lovers' lives, give those lives meaning, fuel the spiritual resources they need to withstand the pressure of conscience and convention. The power of the passion itself justifies a subversive commitment to it, turns "wrong" into "strong," abjection into transcendence, the dark end of the street/wrong side of the tracks into the golden path of glory.
The song allegorizes the predicament of poetry, of social outcasts, of outsiders who are poets, who live in dark corners of social lacunae, in the psychic and physical slums of the marginal imagination. Jacques Derrida has pointed out that the dark end of the street can't be a dwelling place; transgression is characterized by its necessarily transient nature, defined by and dependent upon the norm it violates. No one can live in the perpetual and unqualified “outside,” not only because it is difficult enough to strain ordinary human resources beyond their limits but because such a “place” does not even exist. As the adult Gertrude Stein remarked on revisiting the Oakland of her childhood, “there is no there there.” But the poets of this study attempt just that: to live perpetually in the nonplace, the constant currency, of language. The avant-gardes they comprise occupy the razor’s edge, the margin of constant error that permits no mistake but failure, which is not a mistake but inevitable and not unexpected. “Street” life conducts its commerce on the thin margin of sidewalk that defines discrete neighborhoods, language usages, cultures; and puts these in uncontrollable circulation, simultaneously permeating the core of American culture and defining its margin. The margin is not a habitat but an event, a state of becoming and developing in constant flux. The transgressive gesture is mottled, embodied in the mental patient and the sailor, the hustler and the housing-project tenants, the Jews and the juveniles whose poetry makes up the matter of this book—whose vanguard persistence in public life has nominalized the adjective. And the transgressive gesture is embodied as well in the hoboes, the homeless, the voyagers they write about. The dark end of the street is not a geopolitical locale but a condition of subversive passion: the lovers of Carr’s soul hit create the dark end of the street in every passionate utterance, in every instance of transgressive intersubjectivity, in every attempt to force their eyes not to meet during chance encounters “downtown.”

**Teen Movie: There**

The title of the soul hit also served as the title of a full-length feature film made in 1981 by working-class teenage students at the Group School, an experimental high school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a city (as part of “greater Boston”) characterized by a racial and ethnic factionalism which not infrequently erupts into violence. Having grown up in Newton, Boston’s “golden ghetto,” I was struck each time I returned for brief vacations by the regularity with which tales of racial, class, or gender brutality occupied the Globe’s headlines, be it police shootings of unarmed Black or Hispanic youth, the rape/murders of prostitutes, or, as in the case that made national headlines several years ago, the accusation by a middle-class white man that his wife had been shot by a Black man, an accusation that prompted police harassment of Black neighborhoods and the random round-up of Black men until it was discovered that the husband himself was the murderer. Based on these kinds of incidents, and the violent anti-desegregation busing riots of the 1970s, Boston is seen, and sees itself, as violently self-contradictory: genteel / vicious, homogeneous / intolerant, liberal / profoundly reactionary, intellectually enlightened / educationally backward—a city embodying ideological and temperamental dichotomies that can only be held together by violent authority. Different ethnic groups, each with its particular class and ideological affiliations, struggle with and for this authority.

The teen movie *The Dark End of the Street*, however, tells a different story, one of the cruel effects of this civic self-misperception on the lives of the young, the poor, those disenfranchised by the social value assigned to skin-color (a relatively immanent trace of that Platonic chimera called “race”), income, and gender. The film is at least partially a collectively produced work of art (with a professional director and scriptwriter), a stunning instance of working-class youth art, written and acted by the teenage students of a progressive high school that services primarily the urban working-class. In the story, a party in the housing projects ends in a drunken argument in which a young Black man falls off one of the project roofs. The only witnesses, a young white couple, are too afraid to tell the police. Although all participants in the altercation are friends, the media assumes the accident to be an instance of racial conflict, and this assumption comes to determine the teens’ relations with each other, especially endangering the friendship between the young white woman and the Black girlfriend of the victim of the accident. The final episode takes place in the project home of one of the two girls; against the background of an a capella jazz female-voice version of “The Dark End of the Street,” they resolve the conflicts with which the party incident has disrupted their lives. The star-crossed,
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In one of the most intriguing, breathtakingly complex scenes of the film, a television reporter spots on the street a man who looks like the protagonist of the novel. She approaches him and starts asking questions about his experience. The character, played by an actor, is confused andforming a sense of the connection between the two worlds. The reporter, played by a real journalist, is intrigued by the parallel and decides to investigate further.

The scene is shot in a busy city street, with cars and people passing by. The lighting is dim, creating a sense of mystery and tension. The dialogue between the two characters is concise yet powerful, conveying the complexity of the situation.

The use of a real journalist in the scene adds to the realism of the story, making it more engaging for the audience. The contrast between the fictional world and the real world is effectively highlighted, leaving the viewers to ponder on the implications of such a scenario.
Jack Spicer, Jewish-American lesbian-in-exile Gertrude Stein, Boston Brahmin Robert Lowell, and three unpublished poets, teenage women from a South Boston housing project: Charlotte Osborne, Cheryl Mellen, and Susan Johnson. The metaphysics and utter physicality of place and placelessness are key issues in each poet's oeuvre, though the way in which this is so is exquisitely peculiar and unique for each poet. I am not concerned with a poetics of space per se, much less with regionalism, except to note that space and place are imbued with social meaning, and heavily inflect what we call culture: the social location (a metaphysical and physical place) out of which each poet writes. Thus most of the housing-project poetry notes the unlivability of the place—"the D"—the girls describe; Robert Lowell's work relies on our geosocial knowledge of polite society to understand the import of cues like "91 Revere Street" and "hardly passionate Marlborough Street"; Kaufman's genealogical indeterminacy is underscored by his New Orleans origins, and his stature in the poetic pantheon of the 1960s rests partially on his San Francisco Beat-street milieu; Spicer and Duncan were groundbreakers in establishing the gay scene of California's Bay Area; and Gertrude Stein is legendary for the ways in which her expatriate status facilitated the literary blossoming of American high modernism. In not being "there," or in inhabiting an untenable "there" or an anachronistic one that, like Lowell's Boston, is decaying behind a façade of respectability, these writers enact biographically the ways in which their poetic language disorients their readers. Their deterritorialization, then, is geopolitically literal as well as formally literary. Our attentiveness to the confluences and dissonances of particular subcultures, biographies, and poetic texts makes for rich, thick descriptions of the value of poetry in deterritorialized survival. Poets are real people with life stories that may not be richer than others' life stories, but are certainly no less so: the interpenetration of social locations and emotional sensibilities enacted in their work becomes allegorical of those of others. Thus in my elaboration of each poet and his or her oeuvre as an experiential moment of social contradictions and resonances, I hope to suggest some general structures and metaphors—the physics and metaphysics—of oppression and resistance. These individual instances can be read as allegorical of other or larger such struggles not specifically addressed in this study.

For these reasons my choice of poets has been governed not so much by each one's canonical or noncanonical relation to American modernism or even to the avant-garde as understood in historical categories or formalist theories. Rather, these poets share an existential and phenomenological opposition to dominant cultures (even when, like Lowell, or like Stein living on the stipend made possible by her brother Michael, who inherited their father Daniel's Western-expansionist San Francisco trolley business, they appear to be prime beneficiaries thereof). I want to demonstrate, in each case, how this complex of oppositions is lived and stylistically manifested primarily in the genre of lyrical poetry. As poets and social deviants these subjects are not being good aristocrats, good Jews, good Blacks, good girls, good citizens; even the ambiguity of gay masculinity that would presumably make poetry an acceptable vocation for a gay man (as it was decidedly not for Lowell) does not read out for Spicer and Duncan: the former excoriated his gay community for the meaninglessness of its sexual connections, and the latter, after all, had his poems returned to him by John Crowe Ransom at the Kenyon Review after and because he came out in an essay in Politics. Rather, their orientation toward poetry associates them with the social exile to which Plato relegated poetry, and where it has wandered ever since.

This latter statement is an arguably romantic and subjectivist claim that requires some elucidation.

Elucidating the Dark: The Chain, the Street, and the Text

Exile on Main Street

Then I really felt in exile, and my nervousness was going to make me permeable to what—for want of other words—I shall call poetry.

Jean Genet

Poetry as a form of discourse has been marginalized—specifically feminized and exiled—by the founders of the philosophical system that dominates the West. We can see the way this feminization and exile operates even today, with, for example, the dismissal of poetry for being either too low a form of low culture—as in street rhymes, kitchen talk, and song lyrics, or too high a form of high culture—as in what gets taught in underpopulated English department courses,
derided as effete or obscure. A range of theorists participating in Western philosophy and aesthetics, from Plato to Trinh T. Minh-ha, have separated poetry from discourses of mastery, which include the abstractions of philosophy or government and the putatively unambiguous speech of justice as well as the empiricism of positivist science. The uses to which this separation has been put, however, have varied hugely; most recently, subaltern theorists claim that poetry coming out of groups not represented in the mainstream of public power subverts this mainstream. My project shares this claim, and aims to demonstrate its validity by examining specific American writers who fall outside traditional power centers. Alongside the development of the master trope of the Great Chain of Being—a philosophy based on domination and subjection—the subversive radical subjectivity of poetry has emerged with particular relevance for nondominant groups, those who experience what I call marginality: disenfranchisement, ostracism or, quite simply, oppression, but which W. E. B. Du Bois refers to as the experience of "twoness," or of "being a problem."

Of the several dominant schools of twentieth-century American poetry, some have struggled more directly than others with the "problem" of the Other—with their role, as members of a dominant social group, in both questioning and possibly sustaining the "problematicness" of the people who work for them, who are not their social and political equals. In particular, the Americanist (Grane-Williams-Olson-Ginsberg, etc.) school of American modernist poetry (as distinct from, but not necessarily opposed to, Pound's and Eliot's European orientation) implicitly domesticated and aestheticized a primeval Other, valorizing organicity and primitivism, turning away from high culture for subject matter and language, and embracing in its field theory all manner of subjects with both emancipatory and imperialist undertones. Even these relatively renegade (to Eliot, the Agrarians, and the New Critics) efforts on the part of mainstream American modernists to break with the tradition of academic poetry and examine their relationship to the social and natural world reenact certain questionable conventions about who gets to speak for and about whom—conventions which, along with the Chain, have characterized Western imperial discourse. Likewise, contemporary attempts to write about this poetry as sociocultural rather than strictly aesthetic artifact tend likewise to replay the desire to subsume all, to designate and account for all "foreignness" it declares to be within its scope. The perceptive analysis of Williams's poem "Elsie" with which James Clifford inaugurates his book of ethnographic essays on "the predicament of culture," for instance, foregrounds Williams's attempt to understand (in two senses: to master and to empathize with) the situation of a young working-class woman who does housework for his wife. In this gem of an essay on poetry as cultural critique, Clifford's tone of bemused power and ambivalent excitement/anxiety about his impending loss of control over the means of discourse resonates with what he so accurately targets in Williams's tone: a desire and reluctance to gracefully relinquish the reins of power and let oneself be taken by the forces of modern (in Clifford's case, postmodern) chaos. For both Williams the modernist and Clifford the postmodernist, the Other is an object whose subjectivity they struggle to acknowledge, against the grain of their Anglo-American masculinist training. However, within the imperial domain of American postmodernism, Others inside the walls of the city reappropriate literary conventions to represent their own experience as contraband subjects—"miners" rather than "minor," in that they undermine dominant discourses, unearthing precious materials from the hidden worlds under and within the metropolis, their bodies ravaged with signs of their Orphic enterprise. These contraband subjects are the focuses of my study. My goal is to let their work speak through my text rather than the reverse; for instance, I place the young women's poetry before my analysis of it rather than as appendix, and I engage in those close readings that, in our legitimation of wider cultural concerns, we nowadays tend to relegate to the dustbin of past misguided/"information-retrieval" approach to hitherto neglected work.

Recent scholarship on the lyric, notably by Hans Robert Jauss, has demonstrated its role in transmitting rather than countering socially normative values. Likewise, Robert von Hallberg's work on American poetry and culture has done much to show the "centrism"—that is, the congruence of the poetry of a given period with the general national values and intellectual trends of that era—of postwar American poetry, and the role of poetry in the development of empire. His work deals primarily with writers who are rather unambiguously headed for literary canonization, however, and with those aspects of
their opus that conform to the centrists view. Some of the same writers von Hallberg examines—Merrill and Lowell—come up for discussion in my project as well, but from a different vantage point and with an emphasis on the silenced or marginalized parts of their experience. While such work as Jau's and Von Hallberg's provides a necessary and valuable counterweight to claims that poetry always and exclusively serves either as rarified entertainment for the effete or as outlet for the disaffected lower fringes, it underemphasizes the differences between poetry and other forms of cultural or institutional discourse, and particularly its difference from both the positivist and the abstract speculative modes of Western philosophical expression.

Without engaging too crudely the "romance of oppositionality" per se, the present study focuses on the ways in which poetry can undermine the philosophic and social systems that have declared it and its disenfranchised writers Other. My bias presumes the inevitable failure of a philosophy that splits the world into hierarchic dichotomies; having said that, I find most interesting the dark side of the street, the counterhegemonic elements in poetry that articulate an admittedly complex relationship between less powerful and more powerful strata of American culture. I propose that poetry takes on an anti-"humanist" role, insofar as Western humanism bases its principles on Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of order, and I will explore those aspects of these poets' work that either have their origin in an altogether different cultural tradition (as in the "African" aspects of African-American poetry), or which actively, if not intentionally, reverse, equalize, or dissolve entirely the terms of Western philosophical order and the neat dualisms that have informed the Western value system.

Also, this study for the most part confines itself to writing that falls under a fairly conventional and academic definition of the word "poetry"—that is, lyric or experimental poems by individual "poets" who self-consciously consider themselves so. Gertrude Stein's uncat-
categorizable experiments and the heretofore unpublished poems by my former students in South Boston are somewhat less lyrical and more ballad-like, street-aphoristic, or even journalistic in their diction and form than the poems of Robert Lowell, Bob Kaufman, Robert Duncan, or the other nationally acknowledged poets under discussion. However, the former poems share with the latter the self-con-
scious poetics of the language and the form; they are fully intended as "poems" or art-writing. Besides, the use of the works is similar; the writers engage a verbal aesthetic to counter an oppressive social situation, and in doing so, to paraphrase Genet, they turn an otherwise painful experience to good account. Street-rhymes, toasts and dozens, popular music lyrics, letters and stream-of-consciousness therapy journals all share some of these characteristics and are worthy of study along comparable lines, and they clearly constitute cultural riches from which these poets have borrowed heavily, but they are not my focus here. A comprehensive definition of poetry would have to expand to fit Owen Barfield's guideline that a "felt change of consciousness" on the part of the recipient or listener determines the poetics of a verbal construct, or to fit even a Kristeva extreme of the poetic and revolutionary potential of all utterance (so that, for example, Lowell's prose piece is his most poetic, because most revolutionary, moment, not only for the poet but for the reader who encounters it after having become accustomed to Lowell's highly wrought verse)—but within such comprehensive definitions, I have limited my scope to writers who use and challenge specific modernist conventions.

Furthermore, just as it is impossible to take on "poetry" in its unbounded significance, it has not proven especially useful to attempt to represent writers from a comprehensive catalogue of marginalized American cultures. Most of the writers here are marginal in more than one sense; I have not addressed exclusive categories of marginality: For example, I do not treat categories of gender or of class as isolated from other aspects of marginality, although these are issues for many of the writers under discussion: Lowell is obsessed with the curse of his patrician origins; the South Boston poems are permeated with as much working/unemployed class consciousness as they are with the pain of being female and young; in fact, these three aspects of oppression are of a piece, indivisible in the poems. Moreover, most children of the world are economically dependent, including those with wealthy parents; women and children comprise most of the world's poor, as indicated by one of the several meanings of the media phrase "the feminization of poverty." Kaufman's bare subsistence reveals a shaky tightrope between a mauditi exotic-asetc renunciation ("I would die for Poetry""); which he did on the same day I first drafted this paragraph) and an all-too-everyday urban Afri-
can-American experience of addiction and poverty. Even though the specific areas of sensibility, the particular sense of powerlessness or empowerment, may resonate with different symbols, youth oppression and class oppression are comparable in the sense that these are quite obviously mobile—youth, in fact, is so by definition. But age-ism and other forms of injustice are linked and possibly—to use a loaded word—universal, since all adults were children once and as such were indoctrinated into the mores and conventions of social oppression.

The obvious mobility of age and class should not, however, blind us to the constructedness and even the arbitrariness of many other current classifications of categories of oppression, and the mutability of these categories over time and space. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has pointed out, it is the arbitrariness of the designation of “race” that makes it the ultimate signifier of difference in American social discourse. Using the trope of performance, Judith Butler and others are making similar points in the realm of gender and sex. This is not in any way to deny that culturally constructed markers of difference are real, in the sense that they have real consequences in the lives of real people. But the very notion of category participates in the limited and limiting language of fixity and objectification that imprisons consciousness and identity. That is one reason I have not tried to cover all the bases in my attention to oppressed Americas: there is no Native American chapter, no Nuyorican or Chicana/o poet featured here, although some of the paradigms I use could be profitably applied to poetry by writers who have these identifications. In the Stein chapter I argue for a conception of identity, ethnic or otherwise, which reflects a mélange of cultural elements in any self-identification by the enunciating subject. There can be no “final” self-identification; we understand ourselves differently every day. Deleuze and Guattari’s useful prefix “becoming” evokes such a non-static notion of identity, as does Michael Fischer’s term “the reinvention of ethnicity.”

**ChainChainChain: The Discourse of Verticality**

Most philosophers and historians of ideas point to Plato and his protégé Aristotle as the men who first articulated the images and concepts that have developed into the “Western metaphysical system”: a conceptual hierarchy underlying the justification of a social order dependent on category, ranking wealthy men of European descent above women of the same origins, and these in turn above the poor of comparable background, and these in turn above people of color of both genders, and all of these above animals, plants, and earth in descending order—the Great Chain of Being. It is against and after this construct, its persistence and evolution from classical Greece to the twentieth century, and its refinements and variations within contemporary Western metaphysics, that the argument of this work unfolds, and it is against the background and recent memory of this construct that the modern poets addressed here develop their own poetics and a corresponding metaphysics. For instance, in 1933 (ten years after Williams published “Elsie,” which in turn appeared less than a decade after American women could vote legally), Arthur Lovejoy delivered the William James Lecture Series at Harvard University on the Great Chain of Being; one could speculate that Lovejoy’s choice to devote so much analysis to this ancient trope was a reaction to the latter political development, and to Williams’s attempt to imagine social breakdown as positive. Both these moments represented challenges to the construct Lovejoy legitimates as the underpinnings of Western civilization. The lecture series and the tome it resulted in refer to the entire development of Western philosophy, with particular reference to the Great Chain of Being, as “footnotes to Plato.” Plato is commonly credited with introducing the notion of an Ideal reality (a reality of Ideas) both split off from and more “real” than immanent, apprehensible, physical phenomena, which were seen to be imperfect approximations of this Ideal, invisible and abstract; this Ideal realm was assigned a higher value than its polar-opposite partner. The form of this idea has been duplicated in the proliferation of other binaries—good versus bad, culture versus nature, mind versus body, truth versus appearance, depth versus superficiality, individual versus community, permanence versus flux, and so on—in which one member of the pair is clearly coded as superior to the other. Aristotle, according to Lovejoy, both modified and reinforced this concept with the notion of categories and gradation; the plenitude of life forms could be organized into an order ranging from the lowest and most primitive natural organisms to the highest and most perfect abstractions. This hierarchy both bridged and underscored the dis-
tance between the humble Immanent and the lofty and complex Ideal.\textsuperscript{20} Aristotle's preoccupation in the \textit{Poetics} with good as opposed to bad, noble as opposed to base human beings and the respective art forms corresponding to each—tragic and comic drama—and the questions of relative merit that organize the poetic forms he chooses to address into a hierarchy ("Which is the higher form, Epic Poetry or Tragedy?")\textsuperscript{21} reflect a more general predisposition toward order in terms of differential value. While these hierarchically organized dichotomies have sustained explicit challenges from within the Western philosophical and political traditions in the last hundred years, such that it would be inappropriate to assume that they still reign unquestioned in the realm of ideas, they are firmly entrenched in many of the assumptions that govern political and social life; they had their genesis, after all, in the everyday social life of the Greek men who formulated them.

While Lovejoy's work, the major modern treatise on Western hierarchic philosophy, is by no means an unqualified apologetic for the Great Chain and its influence on Western social and cultural life, the location of Harvard University as intellectual power center of a United States that is the political and military power center of the world overdetermines the ideological thrust of the project, implicating it in the system it describes with qualified approval. In a sense, however, this enormous labor of love, this concern to outline the philosophical cornerstone of the West, represents an elegiac moment. In documenting a metaphysics already disqualified by the turn of the century, \textit{The Great Chain of Being} articulates the last gasp of the modernist allegiance to traditional hierarchy. In 1953 the United States, already imbued with the imperial consciousness of its European former colonists and present allies, was making its bid as "leader of the free world," reaching for global domination and foreign exploitation to buttress its internal democracy. Even as the nation stood on the threshold of achieving this aim, however, its philosophical underpinnings were collapsing. Nietzsche, in the \textit{Genealogy of Morals}, had already revealed the socially constructed basis of an epistemology based on gradation and valuation. Using his etymological imagination, he points out that the classical Greek words that Plato and Aristotle used to describe good and bad, noble and base, had specifically classbound meanings: words for "good" actually meant "aristocratic, highborn," and so on, and the words for

"bad" meant "illborn." He demonstrates this in Latin as well, linking \textit{malus}/"bad" with \textit{melas}/"dark," which certainly speaks to social life in the contemporary world.\textsuperscript{22} (The evolution of the word "shiftless" points toward the same pattern in English: what begins as a description of poverty—too poor to own the most basic undergarment—becomes a moral judgment: too lazy to work.)

Economic and political privilege are not only associated with virtue, they are associated with truth itself:

They call themselves, for instance, "the truthful"; this is so above all of the Greek nobility, whose mouthpiece is the Megarian poet Theognis. The root of the word coined for this, \textit{esbolos}, signifies one who \textit{is}, who possesses reality, who is actual, who is true; then, with a subjective turn, the true as the truthful: in this phase of conceptual transformation it becomes a slogan and watchword of the nobility and passes over entirely into the sense of "noble," as distinct from the \textit{lying} common man.\textsuperscript{23}

Gerald Else's work on Aristotle's \textit{Poetics} documents this syntactic conflation of heroes with aristocrats, moral degenerates with the poor or common, and asserts simply that the Greeks, "obsessed" with the dichotomy between good and bad, considered these terms to be "quite as much social, political, and economic as they are moral. . . . The dichotomy is absolute and exclusive for a simple reason: it began as the aristocrats' view of society and reflects their idea of the gulf between themselves and the 'others.'"\textsuperscript{24}

Furthermore, the figure of the philosopher himself emerged with that of the aristocrat, since truth was the highest metaphysical construct in the world (the top of the Chain, simultaneously the most abstract and the most "real"), and philosophy the highest of callings.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, the search for truth, the ability to abstract, was connected to political power. The implications of this merging have cut both ways throughout the centuries: free (upper-class or propertyed) adult male humans have been attributed (by themselves) reasoning powers far exceeding those of other beings; and skill in analytic, discursive logic has itself become associated with various forms of material and social prestige. Societies that permit upward mobility generally look for evidence of this particular form of intelligence as a major criterion in determining whether a given individual or group merits recognition and reward; by corollary logic, as I shall argue in
the essay on Gertrude Stein's "Jewish" language use, a lesser value is assigned to associative, affective, and especially tactile and kinetic modes of expression, and to the people who are perceived by the power bloc to engage in these modes.

In arguing for a postmodern vanguard poetry that supersedes while growing out of the modern concern with valuation and community, I do not want to posit the Platonic era as a point of origin. Nor do I want, by offering a contending myth of origin, to argue that the current possibilities of a poetics of marginality hearken back to a more authentic pre-Chain, pre-Platonic mode, though some developments in contemporary poetics, particularly ethnopoetics, contain an element of nostalgia in precisely this vein. Nonetheless, in claiming a shift from the modern to the postmodern, from the verticality of the Chain to the laterality of the street, I want to acknowledge a precedent for lateralism. In a work whose polemical project is similar to this one, but concerns itself with Greece in the fourth century B.C.E., Page Dubois documents the prehistory and rise of the Great Chain of Being in terms of those subordinated in its hierarchy, placing Plato's and Aristotle's writings in historical context. The shift in the basic sociopolitical unit, in Greek political thought and deed, from polis to empire, from a contained democracy to a potentially limitless imperial domain, was accompanied by other related changes. A shift in worldview took place, from one in which the Greek male citizen saw himself as a center surrounded by powerful mythological Others (women as Amazons, animals as Satyrs and Centaurs), to one in which he saw himself at the top of a ladder of beings, qualitatively superior to women, noncitizens (slaves and foreigners, who were potential slaves), and beasts, who in turn were above fish, plants, and earth, in descending order. In social terms, this change meant that the dangerous Other was now contained within the boundaries of the empire (or could be, through expansionist activity), and this volatile containment had to be defused with images of superiority legitimized by a rational philosophy. (The difference in imagery is similar to that between the terms "marginal" and "oppressed" described in my preface.)

Accompanying this shift in polity was a change in the primary form of discourse from a "celebratory ritual art" coming out of a "mythic, literary, poetic [I would add the word "lyrical"] consciousness to one which examines problems in terms of logos, reason": discursive, an

alytic, linear philosophy. This latter philosophy itself incorporates first a tremendous split between the ideal and the immanent (the overwhelming and troublesome legacy with which progressive philosophers have since struggled), and then a series of gradations and categories separating and ordering the denizens of the immanent realm. Dubois argues persuasively that this philosophy's governing image is that of domination and subordination — of slavery, which, ultimately, was the institution it was developed to defend. Again, as with the conflation of the figures of philosopher and aristocrat, the legitimation works both ways: philosophic discourse offers a rationale for slavery, imperialism, and the subordination of women, children, and animals; and the historical fact of empire makes the philosophy look like an objective description of a "natural order."

Pre-Platonic Poetry, Post-Platonic Poetics

To an Army Wife, in Sardis:
Some say a cavalry corps,
some infantry, some, again,
will maintain that the swift oars
of our fleet are the finest
sight on dark earth; but I say
that whatever one loves, is.
This is easily proved: did
not Helen—she who had scanned
the flower of the world's manhood—
choose as first among men one
who laid Troy's honor in ruin?
warped to his will, forgetting
love due her own blood, her own
child, she wandered far with him.
So Anactoria, although you
being far away forget us,
the dear sound of your footstep
and light glancing in your eyes
would move me more than glitter
of Lydian horse or armored
tread of mainland infantry.

Sappho
Introductions and Interdictions

The question finally suggests itself: Which is the higher form of art, Epic Poetry or Tragedy? Those who favor the Epic may argue thus: The less vulgar form is the higher, and that which addresses the better audience is always the less vulgar. . . . The reply to this argument is twofold. . . . it is clear that Tragedy, since it attains the poetic end more effectively than the Epic, is the higher form of the two.

Aristotle

The terms of the “old quarrel between poetry and philosophy,” at least as formulated by those (philosophers) who posited the quarrel, is thrown into sharp relief when we consider that the Western lyric tradition is generally acknowledged to begin with Sappho. If we contrast her work with that of Aristotle, the most obvious difference is the one mentioned by Page Dubois: namely, that Sappho writes poetry—celebratory, ritualistic—while Aristotle writes analytic prose about poetry. The contrast between Sappho’s and Aristotle’s discursive practices can help foreground, in a wider sense and with more contemporary application, those aspects of poetry which, though they may have been attributed to “her” by a patriarchal philosophic system, may provide the terms for the subversion of that system.

In reviewing some of the recent literature on the nature of poetry, we find a great deal of attention centered on the “radical subjectivity” of the lyric. Theorists engage the familiar language of dichotomies to distinguish the lyric’s tendency toward the subject rather than the object, both of which are held to be elements in any utterance. The lyric is designated the most subject-oriented of all verbal statements even more so than other forms of poetry and literature. This subject, represented by the trope of the “lyric I,” stands in a peculiar relation to other subjects, as the lyric occupies a peculiar position vis-à-vis other discursive practices. According to Karlheinz Stierle, who draws on Foucault and Jakobson for his lyric theories, all other forms of discourse are institutionally governed and generated, and all of the subjects posited through these institutional forms of discourse are societally prescribed “roles”—the graduate student with her dissertation, the mother with her newsy letters to sons and daughters away from home, the boss with his communiqués and memos to employees. Only the “lyric I” constitutes true, unmediated subjectivity sans role, and only the lyric is not institutionally circumscribed: “La poésie lyrique est essentiellement anti-discours.” Its position is on the outskirts, marginally abuting these other normative public discursive
Sappho's division of island from mainland underscores the sense of exile, though Sappho reverses the hierarchy of mainland/island by intimating that Anactoria has betrayed the women's community on the island Lesbos by following her military husband and that this can only lead to devastation. But we find that what is "radical" is perhaps not so much subjectivity itself as the special domain of this lyric, but its frank thematic acknowledgment as such. By comparison, Aristotle proposes his hierarchy of genres as rationally derived, and hence objective. The etymologies traced earlier do indeed point toward the formulation of values—good versus bad—deriving from the subjective experience of privileged Athenians, but this origin is cloaked in the assertion of universality. Sappho, writing about three hundred years before Plato's famous student, uses a similar attention to superlatives in this translation ("the finest / sight on dark earth") ("the highest form of poetry"), but here it is to acknowledge the plurality of subjects and of pleasing things, and to directly challenge the idea of an absolute standard, or a philosophical war between absolute standards:

Some say a cavalry corps,
some infantry, some, again,
will maintain that the swift oars
of our fleet are the finest
sight on dark earth; but I say
that whatever one loves, is.

Here, Sappho equates the assertion of an objective absolute with militarism and nationalism, with the heroism that Plato sets up as superior to, and in direct opposition to, the (feminine) values inhering in poetry. Perhaps the major discrepancy between the two subjectivities under discussion is precisely that the philosopher's claims to be absolute, uniformly applicable to an entire empire/state's cultural system, and the poet's celebrates the plurality of subjects, difference itself, and it is an emotion—"love," unmanly and unseemly—which allows for that difference.56

However, according to these theories, poetry still serves a social function, even as it provides the only ground for a non-socially prescribed identity. This function is homeopathic; the fact of its coexistence with institutional forms of utterance, even while it transgresses their rules, means that there is a space where these prescribed forms can be not only healthily violated, but healthily recombined and rejuvenated. It would thus appear to actually strengthen, rather than to threaten in any serious way, normative discourse. In political terms, we could translate this to mean that the possible expression of oppressed groups' subjective experience through poetry simply strengthens the hegemonic system that keeps them down, by appearing to "give them a voice" in as rarified and "safe" a venue as poetry. Publishing an anthology of homeless kids' poetry every few years satisfies (humanist) liberal human-interest sensibilities, and costs less than employment and housing programs. But writers such as Stierle and Eric Gans, who specifically claim this ultimately socializing function for the seemingly "individualistic" lyric, compare Sappho's lyrics with Anacreon's ribald verses or Rilke's poetry, and find that her poetry, which we read as the starting point of the lyric tradition, falls short of this redemptive imperative, and thus fails. Sappho's "I," apparently, remains an "I," unassimilated into any greater social network.57

How can the alleged founder of a tradition not live up to that tradition? These theorists take for their point of departure a split between public and private, community and individual, even while they aim to show how poetry can bridge that split. Unsurprisingly, just as the rebels within Plato's tradition are considered "nihilists" or "prophets of extremity," so the Others who write are considered outsiders, and their writings shot in the dark. Multiple communities and multiple subjects all involve each other in elaborate interplay. Sappho's poetry is not asocial; she writes from a community of women. Writing that expresses a philosophy different from that of the dominant one does not come out of a void, but rather from a non-dominant culture with a complicated relation to the whole, which is itself not a centralized, coherent entity, but a series of relationships between cultures.

Another aspect of poetry, however, complements these. Poetry had its origins in healing rituals, invocations to the powers that govern material (epidemiological, meteorological, nutritional, anatomical) conditions and was intimately connected to the bodily and spiritual life of communities. Recent work in ethnopoetics and anthropology has raised both the possibilities of kinship between traditional forms of ritual utterance and modern Western poetry, and the dangers of a presumptuous and too hasty equivalence of the two, born perhaps of
Introductions and Interdictions

a romantic desire to see poetry as a means toward global unmediated consciousness, a bridge between “modern” and “primitive” that can serve as a way out of the alienation of industrialized society. Despite the dangers of ahistoricity, it is worth considering that the needs served by contemporary Western poetry may bear a family resemblance to those served by other forms of ritual utterance elsewhere and at other times.

To reiterate the two aspects of poetry elaborated on here: poetry as subjective activity allows the poet or reader to validate her or his own experience in relation to a normative myth of experience; poetry as communal activity gives this subjective expression a sympathetic context—a constantly mobile “tradition”—whether or not the poet or reader is in actual contact with like-minded souls. Judy Grahn brings together the communal aspect of poetry with affirmation of nonnormative experience, and simultaneously touches on the idea of poetry by “marginals” as indigenous:

Poetry helps the language stay open, and language is what you think with. We lead history . . . Almost all women write poetry, and they write it in very real ways. They write love poetry when they are adolescents, and they write protest poetry too. When I was eleven, I wrote a long ballad about not wanting to do the dishes and my Girl Scout troupe put it on as a matter of course. That’s indigenous art. It doesn’t necessarily get on television, but that isn’t our function.49

In spite of their (sometimes unconscious) relationship to community, the significant loneliness of many of the writers studied here contributes to the singularity of vision to which the lyric lends itself, because it speaks to the subjective suffering so often overlooked in studies of oppression.50

While a discussion of Sapphic antidiscourse in conflict with Platonic discourse is not wholly irrelevant in a study of contemporary American poets, and while we have by no means confidently left behind the modern adaptations of the hierarchic tropes and structures of the latter (ladder) mode, the postmodern (anti)discursive scene reflects no such neat dichotomy as the one I have outlined between poetry and philosophy, or between the lateral and the vertical. The poetry is not neatly contained in a respectable, closed lyric: even the fragmentation of modern poetry—unlike the literal fragments of Sappho’s extant work that have been pieced together variously by different scholars, poets and translators to most closely resemble postulated anterior “whole” lyric—is conceived fragmentedly. Its “wholeness” a priori violated, it is already a collage of contemporaneous, mutually jostling discourses—including what was once philosophy.

Taking It To The Street

I Speak in an Illusion

I speak but only in an illusion
For I see and I don’t
It’s me and it’s not
I hear and I don’t
These illusions belong to me
I stole them from another
Care to spend a day in my House of Death?
Look at my Garden . . . are U amazed?
No trees, no flowers, no grass . . . no gardens . . .
I love and I don’t
I Hate and I don’t
I Sing and I don’t
I live and I don’t
For I’m in a room of clouded smoke
And a perfumed odor
Nowhere can I go and break these bonds
Which have me in an illusion
But the bonds are real

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Theory as non-theory leaves the field open. For, it is in the space of such voiding that theory can be said to come closest to poetry, making possible analytical discourses that take into account crises of meaning, subject, and structure by reflecting and acknowledging within their own fabric that these crises are inherent to the signifying function. . . . [Poetry] is . . . “the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women” . . . Hence, it is also a political tool to question multiple forms of repression and dominance, including the linear use of language as an instrument or a vehicle to support a praxis rather than constituting one. Poetic language communicates and works with meaning, but being only one of its limits, meaning can
never exhaust the poetic activity... Working with subject-ivity is an ongoing practice that [does not concern] inserting a "me" into language, but [creates] an opening where the "me" disappears while "I" endlessly come and go...

Trim T. Minb-ba

With Nietzsche and the late nineteenth century came challenges to the hegemonic imagery of the Chain, even as imperial efforts in Western Europe strove to manage popular support by promulgating myths of difference and superiority. Globally expansionist activities brought Anglo-Europeans into close contact with "other" cultures, and once again the vertical images of hierarchy had tocede to those of a lateral, panoramic acknowledgment of difference. Contemporary juxtaposition has come to replace narrative structures based on (implicitly hierarchic) anteriority and causality. The language of center and margin, rather than top and bottom, reenters the tropic imagination. Even though difference continues to be rhetorically cast as "bad," "less than," and worthy of rule by the "better," the breakdown is underway; the proliferation of discourse about Others allows cracks and fissures in the ideological edifice it was intended to buttress. From Romantic critiques of positivism to contemporary poststructuralist attacks on "logocentrism," with Nietzsche's evolution from The Birth of Tragedy to Beyond Good and Evil serving to instantiate a microcosmic fulcrum of transition, these challenges are especially poignant and relevant here for several reasons. Primarily, these philosophers, from Nietzsche through Heidegger to Foucault and Derrida, embody their antipositivism in a highly "poetic" poetics of discontinuity rather than a heretofore traditionally linear argumentation; one commentator refers to their "aestheticist" orientation. Nietzsche using stinging, self-referential aphorisms and an extravagantly vigorous tempo as weapons to attack traditional Western metaphysics, a project central to his entire opus. These stylistic characteristics resonate with some of the trends in modern poetics that have started to unravel the lyric mode—MacLeish's highly contestable "a poem should not mean but be" and the Williams-Creeley continuum: "No ideas but in things," "no things but in words," which moves from an objectivist stance to a deconstructive, proto-"language" position. Heidegger's stylistic and intellectual preoccupation with the open-ended process of the "poetics of being" makes his work appealing to admirers of experimental, and marginalized, modernists such as Woolf and Proust. Derrida's challenge to the notion of language as primarily referential and mediating a fixed reality, and the consequent difficulty of his style, has obvious resonances in the language poets' impatience with the rigid referentiality of the traditional lyric or (as they often put it) "workshop" poem. Foucault's similarly radical historiographic undertakings are made manifest in the shimmering, elusive quality of his prose. These writers poetize philosophy, lateralize hierarchy, and complicate heretofore unambiguous narratives about empire, language, and difference. This lateralization turns the Chain into a street. It is impossible to return to the pre-Platonic state and precursive utterances Page Dubois describes; the simultaneity and circulatory possibilities of the street bear the scars of hierarchy, exploitation, and ongoing cruelty. The poetic utterances of this condition echo but differ sharply from Sappho's self-confident separation of island and mainland, her assertion of her right to subjectivity ("but I say . . . "), her ability to name absolutely the woman who has betrayed and abandoned her, and the institutions that that woman has preferred to Sappho's.

As I have suggested, the breakdown of positivist discourse finds an analogous breakdown in traditional lyric poetry. Walter Benjamin's essay on Baudelaire declares the lyric to be in crisis; Baudelaire (publication of whose Les Fleurs du Mal in 1857 is commonly credited, along with that of Flaubert's Madame Bovary in the same year, with inaugurating European literary modernism) serves as the first antilyrical lyricist; in other words, no sooner does the lyric become the dominant mode of poetic expression than it is in crisis, about to be superseded by a form reflecting a consciousness that sees through the elegiac yearning for the autonomous subject made evident by the lyric's popularity. To the extent that the traditional lyric still exists in the modern American scene, this crisis is in full evidence in the works I examine. While a fully developed discussion of modernism and postmodernism would skew this project digressively, I would claim that, in the current transition from the modern to the postmodern, modern (twentieth-century) poetry is "modernist" to the extent to which it adheres to lyrical principles, "postmodernist" to the extent to which those principles are obviously inadequate to the most urgent contemporary utterances; those emanating from the subcultures, the margins, the "outside."
the poem, describing its essence and impact. The reader is encouraged to reflect on the themes and techniques used by the poet. The discussion is rich in critical analysis, offering insights into the poet's intentions and the broader cultural context of the work. The text is a model of how to engage with literature, providing a clear and comprehensive understanding of the poem's significance.
Like Judy Lucero, Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha employs multiple layers of knowingness in her films and her written theory. Though it deploys the Latinate abstraction of “high theory,” the passage presented here eschews the scientism of many subjectivist theorists such as Kristeva and Sollers; it refuses footnotes, it is a collage of quoted poetry, aphoristic half-sentences, and more conventionally discursive critiques of linear thought and the objectification of perceived Others in (post)colonialist ethnography. In rejecting a stable “me”-object in favor of an infinitely protean “I”-subject, her text describes its own paradoxicality as well as that of the Lucero poem: “It’s me and it’s not . . . ” “subject-ivity is an ongoing practice,” not a fixed condition. That a postcolonial woman refugee chooses to speak in all tongues at once marks a significant shift from a condition in which only the dominant can speak, or in which the subcultural, like Sappho, can take an unambiguously self-assertive oppositional stance not from underneath but from outside. The montagelike nature of Trinh’s (written and cinematic) speech enunciates a layered “reality” similar to the nonreality of Lucero’s “illusion,” which she both masters and suffers. Both of these writers articulate a poetics of philosophy and a philosophics of poetry. Both of these writers are able to sustain—must sustain—multiple “lyric I”s, multiply performative subject-personae. Must sustain: in order to survive, and one of them didn’t.

It is not my purpose, however, to celebrate naïvely the vanguard poet’s psycho-emotional tap dance for survival as an unqualified affirmation or unambiguous declaration of position. Nor is it useful, though it may be inevitable, that my fellow academics (who will, I assume, comprise the bulk of this book’s readership) receive this study as an impassioned humanistic plea for the recognition of the poetic impulse as making “Others” “just like us”—whoever “we” may be. In a perceptive article on the worker-poetry vogue in nineteenth-century France, Jacques Rancière points out that, from the point of view of their bourgeois sponsors and to some degree from their own experiential standpoints, worker poets could be poets to the extent that they were not workers, to the extent that they saw themselves as alienated from their own class culture and drawn toward “higher things,” particularly imaginative language use. They could make the emotive argument to the bourgeois reading public that they too aspired to the same ethereal dreams (smoke rings: “ronds de fumée” evocative of Lucero’s “room of clouded smoke”: reading this phrase as a reference to poetic activity as well as to pharmaceutical euphoria complicates the scenario productively) and they too loved the finer things of the spirit as much as any leisureed person did. Their poets’ souls were trapped inside the bodies of workers just as these workers’ bodies were themselves trapped inside the temporal, spatial, and cultural constraints of workshops and factories. Nonetheless, they were not leisureed or middle-class people, and derived their poignant cachet precisely from the perceived distance between their poetic aspirations and their class circumstances. If they were not “really” workers, they certainly had no place in the bourgeoisie or aristocracy either; they were as estranged from the latter class cultures of privilege as from their own.

As a potential “bourgeois sponsor” writing to others who want their course offerings and scholarly methods to reflect the cultural heterogeneity of contemporary American life, I want to acknowledge the necessity of teaching the economic and political power differentials that operate in multicultural relations, and the need to understand individual poets and texts as nonautonomous, interdependent with and implicated in vast and specific social matrices. At the same time it is important to avoid Deleuze and Guattari’s maneuver in the direction of a logic of representation, their rationale for collectivity whereby a single “gifted” poet is permitted to speak for others presumably less articulate. As Rancière points out, this is reductive in that it ignores the poet’s subjective relations to both her or his subculture and to the mainstream culture. None of the poets studied here, except possibly Lowell the aristocrat, saw themselves as representative, and even he risked social and familial censure when he committed himself to poetry (especially when it entailed abandoning Harvard for the relatively modest Kenyon College); their calling as poets does make them different, often unacceptable to their class cohort even as their class/caste standing removes them from the possibilities of easy assimilation into privileged recognition (except, of course, for Lowell, who continually struggled with precisely this privilege). In a sense, however, this estrangement on both ends of the spectrum of privilege puts the poet at advantage: “inside inside, outside outside,” the poet has to reinvent him- or herself in language. Paradoxically, through representing their experiences of exile and self-invention these writers become ‘representative’ and their texts
"collective." Thus, if a collectivity voices its aspirations through these texts, it may be aside from any intention or felt experience on the part of the writer; as Deleuze and Guattari point out, it is precisely the outsiderhood of these writers, their marginality vis-à-vis the mainstream as well as their own "fragile community" that enables "minor(ity)" writers to "express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility." 51

W. E. B. Du Bois speaks of the African-American aspiration toward equality or freedom as a longing to "be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius," 52 and reiterates these central issues of "work, culture, and freedom," 53 in the opening essay of The Souls of Black Folk, his attempt to explain the consciousness of his particular subculture to the people of the dominant culture. The same essay, published in 1903, remains one of the best and most succinct elucidations of the simultaneous dilemma and blessing of the marginalized consciousness.

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings. 54

Here, Du Bois outlines not the false dichotomies we have been discussing, but the related situation of internalized duality, in which members of the abased part of a classical social dualism—white/black, man/woman, adult/child—live an (at least) double life-of-the-mind of one kind or another: either having to maintain the appearance of second-classness while not fully believing it, or maintaining fluency in two sometimes contradictory cultural systems, or having simply to believe in one's right to exist, to participate in general and individual undertakings in the areas of "work, culture, and freedom" in the face of strong dominant-cultural messages to the contrary. In a sense this is an internalized reproduction of the dualism that has en-
Notes

Pre-Monitions: Definitions, Explanations, Acknowledgments

7. David Henderson, author’s notes, April 1986.
8. See, for example, Barbara Harlow’s Resistance Literature (New York: Methuen, 1987), which treats very consciously, politically emancipatorist literature by politically engaged writers of Central and South America, Africa, and the Middle East.
12. Janice Perlman’s The Myth of Marginality (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) is a detailed presentation of this argument; although her subject matter is the slum dwellers of Brazil, her review of socioeconomic marginality theories and their origins in psychology is pertinent to North American studies as well, and can even be to some extent transposed into literary terms.

1. Introductions and Interdictions

9. Ibid., p. 43.
14. This apt phrase was supplied by Walther Ludwig, *MMLA*, November 1989, Minneapolis.
20. For a summary of these ideas, see Lovejoy, *Great Chain*, pp. 55-58.
33. Ibid., p. 432.
35. Ibid., p. 437.
which they find they have been arbitrarily “thrown”; it is a condition characterized by anxious awareness of the future, and as containing both the necessity of choice and death, the cessation of being” (p. 315). Even the contemporary poststructuralist critical investigation into the arbitrariness of hierarchic dualisms has been termed, sometimes pejoratively, “deconstruction,” and attributed with destructive intentions or results reducing everything to meaninglessness, purposive obscuration, sterility, and so forth. One work on all four philosophers—Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida—characterizes them as “crisis thinkers” (Megill, Prophets, inside cover).

It would be reductive to claim that these criticisms or even the sympathetic interpretations of scholars like Heller are wrong, and that they simply misconstrue or overlook the intentions, the actual meaning, or the revolutionary potential of these kinds of counterhegemonic philosophy. It is, unfortunately, impossible to definitively refute the fascists’ interpretation of Nietzsche, even though it is possible to offer alternate, coherent, and certainly more palatable readings, and even though there is no question but that he would have been horrified to see this particular use of his work (Heidegger, on the other hand, was explicitly enthusiastic about Hitler’s leadership in Germany’s imperialist endeavors.) And poststructuralists’ insistence on separating signifier from a narrow correspondence with a one-and-only signified can easily lead to a sense that physical events and agency cannot be of primary importance since they can never be spoken about unambiguously—such that, for example, genocide can be spoken of as a “final solution,” or, more recently, as a series of “disappearances.”

The two reasons for looking at attempts to undermine or overturn the system from within—the stylistic poeity of these attempts, and their unemancipatory aspects—combine in an uncomfortable problematic. What are the limitations and possibilities of challenges to a system coming from those whose interests are ostensibly served by that system? This question becomes most relevant in an examination of poetry by straight white upwardly mobile men, though it is also worth acknowledging in a re-view of attempted philosophical mutinies. Clearly, in this work on the liberatory possibilities that must be acknowledged, from seemingly milder transgressions (the reproduction of the conceptual forms these privileged philosophers or poets struggle against) to a more sinister connection, by virtue of its valorization of nonreferential uses of language and the doors that open to mystification, between poetic discourse and fascism (Americans are reminded of Ezra Pound, one of our most acknowledged innovators, whose poetry has deeply inspired and influenced anti-Fascists such as Allen Ginsberg and Ernesto Cardenal). Plato’s banishment of poets from the ideal republic ruled by philosopher-kings of rational discourse makes a certain amount of melancholy sense in this context, since we have established him as the philosopher who crystallized the antithesis between these two forms of discourse, it is not surprising that the heirs of a tradition based on this split would view or experience as “uncivilizing” any gesture toward discarding the opposition. While this work does not pretend to philosophical expertise, these questions inform it. The anarchic and subjective potential of poetry in modern life can begin to suggest some of the reasons for its misappropriation and also its inherently subversive—in a liberatory sense—possibilities.


2. "Unmeaning Jargon" / Uncanonized Beatitude: Bob Kaufman, Poet


