

**PERFORMING MEMORY: AMERICAN POETS THEATER AND THE POETICS
OF THE ARCHIVE, 1945-1995**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation uses the methodological tools of archival research to interrogate the relationship between performance, community, and memory in an extended study of American poets theater, a quasi-genre or aesthetic tendency that aligns poetic practices with the conventions of theatre and site-specific performance. At the same time, archival theory provides a theoretical framework for thinking through poets theater's coterie function. I trace a poetics of the archive across American poetry after 1945 to argue that poets theater creates an accessible record of past communities and community events. In keeping with this community-focused approach, each chapter of this dissertation addresses the origins of American poets theater in the social and aesthetic contexts from which it develops, including the New York School and second-generation New York School of poets, the San Francisco Renaissance, and the New Narrative Movement. Each community, I argue, contributes to the development of poets theater as we recognize it today.

Building on these situated contexts, this dissertation also draws on the work of Rebecca Schneider to suggest that poets theater should be read as both a form of re-enactment and an archival-theatrical event. I argue that poets theater operates as a trans-historical tool of the coterie that, through the process of re-enactment, works to capture, recreate, create anew, or signal affective connections across spaces and times. This allows poets theater to extend the parameters of coterie to include both the original event and the re-performance of it, eliciting community membership to both audience members and performers alike across times and performances.

Lay Summary

This dissertation explores the origins of “poets theater,” a hybrid form of poetry and performance associated with American poetry communities in the period following the Second World War. I use archival research to argue that poets theater develops from its relationship with poetic communities such as the first- and second-generation New York School poets, the San Francisco Renaissance, and the New Narrative movement. Across these four case studies, I make the argument that poets theater has been used as a tool for both building and preserving community. Each future performance fulfills this function by creating community across spaces and times.

Preface

This dissertation is original, independent work by the author, Rebecca Dodd. An early version of Chapter 4 was presented in 2019 at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE) in Vancouver, British Columbia. This project and its methods were approved by the University of British Columbia's Research Ethics Board (certificate #H17-00316).

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Introduction. When is Poets Theater? Theatrical Performance in the Temporal Fold

I first became interested in poets theater in 2012. I was thinking about spatial practice and vulnerability, site-specific performance, and autobiography. At the same time, I was working through a profound personal loss and struggling to find my place in academia as a new graduate student. Poets theater seemed to offer a lifeline: it worked to negotiate community, friendships, and memories; it was both playful and political; but most of all it was *welcoming*. My early encounters with poets theater, which included conversations with friends and colleagues, introductions to others working in the (decidedly small) field, and the occasional performance, also shared this sense of community and access. But although there was a rigorous interpersonal network around the genre, the scholarship seemed to be missing.

Poets theater takes its name from a number of independent theatre venues that arose in the United States after the Second World War. It is a quasi-genre or aesthetic tendency that aligns poetic practices with the conventions of the theatre and is often associated with poetic communities such as Black Mountain, the Beats, the New York School, and the New Narrative Movement. Historical examples of poets theater occur as early as 1951, with the Cambridge Poets Theatre, and extend into the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the New York Poets Theatre, the Judson Poets' Theater, and the San Francisco Poets Theater.¹ As evidenced by these examples, the term “poets theater” changes often, particularly in the distinction between the plural or possessive *s* and in terms of regional spellings. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have adopted the plural, Americanized spelling to both delineate the parameters of this project and emphasize what I consider to be an important distinction—the term “poets

¹ For more information about the history and development of poets theater, see Heidi R. Bean's *Poetry 'N Acts: The Cultural Politics of Twentieth-Century American Poets' Theater* and Kevin Killian and David Brazil's introduction to *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater, 1945–1985*, “Why Poets Theater?”

theater,” as I spell it, serves as a useful semantic metaphor for how poetry and theatre intersect in a way that is bidirectional rather than possessive or subordinate.²

Along with the question of spelling, there has been little consensus in how scholars and practitioners define the “poets theater” genre. Kevin Killian and David Brazil go so far as to ask whether poets theater is even a genre at all (ii); and poet and playwright Corina Copp acknowledges the genre’s indeterminacy by playfully asking if the term does not merely indicate “writing dialogue with line breaks?” (qtd. in Donovan “What is Poets Theater?”). That said, most investigations of the genre focus on the relationship between poetry and theatre. As Patrick Durgin puts it, poets theater develops from a “need some poets feel to explore the demands of setting, character, dialogue, scene, and other narrative and performative concerns of the theater” (qtd. in Donovan “What is Poets Theater?”). Similarly, in their preface to the anthology *Poets’ Theatre: A Collection of Recent Works* (1981), Cynthia Savage and Michael Slater define poets theater in relation to “the belief that language in theatre *matters*” (v), suggesting that the term “poets theater” also indicates a type of drama written with a poet’s eye toward language. Along similar lines, Herbert Machiz, director of the Artists’ Theatre, a New York–based company that worked with poets such as Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, aligns poets theater with the “constant joy [of] work[ing] with words that rang or shimmered or shocked” (*Artists’ Theatre: Four Plays* 12). While at times employed to signal a type of drama with a poetic focus on language, the term “poets theater” has also been used to refer—in its broadest application—to any play written by a poet, perhaps trying her hand at a new

² This usage follows Brazil and Killian. Throughout this dissertation I will refer to the genre as “poets theater” but will respect both specific historical spellings (such as those associated with specific companies) and different spellings that arise within other sources.

genre, or, in considering the historical influx of theatre companies sharing its name, the work produced for or by a “Poets Theater” company.

Despite these varied uses of the term, “poets theater” has emerged in contemporary discourse as a distinct performance practice that exceeds the limitations of both the scripted, poetic text and the performed play. Scholars Heidi R. Bean and Laura Hinton, for example, describe it as “a theatrical event that is scripted and preconceived but also open-ended and site-specific [where] meanings unfold not according to some predetermined narrative or social situation, but rather performatively, informed by local contexts, audience make-up, and performance conditions” (n.pag). Similarly, David Buuck suggests that poets theater emerges from the space *between* text and audience, as “spontaneous life art happening between the line readings” and “between the players” respectively (“Some Remarks on Poets Theater”). These definitions, I argue, align poets theater with what David Osipovich calls “theatrical performance... a particular kind of interaction between performers and observers (actors and audience members) in a shared physical space” (461). Still, the concept of theatrical performance fails to capture poets theater’s characteristic attention to language, emphasizing instead the genre’s site-specific and relational character over its relationship to text. Indeed, Osipovich goes so far as to suggest that theatrical performance is “essentially un-scriptable” (462). What, then, allows poets theater to be “scripted and preconceived” but also “open-ended and site-specific” (Bean and Hinton)? Put another way, how does poets theater maintain a fidelity to text while also subverting fidelity?

Other models for reading how poetry and theatre intersect help clarify this dynamic. While scholars associate poets theater with American poetic communities after the Second World War, the seeming interdisciplinarity of poets writing for the theatre is certainly not a

new (or geographically limited) occurrence. Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole have identified a generic antecedent in what they call the “Modernist poetic drama” of the period preceding the emergence of poets theater: the work of American Modernists such as Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens (14). In *Poets at Play: An Anthology of Modernist Drama*, Bay-Cheng and Cole define poetic drama as “those plays that draw attention to themselves as literary creations that are never subsumed into the apparent reality of the play” (17–18). Hinging on the distinction between drama and theatre, Bay-Cheng and Cole’s conception of poetic drama lends itself solely to a description of the *scripted* qualities of the performable text, suggesting that poetic drama’s literary formality supersedes any potential performance. Conversely, in *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, W. B. Worthen explores what he calls “poetic theater,” which “uses the poet’s text, the *word*, to determine the contours of the spectacle and the experience of the audience” (5). Worthen shifts the sites of his study to include Irish playwrights W. B. Yeats and Samuel Beckett, and argues that poetic theater emerges from the performative relationship “between the text and its staging,” wherein we must take “the staging of the *word* (rather than the *scene* of realism) as the point of the dramatic event and the spectator’s interpretation” (7). As opposed to poetic drama, then, poetic theater emerges from the performance of language and the textual parameters it sets. Together these two models articulate a gradient along which the poetic text operates in varying degrees of reciprocity with the stage and its audience. In both cases, however, the written text authorizes theatrical production.

There is significant overlap between examples of modernist poetic *drama*, poetic *theater*, and the post-1945 *poets theater* that is the subject of this study—including the critical and often determinative role of poetic language in theatrical production. As such, both *Modern*

Drama and Poets at Play help frame the complexities of how a poetic text might operate within the confines of the theatre. Poets theater differs from these earlier models, however, in how it engages with, or rather *absorbs*, its audience. For example, following Andreas Huyssen's suggestion that "[m]odernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture" (Huyssen vii), Cole and Bay-Cheng submit that the poetic drama of the American modernists developed as a way of engaging the new mass audiences of popular culture, "without becoming 'contaminated'" by them (16–17). Worthen similarly suggests that poetic theater *imposes* the scripted theatrical performance on its audience. In contrast, poets theater operates as a site-determined and integrated spatial practice that develops, at least in part, from an interactive negotiation with its audience. Not only does *contamination* occur but the audience is also able to *impose* upon the text.

Huyssen's notion of contamination presents an apt metaphor for the difference between these varied theatrical forms. In its concentration on purely scripted text, poetic drama strives to strengthen the divide between spectator and performance, wherein the rigidity of the performance (by which I mean its adherence to the playscript) acts as a prophylactic barrier between audience and text. Conversely, poets theater joins a tradition of non-naturalist theatre styles that sought to activate their audiences in ways akin to the participatory theatre and site-specific performance practices of the 1960s.³ Poets theater thus lays claim to the reality of the

³ For more on this history, see Stephen Bottoms' *Playing Underground* and Killian and Brazil's introduction to *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater*. Bottoms offers a history of the off-off-Broadway movement, which he suggests provided a venue for poets to present their work, alongside artists in a wide spectrum of media, including dance, theatre, performance art, and music; this created an atmosphere of collaboration and inter-mediatic exchange and influence (2). Killian and Brazil delineate a history of post-World War II poets theater and its shared influence from Performance Art, Experimental Theatre, Fluxus, and Happenings. For a comprehensive history of audience participation in the theatre, see Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*.

theatrical event in and of itself, integrating performance with the lived, independent experiences of its audiences. Turning again to Huyssen's metaphor, poets theater's relationship to its audience can be read as *infective*, or at the very least unhygienic. Within the purview of the theatrical event, audience and performance merge and mutate to form something closer to Osipovich's notion of a theatrical performance that "has its own aesthetic identity, separate from the [scripted] play" (462).

Because of this relationship between text and audience, poets theater more closely resembles poetic theater than it does poetic drama, but neither can fully account for its boundedness to site-specific considerations like performance conditions and the responsiveness of the audience. In part, this is because the limits of the theatrical event depend on how we conceive of the relationship among text, performance, and audience. Where Bay-Cheng and Cole read modernist poetic drama as transitive between the exclusionary practices of the modernists and the absorptive ones of the avant-gardists, Worthen's conception of the poetic theater trades in a more productive, though not entirely immersive, audience-spectator relationship, wherein the spectator must "submi[t]" to the "text's authority" (7). This conception of the theatrical event does encompass the audience, but only inasmuch as they are shaped by the performance of the text. While remaining dependent on the primacy of the scripted word, Worthen's poetic theater relies on the theatricality produced through the staging of the text in front of a spectator.

This sense of theatricality is also central to poets theater's unique character, which David Buuck describes in terms of a "[r]igorous amateurism. Under-rehearsedness. Minimal stage directions. Serious silliness. Counter-professionalism.... Improvisation, ad-libs, unscripted laughter, mistakes & missed-cues" ("Some Remarks on Poets Theater"). As Josette

Féral defines it, theatricality is determined contextually: it is dependent on the spatial and embodied parameters of performance as observed by a spectator (96). Poets theater's reliance on an essential "[a]nti-illusionism" in which "[p]rops are only ever props, not the things they are meant to represent [and] 'Actors' are not their roles... just people" (Buuck) heightens this sense of presentational spectacle.

This is also true, in varying degrees, of poets theater's generic predecessors. For example, in contrast to the strictly text-determined performances of poetic drama, it is only when text is *vocalized* that "a poetic theater become[s] possible, a theater in which the linguistic complexity of the text is visible through the spectacle" (Worthen 101). In this way, both poetic drama and poetic theater move away from modernity's inherent anti-theatricality, which "recreated the theater as a non-theatrical reality" (Gran 251). Where poetic drama firmly differentiates between the textual and performative realities of the theatrical event, poetic theater provides a "direct intervention in the rhetorical ordering of realism, reclaiming the text's authority over the physical 'languages' that construct the drama as theater" (Worthen 100). While both forms are inherently theatrical, poetic theater includes the audience in the purview of the theatrical event, albeit only inasmuch as they might facilitate the play's theatricality. Poetic drama, conversely, uses poeticism to reinforce the divide between audience and performance.

While they share many qualities, neither Worthen's nor Bay-Cheng and Cole's understanding of the hybrid poetic-theatrical text fully accounts for American poets theater as it is understood today. As it develops toward the immersive theatrical event described by Bean and Hinton, contemporary poets theater operates within a dynamic tension between the site-specific, immersive theater of Osipovich's "theatrical performance" and the innate theatricality

of both poetic theater and Modernist poetic drama, simultaneously embodying both the real experience and the staged one. To again use Huysen's terms, poets theater presents a "new paradigm" (x) rather than a completely new model for poets working in the theater, reflective of the transition from modernism to postmodernism and constitutive of poets theater's distinctive relationship to the concept of theatricality. As Anne-Britt Gran notes, postmodernism is an "era of performance... of the pastiche, of simulacrum, seduction, masquerade, the staging of the body and the subject—in short, the era of what we often associate with the 'theater-like' or 'theatrical'" (252). It is within this definition of postmodernism that we locate Buuck's description of poets theater. As Huysen clarifies, the new paradigm is not "a total break or rupture between modernism and postmodernism"; instead, "modernism, avantgarde, and mass culture have entered into a new set of mutual relations and discursive configurations" (x). Within this new set of postmodern relations, American poets theater strives to erode the conventional boundaries between stage and spectator, actor and audience, and scripted and spontaneous performance, creating an intimate space that encompasses both the performance and the community. It is precisely because of this shifting relationship with the audience that poets theater takes on its distinct character and begins to diverge from its predecessors, both of which embody different degrees of a more "sterile" relationship to the site and community of production.

American Poets Theater after 1945

Until recently, there has been little scholarship on poets theater as a distinct theatrical form. But—perhaps due to the founding of an annual Poets Theater Festival in 2001 by the San Francisco-based Small Press Traffic Literary Arts Center (SPT), or the ongoing insistence of poets and practitioners like Kevin Killian and David Buuck—the first decade of the twenty-

first century saw a small resurgence of poets theater in artistic, community, and institutional discourse.⁴ Most notably, in 2008, after years of participation in the SPT Poets Theater festival, Buuck published a short piece, “Some Remarks on Poets Theater,” describing his best practices; in 2010, Kenning Editions released *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater, 1945–1985*, a collection of over forty plays co-edited by Killian and David Brazil; with its release, there was an accompanying flurry of activity in the form of reviews and blog posts speculating about the status and definition of poets theater as a genre. For example, on April 5, 2010, Thom Donovan published “What is Poets Theater?” on the Poetry Foundation’s *Harriet the Blog*, in which poets and scholars familiar with the genre responded to the titular question. At the same time, there has been a minor boom in institutionalized scholarship: in 2009, the journal *Postmodern Culture* devoted a special issue to poets theater, edited and introduced by Laura Hinton and Heidi R. Bean; Bean’s foundational doctoral work on the topic, *Poetry ’n Acts: The Cultural Politics of Twentieth-Century American Poets’ Theater*, was submitted the following year. These works have helped formalize our understanding of poets theater as it moves beyond the parameters set by previous studies on the status of the poetic text within the theatre, and to expand our definition of a “poets theater” proper.

As discussed above, poets theater as a performance practice is distinct from other genres because of how it emerges from the interplay between poeticism and spectacle. Recent scholarship elaborates on this by foregrounding the politics central to its character. In

⁴ Killian’s work in the field of poets theater, as an anthologist and playwright, is extensive. With David Brazil, he is co-editor of *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater*, and he is the sole author of *Stage Fright: Selected Plays from San Francisco Poets Theater* (2019). He has written, staged, and performed in a number of poets theater productions since the 1980s, and, along with Dodie Bellamy, has run a series of poets theater workshops across North America. Notably, Killian is credited with introducing a number of scholars (including me) to poets theater, as both a poet and historian. Thom Donovan, for example, describes his “initiatory experience” with the genre as being during the *Prose Acts* conference at SUNY Buffalo in 2002, where Killian presented his play *The Vegetable Kingdom*. Donovan describes this experience in “Why Poets Theatre Now?”

conversation with Worthen, for example, Bean argues that his definition of poetic theater cannot account for poets theater as she experiences it: “self-consciously political, aimed at social critique precisely *through* an investigation of the relationship between language and performance” (12–13). This turn toward the political is also at the heart of the work gathered in *Postmodern Culture*’s poets theater special issue, which collectively acknowledges that “poet’s theater is, at its basis, a critique and rethinking of language’s complicity in the production and imposition of generalizable norms” (Bean and Hinton). In both cases, poets theater functions as a mode of ontological critique that interrogates the ways in which both the self and the social are shaped by language.

Bean argues that this aspect of poets theater’s character develops from the “open field” of post-1945 American poetry and performance practices, which she reads against Erving Goffman and J. L. Austin’s theories of performativity. Starting with Goffman’s notion of the individual as a “performer” in an “active process of self-presentation” (Bean 40) and Austin’s theory of the speech act as a performative, constitutive utterance, Bean argues that, in their focus on the experiential, art and poetic practices from the 1950s onward are marked by the “notion of performance as a constitutive act” (41). Further, non-illusionist performance practices, such as those described by Buuck, “raise questions about the boundaries between art and everyday life” (Bean 69). Poets theater, which develops within the constellation of these practices,

might best be understood as a [process] that forces us into awareness not only of the world as it is but also into an awareness of our own roles in constructing it that way, via all the structures and strategies of representation and creation we have available to use.... it is this understanding that marks the start of a politically oriented poets’

theater. (69)

Bean further elaborates on this political function by suggesting that poets theater operates as a form of what she calls “generative mimesis,” a term adapted from Elin Diamond’s notion of “feminist mimesis,” which “challenges the objective nature of mimicry, and instead displays mimesis as a performative representation” (Bean 21). Through the process of *generative* mimesis, poets theater “reconceptualizes mimeticism through an understanding of social identity as a process of citation and identification” (22). As such, mimetic representation becomes a strategy for identity formation but is simultaneously a critique of those processes. In relation to both Worthen and Bay-Cheng’s understandings of the poetic text in the theatre, Bean’s conception of poets theater as a form of generative mimesis problematizes the status of mimeticism while also doubly affirming poets theater’s intimate relationship with audiences and spaces of production.

Although, as Killian and Brazil suggest, this function may shift and change over time, poets theater, crucially, remains a tool of the coterie:

Poets Theater is praxis, a way for a community to take its own temperature, and to blow off steam as required. It is a finger on the pulse of the very recent past, so some of its most salutary side effects have, in the distance of time, been outmoded or grown unnoticeable, irretrievable. In some cases the fun has lifted, like a mist, and all that remains is the poetry, or even the sombre, or even the perverse or distressing. (xiv)

In this way, Killian and Brazil implore us to remember that poets theater “is first and foremost about the scene of its production” as both a “social scene” and, crucially, “a geographical one”

(i). That is to say, poets theater as we know it today is integrally tied to its spaces of production, which have largely been spaces of community.

In terms of the spatial parameters of the poets theater performance, this sense of community extends to include performers and audience alike. To modify Osipovich's description of theatrical performance, "the nature of [poets theater] lies in the encounter itself" (465), linking performance to the social and spatial contexts in which it plays out. Bean articulates this dynamic as "a kind of three-way encounter between author/text, performer/vocalizer, and audience/listener" (19), highlighting the importance of the embodied link between text and performance, as well as the integral role of the spectator. Similarly, Buuck describes poets theater as a performative quality that "only occurs during the performance of the piece in front of others (and, often, at the bar afterwards)," noting too that poets theater "should generally not be recorded.... [as] the audience tends not to fit in the frame" ("Some Remarks on Poets Theater"). As these examples suggest, poets theater needs to be *encountered* physically in shared time and space in order to be perceived or identified. Put more simply, "we know it when we *see* it" (Killian and Brazil ii; emphasis added).

But the question of "seeing" poets theater also poses a distinct set of problems for the scholar. The integral role of audience as both a witness *to* and active participant *in* the production of the theatrical event—as well as a vital player in its identification as such—points toward a disciplinary difficulty at the heart of the genre. Poets theater practitioners and scholars alike have tried to attend to this question. For Bean, the problem of identifying poets theater is a matter of knowing *where* to look: "The question of my introduction title, 'Where Is Poets' Theater?'" (26), she writes, "points to several overlapping questions of location: Where precisely are the critical practices of poets' theater itself inscribed? (On the page, on the stage,

between the two, or perhaps somewhere else?) In what ways is poets' theater a site-specific practice?" (26). To ask "where" is to recognize poets theater as socially and spatially integrated with the site of production.

At the same time, Bean's query points toward an "absence in the critical record" (26). In many cases, even poets theater's primary materials remain difficult to track. For several of the poets associated with the genre, incursions into the theatre were brief: many, as Patrick Durgin notes, produced only one or two plays amidst an extensive volume of work (qtd. in Donovan "What is Poets Theater?"). Even then, the poets theater manuscript has often been left unpublished, to be found in the deepest corners of the archive, found by chance, or perhaps both.⁵ Further, to study poets theater is both an exercise in reconstruction and an archival project. In her own method, Bean argues for an approach that contextualizes theatrical production using ephemera such as "publication histories, reviews, scripts, performances, [and] playbills" (13), and employs a version of Elin Diamond's (via Brecht's) "gestic criticism," a method designed to place the performance in relation to its historical, cultural, and for Bean, literary contexts (24). To Brecht, as Meg Mumford explains, to employ the gestic, or *gestus*, in theatre means "*to present artistically the mutable socio-economic and ideological construction of human behaviour and relations*" (54). This methodology, which draws on archival material, first-hand accounts, and historical context, allows the scholar to read the poets theater performance in relation to its site of production, and ultimately finds poets theater in both the critical record, cultural memory, and production process. Importantly, Bean's method allows us to locate poets theater beyond the page, illustrating that the very nature of the genre is relational and site-dependent.

⁵ According to Killian and Brazil, for example, Diane Di Prima's *Rain Fur* exists today only by the grace of James Waring, who encouraged Di Prima to keep the manuscript after he found it had been discarded (552).

When is Poets Theater? Poets Theater in the Archive

While poets theater is critically tied to the present moment of production, the traces it leaves for scholars and others interested in the practice and art are most often examined later. As Heidi Bean and others suggest, it exists only *beyond* the parameters of the page, becoming poets theater proper in the moment of its execution. Even then poets theater is only temporary, destined to disappear after the moment of inscription: to study it is both an exercise in reconstruction and an archival project. As such, my own methodology has put me in the archive: searching for materials that had previously been overlooked, trying to read gestically, as Bean recommends, and searching for poets theater's varying puzzle pieces in scripts, reviews, and production notes. But where recent studies of poets theater consider the genre in terms of the moment of production, I reorient my approach by focussing on the moment of *re*-production. In addition to "where?", the scholastic pursuit of poets theater also needs to consider a new set of questions: How can we think critically about a genre that is always already lost to posterity? How does the scholar get around questions of *ephemerality* and *witness* when all they have is script? As noted above, these questions have of course long troubled theatre and performance scholars, but in this instance, I ask more specifically, how does poets theater's unique social function manifest across times?

In addressing these questions, I shift the critical lens from Bean's question of *where?* to the question of *when?* This allows me to engage with the difficulties that arise around defining and characterizing poets theater, while adding my own voice to a growing chorus seeking to locate the genre amongst its events, archives, anthologies, reviews, and first-hand accounts. In asking "*when?*" I propose a strategy for reading these works that is at once a method and a scholarly intervention. Our critical orientation needs to account for the ways in

which these theatrical performances remain just beyond the scholar's grasp—intended, perhaps, to be projected forward (as I will discuss below), but always located in the past. More than that, to read poets theater outside its scene of production is to lose our object of study entirely. As contemporary scholarship has demonstrated, poets theater is critically tied to the moment of execution and inscribed with a *liveness* destined to disappear beyond the conditions of that inscription. Its very definition emerges from a social function that exists within the theatrical encounter, tying poets theater irrevocably to its social and historical conditions. Bean illustrates this in her framework for reading poets theater as “cultural intervention[n]” in which each play is “placed within its own specific cultural context, against a background of ideas about language and cultural identity” (24). At the same time, theatrical performance corrugates amongst its past and present iterations, performance contexts, and audiences. Poets theater exists within a tension between the liveness of its varied performances and the scripted remainder. For this reason, we need a new methodology: one that accounts for the spatial *and* temporal orientations of poets theater in its moments both of production and of access.

i. The Living Archive

Over the course of this project, and amidst many hours spent amongst poets theater's assorted repositories, I found something that I was not expecting: I found *another* archive. As I sifted through papers, fonds, letters, and anthologies, I was struck by an archival quality present in many of these texts. Was this what Killian and Brazil meant when they suggested poets theater was “a finger on the pulse of the very recent past” (xiv)? They gesture toward a coterie function similar to Bean's, but this was something more. In 1957, for example, poet Helen Adam wrote *Initiation to the Magic Workshop*, a play based on Jack Spicer's legendary fifteen-week “Poetry as Magic” workshop, which she attended that same year; in 1959, Frank

O'Hara composed a letter to fellow poet John Ashbery, in which he describes a recent poetry reading as a theatrical event, framing parts of his letter as a scripted play; and in 1963, John Wieners' play *Of Asphodel, in Hell's Despite*, a reworking of William Carlos Williams' long poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" is staged by the Judson Poets' Theater in New York City, echoing one of Williams' last public readings. Across these examples, I found poets using theatre conventions to frame significant historical or literary events from within their own communities. I found poets capturing and reframing history in an archival gesture that worked both to preserve and, when performed, significantly enliven the past.

More broadly, though, I was struck by how performance practices could also be archival. The texts I survey over the course of this dissertation use a variety of theatre conventions to engage with history. Simultaneously, they create *and* record lived community experiences in a way that allows text and history to be brought to life and prevents the past from being lost to posterity; they employ a poetics both of documentation and of enactment. More than that, the texts surveyed here employ the theatrical as a way of bringing the lived experience back, to be lived *again*. In a practice similar to what Jay Anderson calls "living history... an attempt by people to simulate life in another time" (291), poets theater theatricalizes the past by *scripting* it. As a form of theatrical performance, then, poets theater as script offers a referent through which both actors and audiences might access another time. Pivotal, however, this living theatrical-archival convergence also alters the present. In Osipovich's words, this liveness "means that, in a very real sense, actors have to *live* within the framework... the possibility exists for the unexpected—for spontaneous creation on the part of the actors and spontaneous happenstance on the part of the world" (463). Poets theater

creates an archive that is at once textual and *living*: an archive housed in script but accessed by way of the stage door.

The question “*when* is poets theater?” takes on both a textual and a scholarly orientation, wherein the *when* depends on *where* you are standing. As such, this dissertation is also concerned with the site of artistic production along three temporal orientations: the past, the present, and the future. Looking forward, the poet uses the conventions of theatre to capture, preserve, and (in many cases) critique a history; in the moment of performance, the play enlivens the past in a gesture that directly engages with and shapes the present; and with an eye to the past, the scholar approaches this new living archive as an archivist reads a history. It is within this layered sense of *when* that I argue that poets theater must be read as a form of *re-enactment*: a “practice of re-playing or re-doing a precedent event, artwork, or act... where *then* and *now* punctuate each other” (Schneider 2). In this way, too, poets theater acts, in each reiteration, as a form of archive, an accessible record of past communities, events, and performances. From a generic standpoint, this allows us to read poets theater for its scene of production—as Bean does and as an archivist would—while simultaneously acknowledging that these scenes of production are many and varied across times. Even beyond the purview of the documentary, poets theater as a form becomes a sort of time capsule, an archival-theatrical event that develops within this temporal fold.

In terms of the individual plays addressed by this dissertation, this methodology allows us to consider how each play casts (or re-casts) the past and to approach these works with an “invest[ment],” as performance scholar Rebecca Schneider puts it, “in the curious inadequacies of the copy, and *what inadequacy gets right* about our faulty steps backwards, forwards, and

to the side” (6). As a result, this project is chiefly concerned with the ways in which poets theater acts as part of, and simultaneously challenges, the archival record.

Asking how the performed text might complicate or enliven the archival substrate, I consider the textual, embodied, and residual elements of performance to interrogate how a poetic turn toward the archive becomes a present engagement with history. Every subsequent reiteration of a poets theater play echoes with the social-spatial relations of previous performances and performance spaces. Further, reading poets theater *as* re-enactment allows us to approach the genre holistically: concurrently as text, as textual practice, and as performance. Within this framework, this dissertation asks the following questions: how does the living or enlivened archive capture, trace, or challenge the past? How does the theatricalization of the present underwrite a future archive? And what does the performance of the past *do* to a history?

The Archive and the Repertoire: Toward a Spatial Reading of Poets Theater as Archival-Theatrical Performance

I have located poets theater within texts and communities of practice that engage with a poetics of documentation, seeking to capture and preserve the lived experience, and I have also situated poets theater as a function of the coterie, building toward a shared sociality or community experience. I argue that this socially situated use-function operates to record, affirm, and project the experience of community through documentation. The dynamics of poets theater’s living archive depend, however, on a tension between script and performance, in which the script becomes the textual referent, acting as a form of documentation, locating the play temporally and anchoring it to an origin point. Yet, the poets theater performance is malleable. This aligns with what Paul Voss and Marta Werner call a “poetics of the archive... a poetics of recollection, of re-mem-bering, in which all proofs are provisional and subject to

re-vision” (“Toward a Poetics of the Archive”). At the same time, this also relates to what Anne Waldman defines as a poetics of documentation, “a rite, a proof, a psychological tendency to hold, to capture, to validate. It is the evidence. Never clearly ‘objective.’ What happened, what happens, filtered through these sense perceptions” (236).

What separates the poetics of the archive from the poetics of documentation, it seems, is its temporal orientation. One *documents* toward a future archive, toward posterity. Conversely, to employ a poetics of the archive is to *return*, and in this way, the poetics of the archive becomes a poetics of re-enactment, “the practice of re-playing or re-doing” (Schneider 2). Furthermore, this shift between documentation and archive occurs through performance. Waldman, for example, describes the *urge* to document as embedded in a performative *urgency*: “to hold, to capture, to validate” the lived experience. “Friend Joe Brainard was dying,” she writes, “& there was urgency to document his passing which was during an eclipse” (236). This “urgency to document” led to the development of the performance piece “There was a Time an Eclipse,” part XVII of Book II of her long poem *The Iovis Trilogy*.⁶ “There was a Time an Eclipse” “documents the moment of [Brainard’s] death in [Waldman’s] own breath, and [the moment] he enters [her] body” (236). “You know how friends do that when they die? Enter?” she writes (236). As she describes it, her documentation of Brainard’s death was later supplemented by performance:

Later I asked Steven Taylor to accompany a reading of it with violin. Now we are scoring text and music. There is one point on one note I am chanting “he sees he sees he sees he sees” over and over which sounds like “seizes seizes seizes.” (236)

⁶ A. J. Carruthers discusses this in “‘Music for Posterity’: Afterlives for the Score in Anne Waldman’s *The Iovis Trilogy*,” in his book *Notational Experiments in North American Long Poems, 1961–2011*.

Waldman's conflation of "what happened" with "what happens" (236) speaks to the temporal orientation of both the archival qua documentation and the performative. It is in *documenting* Brainard's death that Waldman preserves "what happened," but it is in the later *re-enactment* of that documentation—the revisiting—that she arrives at "what happens," the archival narrative. Notably, this archive belongs to the body more than the text, as it "seizes" rather than "sees" the past.

Waldman's turn to the embodied here also marks a pivotal shift away from the archive and toward the repertoire. Diana Taylor outlines the difference: "'Archival' memory exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones" (19). These items are stable, though our interpretation of them may change over time. In contrast, the repertoire "enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.... The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there,' being part of the transmission" (20). In contrast to the permanence of the archive, the material of the repertoire consistently undergoes change: "the repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies and meaning.... But even though the embodiment changes, the meaning might very well stay the same" (20).

Re-enactment, as well as poets theater, seems to fit *between* the archive and the repertoire, as it pivots between temporal orientations as an embodied practice. While Waldman's poetics of documentation provides an archival score to Brainard's death, "the evidence," (Waldman 236) as she puts it, or her "transmission" of it (Taylor 20), as Taylor does, allows for a new understanding of the event in question. In this way, the performance of

the documentary challenges the archive and “functions as an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis” (Taylor xiv).

Waldman’s turn to the embodied also speaks to how both the archive and the repertoire mobilize the past. In her seminal essay “Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust,” Carolyn Steedman locates Derrida’s archive fever in the body, not only as the metaphorical state suggested in *Archive Fever* but as a literal malady: an “Archive Fever Proper” (1163). Framing this *real* fever as a workplace hazard—“meningitis due to or as a complication of anthrax” (1172) “contracted in the dust of the archive” (1163)—Steedman suggests that our engagement with the archive move beyond merely reading the past into the embodied present. As such, Steedman lays the groundwork for a sticky spatial metaphor around space and the body, in which the past is brought into the present through performance, embodiment, and presence. The moment of archival access then becomes a point of contact as well as a re-enactment of history as a disciplinary practice—that is to say, the *pursuit* of the past. Here, Steedman employs a new poetics, one in which the past moves through material bodies to register in new spaces. A spatial reading of the archive, similarly to Waldman’s, then suggests a sort of communion: the past “enters [the] body. You know how friends do that when they die? Enter?” (236). Reading Steedman spatially affords us new insight into the fraught relationship between site-specificity and the archive, and, in particular, the ways in which the shared space of performance maps, traces, and—crucially—re-embodies affective relationships and much more, across scales and spaces.

Take, for example, Steedman’s own archival experience, in which she acts as both historian and witness. Steedman’s analysis centres on a passage from Jules Michelet’s *Oeuvres Complètes* containing an account of his time spent in the Archives Nationales of Paris during

the 1820s. Michelet begins with a poetics of documentation, writing of his archival experience as a way of bringing history to life, but he also shifts toward the performative: “[A]s I breathed in their dust,” he reflects, “I saw them rise up” (qtd. in Steedman 1171). Thinking again of the malady as a place where the body and the archive intersect, Steedman suggests,

It cannot be determined whether it is the manuscripts or the dead or both who come to life, and take shape and form. But we can be clearer than Michelet could be about exactly what it was that he breathed in: the dust of the workers who made the papers and parchments, the dust of the animals who provided the skin for their leather bindings, the by-product of all the filthy trades that have, by circuitous routes, deposited their end-products in the archives. And we are forced to consider whether it was not life that he breathed into “the souls who had suffered so long ago and who were smothered now in the past” but death that he took into himself with each lungful of the past. (1171)

Michelet’s own account of archival experience speaks to the performative, embodied, and material aspects of archival work, but the materiality of Steedman’s dust also emboldens us to think about the implicit metaphor in the ingestion of history’s material. The visuality of Michelet’s description suggests a hidden archival body. The parity between his own breath and the inhalation of and by his “papers and parchments, so long deserted” (qtd. in Steedman 1171), as they “rise up” creates a physiological circuit between history and historian, archive and archivist, document and performer.

Site/Citation: The Coterie as Performative and Textual Practice

When read as a form of re-enactment, poets theater becomes an explicitly citational practice, re-performing and reinterpreting the past, be it a specific historical event or a previous

theatrical one. In this way, poets theater also acts as a type of living, embodied archive, scripted toward preservation and performed toward remembrance. However, as Schneider suggests, “it is not *presence* that appears in the syncopated time of citational performance, but precisely (again) the missed encounter.... performance plays the ‘sedimented acts’ and spectral meanings that haunt material in constant collective interaction, in constellation, in transmutation” (102). Here, Schneider draws on Judith Butler’s notion of the gendered body as constituted through “acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (523). But read in relation to the materials of this dissertation, the idea of the sedimented act refers not only to the individual gendered body but to a collective one. Poets theater functions as an “instrument for the self-flecion of the coterie” (Killian and Brazil xiii), emerging from the encounter between text, audience, and performance. How, then, do we account for the *missed* encounter of theatrical *re*-performance?

The answer to this question lies in our understanding of the coterie. As an organizing principle within poetry, the term coterie refers to the poetic practice of writing for a small social group of which one is a member, and amongst which there is often a shared sense of aesthetic tendencies, social context, and perhaps also repertoire. I argue that poets theater acts as a type of trans-historical poetics of coterie that, through the parameters of re-enactment, works to capture, recreate, create anew, or signal affective connections across spaces and times. The archival-theatrical event extends the coterie beyond the historical event to include the performed and re-performed one, eliciting membership across times and performances to audience members and performers alike. In this way, I suggest that poets theater itself is an archival act, capturing, tracing, and ultimately creating affective bonds across times and performances while also challenging social formation and spatial norms across spatial-

temporal contexts. This archival surplus is what ties poets theater as a scripted, poetic practice to poets theater as a performative one.

The materials gathered herein engage the community archive on two significant fronts: the site and the citational. On a textual level, a coterie can be created through shared references, community intertext, and name-dropping. As Lytle Shaw suggests in his study on the poetry of Frank O'Hara, coterie poetics "thematiz[e] the idea of a close-knit audience through intimate, seemingly shared references, dedications, and the mention of proper names" (*The Poetics of Coterie* 2). The coterie writer, by creating a type of intertextual, "intersocial matrix," brings a "small, temporary collectivity into being" that "helps to produce, highlight, or somehow change the terms of social formation" (49). The same is doubly true, I suggest, for a performed coterie that softens the boundary between living, everyday spaces and spaces of performance by imposing a sense of collectivity and inclusiveness and erasing intrusive difference. According to Shaw, a *poetics* of coterie is "an experimental way of conceptualizing literary and social linkages," used "to reimagine the social logics that allow group formations in the first place" (37). Frank O'Hara, for example, uses a poetics of coterie as a tactic to "rethink both familial and literary historical models of kinship" (Shaw "On Coterie: Frank O'Hara"). Ultimately, then, the "practice of linking attributes to previously obscure names tends to build... a figure or rhetoric of community that becomes legible through accumulated reference... [and] increasingly becomes part of a social world that the poems create" ("On Coterie: Frank O'Hara"). Equally, poets theater enacts a poetics of coterie across spaces and times by performing the experience of community, be it archival, fictional, or merely relational.

Within each example mentioned above, as well as in the additional texts explored over the course of this dissertation, a secondary trend emerges: Adam's *Initiation to the Magic Workshop* incorporates the language of her fellow classmates to create a poetic, as well as historical, re-enactment of the event; Wieners' *Of Asphodel, in Hell's Despite* offers intertextual and thematic reworkings of the poetry of William Carlos Williams, simultaneously referencing and calling into question poetic lineage and literary tradition; and the New Narrative writing of Dodie Bellamy, Sam D'Alessandro, and others seamlessly absorbs and incorporates the language of their peers into a single textual object. Each of these examples performs coterie through archival-textual practice. Further, intertextual exchange between texts creates a social world in the same way that "accumulated reference" outlines a "social world" ("On Coterie: Frank O'Hara"). Not only does this use of intertext align with Shaw's conception of a poetics of coterie, but it also works to tie the performed text to a locational memory or the concrete space of the community of practice from which it emerges. In turn, this simultaneously applies pressure to and reworks literary history in a new engagement with the coterie that moves beyond the definitional. By bringing the coterie's language into spaces of performance, these examples of poets theater re-iterate, but also—pivotaly—recreate a type of performed coterie.

Crucially, the coterie also has a spatial dimension. In *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Local Identity*, Miwon Kwon outlines our shifting understanding of what has been called "[s]ite-determined, site-oriented, site-referenced, site-conscious, site-responsive, [or] site-related" art (1), from a "phenomenological or experiential understanding of the site... the size, scale, texture, and dimension of walls, ceilings, rooms.... [to] more 'public' realms.... as various as a billboard, an artistic genre, a disenfranchised community, ...[or] a social cause"

(3). Framing poets theater in terms of this extended field of site-specificity allows for a reading of the coterie that simultaneously accounts for the spatial, textual, and performative aspects of its practice. Following Shaw, poets theater can be read as a formal means of *creating* community, not only through “accumulated reference” but through an intricate cross-hatching of spatially and textually located sites of performance. In this way, the citational aspects of poets theater work similarly to Michael Warner’s conception of a public as something “that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (“Publics and Counterpublics” 50). The mechanism by which literary coterie remember is unique, mixing the textual and the spatial or performative and claiming both spaces, texts, and futures for the coterie.

Chapters

When I began my research into poets theater, I felt welcome. In part this was because of the passion and enthusiasm of those already working in this burgeoning field. But it was also because poets theater itself allowed me to feel a connection to the poetic and artistic communities out of which it blossomed. Poets theater was never *just* about voyeurism (though that is certainly part of it). It was also about participation.

This dissertation develops out of that unique form of participation that comes with spatially integrated, relational performance. While poets theater always serves a coterie function, as Bean, Killian, and others have reminded us, the work I look at here deals exclusively with autobiographical, community-focussed texts. On one hand, this lends an archival dimension to poets theater. On the other, this focus on the historical allows us to read the genre in terms of re-enactment. By considering the social, “Performing Memory: American Poets Theater and the Poetics of the Archive, 1945–1995,” operates within an expanded field

of study to account for and engage with the varied textual, performative, and social spaces of poets theater.

By starting with location, be it textually, spatially, or temporally determined, this approach takes Killian and Brazil's "scene[s] of production," (i) together with Schneider's conception of re-enactment, to argue that poets theater works to develop a transtemporal coterie that exceeds the single iteration and instead connects texts and bodies across spaces and times. As indicated by the geographic-temporal focus of the following chapters, the texts I explore here are all interested in spatial practice: the idea of the local, what it means to move across time, physical space, everyday space, sharing space, and the spaces of the body. This project, then, is designed to shift between two scales: exploring individual scenes of production—including poetic communities and specific historic and theatrical events—in tandem with poets theater's broader trajectory as a form. The goal is to show how poets theater develops across located scenes of production, not only as a constellation of formal qualities but as an accumulative archival and coterie practice.

The following chapters reflect my own understanding of poets theater's development as a genre, based on my study of the broader poetic field. Each chapter therefore reads poets theater within the coterie and aesthetic contexts from which it develops. Poetic practices and historical conditions across varied sites of production, I argue, led to poets theater's development into a distinct formal quality. In other words, poets theater is not only a *tool* for creating the coterie but also a *product* of the distinct poetic practices within artistic communities. Poets theater's development as a unique form is indebted not only to its relationship to the performing arts but to the poetic projects of its various communities, such as the New York School of poets, the San Francisco Renaissance, and the New Narrative

Movement. There are also a number of poetic communities that have no doubt contributed to, participated in, and helped shape poets theater that do not make it into this dissertation, including the poets associated with Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theater/School or the Language poets associated with the San Francisco Poets Theater. Bean discusses both of these groups in her own dissertation on the subject, and they have undoubtedly made pivotal contributions to the development of poets theater as we recognize it today.

The communities on which I focus also provide us with a framework for understanding poets theater as a genre. At times, the stakes are higher than others, but in most cases these chapters respond to a desire to create, amend, or challenge the historical record. As such, this project traces the development of poets theater toward Bean and Hinton's definition of it as an "open-ended and site-specific" ("Poet's Theater: An Introduction") performative event by situating that development within the extended field of poetic community. On a broader level, this dissertation also traces an archival turn in American poetry after 1945 and considers both the spatial and embodied implications of the performed text as it relates to a transtemporal poetics of coterie.

My first two chapters "'This History of Us': New York School Poets Theater and the Re-Performance of the Coterie" and "'What we desire now is Space': Poets Theater's Spatial and Textual Palimpsest and the Archival Interventions of the Second-Generation New York School Poets" serve to develop a framework for reading poets theater that accounts for this extended field of production, including both the temporal "fold" (Schneider 6) and a literary and spatial coterie. Poets theater, I argue, creates a transtemporal coterie through a process of textual and archival re-enactment that extends the temporal boundaries of community. My first chapter begins in the archive, with a letter from Frank O'Hara to John Ashbery, and considers

how performance alters the documentary text. Responding to questions such as how do spatial practices hold memory, and how does “claiming space” become a memorial practice, I think through the spatial dimensions of text, performance, and the archive. At the same time, I expand on my conception of the living archive to suggest that poets theater rehearses and re-performs community through the intimate spatial practice of site-specific re-enactment, in which the theatrical-archival performance becomes a slipstitch between spaces and times.

My second chapter joins spatial with textual locationality but moves from the first-generation New York School of poets to the second, beginning with the work of Bernadette Mayer and Joe Brainard and concluding with the work of Alice Notley and Boston poet John Wieners. In terms of the work discussed in this chapter, Wieners’ relationship to the second-generation New York school is one of lineage and space. Together, Notley and Wieners engage with ideas around poetic lineage by reworking the texts of their poetic predecessor, William Carlos Williams. I explore the textual archive as a means of explaining how textual re-enactment can make way for spatial reinterpretations of coterie, belonging, and influence. Poets theater, I argue, can be used as a tool for spatial and archival intervention, and a play can become a place of memorial and spatial intervention. This chapter explores poetic lineage more specifically and conflates site with cite, suggesting that intertextual poetics creates a located poetics of coterie that works to challenge spatial preoccupations within both community and theatrical spaces.

My third chapter, “The Poet as Time Mechanic: Re-enactment and Collage in the San Francisco Renaissance,” considers how a future coterie might be re-embodied through performative re-enactment. I explore poets theater in terms of the theory of performative surrogation to argue that site-specific performance allows for a type of transtemporal world-

building that reaches across times to create textual and affective connections. Using Helen Adam's *Initiation to the Magic Workshop* as a case study, I suggest that Spicer's notions of the "real" in poetry align with the performative notion of re-enactment. I also explore why the poet might turn to re-enactment, aligning Adam's collage-based "curatorial" work with a desire to return to or control the archive. As Allison Fraser notes, Adam's use of collage "allow[ed] her to renegotiate her own position and the status of women in mid-twentieth-century America" (53) by "subtly undermining the dominant knowledge base" (54). In the context of her play *Initiation to the Magic Workshop*, I argue that Adam employs a collage-like use of intertext to both document and re-shape Spicer's historic Poetry as Magic workshop and to play out the ongoing power struggle between Duncan and Spicer.

Finally, my fourth chapter, "'Nothing ever just disappears': Playing Dead and the Absent-Present Body in New Narrative's Relational Archive," refocuses our attention on the body in performance as a nexus of both time and space in order to consider the implications of poets theater as a relational text. Here, I explore poets theater's ephemerality through an interrogation of the absent-present spectre that surrounds re-enactment and coterie texts. While I argue that poets theater is fundamentally a relational text, I simultaneously suggest that the felt absence of the original event, which underwrites the re-enactment, also becomes a sort of affective presence, gesturing toward (and therefore marking) the lost object. Here I explore the work of New Narrative writers Robert Glück, Dodie Bellamy, and Sam D'Allesandro, whose writing brings the body to bear on relational and performative spaces. While Glück's essay-work situates the body at the center of the New Narrative relational archive, Bellamy and D'Allesandro's collaborative epistolary text *Real: The Letters of Mina Harker and Sam D'Allesandro* performs the relational work of the coterie. This becomes a

study in absence when the epistolary chain breaks following the real death of Sam D'Allesandro. The way the text must re-collect itself *outside* of relation stands as a metaphor for the ways in which the original spatial and intersubjective dynamics haunt the re-enacted text. This chapter concludes with a study of the collaborative work of Aaron Shurin and dancer Ney Fonseca as they explore spaces of absence through a collaborative interplay between dance and narrative. In hybrid genres such as poets theater, the act of performance itself writes toward what archivist Rodney G. S. Carter calls the "absent-presence" (223), which simultaneously gestures towards its own future absence and actively recuperates aspects of that loss. In terms of the tension between intimacy and absence, the absent presence exists in the corporeal performance of being *outside* relation, rooted in a body that is simultaneously there and not there.

Together, this work traces a trajectory of poetic inheritance in which poets theater develops into the form we recognize today. At the same time, each chapter works to underscore the importance of poetic community to the development of post-1945 American poetry.

Chapter 1. “This History of Us”: New York School Poets Theater and the Re-Performance of the Coterie

So now then we begin again this history of us....

-Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*

To develop a framework for studying poets theater that accounts for both its extended field of production and its connection to the literary and spatial coterie, this chapter explores the genre in the context of the New York School of poets—generally defined to include Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, and Kenneth Koch—and New York City’s theatre scene at mid-twentieth century. Starting with a letter from O’Hara to Ashbery, which records and theatricalizes community space for posterity, I consider O’Hara’s poetics and the transtemporal potential of re-performing the community-archival text in the context of everyday life. Like O’Hara’s poetics, which he describes in his tongue-in-cheek manifesto “Personism”—advocating for a type of intimacy in poetry that “puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style” (499)—I argue that the re-performance of the archival document lets poets theater merge archival spaces with lived ones, ultimately “allow[ing] the [audience] to become part of a community” (Herring 419), regardless of temporal incompatibility. This intimate community, or coterie, function extends transtemporally across spaces and times. Like the epistolary text, which collapses the distance between persons, the re-enacted archival text in re-performance creates an intimate through line across specific social spaces. As such, poets theater becomes a sort of *living* archive—both specifically, when tied to archival content, but also more generally, when the site-specific text moves across generations. Every subsequent reiteration of a poets theater play echoes with the social-spatial relations of previous performances and performance spaces, creating an intimate bond between audiences, performers, and communities across times.

In considering the conflation of historical and theatrical spaces, I also turn to the influences of surrealist theatre practices, the work of Antonin Artaud, and a trend prominent across poets theater plays but particularly prevalent in those associated with the New York School coterie: metatheatricality, which playwright and theatre scholar Lionel Abel describes as a characteristic of “theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized” (60).⁷ Exploring these historical precedents in the context of the New York School of poets provides us with the opportunity to conceptualize the way space is used as a transtemporal tactic for creating intimacy, and as a means of spatializing the archive. Here, I offer a case study of metatheatricality and New York’s *Artists Theater* and consider two additional coterie plays by New York School poets, ultimately suggesting that intimate spatial practice is key to community formation across times.

A Letter from the Living Archive

In “Personism: A Manifesto,” Frank O’Hara advocates for a poem that will “address itself to one person (other than the poet itself)” (499), articulating a type of intimacy in poetry that “puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style” (499). The striking sexual imagery of these lines speaks to a form of direct, seemingly unencumbered communication between the poet and his public, in which “[t]he poem is correspondingly gratified... at last between two persons instead of two pages” (499). The payoff of the personist poem, it seems, lies in its sociability. After all, personism arises from the realization that the poet could always just “use the telephone instead of writing the poem” (499), reaching their recipient directly.

⁷ Examples of metatheatricality can be found in a number of poets’ theater plays by the first-generation New York School poets, including John Ashbery’s *The Heroes*, James Schuyler’s *The Mystery Chef Mystery*, and Kenneth Koch’s *Edward and Christine*.

More than that, as Terrel Scott Herring puts it, O'Hara's personist poem also offers "a Whitmanesque record of a day in a life, a record that connects individuals through print... attempt[ing] to relay to the reader the poet's public and private lives" (417). Connecting once again to the sociality of O'Hara's work, Herring argues that the poem operates as "a utopian fantasy, one that strives to connect private citizens through the medium of public print" (416). As such, the personist poem "allow[s] the reader to become part of a community" (419), promising a type of mutual recognition between the poet and her public in which positioning the poem "Lucky Pierre style" connotes a visceral form of intimacy, even though O'Hara insists that personism itself "does not have anything to do with personality or intimacy, far from it!" (499). Taking O'Hara at his word, Herring reads this insistence on impersonality as a form of abstraction, in which the poem creates a space "through which impersonal identification can occur" (416), but through which the identifying subject enjoys what Michael Warner has termed a more anonymous and disembodied "mass subjectivity" ("The Mass Public and the Mass Subject" 384). In this way, the poem becomes "a quasi-intimate object whose connecting of impersonal individuals parallels the operations of this mass public sphere"; the poem "obligingly provides a body for the disembodied poet and reader to identify with" (Herring 419). In direct opposition to modernism's vigilance against the "contaminat[ing]" masses (Huysen vii), O'Hara offers a model for textual transmission and sociability that allows for both impersonal and intimate identification within the poetic text.

Yet, as both Dan Chiasson and Siobhan Phillips have pointed out, "personist telephones don't work if 'the person on the other end is dead'" (Chiasson qtd. in Phillips 66). The same is true, we could venture, of the caller. This challenge raises an interesting question about the posterity and transferability of the documentary text in relation to future readerships, where

there is an expectation of fidelity rather than abstraction. While O'Hara's model for merging the public and the private ultimately creates community through identification, the intimate spatial practices of certain archival performance strategies, I argue, extend this strategy transtemporally, offering a means of circumventing the impersonality of the personist identification despite the shifting status of poets, audiences, or telephone operators, offering a new avenue for extending O'Hara's *Lucky Pierre* poetics transtemporally.

Take for example, a letter from O'Hara to John Ashbery dated March 16, 1959—a few months after he penned “Personism: a Manifesto” and the same year that Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 parts* and Jack Gelber's *The Connection* redefined the capacity of audience-spectator relationships in gallery and theatrical spaces. O'Hara describes a recent poetry reading at the Living Theatre in New York City. Founded and led by Judith Malina and Julian Beck, the Living Theatre strove to upend traditional and delimited theatrical space by focusing on audience participation and spatial integration at the site of production. While the theatre continues this work today, it initially developed as part of a wider trend in the experimental performance practices of the post-1945 period which, following Artaud's call for a “theater of action,” sought to re-establish “direct communication... between the actor and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator” (Artaud “Theatre of Cruelty” 96). This focus on intimate and porous social space worked to collapse theatrical and lived spaces at the site of artistic production.

It is fitting, then, that space is also foregrounded in O'Hara's description of the evening, which tethers the historical event to location, extending coordinates to the reader—“on the corner of 6th and 14th street” (O'Hara 1959)— and creates a spatial framework through which to view and contextualize the event as he retells it. This framework extends from the historical

event to the letter itself, in which attention to concrete space is bolstered in its invitation for us to engage with the text's site-specificity. What follows from the spatial coordinates provided ("On the corner of 6th and 14th street") is the retelling of an historical event presented, in part, as a scripted play. O'Hara frames the evening in question—a tumultuous night of infighting and acrimony at a shared reading with Gregory Corso—as something explicitly theatrical. Embedded in space and subsequently spatialized through the implications of genre and form, the letter becomes a dense layering of real, imagined, and trans-spatial properties: as epistolary text, it connects a sender with a receiver across disparate spaces; and simultaneously, by *scripting* the past, the letter frames remembered and theatrical spaces in terms of each other. Aligning with the theatrical practices of this period, then, O'Hara's letter asks us to approach the doubly located event as "a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind" (Artaud "The Theater of Cruelty" 96): even as Ashbery receives O'Hara's letter in Paris, his reading of it remains located in New York.

Along with these spatial and theatrical qualities, the letter itself also has an added archival element—similar to the Whitmanesque record of the personist poem—signaling immediately that what O'Hara is about to describe is worth preserving and is "the only thing of any event" that he has to report: a "disaster" of a reading at the Living Theater (O'Hara 1959). After a brief preface explaining the primary tension of the evening—Corso's "betrayal" of O'Hara through the "butter[ing] up" of Jack Kerouac, "an openly avowed object of [O'Hara's] dislike"—the text begins to take the shape of a scripted play (1959). As O'Hara describes it, Corso reads first and ends with his poem "Marriage," which he concludes with a series of aggressive and homophobic remarks aimed at O'Hara: "You see, you have it so easy because you're a faggot. Why don't you get married, you'd make a much better father than I

would” (1959). Allen Ginsberg, who is also in attendance, interjects with a plea for Corso to “shut up and let [O’Hara] read,” thus becoming the second target of Corso’s aggression—“And you’re a fucking faggot too, Allen Ginsberg” (1959). Then, Kerouac, who until this point has been waiting in the wings, intercedes:

Jack Kerouac: Let me read, I want to read from *Mr. Sachs* (his new novel)

Gregory: No, it’s our reading, you stay out of it.

So I [O’Hara] read a few things ending with the “Ode to Mike Goldberg.”

Gregory said, “That’s beautiful” and everyone seemed to be interested, when Jack K said “You’re ruining American Poetry, O’Hara.”

Me: That’s more than you ever did for it.

Intermission—during intermission, a long emotional scene between me and Gregory about whether I was withdrawing from him, would I stick by him, etc. I reminded him that he’d also prefaced my reading by the remark “he’s sort of chichi sometimes but when he feels something its terrific.”

Enter Jack Kerouac.

Gregory (starts shouting): You’re taking my Frank from me! You put me in a bad light!

Jack repeats about ruining etc. Gregory remarks that he shouldn’t put my work down, that “Ode to MG” is beautiful.

Jack says: I don’t like it.

I say: Jack, I’ve known you for several years and I never liked you and I don’t care whether you like me or it or anything else.

Jack says: I’m sick and tired of you and your six thousand pricks.

Intervention on the part of stage manager and Julian who have been running in and out during this. Jack lies on the floor. We go back... (O'Hara 1959)

Reading this letter over sixty years later raises the following questions: What happens when Artaud's "single site" ("The Theater of Cruelty" 96) is cast as transtemporal? How do the performative and site-specific implications of O'Hara's letter operate in new spatial, temporal, and social contexts? How is the re-performed archive affected when the boundaries around the site-specific, theatrical event shift across times and, crucially, spaces?

The archival elements of this piece are evident: the letter seeks to capture and preserve an event that plays out within the coterie settings of the New York poetry reading. Equally, the letter serves as an example of the inter-mediatic nature of the New York art scene during the 1950s and 60s, bringing together poets, directors, painters, and filmmakers within the shared space of the theatre. According to O'Hara's letter, the reading in question brings together the Living Theatre's cofounder Julian Beck, poets Frank O'Hara, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac, poet and filmmaker Willard Maas, painter Willem De Koonig, and composer Morton Feldman—amongst others—within the walls of a prominent off-off-Broadway theatre (O'Hara 1959). Yet, the letter does more than preserve the community event. It also articulates the interpersonal dynamics and relationships of the community itself. To read the letter in full provides an intimate and affective portrait of the New York art scene, replete with allegiances, infighting, private jokes, and personal slights.

At the same time, the use of theatrical conventions (the entrances and exits, the intermission, the final intervention by the anonymous "stage manager" and Beck) and the ways in which these conventions undercut the authority of the "staged" event introduce a new set of problematics to the question of theatrical and archival spaces. Although presented factually,

what does the use of these conventions lead to our reading of the historical or the spatial? O'Hara himself troubles this notion when, at the end of his letter, he concedes, "[a]ctually, everyone has a different version, but this is the way I remember it" (O'Hara 1959).

"Lucky Pierre Style": Intimacy in New York's Theatre Scene

I would simply say that theatre is something which engages both the eye and the ear.... The reason I want to make my definition of theatre that simple is so one could view everyday life itself as theatre.
-John Cage⁸

Along with O'Hara's conception of the personist poem as a means of creating personal connection by direct communication with an audience—rendered doubly intimate through the implications of the *performed* personist text—artistic spaces in New York City were also becoming increasingly intertwined with individual artistic communities at this time. Particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, New York became a locus of poetic, theatrical, and artistic experimentation, often described under the banners of the off-off-Broadway scene and the New York School of poets and painters. In *Playing Underground*, Stephen Bottoms describes the off-off-Broadway scene as characterized by a horizontality that brought together artists across mediums, all of whom were "experimenting in directly comparable ways," including "poets, dancers, painters, musicians, and filmmakers" (2). While the aesthetics and media of this artistic movement were incredibly diverse, and the venues associated with it were more of a "loose constellation of enterprises" than an organized collection, the scene is marked by its strong sense of community (3). Because this constellation of community-focused venues provided a point of contact between a variety of art forms, the history and description of the New York art scene in this period provided by Bottoms and others is integral to our understanding of both theatre and performance practices as they develop into the second half

⁸ This quote is taken from an interview with John Cage by Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner for *The Tulane Drama Review* in 1965.

of the twentieth century. The spirit of exchange and collaboration that existed between performance art, experimental theatre, and American poetry has been well documented—and well mapped—amidst the network of shared performance spaces and venues, collaborative projects, and inter-mediatic friendships and partnerships.⁹ We can read the development of artistic practice in this context as being the direct result of the spatial practices that enabled it. That is to say, in the sharing of the spaces of production and performance, we see a distinct move toward inter-mediatic collaboration and experimentation. As a result, the sharing of space also becomes central to the aesthetics that develop within this community.

In part, this move toward close-knit artistic communities and inter-mediatic experimentation is also the result of an influx of European avant-garde artwork and manifestos reaching American shores. In particular, the influences of surrealism and the work of Antonin Artaud help contextualize the artistic undercurrents of this period, including those that arise from O'Hara's letter and from poets theater more generally. Both, I argue, express a desire for intimacy stemming from the disillusionment and disconnect felt by artistic communities following the First and Second World Wars. This desire extends in various forms across both theatrical and poetic practice, beginning with the first traces of surrealism in the 1920s and the drive to collapse the distinction between art and life, with the ultimate goal to “transform the world and to change life” (Fijalkowski and Richardson 1).

For many early avant-gardists, like the surrealists, this desire for revolutionary change manifested as a form of performed terrorism against the audience. As RoseLee Goldberg describes, “from the Futurists to the present.... Performance has been a way of appealing directly to a large public, as well as shocking audiences into reassessing their own notions of

⁹ For more on the off-off Broadway movement see Stephen Bottoms' *Playing Underground*, and Arthur Sainer's *The Radical Theater Notebook*.

art and its relation to culture” (214). André Breton’s “Second Manifesto of Surrealism” provides a poignant example when he writes that the “simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd” (125).

While poets theater does not necessarily offer an equivalent to Breton’s smoking gun, the poetry reading was often a space of—sometimes radical—social experimentation. One particularly resonant example arises from a reading held on January 10, 1968 at the Poetry Project in New York City, where Kenneth Koch was interrupted in the midst of reading “To My Audience” by a loud gun shot. As Ron Padgett remembers,

A tall, somewhat scraggly white man, in his mid-to-late twenties and wearing a Dostoevskyan overcoat, emerged from the door behind the podium and took a few steps towards Kenneth, on Kenneth’s left side, and he aimed a small revolver at Kenneth and from close range fired several shots. It was quite loud and stunning. Kenneth cringed and lurched. The audience jumped. I jumped too, but I kept my eye on Kenneth and saw that he was not shot. Around this time there were lots of Happenings, and other unusual art events with pranks set up to fool the audience, so you never knew. But it was very unlikely that Kenneth was going to set up a thing like this. When I saw that Kenneth wasn’t in fact hurt, and I realized that this must be some kind of stunt, I was mightily relieved. Meanwhile, the assailant walked down the center aisle toward a cohort who was distributing leaflets from the back (qtd. in Kane 172)

The library at the University of California, San Diego, holds a recording of this event, upon which, fittingly, Koch can be heard calling after the assailant “...surrealist with a gun, get out

of here!” before adding, in jest, “I never should have said ‘my audience of camel dung!’” (“Kenneth Koch Poetry Reading January 10 1968”). This illustrates surrealism’s influence on the New York art scene, and while it is not Koch’s reading of “To My Audience” that jars its listeners into rethinking their relationship to the space of performance, the space of performance is nonetheless encapsulated in the surrealist event. In hearing the shocked silences, confusion, yelling, and relieved laughter of the audience, there is also no question that the staged shooting heightens the intimacy of the performance space and destabilizes the distinction between art and life.

We see these tactics, too, in the work of Antonin Artaud, who advocates in *The Theater and its Double* for a theatre aligned not only with life as we recognize it but with *living*. In his preface, “The Theater and Culture,” Artaud argues for an artistic form that acts as “protest against the idea of culture as distance from life—as if there were culture on one side and life on the other, as if true culture were not a redefined means of understanding and *exercising* life” (10). Rather, he suggests, the new theatre must provide a “sense of life renewed” and of a theatre that “brings [life] into being” (13). For Artaud, this interpretation of the theatre can be read as life’s double: not in the sense of an imitation or recording, but in the sense of a parallel:

the true theater, because it moves and makes use of living instruments, continues to stir up shadows where life has never ceased to grope its way. The actor does not make the same gestures twice, but he makes gestures, he moves; and although he brutalizes forms, nevertheless behind them and through their destruction he rejoins that which outlives forms and produces their continuation.... For the theater as for culture, it remains a question of naming and directing shadows: and the theater, not confined to a fixed language and

form, not only destroys false shadows but prepares the way for a new generation of shadows, around which assembles the true spectacle of life. To break through language and to touch life is to create or recreate the theater. (12–13)

Here Artaud seeks a type of intimacy through theatrical practice that brings together audience and spectacle in an experience that is *lived*. While, like his surrealist contemporaries, Artaud sees this form of artistic intimacy as a means of instigating revolutionary change, his appeal to merge art with life also resonates with the understanding of poets theater as a spatially integrated and partially improvised theatrical event.

Returning to O'Hara's letter to Ashbery and his connection to location, the Living Theatre was an early adopter of Artaud's theatrical practices, seemingly taking their name from the suggested collapse between theatre and the lived experience. Well-known for their use of aggressive and participatory performance tactics, through which they believed they "might emotionally and physically affect audiences enough to encourage their participation in socially transformative efforts" (Keenaghan 101), the Living Theater, like their surrealist predecessors, utilized the space of the theatre "to change life" (Fijalkowski and Richardson 1). Similarly to O'Hara's personist poem and both surrealism's and Artaud's argument for artistic practice that merges performance with life itself, this change depends on an intimate space in which the audience's experience of the event merges with their experience of everyday life.

Metatheatricality

A way this intimacy between theatre and life manifests in poets theater is through the use of metatheatricality. As poetic and artistic practices of this period seek to collapse the distinction between art and everyday life, they also begin to focus on the quotidian experience. Moving from the intimate artistic practices of this period, then, I explore how a play can

actively and visibly conflate the spaces of everyday life with the space of the theatre through a process of theatricalization. While theatricality “is not a strictly theatrical phenomenon” (Féral 95), I am interested in how everyday life is brought into theatrical space and the implications this has on both spatial practice and product.

In “Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language,” Josette Féral ties social space and theatrical space together through an analysis on the concept of theatricality. For Féral, theatricality is a combination of spectatorship and spatial practice, in which “[t]heatricality does not emerge passively from an ensemble of theatrical objects whose properties one could enumerate at a glance, but as part of a dynamic process belonging to both the actor and the spectator who takes possession of the action he watches” (102). This dynamic can play out in both designated and non-designated performance spaces, each with their own sets of problematics. In the theatre, for example, “[t]he spectator knows what to expect from the place in which he finds himself.... Because a semiotization of space has already occurred, the spectator perceives the theatricality of the stage, and of the space surrounding him” (96). In what we might designate as “nontheatrical” spaces, a different semiotization of the space has occurred, designating a different set of spatial practices. Notably, for Féral, “space is the vehicle of theatricality.... for the passage from the literary to the theatrical is first and foremost completed through a spatial realization of the text” (96). But it is also “the simple exercise of watching that reassigns gestures to theatrical space” (97). As such, “[m]ore than a property with analyzable characteristics, theatricality seems to be a *process* that has to do with a ‘gaze’ that postulates and creates a distinct, virtual space belonging to the other, from which fiction can emerge” (97). In this way, texts like O’Hara’s letter, John Ashbery’s *The Heroes*, and Lionel Abel’s *Absalom*, all of which I will discuss below, turn a lens back on everyday life, a

process that framing the quotidian *as* theatre formalizes. While theatricalization can be read as a spatial process that occurs both inside and outside theatrical spaces, metatheatricality—which Abel defines as “theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized” (60)—operates with an innate sense of self-reflexivity. As a socially integrated theatrical event, poets theater in general tends to possess this same self-reflectivity.

i. The Artists’ Theatre

The Artists’ Theatre, an experimental theatre group operating in New York City between 1953 and 1956, offers a poignant example of the inter-mediatic collaboration that existed during this period. According to director Herbert Machiz, the company prioritized “a merger of writers, painters, and composers” (7), producing, over their brief tenure, sixteen plays that brought together artists such as Andy Warhol, Al Kresch, and Larry Rivers, as well as composers such as John Gruen and Teji Ito.¹⁰ Amongst this repertoire were several poet-written pieces such as *Try! Try!* by Frank O’Hara, *The Heroes* by John Ashbery, and *The Bait* by James Merrill.¹¹ In introducing *Artists’ Theatre: Four Plays*, a published selection from the company’s short run, Machiz notes that the Artists’ Theatre “wanted only to encourage free collaboration of artists who would experiment with new vistas for themselves and offer fresh experiences to an audience” (8). In so doing, the company produced plays that “bypass[ed] an

¹⁰ For a sample of the work produced by the Artists’ Theatre over this short period, see *Artists’ Theatre: New York*, edited by Herbert Machiz (Grove Press, 1960) and *Playbook: Five Plays for a New Theatre* (New Directions, 1956).

¹¹ In *Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets*, Terence Diggory erroneously suggests that the *Try! Try!* performed at the Cambridge Poets’ Theatre was the same as the *Try! Try!* produced with the Artists’ Theatre. However, a footnote to the version of *Try! Try!* included in *Artists’ Theatre* reads, “This is the second play of this title and with these characters. The first was performed by the Poets’ Theatre, Cambridge, Mass. The present play is not a second version, but an almost completely new play written for the New York cast and for the décor of Larry Rivers” (17). The preceding version, which was written in 1951 and subtitled “*A Noh Play*” was performed on the Cambridge Poets’ Theatre’s opening night, with a cast including John Ashbery, Violet “Bunny” Lang, and Jack Rogers. For more information, see Andrew Epstein’s *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*.

exhausted naturalism in favour of a fresh approach to the individual in the coils of modern society” (9). Accordingly, this anti-illusory approach to theatre worked toward an aesthetic in which “[n]one of the plays need be hampered by the tiresome requisites of ‘realism’” (12). This interest in audience experience and the ultimate goal of untethering the theatrical from “realism” and “naturalism” indicates a new spatial focus in the theatre’s work. In Machiz’s words, “[t]he *play* was always the thing” (italics added 12). Attention to “the play” as a mediated experience draws the audience’s attention to the constructedness of both the work of art and the experience of everyday life, which, in terms of the metatheatrical, we can read as the space of performance.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the theatre staged Lionel Abel’s award-winning play *Absalom* as its final production, in May of 1956. *Absalom*, which retells the Judeo-Christian story of the conflict between King David and his son, is a meditation on the tension around performative and lived space, both of which, we learn, are constructed. The play’s primary tension stems from a conflict between language and action: a king struggles to name an heir, creating a rift within his own family and ultimately starting a war. While David’s decision holds disastrous consequences, we discover that it is only in the performative act of naming that his decision has any effect. As John L. Austin notes of the speech act, “it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing... or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (qtd. in Reinelt 203). The performative utterance, then, becomes the act.

Within *Absalom*, we see several examples of this dynamic as the performative utterance continuously overrides the action of the play. For instance, David initially postpones his decision to name an heir, but Abishai (his scribe) refutes him, stating that he cannot because

he “has already written in this chronicle that today [David] will announce [his] heir to the people of Israel” (139), ultimately claiming that David’s “acts are destined” (140) by the hand of the scribe. As the play continues, Abishai and his “magical” (140) book begin to drive the theatrical action until, eventually, David’s behaviour merge with the words of the scribe:

Abishai:

Yes, Sire. And now I shall write how you appointed him. (*David sits before the table.... Abishai is seated and writes. David reads haltingly, having to wait on Abishai’s writing.*)

David:

Then David called... his counsellor, Joab (enter Joab) and David said to him, “You are for Absalom... and the people in the main are for Absalom... and Tamar is for Absalom... then there are Jonadab and Adonijah, each of whom would like to be chosen himself... yet each prefers Absalom to the other.... But I have one other son, Joab, who likes his own claim.... Send me that son now, Joab.... Send in to me my youngest Solomon.

(Solomon, in the ante-room, rises as if he had heard his name called. Jonadab and Adonijah also rise and exit, dismissed. Solomon enters the throne room. David rises and crosses toward him. Solomon kneels. David removes his crown and places it on his son’s head. Semei is overcome. A pause, during which all the characters remain fixed in their postures). (149-150)

As David reads, the artifice of the production begins to show through the lines of text and the hand of the author becomes more and more visible. For an audience, it becomes impossible

to ignore the connection between the action of the play and the hypervisibility of the script. As such, the play reflects on its own constructed nature.

In 1963, the same year as *Absalom*'s debut, Abel, the play's author, defined the metatheatrical as "theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized" (60). As we see in *Absalom*, this paradigm moves beyond the "play-within-a-play" (60) model to include texts critical of their own constructedness. In an effort to validate metatheatre, Abel writes,

Only certain plays tell us at once that the happenings and characters in them are of the playwright's invention.... Such plays have truth in them, not because they convince us of real occurrences or existing persons, but because they show the reality of the dramatic imagination, instanced by the playwright's and also by that of his characters. Of such plays, it may be said: "The play's the thing".... Moreover, I wish to designate a whole range of plays, some of which do not employ the play-within-a-play, even as a device.... Yet [they] have a common character: all of them are theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized. By this I mean that the persons appearing on the stage in these plays are there not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them.... They represent to the playwright the effect of dramatic imagination before he has begun to exercise his own; on the other hand, unlike figures in tragedy, they are aware of their own theatricality. Now, from a certain point of view, only that life which has acknowledged its inherent theatricality can be made interesting on the stage. From the same modern view, events, when interesting, will have the quality of having been thought, rather than of having simply occurred. But then the playwright has the obligation to

acknowledge in the very structure of his play that it was his imagination which controlled the event from beginning to end.

Plays of the kind I have in mind.... I call metaplays, works of metatheatre. (59–61)

I quote Abel at length here because of how his own definition incorporates elements of artistic intention and reflexivity, as well as an insistence on both the theatricality and the quotidian elements of the plays in question—that is, the way in which life must be “aware of its own theatricality” (60) and the ways in which life is captured on stage while also becoming reflexive of life itself, not only mimetically but intrinsically. To be aware of one’s own “inherent” theatricality turns the looking glass back on everyday life, ultimately magnifying its constructed nature. In *Absalom*, Abel’s own language mirrors that of Abishai; “the characters remain fixed in their postures” (*Absalom* 150), as if “caught by the playwright in dramatic postures” (*Metatheatre* 60).

Another example of Abel’s style of metatheatre can be found in John Ashbery’s *The Heroes*, staged by the Artists’ Theatre in May of 1953. The play brings together a cast of characters from Greek mythology, including Achilles, Circe, Theseus, and Patroclus, for a weekend away at “a country house near the sea” (47) and opens with Theseus telling Patroclus about his experience with the minotaur in Daedalus’ maze. Reflecting on the constructed nature of myth and narrative, Theseus states,

I’d always supposed the world was full of fakes, but I was foolish enough to believe that it was made interesting by the varying degrees of skill with which they covered up their lack of integrity. It never occurred to me that the greatest fake of all would make not the slightest effort to convince me of its reality...

not a pretense! But there it was—a stupid, unambitious piece of stage machinery. (36)

Aligning his past experiences in terms of his present theatricality, Theseus draws attention to the ways in which “reality” might be staged. Within the quotidian setting of the “weekend away,” a space made only more mundane in contrast to its heroic occupants, Theseus’ words highlight the theatricality of the play in progress. In contradiction, though, Theseus remarks that “the maidens [the minotaur] was supposed to have devoured” (49) were, in actuality, “All dead” (51), complicating the easy distinction between the “fakes” and the real. This scene concludes with a re-performance of Theseus’ experience in the maze with the help of Hebe (playing the part of Ariadne) and Patroclus (playing the monster). Theseus narrates, “[d]rawing my sword... I kicked open the door to the little privy-like enclosure where he lay. There was nothing there but a great big doodle-bug made of wood and painted canvas” (52–53). While the original monster is shown to be fake, however, Patroclus’ re-performance of his encounter with it shocks Hebe into a faint—ultimately asserting, within this metatheatrical engagement with the past, a certain performative reality.

Like O’Hara’s letter to Ashbery, metatheatricality as defined by Abel relates to poets theater as a genre because of the way both frame lived space as “already theatricalized.” Like the re-enactment featured in *The Heroes*, however, it is in the theatricalization of the performance that the true nature of lived experience becomes visible. Like Breton shooting into a crowded street or Koch assaulted at a crowded reading, the heightened experience of situating performance within everyday spaces offers new avenues for experiencing both life and art.

The Transtemporal Coterie of the Living Archive

While surrealism and surrealist tactics can be read as “a reorientation of life away from the stagnant existence the structures of contemporary society give it, toward the promises of desire” and self-expression (Fijalkowski and Richardson 1), Raymond Spiteri argues that there is also a “collective dimension” to the movement (107). This collective dimension exceeds the limitations of self-identity to “engende[r] new modes of collective belonging and community,” with the broader goal of political transformation (107): not only does surrealism demand a sort of “collective identity” through the idea of group participation and aesthetic or political programme but it also “entails a belief that the repressive structures of society—family, country, religion—can be overthrown and replaced by a new, non-hierarchical mode of sociability” (107).

It is within the theatrical and artistic milieu of the surrealists, Artaud, and the Living Theatre that the New York School poets formed their own close-knit artistic community in the 1950s and 1960s, working with a keen “awareness that their destinies as poets were intertwined” (Lehman 2). Predictably, their oeuvre as a whole reflects a similar sense of shared production and community, marked by frequent collaboration, name-dropping, and direct address.¹² The intimate ways in which the New York School, their social circles, and their readerships interacted is similarly visible in the poetics of the period, perhaps most clearly articulated in O’Hara’s own poetics of coterie which, as Lytle Shaw argues, worked to build and delimit poetic community *through* verse, mirroring the surrealist desire to produce “new, non-hierarchical mode[s] of sociability” (Spiteri 107). This is especially apparent in two

¹² For more on the New York School collaborations see Andrew Epstein’s *Beautiful Enemies*, especially the subsection “Coterie and Collaboration: The Avant-Garde as ‘Intimate Community’” (pp. 29-40) and *New York School Collaborations: The Color of Vowels*, edited by Mark Silverberg.

coterie plays from the New York School catalogue: O'Hara, Koch, and Ashbery's collaborative play *The Coronation Murder Mystery* and James Schuyler's *The Mystery Chef Mystery*.

The Coronation Murder Mystery was written for and initially performed on November 9, 1956, at the studio of Mike Goldberg (noted to be, specifically, 86 East 10th Street) as part of a celebration for James Schuyler's thirty-third birthday, a party at which the play is also set. Starring Goldberg and his fellow artists Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher as themselves, alongside Ashbery as Schuyler, Koch as a psychiatrist, O'Hara as "the body" (later suspected by the other characters to actually be Koch), the actress Irma Hurley as "girl," and Hal Fronden as the art dealer and writer John Myers (famous for providing the New York School poets with their moniker), the play begins with "Jimmy Schuyler... visiting Mike and looking at his paintings" (145). Suddenly, a "pretty girl" bursts in, seeking help in solving the mystery of her murdered brother (145). A rotating cast of characters joins the group, interrupting each other and talking at cross-purposes—including Freilicher who, as herself, interrupts the action from the audience (148). While in the end, it turns out that the girl's brother has not, in fact, been murdered, it is revealed that she is Rivers' younger sister and an ardent "fan of Jimmy Schuyler's" (153). The murder mystery, it turns out, despite revealing an actual body, was merely an "unseemly way... to introduce [the two characters]" (153).

In "New York School Collaborations and *The Coronation Murder Mystery*," Mark Silverberg remarks on both the collaborative and social elements of the play, citing Thomas Hines's definition of collaboration as "work artists do together to produce a joint creation" (Hines 4) and Peter Schjeldahl's description of a specifically "New York School collaboration" as being as "infectious and frustrating as a lively party overheard through a wall. (You had to

be there. You almost are)” (qtd. in Silverberg 7). In keeping with much New York School writing, *The Coronation Murder Mystery* makes extensive use of name-dropping and gossip, even going so far as attaching the names of New York School poets, their friends, and their influences to everyday objects such as “Elliot and Stein orange and grapefruit juice” (152) and “John Ashbery petunias” (153). But, Silverberg is quick to note, the play “stages a kind of collaborative or communal dream where people, reputations, and names float freely” but individual identity “is subsumed by the collective” (5).

This reading of the play, which situates it as both a “collaborative” and “New York School” project is also particularly apt in relation to the central dilemma of poets theater:

As imagined audience members, we are both there and not-there for this (campy, overdramatized, and yet for that very reason seemingly real)... event. Structurally, the play defies narrative and the conventions of realist theater in favor of a loose construction that we might say takes the shape of a party that audience members have been invited to attend. Since both the play’s subject and occasion are a social gathering, and since part of the cast performs from the audience, the line between performers and observers is practically erased. In fact, both roles are subsumed by the more inclusive and essential role of the partygoer. (8)

Schuyler’s own *The Mystery Chef Mystery* offers a similar model for collaboration with the audience. As seen in Koch, O’Hara, and Ashbery’s work, coterie can be created on a textual level through shared references, community intertext, and naming. If we expand our scope, we

can see this strategy at work across New York School poetry.¹³ For example, Frank O’Hara’s coterie poetics “thematized the idea of a close-knit audience through intimate, seemingly shared references, dedications, and the mention of proper names” (Shaw 2). As discussed in the previous chapter, Lytle Shaw’s *Frank O’Hara: the Poetics of Coterie* focuses on coterie, suggesting that the coterie writer, by creating a type of intertextual “intersocial matrix,” brings a “small, temporary collectivity into being,” which “helps to produce, highlight, or somehow change the terms of social formation” (49). The same is doubly true for a performed coterie, which softens the boundary between the space of performance and the space of real life by imposing a sense of collectivity and inclusiveness which therefore erases intrusive difference.

Like *The Coronation Murder Mystery*, *The Mystery Chef Mystery* relies, in part, on an intimate public’s ability to parse a number of private references. In their footnote to the play, Killian and Brazil remark that “the in-jokes fall fast and furious” (542) in anticipation of their reception by a coterie-based audience. For example, the subtitle (“A Play for Two Pianos”) is a reference to Schuyler’s “recently begun love affair with the pianist Arthur Gold, who with his partner Robert Fizdale was always commissioning works ‘for two pianos’” (542). Notably, the play itself depicts a raucous and absurd confrontation between two members of a love triangle, which plays out along the conventions of slapstick: in the short span of the two-page play, food is flung, the character of Cora is “clout[ed] by a frying pan” (Schuyler 50) wielded by Astorbery, and egg sandwiches are confiscated in an armed stick-up. While most of the in-jokes are lost to posterity, others are obvious: the two central characters, John Astorbery and Cora Koch, who, by the end of the play, is revealed to be Kenneth in a wig (62), are palpable

¹³ O’Hara’s work, along with that of the other New York School poets, has been explored in its relation to coterie in the work of Marjorie Perloff (*Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters*) and Geoff Ward (*Statues of Liberty: The New York School Poets*).

examples of coterie writing as modelled by O'Hara and discussed by Shaw. These characters were, of course, meant to signify Ashbery and Koch, but as the play ends and Cora is revealed to be Cora-Kenneth, they cross over into real life. "Drank Dzohara" (no doubt another thinly veiled reference, this time to Frank O'Hara) is also mentioned as the third member of this love triangle, but does not make an appearance. The mystery of *The Mystery Chef Mystery* is solved when three of the play's characters declare, "we know you Kenneth, take off that wig!" (62). An aside tells the audience that "Cora-Kenneth—for it is he—lets out a terrible cry as the others pelt him with spaghetti and meat balls as the curtain falls" (62). The absurdity of this ending, with the figurative punishing of the secret interlocutor Kenneth, illustrates the overlapping spheres of coterie and performed coterie. Of course, the relationship between the performance and its coterie audience was only thinly veiled. Yet, Kenneth's intrusion serves to hyphenate the social space of performance to the coterie space of the community in which the play was produced and performed. As such, the piece creates a "small, temporary collectivity" (49) amongst audience members and performers who, despite their original relation to the New York School poets, are at least temporarily invited into that shared space.

But as with O'Hara's letter to Ashbery, what happens when these plays are reproduced outside their original setting? Who will step in to play Jane Freilicher emerging from the audience, or Kenneth in a wig, if they are not there to play themselves? And how does this change the dynamics of poets theater's slippery archive? As Silverberg points out, the New York School's collaborative work exceeds the idea of authorship and comes to include an entire collective form. Further, "New York School collaborations produce a desire to *be there*, to enter the conversation, scene, or party out of which the work has seemingly grown" (7). The re-performance of the coterie play allows this collaboration to take place through time, cast

into the future. Both plays I have looked at here operate as a means of assigning coterie values, goals, and relationships to the surrealist and Artaudian tactic of merging the spaces of life and the spaces of performance. And just as Artaud wished to bring life to theatre, these situated examples of poets theater offer a strategy to bring life to the community archive.

To re-perform either of these plays would be to cast the play, the characters, the audience, and the social context across times. While much of the humour and specificity of the coterie play may be lost, it does nonetheless create an intimate link between performance spaces and, like O'Hara's personist poem, situates that performance between two people or groups of people, "Lucky Pierre Style." At the same time, the re-performance of the archival document lets poets theater merge archival spaces with lived ones, ultimately "allow[ing] the [audience] to become part of a community" (Herring 419) through the shared act of performance.

Coda: O'Hara's Letter Today



Figure 1. Still of John Ashbery (Right) with Ron Padgett (Left) reading O'Hara's letter, 5 April 2011. Used in accordance with fair use laws. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oacw2wX5nac>

It is perhaps worth noting that when I first encountered O'Hara's letter, it was not in the archive (though I later had the opportunity to read the letter in that context). Rather, it was in circulation: read aloud by its intended recipient as part of the Woodbury Library's *Oral History Initiative*. On April 5, 2011, at Harvard's Askwith Lecture Hall, Ashbery read the letter as part of an informal conversation with Ron Padgett, commemorating the life and work of their late friend Frank O'Hara. I accessed this text several years later as an audio recording, digitized and distributed as part of the Poetry Foundation's *Poetry Lectures* podcast, and as a video hosted on *youtube*. This unruly pathway of circulation allowed me to think about how spaces of performance collide with the spaces of history. Would I have found O'Hara's letter if it hadn't been re-performed? And how had Ashbery's recital of the letter framed my understanding of this coterie event?

My first observation about the letter was that in performance—that is to say, when read aloud by Ashbery—it becomes a type of historical *re-enactment*, rather than just a retelling of the night in question. The play that O'Hara crafts is introduced to new audiences, layering a new transtemporal context on top of the original documentary one with each repeated listen. As such, O'Hara's letter taught me to think about the enacted archive as distinct from the scripted one.

For example, in my own experience, Ashbery's reading of the letter fills the space of the room. It is warm, conversational, and humorous. He begins by explaining that he chose *this* letter because it offers an example of a "literary scandal... involving people [the audience would] all know about" ("Oral History Initiative: On Frank O'Hara"). The audience—also included in the framework of the event—are recorded giggling in anticipation. Next, Ashbery reads the letter by way of his own interpretation. The audience responds with silences and

laughter, and it is clear that they have been drawn into the action of the letter. I also feel drawn in as I listen at home, and I am reminded that every subsequent reiteration of the poets theater play echoes with the social-spatial relations of previous performances and spaces. I may be in my living room, but I am also (in part) in the Askwith Lecture Hall with Ashbery, and (in part) back at the Living Theatre with O'Hara, Corso, and Kerouac. This realization informs the methodology underlying this project, for which I have tried to choose texts that I can *witness* or *experience* in re-performance.

Given that all we usually have is a textual remainder, the scripted version of the poets theater play is also usually missing something. For example, without the added element of performance, the theatrical conventions of O'Hara's letter are far less visible. For this reason, the transcription I have presented above is based on the recording in which Ashbery reads O'Hara's letter: lineation, italics, and punctuation are my own interpretation of the performative event. Considered side by side, it becomes clear that it is in Ashbery's *re-enactment* of the letter that the archival play takes on something new, layering a theatrical event onto the historical one and subsequently adding an additional layer of commentary (through inflection, pause, and laughter), critique, and performance. The theatricalization of the letter, then, provides new contexts, new readings, and new animations of the historical. As such, the historical text, when re-enacted in new social spaces, becomes something of which "everyone has a different version, but this is the way I remember [or perform] it" (O'Hara 1959).

As a listener, and later as a reader, I came to O'Hara's letter in two distinct capacities. In both, I am a scholar, listening for nuance and considering the archival subject of study. But as a listener and *audience member*, I also become part of a community. In this new context, I

can read the archive differently: rather than merely *reading* Corso's outburst, for example, I can feel the way his homophobic comments cut through space, emblematic of the anti-gay sentiment and hyper-masculinity that surrounded the New York art scene, and the poetry world more generally, during the 1950s and 60s (Nelson 95). At the same time, I can laugh with Ashbery at Kerouac's haughty self-involvement, sharing in the joke and feeling O'Hara's "openly avowed... dislike" (O'Hara 1959). The limit to this sense of presence, though, is worth remembering: Ashbery is not fully present when I listen, nor was he at the reading described by O'Hara. However, his dramatized reading of the letter does work, in some capacity, to reactivate the event. While this recreation is a modified one, it exists, in part, because of my willingness as both a scholar and an audience member to extend my own sense of lived presence to the archival object.

But this experience also reminds me that the coterie projected through this recording—and ultimately through this project as a whole—is a privileged one, existing mainly in largely white, institutional spaces and speaking directly from the archive of those already privileged bodies. I have tried to mitigate this by exploring how poets theater provides a tactic for undercutting, as well as critiquing, the archival record. But as a whole, this project replicates the coterie that it studies.

Like O'Hara's conception of the personist poem, then, hearing Ashbery's retelling of the letter is like picking up the telephone: even though the person on the other end might be dead, there is still a lived point of connection. In keeping with Herring's suggestion, we connect with O'Hara's private life, the letter "creating an intimate artistic space through which... identification can occur" (Herring 416). But this time, identification is not "impersonal," and we do not need the text to "obligingly provid[e] a body for the disembodied

poet and reader to identify with” (419). Instead, we have our own bodies and our own lived spaces, which merge with performative and archival ones.

The letter itself is not an intentional example of poets theater, despite the fact that the use of theatrical conventions opens the text up to the possibility of re-performance. O’Hara’s letter does serve, however, as an archive. Accessing this archive involves *sharing* the spaces of the past: in sharing the space of the lecture hall with Ashbery—even though that space is highly mediated by recording equipment and headphones—I am in turn sharing my own spaces (the spaces in which I listen and study) with Ashbery, O’Hara, Corso, and others. At the moment of performance, our spaces become mixed and the archival text is brought to life.

Chapter 2. “What We Desire Now is Space”: Poets Theater’s Spatial and Textual Palimpsest and the Archival Interventions of the Second-Generation New York School Poets

Nothing disappears completely.... In space, what came earlier continues to underpin what follows.

-Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*

Frank O’Hara’s lunch poem “A Step Away from Them” follows its speaker through Manhattan:

...I go
for a walk among the hum-colored
cabs. First, down the sidewalk
where laborers feed their dirty
glistening torsos sandwiches
and Coca-Cola....
...
.... Then onto the
avenue....
...

On

To Times Square.... (ll. 1–16)

As he walks, he engages with his surroundings: he describes the people he encounters, and the poem appears to develop spontaneously from the experience of moving through urban space. Simultaneously, then, “A Step Away from Them” both records and responds to the situated, everyday experience of walking in New York City. It thus creates, as Brad Gooch suggests, “a record for history of the sensations of a sensitive and sophisticated man in the middle of the

twentieth century walking through what was considered by some the capital of the globe” (288).

Critically—and mirroring O’Hara’s letter to Ashbery—this act of quotidian documentation is followed by a performative imperative. The speaker, who starts his description of the walk in the first person, then shifts to the third, ascribing his actions outward to any “one” (l.40), as if offering a directive to the reader. With this shift, the poem progresses as a type of everyday performance, reminiscent of, as I discuss below, the Fluxus event score: “*one* has eaten and *one* walks, / past the magazines with nudes / and the posters for BULLFIGHT” (ll.40–42, italics added). In *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara: Difference, Homosexuality, Topography*, Hazel Smith develops a paradigm for reading “A Step Away from Them” that she calls the “performative-inscription,” drawing on “Austin’s definition of a performative as an illocutionary act which achieves what it says while it says it” (61). Arguing that “the walk and text are synchronous” (61), Smith suggests that “the walk poem has a performative, improvised and creative aspect which is closely allied to the poem as generative speech act” (61). In this way, the performative-inscription of the poem is able to affect the space of the city, creating a performative and, importantly, transformative, event in and of itself.

Strikingly, however, O’Hara’s work also turns the map of its composition into a form of spatialized, somatic remembrance, suggesting—as its title does—that the act and sensation of *walking* such spaces brings us closer to the past. As the poem progresses, the speaker’s engagement with the city triggers individual acts of memory and memorial. Nestled amongst the buildings, the streets, and their occupants, the walker contextualizes his journey with moments of significant cultural and personal loss: “[f]irst / Bunny died, then John Latouche, /

then Jackson Pollock” (ll.35–38). The act of remembrance, brought about through walking also becomes performative—seemingly tied to the space rather than merely the speaker. We get the impression that anyone who walks this route would also remember these significant cultural losses, as they become inscribed on the space.

“A Step Away from Them” asks us, as readers, to explore the past *spatially*: the poem’s site-specificity links both the walker’s and our own engagement with the past to the concrete space of the city. As such, while John Lowney argues that this work “stresses the role of memory for reading the present” (121), these moments of remembrance point equally to the spatial implications of reading the past. It is the creative, performative-inscription of the walk that conjures O’Hara’s memories, allowing him to access “what [he remembers] while [he remembers] it” (61). Both the spatial practice of walking and the space of the city itself combine to perform a type of archival action, creating a record while also accessing it, and connecting that record to the present moment of action.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, this form of spatialized, enacted memory allows authors, performers, and audience members to build affective community bonds through shared spatial-archival practice. But, as Smith articulates, walking the space of a poem or performance has further *inscriptive* implications. This chapter explores the ways in which the second-generation New York School builds on the spatial and poetic practices of their poetic predecessors, the first-generation New York School, by engaging with everyday spaces, poetic community, and transtemporality. Turning to the work of Bernadette Mayer, Joe Brainard, Alice Notley, and New York School interloper John Wieners, I read poets theater as a type of “performative-inscription” that produces a spatial-theatrical palimpsest, layering performances of space on to new spaces of performance, and providing, at the same time, a

platform for archival intervention. When the site-specific theatrical event unfolds in the spaces of everyday life, I argue, poets theater can work to subvert or intervene in the social-spatial relations embedded at the site of performance as much as it can work to affirm them. In exploring the performative, the work of the New York School's second generation both demands an audience and mounts a spatial-archival critique of the site of production.

Starting with two brief plays by Bernadette Mayer and Joe Brainard, I explore how the theatricalization of everyday life creates space for archival critique by becoming a form of "performative-inscription." Following Smith's paradigm, I argue that both plays ask us to approach everyday life as embedded spatial agents, or what Michel de Certeau calls imaginary "walkers... whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text'" (93).

Likening how we engage with urban space to the ways we use language, de Certeau suggests that

[t]he act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered. At the most elementary level, it has a triple "enunciative" function: it is a process of *appropriation* of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language); it is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language); and it implies *relations* among differentiated positions, that is, among pragmatic "contracts" in the form of movements (just as verbal enunciation as an "allocution," posits another "opposite" the speaker and puts contracts between interlocutors into action. (97-98)

Moving from the street to the theatre, the theatrical-archival text operates in a similar fashion, appropriating and intervening in the spatial practices already in place.

If, as de Certeau suggests, “[w]alking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks’” (99), how does the *textual* map walk the spaces of the archive? In terms of the spatial practices highlighted, sustained, and resisted through the collapsing of both past and present, as well as space and text at the site of performance (or archival access), the re-enactment of the site-specific text takes on a new set of spatial parameters, complicating and challenging the archival dimensions of the textual artefact as it moves to new contexts.

At the same time, poets theater allows its practitioners to participate in larger conversations about poetic lineage and community formation. The second generation utilizes methods similar to those employed by O’Hara and others to affirm connections across spaces and times, while simultaneously forming spaces of critique. Turning to Alice Notley’s poetic text *Dr. Williams’ Heiresses* and Wieners’ play *Of Asphodel, in Hell’s Despite*, I thus explore the ways in which the poet might use both site-specific and citational practices to reimagine poetic lineage and community membership. Investigating what it means to move within the spaces of memory, I suggest that, like O’Hara’s “A Step Away from Them,” both Wieners’ and Notley’s works ask us to explore the past spatially while also considering the ways in which new spatial dynamics complicate our readings of the past. The works collected in this chapter present a case study and critique of the sexual and gendered politics surrounding poetic community and lineage. However, this argument extends to the question of genre. If, as I suggested earlier, poets theater can be read as a form of re-enactment—a practice that absorbs into its spaces of performance both new and old spatial practices—this can complicate the

archival dimensions of the performed text by introducing and producing new social spaces within the context of re-performance.

Life Already Theatricalized: Two Examples of the Subversive Spatial Palimpsest

The second-generation New York School, a group of younger poets, including Ted Berrigan, Alice Notley, Bernadette Mayer, Joe Brainard, Ron Padgett, and Anne Waldman, were greatly influenced by their first-generation predecessors, who “made it possible to be conversational, funny, urban, personal, quotidian, elusive, allusive, sincere cosmopolitan, confessional, lyrical, and performative, often within the space of a single poem” (Shamma 2). While many were eventually forced to move out of New York City and into more suburban areas, they shared with O’Hara, Ashbery, and others an interest in quotidian life in the space of the city, as well as in poetic community and documentation. Ted Berrigan’s *The Sonnets*, for example, frequently chronicles his daily routine, incorporates references to friends and community members, and appropriates text from fellow poets.

Much of Joe Brainard and Bernadette Mayer’s work also trades in a poetics of documentation. Both produce forms of life writing that, like O’Hara’s “A Step Away from Them,” integrate the act of remembrance with poetic production. Brainard’s *I Remember* (1970), for example, is a collection—or collage—of memories, each beginning with the phrase “I remember”:

I remember the first time I got a letter that said “After Five Days Return To” on the envelope and I thought that after I had kept the letter for five days I was supposed to return it to the sender.

I remember the kick I used to get going through my parents’ drawer looking for rubbers. (Peacock)

I remember when polio was the worst thing in the world.

...

I remember my first cigarette. It was a Kent. Up on a hill. In Tulsa, Oklahoma.

With Ron Padgett. (5)

Across 138 pages—and then continuing in the subsequent *I Remember More* (1972), *More I Remember More* (1973), and *I Remember Christmas* (1973)—Brainard moves between the minor and the monumental, through the historic, the somatic, the cultural, and the personal. Critically, though, he employs a structure that at once dictates and summons memory. As Siri Hustvedt notes, it is as if, in writing the phrase “I remember,” “Brainard discovered a memory machine” (qtd. in Auster xviii). In this way, textual practice comes to stand in for and to *determine* memory. In remembering, but more than that, in the performative-inscription of writing “I remember,” Brainard collapses the *act* of remembrance with the site of literary production. It is in this performance of memory that he builds both an archive and a poetics of remembrance, conflating the act of remembering with the creation of the memory itself.¹⁴ Both Mayer’s *Memory* and her long poem *Midwinter Day* also develop a poetics of documentation in which the document is inextricably tied to the moment of composition. For example *Midwinter Day*, composed over the course of a single day, on December 22, 1978, records Mayer’s daily activities, thoughts, and emotions as she balances the pressures of motherhood and domestic labour against artistic production. Throughout the text, the act of writing

¹⁴ For more on life writing and Joe Brainard’s *I Remember*, see “Blowing up Paper Bags to Pop: Joe Brainard’s Almost-Autobiographical Assemblage” by Andrew Fitch and Wojciech Drąg’s “Joe Brainard’s *I Remember*, Fragmentary Life Writing and the Resistance to Narrative and Identity.”

becomes intricately interwoven with the day it seeks to document, shaping the textual product at the same time as it produces it.¹⁵

As with the work explored in the previous chapter, the second generation also embraced a metatheatrical approach to both theatre and documentation, creating, like their predecessors, “theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized” (Abel 60). Mayer’s short piece *A Play* also extends her poetics of everyday documentation to the “performative-inscription.” *A Play*, which was found amongst the Bernadette Mayer Papers in the Special Collections and Archives at the University of California, San Diego, reads—in its entirety—as follows:

[The text consists of only three numbered lines, or steps, describing a morning routine in which the gendered division of labour is illustrated through the juxtaposition of male pleasure and expectations around women’s work. *A Play* by Bernadette Mayer has been removed from this dissertation due to copyright restrictions.]

While examples such as *Memory* and *Midwinter Day* showcase Mayer’s poetics of documentation, *A Play* operates equally as Fluxus event score and daily record. George Brecht, founder of the Fluxus movement, defines the event score in comparison to its musical counterpart:

In composing music, the composer permits an experience by arranging a situation within which sound arises. If a musical score... prepares a musical sound situation, the event-score prepares one for events in all dimensions.... Rather than “an image of a concrete moment in life” it is a signal preparing one

¹⁵ For more on Mayer’s *Midwinter Day*, see “Experimental Poetry from the Disputed Territory: Rereading Bernadette Mayer’s *Midwinter Day* and Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*” by Lucy Biederman.

for the moment itself.... Event-scores prepare one for the event to happen in one's own "now." (qtd. in Robinson 113)¹⁶

But while the event score is intended to prepare its reader or performer for an event to happen within the fabric of their everyday life, Mayer's piece does the curious work of turning the lens inward, highlighting instead a spatial practice she sees, or at least presents, as commonplace. Calling attention to the uneven distribution of household labour, then, Mayer's use of the event score as form, along with her titling of the piece as *A Play* (and therefore framing it as theatre), demands an audience or witness to what is typically obscured. Moving beyond the transtemporal intimacy created through O'Hara's letter to Ashbery *and* the spatial implications of "A Step Away from Them," Mayer's work asks us to walk the subaltern spaces of domestic labour, eliciting a witness while simultaneously mounting a spatial-archival critique at the site of production. Following de Certeau in terms of its "acting-out" (98), any performance of Mayer's *A Play* re-appropriates domestic spaces and renders its various "contracts" (de Certeau 98) visible, and therefore open to critique.

Similarly, Joe Brainard's 1972 metatheatrical play *The Gay Way* actively and visibly conflates the spaces of everyday life with the theatricalized space of the theatre in order to mount a form of spatial critique similar to that inherent in the "performative-inscription" of Mayer's work. The play begins in the realm of everyday life—opening (with the rise of the stage curtain) on a "typical New York City 'Village' bedroom of the mid-fifties" (278). As described, the set itself is conventional and inviting, as "warm sunlight is streaming through the window" (278). This is one of the piece's defining features, as *The Gay Way* plays out in relation to the conventions of the intimate space of the bedroom. Yet, seemingly in opposition

¹⁶ Examples of Fluxus event scores include George Brecht's *Drip Music* (see Robinson) and Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit: a Book of Instructions*.

to this “typical” scene, the curtain reveals a tension as it lifts to expose two naked young men, asleep and in bed, “arm in arm” (278). The young men are partially covered by a white bed sheet but the play’s single line of dialogue, “I guess I better be getting up” (278), triggers a process of spatial reorganization. Like the pressure put on domestic space, as highlighted in Mayer’s *A Play, The Gay Way* uses the conventions of theatre to create a metaphor for the way social space is produced.

Just as one of the men begins to pull back the sheet in a move to get out of bed, the stage curtain quickly drops. Within the script, this action is accompanied by an author’s note explaining how “male nudity was not allowed on the stage in the mid-Fifties. And homosexual themes were heavily frowned upon” (278). As such, both the curtain and the bed sheet work to conceal the site of something that is not conventionally “visible” within heteronormative space: an intimate scene involving homosexuality and the homosexual body. In the intimate space of the “typical” (278) heteronormative bedroom, the homosexual body is subordinated and ultimately rendered invisible. The crux of the play, then, begins after the curtain falls:

As the indignant audience storms out of the theatre shouting “God damned pansies!” and “We want our money back!” the play continues behind the curtain as DICK gets out of bed and joins BOB on the floor for some wild love making (use your imagination here) much to the amusements of the stage hands who, you see, are the real audience. (278)

Through elaborate staging and role playing—Brainard notes that “only a limited number of ‘seats’ will be available due to union laws pertaining to a ‘fixed’ number of stagehands allowed on stage per performance” (278)—the audience is able to see what happens on *both* sides of the curtain. Standing on the stage but not directly involved in the performance, audience

members hyphenate the theatrical space of the bedroom and the social space of the theatre. As such, they bear witness to the (albeit fictionalized) production of the social space within the theatre itself while also gaining a certain amount of access to the presumably private space of both the intimate sphere and the behind-the-scenes production. As the border between theatrical and social space softens, the intimacy that we locate at the level of content in *The Gay Way* is mirrored in the production of the piece itself. Conflating spatial production with metatheatricity, Brainard's piece, being "aware of [its] own theatricality" (Abel 60), also operates as a meta-space, using the performance of spatial practice to elucidate the ways in which, as Lefebvre suggests, "*(social) space is a (social) product*" (26). As such, *The Gay Way* offers a metonymic example of how performance might intervene in spatial production, as well as another example of how the theatricalization of everyday life—that is, the framing of it *as* theatrical—can resist and alter social space.

Contextually, there is also a layering of temporal frames here: the piece, which is set in the 1950s, was not written until the 1970s and therefore can be read as a way of exploring the past.¹⁷ In this way, Brainard simultaneously harnesses the concept of re-enactment (setting his piece in the 1950s to be staged no earlier than the 1970s, when it was written), as well as the means of producing social space, utilizing the representational space of the theatre to intervene in the spatial dialectic. While this is not to suggest that the play offers any sort of concrete or archival re-enactment of a specific historical incident, it does speak to a more *general* form of spatial resistance.

¹⁷ There is no record that this play was ever performed before 2010, when it was staged as part of the Small Press Traffics Poets' Theater festival. There is little information about how this production was staged, excepting a photo by Alli Warren on flicker.com, showing two men lying on a stage covered in a blanket. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/alliwarren/4304883337/in/album-72157623107034135/>

In conclusion, while the theatre is not a city street, *The Gay Way* asks its audience to “walk” the text, ultimately altering the social space of its production. Since the audience must literally participate in the production (as stage hands), they can ultimately decide whether they “affirm... suspect... tr[y] out, transgress... [or] respect...” (de Certeau 99) the map provided by the script: they can follow the example set by the performed audience, or they can resist it. In either case, in the end, they must observe and participate. In this way, the text uses theatrical space to turn the audience’s gaze towards everyday life in order to offer a certain critique of it. The elements of re-enactment inherent in the historical framing of the text, then, take on a new set of spatial parameters, complicating and challenging the social space depicted in the piece.

Both Mayer and Brainard’s plays also imitate the condensed theatre of the Dadaists, Surrealists, and Italian Futurists, who turned toward brevity in order to instill their work with speed and power. The short play *Detonation*, by Italian Futurist Francesco Cangiullo, for example, reads in full as follows:

CHARACTER: A BULLET

Road at night, cold, deserted.

A minute of silence.—A gunshot.

CURTAIN. (qtd. Muse, 1)

As John H. Muse notes, *Detonation* “explodes previous [theatre] convention while distilling several hallmarks of modern theater: atmosphere trumps character, expectations are under attack, and an empty stage resonates beyond itself” (1). While both Mayer and Brainard’s plays could be read, in part, as a critique of the heterosexist, masculinist spaces of avant-garde and modern theatre, they also borrow the tactic of brevity in order to highlight the libidinal

economies and spatial relations at the heart of each piece. Aligning with Abel's work, Muse also reads this theatrical tactic as a form of metatheatricality, in which theatrical expectations "generat[e] conflict not on stage but in the audience, in the friction between the expected scenario and [the] departure from it" (5). Muse applies this reading to theatre conventions, but as Mayer and Brainard's work demonstrates, this framework could be applied equally to space: "brevity's meta[spatial] potential directs attention to a subtle form of reflexiveness.... these plays do not represent or discuss [spatial] production, but they make [social spaces]'s materials and habits unusually visible by paring them down" (6).

The Textual Palimpsest: Establishing Poetic Lineage through Re-Composition

According to David Lehman, John Bernard Myers attributed the "New York School" moniker to its "first-generation" in 1961—much later than the group's loose formation—in an attempt to promote their connection to New York's community of abstract expressionist painters, who had recently come to fame (*The Last Avant-Garde* 20). Even then, the name has been contested by many of the poets to which it was first ascribed. The group of poets who make up what has come to be known as the New York School's "second-generation" have also distanced themselves from the title (Shamma 8). Ted Berrigan playfully describes his own relationship to the school in an interview:

You asked me if I was a member and what about the New York School. Was I in it? Did it really exist? And I said, "Absolutely." "Certainly." "Of Course." I used to tell people they could join for five dollars, and they would write a certain kind of poem. Then I had an idea that the New York School consisted of whomever I thought. And I could have that idea, see, because there was no

New York School. I didn't have to consult John Ashbery to see if it was alright to think Philip Whalen from the West Coast was in it, too."

(qtd. in Shamma 6)¹⁸

Berrigan's playful approach to the question of poetic school and belonging demonstrates the challenges of imposing categorization on organic communities, as well as the different ways in which we might read poetic influence and affiliation. Does one merely need to pay a fee to join a poetic school? Or live close by? Does someone need to invite us in or approve our membership? As Stephen Voce demonstrates in *Poetic Communities: Avant-Garde Activism and Cold War Culture*, poetic community is negotiated through an ongoing process, dependent on participation, a shared social space—be it a room, a city, a magazine, or a page—and a collective aesthetic or social project (4). But this process can take many forms, occupy many spaces, and evolve and change over time.

Often, poetic lineage is also textually negotiated, critiqued, or affirmed. For example, Alice Notley opens her experimental essay *Doctor Williams' Heiresses* with a tongue-in-cheek poetic origin story that is worth quoting at length:

Poe was the first one, he mated with a goddess. His children were Emily Dickinson & Walt Whitman—out of wedlock with a goddess. Then Dickinson & Whitman mated—since they were half divine they could do anything they wanted to—& they had 2 sons, William Carlos Williams & Ezra Pound, & a third son T.S Eliot who went to a faraway country & never came back. From out of the West came Gertrude Stein, the daughter of the guy who wrote the 800-page novel & the girl who thought maybe rightly that she was Shakespeare.

¹⁸ From *Talking in Tranquility: Interviews with Ted Berrigan*, ed. Stephen Ratcliffe and Leslie Scalapino, O Books, 1991, pp. 90–91.

Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams got married: their 2 legitimate children, Frank O'Hara & Philip Whalen, often dressed & acted like their uncle Ezra Pound.... Anyway it was striking how there were no females in this generation; & the first children of the male-females & of Olson & their other brothers were all males, and there were very many of them because of their fathers' incredible promiscuity. But the male-females also produced a second wave of children of which there were many females. These females could not understand how they came to be born—they saw no one among their parents & brothers who resembled them physically, for the goddesses their fathers mated with were evaporative non-parental types. As a matter of fact these females couldn't even believe that their fathers *were* their fathers. They came to indulge in a kind of ancestor worship—that is they each fell in love with a not so distant ancestor. One of them, Bernadette Mayer, fell in love with Gertrude Stein. And the one named Alice Notley fell in love with her grandfather, William Carlos Williams. (*Doctor Williams' Heiresses*)¹⁹

Here, Notley mythologizes and outlines the development of American experimental poetry, while also acknowledging the complicated relationship that she and many other female poets have to this largely male-dominated lineage. While Notley admits that she “fell in love with her grandfather, William Carlos Williams,” “indulg[ing] in a kind of ancestor worship” (*Doctor Williams' Heiresses*) the rest of *Dr. William's Heiresses* collages excerpts of dialogue (presumably between herself and her husband Ted Berrigan) and reflective prose with pieces

¹⁹ According to Bob Perelman, *Dr. Williams' Heiresses* was originally delivered as a lecture forming “part of [Notley's] residency at 80 Langton Street, and it was published by Lyn Hejinian later that year in her Tuumba pamphlet series” (“fucking/me across the decades like we/poets like”: Embodied Poetic Transmission” 195).

of Williams' own writing—including poetry and excerpts from *I Wanted to Write a Poem: the Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*. As such, Notley is able to negotiate as she combines these textual elements, the nature of her relationship with her self-proclaimed forefather.

This use of collage helps create an anachronistic space of dialogue between Notley and Williams, though it is notable that Notley maintains control over the sphere of discourse. As Marjorie Perloff describes it, “collage always involves the *transfer* of materials from one context to another” (“Collage and Poetry”). Notley's work in *Dr. Williams' Heiresses* uses this technique to transpose Williams' often sexist narratives about gender into a new context. For example, in a section made up of a series of quotations taken from Williams' *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, Notley includes Williams' description of a reading to a group of female students at Wellesley College:

Floss had asked me to read the Coda to “Asphodel”... I thought I didn't have time... but they stood on their heels & yelled... the girls... my God I was breathless, but I said do you really want more & they said yes so I read what Floss knew they would like. They were so adorable, I could have raped them all! (Williams *I Wanted to Write a Poem* 95)

Here, Williams' juxtaposed description of the affective labour performed by his wife against his own violent objectification of the female audience is framed by Notley's experience with that text. As if she is speaking with Williams herself, *Dr. Williams' Heiresses* creates a space for Notley to talk back to her poetic predecessor, a man whose work remains highly influential on her own, but whose relationship to sex and gender is problematic. Her use of collage also allows her to invert Williams' authority over the textual sphere (as grandfather and patriarch).

By creating a textual palimpsest in which her work can coexist with that of Williams, she layers her own experiences, appreciations, poetics, and complaints on top of Williams' own writing.

In speaking back, *Dr. Williams' Heiresses* concludes with a passage wherein Notley addresses Williams directly and describes the conditions under which she wrote her long poem "Songs for the Unborn Second Baby":

I typed up all your poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," & Honey that took a long time. In that bad time there was always you. To love as a poet & to hate as a man. Immobile and pregnant & isolate & unhappy, I didn't need to read about your attractions to women other than your wife. ("Songs for the Unborn Second Baby")

Here Notley balances the comfort and pleasure she receives from Williams' poetic ever-presence against her distinct discomfort with certain aspects of his legacy, life, and influence. While, in part, Williams occupies a more generalized male role, adjacent to Notley's own gendered subject position, the exercise of communicating with Williams, and pivotally, of creating the space in which to talk *back*, allows Notley to conclude that she does not "even ever hate [him] temporarily anymore" (*Doctor Williams' Heiresses*). Rather, through the creation of the subversive textual palimpsest—that which layers discursive space on top of discursive space—Notley is able to regain control over her own writing, claiming Williams as both a profound influence and a problematic one.

To return to de Certeau's conception of the walker, as well as Hazel Smith's notion of the "performative-inscription" (61) Notley creates a textual landscape in which she is able to appropriate and challenge the cultural and poetic landmarks already in place within literary history. In so doing, she creates space for her own voice and own poetic practice by way of a text "closely allied to the poem as generative speech act" (H. Smith 61) and therefore

“achieving what it says while it says it” (61). Notley’s textual palimpsest, then, appropriates Williams’ language by “put[ting] contracts between interlocuters into action” (de Certeau 97–98) and explicitly drawing Williams into her negotiation of poetic lineage. As Notley writes in “Songs for the Unborn Second Baby,” a text which she associates closely with Williams’ own as both an obstetrician and a poet, Williams presents the “male principle of the poetry...fucking / [her] across the decades....” (“Songs for the Unborn Second Baby”). The intimacy, as well as the *double entendre*, of this statement speaks to the ways in which the poetic text might move across times and “affirm... suspect, tr[y] out, transgress... respect... etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks’” (de Certeau 99).

Site in Citation: Layering the Textual and the Spatial

Just as Notley’s textual palimpsest allows her to reclaim discursive space through textual intervention and collage, poets theater offers similar spaces of intervention. As shown with the work of Mayer and Brainard, the metatheatrical text creates the opportunity to rearticulate or draw attention to spatial relations, and subsequently to challenge or highlight those relations as covert spatial agents. In layering theatricalized space on to lived space, poets theater’s site-specific, audience-engaged performance practices also work to create a spatial palimpsest that aligns with Notley’s textual one.

John Wieners’ play *Of Asphodel, in Hell’s Despite*, a reworking of William Carlos Williams’ long poem “Asphodel, that Greeny Flower,” offers an example of the way poets theater can combine both the textual and the spatial palimpsest. Presented by the Judson Poets’ Theater and first staged on September 27, 1963, *Of Asphodel* is an example of the postwar artistic community’s shared ethos of bringing artists and poets together under the proscenium arch, while also removing the proscenium altogether: Wieners’ play was originally performed

against sets by artist Andy Warhol, and with a “rock’n’roll” musical score by avant-garde composer John Herbert Macdowell (Tallmer 14).²⁰ Combined under the direction of Jerry Benjamin, these different elements come together to create the type of spatial intimacy that blends lived space with the space of the theatre. Considered by Stephen Bottoms a “striking example of spatial experimentation” (79), *Of Asphodel*, under Benjamin’s direction and in line with Artaud’s call to re-establish a direct link between audience and spectacle,

followed certain happenings in dismantling the conventional stage/auditorium divide: spectators entered the room to dance hall music and were invited by the performers to dance and drink wine, before seating themselves on chairs arranged throughout the room, facing in different directions. Apples were placed and hung around the space within easy grasp of spectators, so that the spatial/visual concept tied in with the thematics of the play: spectator, seated within a church, is implicated directly in the act of eating—or at least being tempted to eat—Eden’s forbidden fruit.... [and t]he Judson audience was subjected to a bombardment of noise, lighting, and other effects...

(*Playing Underground* 79–80)

These spatial tactics soften the boundaries around the performance and create a type of intimacy within the shared experiential space of the theatre.

In his review of the play, *Village Voice* theatre critic Michael Smith recalls that the “extreme interpenetration of audience and action... le[d] to a relaxation in the audience that [was] socially very pleasant” (M. Smith). Because the barrier between action and audience was

²⁰ Presented by the Judson Poets’ Theater and billed alongside Gertrude Stein’s *What Happened* (music by Al Carmines, directed by Lawrence Kornfeld), Wieners’ *Asphodel* played for three consecutive weekends in 1963: September 27–30, October 4–7 and October 11–14 (Bottoms *Playing Underground* 79).

eroded through actions such as overlapping activities and participation within a shared sonic-visual space—as opposed to the delimited and separate theatrical and experiential spaces—audiences could move away from longstanding Western theatre conventions in order to ease *into* the performance in a way that would not have been previously possible. It should be noted, as well, that the audience is listed on the program among the performers (Tallmer 14), making their absorption into the action explicitly deliberate, marked, and expected, as well as suggesting the possibility of welcomed audience interruption. While Smith doubts that these tactics “contribute[d] much to the play at hand” (M. Smith), he acknowledges the reciprocal relationship built through the shared space and action of the play. These staging practices signal a reciprocal development of inter-mediatic artistic practices that emboldens the spatial quality of the performed art, poetry, and theatre of this period. At the same time, the spatial tactics at play in *Of Asphodel* align with Artaud’s conception of a theater of cruelty, working to sever the performance’s “subjugation...to the text” (“Theater of Cruelty” 89) and creating a new language within the theatre that “cannot be defined except by its possibilities for dynamic expression in space... [extending] beyond words... for dissociative and vibratory action taken upon the sensibility” (89).

As metatheatricality highlights the constructed nature of the theatrical text, reflecting equally on language and the spaces of production, what I refer to as metaspaciality specifically calls attention to how social space is produced. We see this dynamic at the fore of Brainard’s *The Gay Way* and Mayer’s *A Play*, each of which engages with space through metatheatrical framing in order either to challenge or interact with social spaces. John Wieners’ *Of Asphodel, in Hell’s Despite* complicates our readings of the past by tapping into the latent potentiality of spatial practice. While not explicitly metatheatrical, the play *is* metaspacial in a way that I

suggest is emblematic of the poets theater genre. As such, I read this text as both a resistant and fluid performed archive. Within the porous spaces of performance characteristic of New York City during this period, *Of Asphodel* asks us to think about what it means to move within a space, and about how a present-tense engagement with the past might become a resistant form of archival practice.

Like Brainard's *The Gay Way*, *Of Asphodel, in Hell's Despite* mirrors the intimate spatial tactics of its production in terms of content, becoming both a play that is *about* intimacy and the social conventions around intimate relationships, and a spatial enactment *of* intimacy. As Bottoms' above-quoted description of the event hints, the play can be read as a retelling of the biblical fall, explicitly rescaled and relegated to the private sphere. The cast of the play is made up of five characters: two versions of a janus-faced heterosexual couple (one old, one young) and "The Girl in Green," a spring lily serving as chorus. In her prologue, the Girl in Green sets the stage for total intimacy—which we know from Bottom's description of the performance is also formal—describing it as a "play about people in Love and what it does / to them, as the atom interlinks with atom" (2). Working within this theme of near-cellular intimacy, the play depicts the two iterations of the same romantic couple as they encounter their past and future selves in a resplendent garden analogous to Eden. Led by the Girl in Green, the two versions of the couple simultaneously work through their past and future: the younger, more optimistic couple sees their future, and the old couple cynically recalls their past. Together, the two pairs weigh the value and possibility of everlasting love and the merits of long-term monogamy.

The younger couple includes a "Young Girl" who craves total intimacy: "[t]o make a short story" she says of her partner, "he's life or death to me / there is no difference... Leiben

ist Tod, und Tod ist auch en Leben” (“love is death, and death is also life”; my trans.; 2). In turn, she is chided by the “Woman,” her future self, who believes (from experience) that “soon [she]’ll be looking for other shoulders to cry on / or other arms to lie in” (2). The young man starts to get cold feet, and the older man regrets his own hesitancy.

By the end of the play, both couples decide to abandon their previously existing notions of “love”—which in the play is depicted as firmly heteronormative—and everyone ends up in Hell. In knowing each other—metaphorically biting the forbidden fruit, which also hangs from the ceiling, tempting the audience—the doubled characters realize they must eschew conventional heteronormative relationships as they prove, ultimately, to lead to failure. Theater critic Jerry Tallmer notes that the audience shares this experience: by the end of the play, everybody “ends in hell, actual not metaphorical,” and the spectator is “quite close to the edge of felt terror. He [sic] (onlooker) comes out of the dark with confetti and streamers in his hair, hysteria in his ears, whispers in his brain” (14). The shared realization between scripted characters and audience, emphasized by staging tactics that shatter the separation between audience and performance, penetrates the already existing social space of the theater, also calling into question the social norms girding everyday social space. The doubling we see in romantic pairing is also seen at the level of setting—the garden depicted could already be Hell just as easily as Eden, and the two couples could be moving from ignorance, in the Asphodel fields of the underworld,²¹ to the realization that they are already in Hell after all. This illusion is at the center of the play’s primary struggle: love’s—or at least conventional, heteronormative love’s—ultimate failure to fully realize itself.

²¹ The Asphodel fields in the Greek underworld are a type of purgatory where ordinary souls were sent after death to continue a version of their former lives (*The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*)

At the same time, though, *Of Asphodel*, like Notley's *Dr. Williams' Heiresses*, also creates a textual palimpsest, engaging with literary history and re-performing a version of William Carlos Williams' semi-autobiographical long poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," which tells of the trials and tribulations of love and deceit. As such—and in a way similar to how its central characters engage simultaneously with their past and present selves through the performance of the play—Wieners' work rehashes Williams' text as a performance of literary history. Like Notley, Wieners borrows heavily from Williams' own writing—"Young Man: ... I like some of what you said tonight. / mostly quotations but..." (7)—and creates a textual palimpsest that also aligns with the performed one. In merging the spatial and the textual, Wieners creates a space in which the audience can engage with Williams' writing and legacy, while also, critically, altering the spaces in which it was produced.

The play concludes with the Girl in Green summarizing this spatio-temporal overlap:

All the space of time contained
in this play we know as hell.
Equal chaos riding fortune here
Continue, continue.
Everywhere. (15)

With this, the action of the play—the tumultuous and universal conflicts of love—is set to continue (as theatrical re-enactment) in perpetuity.

According to Marjorie Perloff, Williams performed "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower" at one of his last poetry readings, at Wellesley in 1956: "Lowell movingly recalls the hush that fell over the enormous audience when the now-famous poet, 'one whole side partly paralyzed, his voice just audible,' read this 'triumph of simple confession'" (*The Poetics of Indeterminacy*

153). Weiner's play acts as re-enactment of this historical event, while also working within the framework of literary lineage. Like Notley's textual palimpsest, *Of Asphodel* allows Wiener and the participating audience the space to interact with, challenge, and undercut Williams' long-established narrative about love and marriage.

In terms of its spatial dimensions, *Of Asphodel* layers a map upon a map. The spatial-intimate dimensions of the play (as described by Bottoms) create a landscape of Eden/Hell within the shared space of the theatre. As the actors and audience then meander through that space, while simultaneously exploring their own pasts and futures, they enact a sort of "long poem of walking" (de Certeau 93) that blends performed and lived space. At the same time, the text's engagement with two concurrent spaces (are we in Eden or are we in Hell?) calls into question the space itself. The intimacy created by sharing the space of performance blends the imagined space of the play with the literal space of the theatre. While it would be a stretch to suggest that *Of Asphodel* is instructive in the way it challenges heteronormative narratives around love, it nonetheless traffics in a certain type of spatial intimacy in terms of its reworking of both Williams writing and of the affective role it plays for the community, building a literary-historical space upon an imagined—or inverted—one. Considering Smith's paradigm for reading the "performative-inscription" (H. Smith 61), Wiener's play operates within a discourse with Williams, as well as with the broader community. Like Notley's *Dr. Williams' Heiresses*, his play challenges the textual dominance of certain narrative and poetic hierarchies within the poetic community of New York City and spatializes that challenge in order to alter the archival record.

Coda

While the first-generation New York School poets used poets theater to build affective connections within poetic communities at the site of performance, as well as across times, the second generation shows, equally, that the intimate, inscriptive tactics of the theatrical-archival event can work to question, alter, or challenge those histories and memories. While O'Hara's "A Step Away from Them" creates a framework for reading the past spatially, Mayer and Brainard's work highlights the ways in which metaspaciality within the documentary performance focusses the reader or audience member's attention on how social space is produced and represented, and ultimately makes space for a critique of these self-same processes. Alongside Brainard and Mayer's work, Notley and Wieners' writing showcases how citational practices also create discursive spaces of critique. Wieners' *Of Asphodel, in Hell's Despite* doubles this enunciative function by combining the textual palimpsest with a spatial one, recreating the community event within a new context and new discourse.

Yet, while these examples illustrate how poets theater aligns with Smith's concept of the "performative-inscription", (H. Smith 61) this chapter is ultimately incomplete. The plays I focus on deal very explicitly with the performance of the text in space, but I have not had the opportunity to witness, experience, or stage any of them. Some, I have been able to trace through performance reviews, and some, it could be argued, were ultimately never intended to be staged at all. This raises an important question at the heart of this study: how might we read the spatial, when we are limited to text?

What I suggest is an imaginative middle ground. Although I have not had the opportunity to experience the spatial changes that I suggest these texts would create, or have created, in practice, maintaining a critical eye on these processes is nonetheless integral to their

study. Without access to the performance, we must embrace this sense of indeterminacy and consider how the hypothetical text might behave in a hypothetical space. While unsettling, this inexactitude creates an important critical opening for the potential of the spatial-archival text, allowing for a text that can change across contexts, across spaces, and between audiences: a text that may perform differently with each iteration. As such, the poets theater play must remain both fluid *and* tied to the spatio-historical context in which it has been, or may be, performed. Like the plays I have considered over the course of this chapter, this allows the spatial agent to take control of the archival object and challenge, subvert, or intervene in the very narrative it presents.

Chapter 3. The Poet as Time Mechanic: Re-enactment and Collage in the San Francisco Renaissance

A poet is a time mechanic, not an embalmer. The words around the immediate shrivel and decay like flesh around the body.... Objects, words must be led across time not preserved against it.

-Jack Spicer, *After Lorca*

Jack Spicer begins *After Lorca* with an introduction by Federico García Lorca, supposedly writing from “Outside Granada” in October 1957, over twenty years after his death (108). As this introduction makes clear, Spicer has enlisted Lorca’s ghost to introduce a new volume of his own poetry, itself a selection of translations of the dead poet’s work. Yet, the ghost remarks,

It must be made clear at the start that these poems are not translations. In even the most literal of them Mr. Spicer seems to derive pleasure in inserting or substituting one or two words which completely change the mood and often the meaning of the poem as I had written it. More often he takes one of my poems and adjoins to half of it another half of his own, giving rather the effect of an unwilling centaur.... Finally, there are an almost equal number of poems that I did not write at all (one supposes that they must be his) executed in a somewhat fanciful imitation of my style. The reader has no indication which of the poems belong to which category, and I have further complicated the problem (with malice aforethought I must admit) by sending Mr. Spicer several poems written after my death which he has also translated and included here. Even the most faithful student of my work will be hard put to decide what is and what is not García Lorca as, indeed, he would if he were to look into my present resting place. (107)

Apparently drawing equally on the practices of dictation, translation, and invention, *After Lorca* becomes the work of two spirits: that of the then-dead poet Lorca, and that of the now-

dead poet Spicer. Imbued, then, with what Lorca has termed *duende*, “an inspiring force” inherited from artistic, community, and magical predecessors (Shoemaker 346), Spicer establishes a framework in which his poetry channels the spirit of his long-dead poetic predecessor. As this spirit is drawn into Spicer’s work, this sense of *duende*—the affective and inspirational bond between Spicer and Lorca—also forges a connection across time, creating a social network in which both poets are, simultaneously, collaborators *and* co-entities.²² In essence, then, by embodying Lorca through the “co-written” introduction, as well as through the substitution and adaptation of certain words within his “translations” (107), Spicer presents a sort of poetics of “surrogation” (Roach 2) in which he embodies Federico García Lorca.

My use of the term “surrogation” is borrowed from performance scholar Joseph Roach, who uses it to indicate a method of cultural reproduction by which an always inadequate substitution for something replaces the absent thing itself. According to Roach, this process provides the capacity for “culture [to] reproduce[e] and re-creat[e] itself” (2). “In the life of a community,” he continues, “the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as accrual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric” (2). As a cultural practice, then, surrogation presents a form of historical re-enactment that openly acknowledges (and embraces) the replacement of the original by another. The surrogation of Lorca by Spicer, from the perspective of the latter continues to build “the network of relations that constitutes [his own] social network” (2), therefore appropriating a literary community across spaces and times even while expanding his own.

²² For more on Lorca’s conception of *duende* as it relates to poetry, see “Lyric as Performance: Lorca and Yeats” by Murray Baumgarten, Edward Hirsch’s “Learning from Lorca,” and Robert Eric Shoemaker’s “After *After Lorca*: Anamnesis and Magic between Jack Spicer and Federico García Lorca.”

Despite the fact that both poets reach us now from beyond the grave, Spicer is still, as Ross Clarkson notes in “Jack Spicer’s Ghosts and the Immemorial Community,” “very much with us” (Clarkson). Writing in 2001, Clarkson is referencing an increased interest in Spicer’s oeuvre, as indicated by a then-recent run of Spicer-focused publications, including Kevin Killian and Lewis Ellingham’s biography, *Poet Be Like God*, and Peter Gizzi’s edited collection of Spicer’s lectures, *The House Jack Built*.²³ Spicer is also very much with this dissertation, not only because of the way his work builds a transtemporal poetics of coterie, as I will discuss below, but because of how his poetry seeks to create something *real*, a goal I align with contemporary poets theater and its repercussions in the spaces of performance.

As *After Lorca* continues—and despite his surrogation of Lorca—Spicer writes that he would like to make a poem out of real objects, to eliminate the implicit metaphor at the heart of poetry and to make something concrete rather than merely representational:

I would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste—a real lemon like newspaper in a collage is a real newspaper. I would like the moon in my poems to be the moon, one which could be suddenly covered with a cloud that has nothing to do with the poem—a moon utterly independent of images. The imagination pictures the real. I would like to point to the real, disclose it, to make a poem that has no sound in it but the pointing of a finger. (133)

Spicer figures the real as sensual and haptic, unpredictable and relational, independent and rooted in touch, taste, and movement: a lemon to “squeeze or taste,” a moon which “could be

²³ Since 2001, this renewed interest has continued with the publication of *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Writing of Jack Spicer* (2008) and a forthcoming collection of unpublished works, edited by Daniel Katz.

suddenly covered with a cloud” (133). Much as the poet himself becomes a surrogate for Lorca, the poem becomes a conduit for real experiences. Language in this capacity operates as a type of anchor point used “to push the real, to drag the real into the poem” (123).

Again, we see the influence of Lorca’s concept of *duende* in Spicer’s poetics, as well as the re-emergence of Artaud’s profound influence on American poetics during the postwar period. As Murray Baumgarten describes Lorca’s *duende*, “[t]he force and power of the *duende* are part of its presentness, its enactment in the here and now, which are possible only when poem becomes performance. If it remains merely lines printed on a page it cannot be event and action. For Lorca the poem must become meaning enacted” (329). For Spicer, too, the poem must operate, in some ways, beyond language itself. Rather, the poem strives to become an exercise—or performance—of real affective connections between authors and audiences alike, or, in Artaud’s words, “[t]o break through language in order to touch life” (“The Theater and Culture” 13).

In poets theater—especially that surveyed over the course of this dissertation—we see this desire for the real, even if that reality merely recreates the archival document and surrogates the historic event with a recreated one. Yet, as a site-specific theatrical even, the performance of the poets theater play has real implications for the space of performance. For Spicer, this surrogation is possible because of the way

[t]hings do not connect; they correspond. That is what makes it possible for a poet to translate real objects, to bring them across language as easily as he can bring them across time.... But the answer is this—every place and every time has a real object to *correspond* with your real object—that lemon may become

this lemon, or it may even become this piece of seaweed, or this particular color of gray in this ocean. (*After Lorca* 133-134)

While we cannot travel between times or literally bring the past into the present, Spicer's work offers a conceptual framework for thinking through how we might continue to build a transtemporal coterie through surrogation and correspondence. As we shall see, Spicer's poetics of coterie extend beyond the present tense, in part because of the way poetry's present is contextual and in part through the articulation of its own boundaries, inclusions, and exclusions, creating what Clarkson terms "instance[s] of community" ("Jack Spicer's Ghosts and the Immemorial Community"). Clarkson explores the trope of the ghost in Spicer's work to argue that Spicer's use of "translation" operates as a determined act of poetic community-building which, through a correspondence with the dead, cuts through both spatial and, more importantly, temporal boundaries, building a heavily layered, transtemporal system of influences, voices, and shared practices.

This chapter seeks to align Spicer's coterie poetics with the performance practices of poets theater. As I have outlined elsewhere, from a performative standpoint, re-enactment, "the practice of re-playing or re-doing a precedent event, artwork, or act" (Schneider 2), "troubles [both] the prevalence of presentism, immediacy, and linear time" (6) and the primacy of the "original" event in question by surrogating it with a present one. After working through Spicer's relationship to coterie and performance, I turn to how performance might renegotiate the structures of past communities, focusing on an historical case study to illustrate the way in which poets theater operates across temporal boundaries. Here, I consider Spicer's famous 1957 "Poetry as Magic" workshop in relation to Helen Adam's play *Initiation to the Magic Workshop* of the same year. Adam's work uses a collage of historical reference and highly

situated intertext to perform a poetics of coterie similar to Spicer’s own, while simultaneously collapsing the past and future through the re-enactment of the historical event. As Allison Fraser notes, Adam’s use of pictural collage in her artwork “allow[ed] her to renegotiate her own position and the status of women in mid-twentieth-century America” (53) by “subtly undermining the dominant knowledge base” (54). Building on Fraser’s work, I argue that Adam’s textual-based “curatorial” work signals a desire to return to or control the archive. In the context of the play in question, Adam employs a collage-like use of intertext to both document and reshape Spicer’s historic Poetry as Magic workshop and to play out an ongoing power struggle between two Bay Area poets, Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer.

“All this is to explain why I dedicate each of our poems to someone”: Re-enactment and the Transtemporal Coterie of Jack Spicer

But the city that we create in our bartalk or in our fuss and fury about each other is in an utterly mixed and mirrored way an image of the city. A return from exile.

-Jack Spicer, “A Textbook of Poetry”

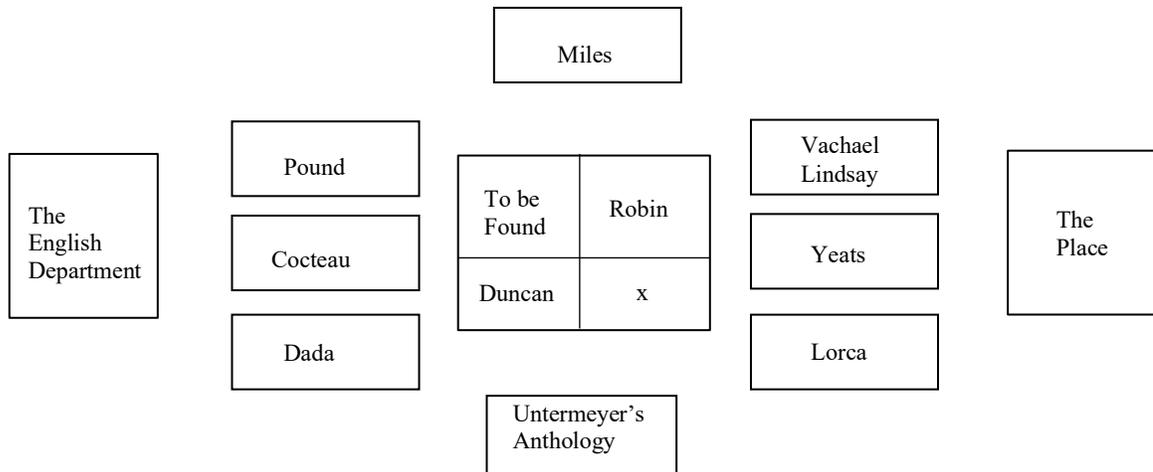


Figure 2. Spicer’s response to Duncan’s questionnaire for “Workshop in Basic Techniques.” Recreated from *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, edited by Robin Blaser. p. 358.

In 1958, Robert Duncan led a workshop entitled “Workshop in Basic Techniques.” Those wishing to attend were asked to complete a lengthy questionnaire, in which, under the sub-heading of “Tradition,” Duncan asked each respondent to “conceive of [them]self as a

poet (that is, the spirit of your work) in the position marked with an x; then list as many poets of the tree or constellation of your genius as you can[,] numbering them according to their position in the design” (Duncan “Workshop in Basic Techniques” 358). Robin Blaser reproduces Spicer’s response in *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*. Notably, Spicer chooses a constellation to represent his influences, clustering them rather than ordering them hierarchically (see Fig. 1) At the heart of this constellation is Spicer’s coterie, represented by his first and most intimate readers, Duncan and Blaser themselves, along with the ethereal “To be found” (Fig. 1). Beyond his coterie is a halo of poetic influences that surrounds his immediate social circle.

The primacy of coterie in Spicer’s constellation is not surprising. While the narrative of the San Francisco Renaissance is, as Michael Davidson points out in *San Francisco Renaissance: Poetry and Community at Mid-century*, highly mythologized (1), we cannot deny the strong sense of community associated with poetry of this period. Small groups like the Maidens or what has become known as the Spicer Circle read, wrote, worked, and socialized together.²⁴ While Davidson suggests “[s]ectarian rivalries among persons, manifestoes, and subgroups within the city fragmented the scene” (3), many factions of that scene were still devoted coterie poets. Much of Jack Spicer’s poetry, particularly that found in *After Lorca* and *Admonitions*, catalogues and, I would argue, creates the various allegiances and acrimonies operating amongst his colleagues in the Bay Area. As such, his work becomes inextricably tied to the coterie group in which (and for which) it was produced.

²⁴ The Maidens were organized by Robert Duncan and included Helen Adam, James Broughton, Jess Collins, Madeline Gleason, and Eve Triem (Ellingham and Killian, 92). The Spicer Circle included a number of younger poets who would meet and drink with Spicer in bars around North Beach.

While Spicer's work is exemplary of a poetics of coterie as previously defined by Shaw—"an experimental way of conceptualizing literary and social linkages" used "to reimagine the social logics that allow group formations in the first place" (*Poetics of Coterie* 37)—the sense of community expressed in his work is not unique. Rather, it is an ethos shared amongst many of the Bay Area poets at mid-century. Dora Geissler, for example, remembers the strong sense of community that surrounded the San Francisco bar scene and, in particular, Spicer's circle of fellow poets, of which she was a member. Figuring coterie as organism, she notes that "the whole was so much greater than its parts, so that when we left the group, we felt so diminished that we couldn't bear to separate from each other" (qtd. in Ellingham and Killian 146). By Geissler's account, the poetry scene is perceived to be much stronger than the individual poet, and this sense of power through coterie and social allegiance extends into the poetic practice of that period. In a very real sense, then, coterie can be both the "site of literary production" (Eisenberg 7), in which the literary community is at once both the subject matter and means of the circulation of poetry, and a way of *practicing* community, extending to a type of social performance that preforms and negotiates community boundaries.

Returning to Duncan's questionnaire, however, it is notable that Spicer reaches beyond the purview of the question to include two *spaces* of influence as well: "The Place" and "The English Department." Spicer's time in the Department of English at the University of California, Berkeley, particularly his relationship with the medievalist Ernst Kantorowicz, was undoubtedly influential on his poetic practice, as noted by Robin Blaser (qtd. in Ellingham and Killian 20). More notable, however, is Spicer's inclusion of The Place, a San Francisco literary bar on Grant Street frequented by Spicer and his circle of friends and poets. Significantly, The Place hosted a series of quasi-poetic events that functioned as an enlivened poetics of coterie,

including an annual “Dada Day” on April 1 and a weekly “Blabbermouth Night.”²⁵ “Blabbermouth Nights,” during which patrons signed up to perform sets of spontaneous and nonsensical babble, “the best babbler winning a free drink” (150), provide a particularly resonant example. Michael Rumaker, a poet who attended these events with Spicer, remembers them as a negotiation between performer and audience:

[J]udged by the enthusiasm and applause of the bar audience on the wit and verbal persuasion of the contestant, a magnum of champagne went to the best bullshit artist. (No small feat given the raucous cynics and critics in the crowd, mostly writers, musicians and painters who weren’t shy with their boos and catcalls (qtd. in Ellingham and Killian 99).

Projecting over the hum of the audience into a (presumably) crowded bar, each contestant “declaimed in loud voice and sweeping gestures from the balcony in the rear” (100). By Rumaker’s description, to be in The Place and not participate in Blabbermouth Night would have been impossible. Due to the projection of voice and the insistence of each contestant, these evenings of raucous competition can be read as actively creating a shared space of performance that encompassed the whole bar. Whether you participated willingly, with “boos and catcalls” (99), or passively, by trying to ignore the contestants, there was no way *not* to be drawn in.

Similarly, Davidson reads Blabbermouth Night for its social function: in part, he suggests, Blabbermouth Night likely served to alienate and “bug the squares,” who came down to The Place (*The San Francisco Renaissance* 150). More importantly, though—and in keeping with Jack Spicer’s influence on the scene—these weekly events “reinforce[d] the

²⁵ Evidence of Dada Day can be found in Spicer’s two poems “A poem for Dada Day at the Place, April 1, 1958” and “A poem for Dada Day at the Place, April 1, 1955.” See *My Vocabulary Did This to Me*.

sense of community that had arisen within the North Beach bar scene. For this community, poetry was a public event, something performed on stage in front of an audience. Blabbermouth Night extended this public dimension” (150). This sense of collectivity through action underwrites much of the poetry coming out of the Bay Area at mid-century, particularly in regard to the performance-driven poets theater that is the subject of this dissertation. Like the Blabbermouth Nights held at the Place, which encompassed those present and aligned distinct community groups divided into those actively participating and those not, we can trace a poetics based on shared experience and communities of practice through the Bay Area at mid-century. As Jeremy Eisenberg suggests, as “self-selecting group[s],” coteries are dependent on “produc[ing] demarcations between insiders and outsiders” (8). These community poetics sought to both map and rearticulate community boundaries through the shared practice of articulating and rearticulating those boundaries.

As the epigraph to this section suggests, and as Davidson notes in *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics*, Spicer’s sense of community is eristic: “[f]or Spicer, argument and conflict signal the fact that ideas are real and earnest, embodied in persons who find them worth fighting for” (42). Certainly, one does not have to look far for instances where Spicer’s antagonistic temperament made its mark on the scene. In a now infamous example, taking place in January of 1958, Spicer read his misogynist poem “For Joe” to a crowd gathered to welcome the visiting poet Denise Levertov at a shared reading with Helen Adam. “For Joe” reads,

People who don’t like the smell of faggot vomit
Will never understand why men don’t like women
Won’t see why those never to be forgotten thighs

of Helen (say) will move us to screams of laughter.

....

Don't deliver us any mail today, mailman.

Send us no letters. The female genital organ is hideous." (164)

The poem is dedicated to Joe Dunn, then employed as a postal worker. In both "For Joe" itself and Spicer's choice to perform it at a reading honouring two female poets, we can find an example of Spicer's interest in negotiating the boundaries of community through both inclusion and, pivotally, exclusion. As Davidson continues, "[m]uch of [the] contention [around community] is related to power dynamics based around gender.... The battle for poetry had to be waged against the twin evils of femininity and assimilation" (42). Either way, it is the embodied social act of "bartalk" ("or in our fuss and fury about each other" ("A Textbook of Poetry" 306)—which we can read as both a type of poetry and a performance, acrimonious or otherwise—that, for Spicer, creates "the city" (306). Bringing a spatial element to bear on his own notion of community, the city stands in for the dynamic of being in a space of *relation*. That is to say, for Spicer, "bartalk" is a "return from exile" (306) and a way for the poet to position themselves either inside or outside a community.

The localization of "the city," or rather the community found within the created city, in opposition to the notion of "exile" is integral to Spicer's conception of coterie, particularly as illustrated through *After Lorca* and *Admonitions*. In both texts, Spicer engages in a form of textual bartalk in order to situate himself within the parameters of his chosen public. While Spicer rarely uses a traditional epigraph, his poetry delimits a community through address, which functions as a generative site of archival intervention and a means of performing a coterie whose parameters are defined in an instant of enactment. As such, his writing—much

like the visualization of poetic influence that he creates for Duncan's workshop—generates a type of archive: a personal retelling of his influences and alliances. Through dedications and paratext, Spicer traces a pathway of poetic circulation which, whether real or imaginary, extends both outward—across a geography of his friends and contemporaries—and downward—*through* history—to include poets and influences such as Federico García Lorca, Yeats, and others. By including the dead and the disparate within the boundaries of his “city,” Spicer maps (and, in mapping, creates) a transtemporal poetic community.

This textual performance of community can also be found at a meta-poetic level in Spicer's conception of the serial poem. In a letter to Robin Blaser included in *Admonitions*, Spicer writes,

The trick naturally is what Duncan learned years ago and tried to teach us—not to search for the perfect poem but to let your way of writing of the moment go along its own paths, explore and retreat but never fully be realized (confined) within the boundaries of one poem.... There is really no single poem. (163)

Spicer sees the poem as existing within the context of a larger body of work, returning the poem “from exile” (306) and situating it in relation to other texts. The poem, then, can be read as analogous to the poet in the context of community.

But as the Levertov/Adam reading illustrates, there is a politics to the negation of both textual and artistic community. Addressing a group of young students and poets in his “California Lecture” concerning the relationship between poetry and politics, Spicer outlines how he distinguishes community from society.²⁶ While he maintains that poetry cannot effect

²⁶ The “California Lecture” was delivered on July 14, 1965 as part of the Berkeley Poetry Conference, which ran from July 12 to July 24, 1965. Spicer, along with seven other poets, including Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, and Ed Dorn, were invited to give lectures (*The House Jack Built* 149).

concrete political change, he is quick to note that there are certainly politics at play within poetic communities and the world of poetry. As Gizzi remarks, Spicer “wants to draw attention to the political aspects of all self-governing bodies and to point out that the poetic community is no exception; it has its own tyrannies of style and personality which are equally debilitating to the rank and file” (“Jack Spicer and the Practice of Reading” 151). For Spicer, these “tyrannies” are deeply tied to publishing practices that both form and articulate the boundaries around the poetic community while curating aesthetic alliances through editorial practices.²⁷ Not unlike the ways in which community boundaries are negotiated through active performances of coterie, Spicer sees the diffuse print culture network of little magazines and publishers as dependent on “produc[ing] demarcations between insiders and outsiders” (Eisenberg 8). In terms of magazines, these determining boundaries fall along aesthetic lines. Seemingly for this reason, Spicer concludes that

a magazine is a society.... You have to behave within the rules of the society, and if you don't, then there's nothing else. In other words, if you publish poetry in *Poetry* magazine, it's great. You get paid money. You get people reading it all throughout the country. But, in the long run, if you're participating in one of these things, then you have to say “yeah, I read *Poetry* myself”—*Poetry* magazine, that is—which I don't, and wouldn't, because I don't believe in the society it creates. (“California Lecture” 157).

²⁷ Spicer gives no indication that he might in fact himself be one of these tyrannies of personality, though this aspect of his personality is well documented in Killian and Ellingham's biography *Poet Be Like God*. Spicer was notorious in his own social circle for delimiting the boundaries around what he saw as acceptable behavior (poetic and otherwise), often going so far as actively protesting the work of his friends, crashing poetry readings, and attempting to ruin marriages.

It is through this idea of the created, or curated society that Spicer arrives at his sense of the community and the poem as relational. “Certainly,” he notes, “we belong to a community rather than a society, we poets. But I think every poet has to create actively his own community” (167). The distinction here seems to develop out of a differential relationship to power. Spicer sees a society as something imposed; a community, on the other hand, is *enacted*, and therefore the onus to create lies with the poet. However, this is not to suggest that Spicer sees community as existing without power structures—recall that Spicer believes there needs to be a healthy amount of conflict and struggle within his community. But it is through enactment—the testing of boundaries, structures, and limits—that his community emerges.

As suggested above, this framework for understanding the genesis of community as existing in a privileged space created by the poet draws a strong parallel between community and poetry, perhaps best articulated in a letter from Spicer to Robin Blaser: “poems belong nowhere. They are one night stands filled (the best of them) with their own emotions, but pointing nowhere.... Poems should echo and reecho each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can” (*Admonitions* 61). By aligning poetry with the social, Spicer creates a layered relational system for understanding the similarities between poetic practice and communities of practice—more specifically, the way in which “[t]hings do not connect; they correspond” (*After Lorca* 34).

Poetry as Magic: A Case Study

While we begin to see more Bay Area poets turning toward the theater in the 1950s and 1960s, including Madeleine Gleason, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, James Kielty, and

James Broughton, this section looks at a play that explicitly embodies Spicer's poetics.²⁸ This is not to suggest that all the poet-written theater of this period operates under these conditions. Rather, this section offers a focused example of a text that embodies or re-enacts Spicer's poetics of coterie while also reinforcing the archival tone of the genre as a whole and showcasing how the site-specific, theatrical event carries with it the dynamics and differences of past performances. I have chosen to focus on Adam's work rather than Spicer's own plays because of the way it relates to both the archival and coterie text. Focusing on one specific historical instance allows us to trace those poetics through the text, its socio-historical context, and possible future iterations.

Helen Adam's *Initiation to the Magic Workshop* recounts Jack Spicer's 1957 "Poetry as Magic" Workshop. In turn, this case study strives to illustrate how poets theater actively forms community through intertextual collage and surrogation, providing a map of community that moves beyond that which is traditionally presented by the archive. Instead, it explicitly illustrates the social relationships between those present at the workshop, and in a larger context, the Bay Area poetry scene, during the period in which it was written. Ultimately, Adam's play brings the historic event into the present tense to be re-performed or rearticulated, while also extending those intentional markers of coterie into the space of performance. Thus, the poetics of intentional community that we see throughout Spicer's work become an enactment of present-tense coterie in performance.

²⁸ The Jack Spicer fonds at the Bancroft library, University of California, Berkeley, for example, holds a number of unpublished manuscripts of plays, including *Pentheus and the Dancers*, *Sex and the Dead: A Halloween Mask*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Quick Said the Bird*, *Armed with Madness*, *The Bacchae (unfinished)*, and *Troilus*.

i. The Workshop

A pivotal moment in the history of the San Francisco Renaissance, Spicer's now-famous "Poetry as Magic" workshop was a free, fifteen-week course held at the San Francisco Library in 1957. As expected from someone who advocated that community was a deliberate act, the make-up of the course was not left to chance. In order to be accepted into Spicer's workshop, potential applicants were expected to submit a lengthy application form ("Poetry as Magic Workshop" 99–104). The questionnaire, which is included in *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, is separated into six categories: "Politics" (99), "Religion" (100), "History" (100), "Poetry" (101), "Personal" (101), and "Practice" (102). Amongst other things, it asked potential attendees about their favourite book of the Bible and which insect they most closely resembled.

Despite the lengthy application process, interest in the course was high and Spicer had 50 applications to choose from (*Poet Be Like God* 81). Of those who submitted applications, he curated his roster to include the poets Helen Adam, Ebbe Borregaard, James Broughton, Robert (Bob) Connor, Robert Duncan, Joe Dunn, Elyce Edelman, Jack Gilbert, Ida Hodes, Joseph Kostolefsky, John Allen Ryan, Eve Triem, Sue Rosen, George Stanley, and Ruth Witt-Diamant. According to Killian and Ellingham, several attendees were either handpicked by Spicer or referred by another member of the group. While the official roster shows fifteen registered participants, others apparently dropped in for one or two classes (81).

According to Robert Duncan, who quotes Spicer's prospectus for the workshop in his introduction to a conclusory reading by the courses' participants, Spicer claimed that the workshop was "not a course in technique or 'how to write'" (qtd. in. Ellingham and Killian 80). Rather, it was meant to be "a group exploration of the practices of the new magical school

of poetry which is best represented in the work of Lorca, Artaud, Charles Olson, and Robert Duncan” (qtd. in Ellingham and Killian 80). By situating this new magical school of poetry within this transtemporal network of poets, Spicer also situates his workshop within a lineage of poetic influences, therefore creating, as he does with *Admonitions* and *After Lorca*, an intentional poetic community that defies temporal boundaries. This aligns with the obvious social element embedded in the idea of “group exploration” (Ellingham and Killian 80) and positions the workshop as an intentional performance of coterie through shared poetic practice.

Yet, despite the lofty claims made by its title, the workshop itself was traditional in its structure. According to James Broughton,

The pattern was not unusual: an assignment was given for a poem to be written that was to be read aloud at the next meeting. What was unusual were Spicer’s assignments. His intention was to shock the group into challenging responses.

The first assignment was safe enough: your personal myth about the Creation.... The second assignment was more unnerving: How would you cook a baby.... And they went on from there. (qtd. in Ellingham and Killian 83)

Given that Spicer’s sense of acrimony is foundational to his understanding of community formation, this use of shock is not surprising, though it was likely aimed at those outside the group rather than those within it. Notably, this assignment also speaks to Spicer’s own chosen community, which includes the French playwright, theorist, and theatre director Antonin Artaud. Artaud famously translated Robert Southwell’s “The Burning Babe,” a Christian poem about the martyrdom of Christ that uses the central image of a burning child. Aligning with Artaud’s call for a use of language in the theatre that carries with it the “possibilities for producing physical shock” (“Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène” 46), this type of poetic

exercise parallels Artaud's desire for artistic production that questions social taboo and pushes audience members to question the way language shapes us.

In keeping with the course theme, there were also elements of magic in workshop assignments. Jack Gilbert describes the workshop's creative process under Spicer's leadership:

Jack took a tarot deck and passed around cards and asked us to see if we could find any meaning in the events of the week as a result of this card, use it as some sort of catalyst for a poem. The night he gave them out, I went to the beach, and I found out that the one that I had was the star, and I also found out that that night was Walpurgisnacht, which if you know anything about black magic is one of the great big black magic black mass festivals in Europe that night. ("Jack Spicer's Poetry as Magic Workshop: June 10 1957")

In this example, Gilbert emphasizes a consistent theme in the course: magic as poetic practice, but also as interpretive tool. Poets were invited to "write a poem that should create a universe... write a poem in which the poet becomes a flesh-eating beast" (George Stanley qtd. in Ellingham and Killian 83), and "write a poem concerning some magic sacrifice" or "evoke magic spirits" (Ruth Witt-Diamant qtd. in Ellingham and Killian 83) As this suggests, Spicer curated a series of ritualistic, process-oriented assignments meant to provoke the creation of the *real* through poetry. With an emphasis on community, the seminar promised to be a collaborative experiment in the exploration of magical practice and poetry with Spicer at the helm. Imbedded, too, at the core of the course was the notion that poetry—like Artaud's conception of the new theater and Lorca's conception of the *duende*—could act as a sort of spell, enacting and invoking some sort of contract with the real. Parallel to this, the group

exploration of the poetics of magic becomes a sort of spell in and of itself, reinforcing, re-enacting, and ultimately creating a sense of community within the group.

This sense of community is best illustrated in a “Poetry as Magic” Workshop Reading that was held at The Poetry Center on two consecutive nights in June of 1957 and marked the end of the workshop. The reading offered a selection of the type of work produced by each poet over the course of the fifteen-week class. Several of the poems referenced the course itself, the theme of magic, or the various assignments undertaken under Spicer’s tutelage. Recordings from this reading also reveal a preoccupation with coterie, similar to that seen in Spicer’s own work. For example, while not directly replicating Spicer’s own poetics of address, many of the poems recited during the climactic reading refer to other members of the group: as its title suggests, Joe Dunn’s “Recipe #6: How to Make a Helen Adam,” an excerpt from “The New School of Boston Cookbook,” presumably works from the “how to cook a baby” assignment to hypothesize the magical origins of a fellow classmate; not surprisingly, several poems also reference Spicer himself, either in dedication, as we see with Joe Dunn’s “For Jack Spicer: In memory of the Death and Decay of a Day” and George Stanley’s “Sequence for Pablito,” or within the poem itself, like the reference in Robert Connor’s “Because the same old morning fog was there” to Spicer’s use of the tarot—“Jesus, Jack, is everyone so alone that you can refuse us tarot cards. What do you see behind these shining faces, why is there a future you don’t care to let them know. Why do you have questions” (“Jack Spicer’s Poetry as Magic Workshop: June 9 1957.”). Similarly, Connor’s poem “I haven’t been misunderstood in so long” addresses Spicer directly: “Oh Jack... am I as pitiful as the rest?.... Spicer is an island where ivory was found” (“Jack Spicer’s Poetry as Magic Workshop: June 9 1957.”). Again, Connor’s poem unfolds outward, referencing his own

community: “One day I kissed the head of Helen Adam riding by on a bicycle like the witch in the Wizard of Oz.... Miss Myles, Spicer, Wapiti, and Duncan too” (“Jack Spicer’s Poetry as Magic Workshop: June 9 1957”).

There is also a series of connecting points that run through the majority of the poems recited at the workshop reading: repeated references to “peaches” (Kostolefsky’s “Harsh” and Borregaard’s “He leaned real close” and “Some stories of the beauty Wapiti”); “Los Angeles” (Rosen’s “The Universe in Four Concentric Parts: Part III,” Gilbert’s “Walpurgisnacht in San Francisco,” Kostolefsky’s “My L.A.”); “salt” (Connor’s “Wapiti” and “I haven’t been misunderstood in so long,” Rosen’s “The Desire for Power is the Desire for Flight,” Gilbert’s “In the Beginning...”); and “wapiti” (Connor’s “Wapiti” and “I haven’t been misunderstood in so long,” Borregaard’s “Some stories of the beauty of the Wapiti” and “Further stories of the beauty Wapiti,” Gilbert’s “Walpurgisnacht in San Francisco”) create ley lines mapping the larger event of the workshop. This also aligns with Spicer’s conception of the serial poem, and when read together, the poems produced throughout the course reveal a sort of retelling of the workshop: each poem reflects an aspect of the course (either Spicer’s assignments, the relationships between poets and their individual poetics, or Spicer’s teachings). This, I argue, performs (or perhaps, *re*-performs) coterie and collective memory through collective memorialization. These shared references also enact coterie through the use of paratext. As with Spicer’s own poetry, the selection of work shared at the reading articulates the boundaries around a group of participants by aligning them through textual practice. It also offers a fuller, more nuanced picture of the historic event. Taken together, this work re-enacts the goal of the workshop, which was to provide a community-based exploration of poetics.

ii. Helen Adam's Initiation to the Magic Workshop

The idea of performing coterie—actively seeking out and replicating lines of kinship in an effort to create, as if by magic, a community—is reflected throughout Spicer's poetry, particularly in parts of *Admonitions* and *For Lorca*. While Spicer tries to capture this sense of the real in his "Poetry as Magic" workshop, we instead see these poetics come to fruition in the work of one of his students. Helen Adam's *Initiation to the Magic Workshop* was written in 1957, during or following Spicer's pivotal workshop. I read *Initiation* as a type of surrogation— as a performable (and re-performable) text, the replacement of the historical event by a reimagined replacement—illustrated through subsequent re-enactments of it. As a case study, Adam's play shows the way in which poets theater actively *forms* community through the activation and performance of a shared history.

Adam herself was a poet, playwright, and collage artist who moved to the United States from Scotland in 1939. After befriending Robert Duncan and his partner, Jess Collins, known by the mononym Jess, Adam quickly fell into the Bay Area poetry scene, becoming one of only four women to be featured in Donald Allen's seminal anthology *The New American Poetry*. Alongside being a prolific poet, she also worked extensively in collage and scrapbooking, a practice that Allison Fraser privileges for the way it "preserve[s] what is to be discarded, and give[s] long-term significance to what was meant to have only momentary use" (3). As a curatorial practice, then, the acts of collage and scrapbooking ascribe meaning to objects, images, and narratives that might otherwise have been overlooked. In Adam's case, the recontextualizing of popular imagery, such as that found in magazines and advertisements, often became a "feminist reworking... [of] misogynist depictions of women" (10). As Fraser concludes, this work allowed Adam to "tak[e] over the role of editor and expan[d] it, shaping

and disseminating unconventional ideas and perspectives on women, the occult and poetry” (11).

Adam also employs a type of collage practice in *Initiation*, where she repeatedly uses social citation and intertext as a form of curatorial and memory work. In relation to coterie practices, this allows Adam to link poetic “attributes” to those associated with the historic event (in this case Spicer’s workshop) and to build “not a body of canonical knowledge... but a figure or rhetoric of community that becomes legible through accumulated reference... [and] increasingly becomes part of a social world that the poems create (Shaw “On Coterie: Frank O’Hara”). In this sense, Adam’s use of textual collage, quoting and referencing the work of her fellow classmates, even in a partially fictionalized context, allows her to control the narrative and shape our reading of the event in question.

Importantly, when Adam moved to the Bay Area, she found the poetry community undergoing a significant schism, divided between two warring factions: Duncan’s and Spicer’s (Fraser 55). *Initiation to the Magic Workshop* offers an archival re-enactment of Spicer’s famous workshop but also deals with this tumultuous time in San Francisco poetry. Not only does Adam’s piece offer an (albeit fictionalized) insider’s perspective of the event itself, but it also provides us with the affective resonances of the Bay Area Poetry scene during the San Francisco Renaissance, particularly the pivotal roles played by Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan in the development of Bay Area poetics. What we see between the lines of the play is a contextual power struggle between Spicer and Duncan, whose powerful and robust poetics meet and diverge over the course of an intense battle. Adam provides a deepened sense of the community in which the action takes place, as the other workshop participants also become embodiments of their poems.

Some aspects of Adam's retelling mirror the facts of the actual event, while others extend outward into the context of the community at large. Most notably, Adam creates a type of collage built on the real: the play's characters, reflective of the Workshop's roster of attendees, "slyly allude to their own poetic tropes (Borregard's "wapitis," Joe Dunne's mailboxes and letters, Sue Rosen's scary trees), as well as their relationship to their master, Jack Spicer" (Ellingham and Killian 548). In these real-life entanglements, we can begin to read the play as an affective retelling of the event, which Adam captures through the relationships she crafts and displays between characters: not necessarily historically accurate, but important to the narrative she is crafting. In this section, I argue that Adam's play presents a way of both remembering and creating coterie through the re-enactment of a pivotal historical event. The performance of coterie, then, works as both a linguistic delimiter of community—similarly to Spicer and the workshop's conclusory reading—and in the re-enactment of coterie within the parameters of the play. While there is no evidence that Adam's play was ever performed for its contemporaries, it nevertheless *performs* coterie by re-enacting an historical event and providing a sense of the social forces at play within the poetic community.

Returning to the play, we can read the action of *Initiation* as a rhetoric of community "becom[ing] legible" (Shaw "On Coterie: Frank O'Hara"). Adam's work is both playful and dark, as it offers a narrativized account of the workshop by telling the story of a fledgling "Initiate" seeking entrance to a magical cohort of poets led by a fictionalized version of Jack Spicer. It begins on a cold and menacing evening, when the Initiate knocks at the door in search of the shelter of magic—"Under Hecate's Wing" (Adam 121)—from certain monsters of the night:

Let me come in. Let me come in.

There's somebody coming who wears no skin.

The velvet ones are close at my back.

And a wolf just crawled through the keyhole crack. (121)

In response to her request for admittance and asylum, Spicer (who in this incarnation is figured as some sort of demonic mage) echoes his own syllabus, and asks, first,

Can you call up a spirit, and kill a child,

Create a universe tame or wild,

Blaspheme, and flourish through a ritual feast,

Or change your shape to a flesh eating beast? (121)

Central to these questions is Spicer's principal project of softening the boundary between poetry and the real. This is echoed by Alice (likely meant to represent Elyce Edelman), who adds as explanation, "No new poet may enter here / Until he has wept a lemon tear" (121). This reference to the famous Spicerean lemon reminds us of the ideology underpinning Spicer's turn to magic: his desire to bring something real into poetry. By implying that one must surrender to magic in order to create poetry amongst Spicer and his enclave, Adam sets up an initiation at the heart of coterie practices. This is echoed by the character of Ida, analogous to Ida Hodes, who worked closely with Ruth Witt Diamant at the Poetry Center, as she announces "I am the one who keeps the gates, / The hidden poet who listens and waits. Listens to poems both short and long / Hushing the wings of my own wild song.... If you can't keep quiet you may not come in" (121–122). Resonant in Ida's lines are Spicer's views on gatekeeping, reinforcing the idea that the world of poetry is also a community achieved through mutual inclusivity or active exclusions. In this sense, her real-life role in the Poetry Center becomes a symbolic role in the play, as she acts as gatekeeper. The initiation, then, which is

the central action of the piece, becomes about more than just a workshop; rather, we begin to see it as a doorway not only to the world of magic but also to the world of coterie as it is negotiated through rites, rituals, and readings—or, in Spicer’s own words, “bartalk” (“A Textbook of Poetry” 306). While the practice of magic was certainly the theme of the course, Spicer’s challenge to the initiate illustrates the overlap between his own poetics and magic, in its ability to enact and create. In the link between “real life” and the play, then, Adam imbues the historical event with a performance of the real, illustrating the connection between the poetics of the scene and the social relationships in which those poetics developed.

The play nonetheless provides a genuine historical record: despite its fantastic trappings, it also covertly references the workshop and its structure, painting an accurate, though somewhat occulted, representation of the event. While there are many references which we can parse, especially with the help of archival materials and interviews, many others undoubtedly fade into obscurity. For example, as Davidson notes, “Spicer heightened the ‘secret society’ quality of the workshop by seating everyone at a round table with himself facing west” (*The San Francisco Renaissance* 152). Adam reflects this in the opening lines of the play, where the characters sing together: “We sit in a circle at the table round” (121). Not only does this speak to the course in real life, but the lines that follow, “Our feet are steady on the solid ground. / But our heads are spinning in the starry sky, / And we all shout Hozanna where the witches fly” (121), also gesture to Spicer’s magical intention. Similarly, Adam uses magical imagery to reflect the structure of the course, with Spicer commanding,

Then stand in the center of the table round,

It’s not too far from solid ground.

The words are powerful, be prepared for shock.

When Duncan roars the table will rock.

When Joseph stammers the table will spin. (122)

These lines reflect the typicality of the workshop's structure: as noted above by Broughton, students were expected to fulfill the assignments and return to class week after week with examples of their work to share with the circle. Yet, by referencing the power of language through poetry, we see Adam (through the character of Spicer) figuring poetry as a type of magic spell or incantation. While still connecting with the real bodies of the workshop participants (Joseph Kostolefsky's "stammer," for example, which we hear evidence of in archival recordings), we witness an overlap with the fantastical that gestures towards the historical event while also moving beyond its borders.

Adam's use of naming and the obvious overlap between the historical event and the realm of the play are very similar to Spicer's own poetics. As Joanne Kyger notes in a 1991 workshop on *Admonitions* at the Naropa Institute, Spicer's use of dedication or admonition functions as "a kind of seduction to bring the people who they're dedicated [to]... into his kind of thinking.... the poem, he says, is this kind of mirror in which the reader finds himself and the poet's trick is to try and get the reader to look in" (Kyger). In Spicer's own words,

Are not these poems all things to all men.... Are they anything better than a kind of mirror?

In themselves, no. Each one of them is a mirror dedicated to the person that I particularly want to look into it. But mirrors can be arranged. The frightening hall of mirrors in a fun house is universal beyond each particular reflection.... Mirror makers know the secret—one does not make a mirror to resemble a person, one brings a person to the mirror (*Admonitions* 157).

Mirroring both the workshop and its participants, *Initiation* dedicates itself to a particular community. But as a performed piece, the play also draws in the reader or audience member, bringing them to Adam's mirror.

When we look into that mirror, we get see a different side of Spicer and Adam's poetic community. The crux of the play centres on a seeming power struggle between Duncan and Spicer, both vying for power within, and control of, the magic circle. Outside the play, both Duncan and Spicer were magnetic and magnanimous personalities, who started out as close friends before becoming alienated from one another (in large part because of Spicer's often spiteful and difficult nature). Adam remembers Spicer's compelling personality and the way he ran his workshop: "he was the most inspiring person to work with. It wasn't in very much what he said, it was a sort of power he arrayed. And you know he had all sorts of devoted young disciples that just hung on his every word" ("On Allen Ginsberg, Jack Spicer, Open Space, and the Atmosphere of San Francisco"). Duncan too, was a respected poet with a certain amount of occultist cachet.

The tension between these two powerful personalities is captured in *Initiation's* conclusion. As the play continues, the cast of characters take turns reading lines that reflect aspects of their own poetry. These lines are framed in terms of a riddle for the initiate to solve, raising the question, "If you follow the road Jack Spicer goes, / does it lead up / or does it lead down, / To Jerusalem, or to Hecate's town?" (122). The initiate is asked to ponder the poetics presented throughout the play and gain their place within the group by answering the riddle, Will Spicer lead you up or down?

Alternately, Adam scholar Kristin Prevalett interprets this portion of the play as an instance of demonic exorcism:

Spicer is usurped by his students from his status as mage because he is a demon from hell and is then cooked to a crisp: “Before the circle can spit complete / My burning babe you must cook and eat. / Will it taste nicer / than roasted Spicer?” Upon thus exorcising him, Duncan is hailed as the true magician. And when Spicer comes back to haunt his mutinied ship with the intention to command it, once again he is met with resistance. “Some things magic does not dare to mock. / It's time for Duncan to stop the clock. / And call up Kore with his earth-quake shock.” (“The Reluctant Pixie Pool”)

Prevalett’s reading is intriguing and largely convincing; however, I see this portion of the play as a reflection of the resonances and relationships within Adam’s poetic community, particularly in terms of Duncan and Spicer. When read in this way, we see this initiation rite as part of a power struggle between Spicer and Duncan, with the initiate at the center. Spicer though, is not “possessed,” as Prevalett suggests (“The Reluctant Pixie Pool”). Rather, he is figured as an Antichrist in contrast to Duncan’s “burning babe.” The burning babe, originally figured as Christ in Robert Southwell’s poem of the same name, symbolizes the sacrifice made by Christ for the greater good. Referenced throughout Duncan’s work, as well as in one of the poems recited during the “Poetry as Magic” workshop reading, the burning babe in this context speaks to Duncan’s position as saviour within the group. As such, he is figured in direct contrast to Spicer, who, “[t]hough the torch of Heaven he can brandish well...[has] a glint at his heels of the fires of Hell” (Adam 122).

[Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions but can be seen at the link below.
“The Enamored Mage” depicts a painting by Jess featuring Robert Duncan behind a bookshelf including *Thrice Greatest Hermes* Volumes I and II, *The Zohar*, Volumes 1-V, and *Pitis Sophia*]

Figure 3. “The Enamored Mage, Translation # 6,” by Jess (1965). <https://art.famsf.org/jess-burgess-franklin-collins/enamord-mage-translation-6-200587>

Whether we choose to read this incarnation of Spicer as a devilish trickster or a demonic antichrist, he is figured in direct opposition to Duncan’s righteous and long-suffering child. It would not be a stretch to read these versions of the two poets as a thinly veiled critique of their long-suffering friendship, particularly on Duncan’s part. This figuring of Duncan and Spicer carries through the rest of the play, which is preoccupied with the question of whether the path leads up or down. This question, which is repeated several times over the course of the short play, suggests a division between Spicer and Duncan that aligns with Christian notions of Heaven and Hell.

At the same time, this division can be understood in the context of Duncan’s relationship to occult literature. In the painting “The Enamored Mage, Translation #6” by Jess, Duncan is depicted behind a row of occult books, including two volumes of the work of Hermes Trismegistus. Within Hermeticism, the principle of correspondence establishes that “that which is below is like that which is above” (Newton qtd. in Robertson 406), indicating that “the *macrocosm* (the universe of God) and the *microcosm* (the physical world, a human being) are inherently connected.... So that each affects the other” (405). The enigma at the heart of Adam’s riddle then, is whether there is a distinction between Spicer’s two roads and thus a difference between Duncan and Spicer.

While Spicer’s own poetics reflect certain magical leanings, his aptitude is called into question as the play progresses. Emphasizing the power of poetry, the play ends with Duncan

reading his poem “The Dance of the Hallows,” which “stop[s] the clock / and call[s] up Kore with his earthquake shock” (Adam 126), tangibly causing all characters to “sink”—or at least “sing”—“to the bottom of the sea” (126). While the character of the initiate earlier worried that it would be Spicer who causes them all to sink to the bottom of the ocean, it is in fact Duncan who ultimately achieves this through the recitation of his own poetry. This is in direct opposition to Duncan’s own view of the power of poetry, as he states in his introduction to the Poetry Center reading:

it is precisely “how to write” that has become the center of my concern with poetry. Sitting in on most of the sessions of the workshop and participating in a number of the assignments I found how strongly I have come to reject the idea of the poem as a projection analogous to magic as an inadequate concept. It is awareness, not influence, that I seek in my work; the process of which the poem is both trace and product, and not the presentation of effect. (Duncan qtd. in Bertholf 101)

In avowedly working against “the presentation of effect” and focusing instead on “trace and product,” Duncan stands in opposition to his fictionalized self and we are forced to read the magical effect in the play as a metaphor for his role within the community, as seen, of course, by Helen Adam. As he ultimately usurps Spicer’s role within the group, Duncan occupies the role of saviour. The answer to the riddle posed to the initiate is perhaps merely that one must seek answers within the poetics of coterie through which the play is enacted. Either way, Duncan emerges as victorious, as *Initiation* presents an affective retelling of the struggle between Spicer and Duncan for supremacy within the San Francisco poetry scene. At the same time, and in keeping with Adam’s interest in transformation, *Initiation* reveals the

transformation of an historic event, *and* those associated with it, into a magical enclave, a literal embodiment of coterie.

Coda

While there is no evidence to suggest that *Initiation to the Magic Workshop* was ever performed by Adam or her contemporaries, in June 2018, Kevin Killian staged the play at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, England, including Spicer scholar Daniel Katz in the role of Spicer and Killian as Duncan. In a recording of the performance provided by fellow participant Tony Torn, we see the cast spread out across a small living room, many either sitting or standing around a wooden table. No one is in costume, and everyone reads from a printed script. In this way, the text takes centre stage, as if disjointedly projected from the past into this new temporal setting across the globe. You can hear the rustling of pages turning over and the shuffle of feet as the participants each recite their lines. More than twice, the frame is interrupted by the late arrival of an audience member as they cut across the room to find seating on the floor.

Watching this re-enactment gives an unexpected sense of what I imagine the "Poetry is Magic" workshop might have been like on some days: nervous participation, unsure footing, and some voices louder than others. But the performance of the play also, very clearly, plays a coterie function. It is obvious, from the loud applause of the audience and the



Figure 4. Still from video recording of *Initiation to the Magic Workshop*, June 2018. Used in accordance with fair use laws. <https://vimeo.com/372109519>

panning shots of the camera, that the room is full of participants. The fullness of the room reminds me of Roach’s concept of surrogation: while those attending the performance, as well as those performing, may not have known each other well—or at all—the shared practice of recreating the past allows Adam’s text to reach across decades and reproduce not only her rearticulation of Spicer’s famous workshop but also the living and textual community around it. Through their participation in Adam’s play, each reader takes on the role of both a past poet *and* part of an ensemble. In this way, they also surrogate for the life of the coterie, exploring, in their collective actions, an intentional exploration of community through poetry. They recreate the dynamics of the poetic community produced through Spicer’s workshop and rearticulated through Adam’s curation of it. Ultimately, this continues “the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric” (Roach 2) of the Bay Area poetry scene—or at least of Spicer’s workshop—at mid-century.

However, as a distant audience member, watching a recording of the event months later, I do not feel the magic in the room. This restaging of Spicer’s “Poetry as Magic” event,

as reframed by Adam, puts the spectator in a puzzling position. As if by Spicer’s own hand, I feel like an outsider to this coterie, and this performance seems to be for the actors—for those surrogating for the original participants—rather than for me. While the audience does seem to enjoy the performance, they also seem shut out and forced into positions of spectators rather than participants.

But for the performers, Adam seems to achieve Spicer’s ultimate poetic goal and complete the initiate’s rite of passage: Adam has “wept a lemon tear” (*Initiation*, 121). While her play does not summon the dead or transport us through time, it does offer its own version of a “lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste” (Spicer *After Lorca*, 33), as well as a form of pure performance that “drag[s] the real into the poem” (25). In the absence of first-hand accounts, interviews, or performance reviews, I do not know if those who participated in this performance started out as friends, colleagues, or strangers. However, it becomes clear by the final frame of their performance that they end as a collective, fading together into the bottom of the sea.



Figure 5. Still from Final Scene of recording of *Initiation to the Magic Workshop*, June 2018. Used in accordance with fair use laws. <https://vimeo.com/372109519>

Chapter 4. “Nothing Ever Just Disappears”: Playing Dead and the Absent Present Body in New Narrative’s Relational Archive

Sam, I never dreamed that playing dead could make you feel so alive
—Dodie Bellamy, *Real*

In his essay “HIV 1986,” New Narrative writer Robert Glück describes how language fails to articulate the “accumulating sorrow” (235) of queer communities during the American HIV and AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. Repeating the phrase “Ten thousand have died” as an example of how language fails to signify the depth of such a loss—or, as he puts it, how it “lies in articulation” (238)—he argues that objective language such as this, often employed “in the torrent of factual coverage, a deluge of facts, debated and reported” (235), only gestures toward the affective reality of such loss.

Glück is not alone in recognizing the pivotal role that language plays—or fails to play—in shaping our understanding of HIV/AIDS and its legacies. Scholarship on the AIDS literature has consistently grappled with the seeming disconnect between signification, representation, and reality in the context of both its medical and social discourse. Most notably, Paula A. Treichler calls the crisis “an epidemic of meanings or signification” (32) suggesting that “[t]he name AIDS in part *constructs* the disease and helps make it intelligible” (31), be it through damaging narratives, moralizing dichotomies, or the “multiple stories” of living and dying with the disease (42). Similarly, James W. Jones notes, “the act of naming [a person with AIDS] imprints values upon the body of the named” (225). Such bodies are, at the peak of the crisis, perceived to belong to “either gay males or intravenous drug users—two groups already stigmatized by definitions of sexual ‘normalcy’ and of narcotic legality” (225). As such, a significant portion of AIDS’ constructed meaning relates directly to those “who are socially marginalized... evok[ing] questions of stereotyping, scapegoating, retribution for ‘unnatural’ lives, and the pathology of proscribed sex” (225). These damaging narratives not only affect

the ways in which the disease itself is perceived, treated, and lived with but ascribe additional layers of meaning to the bodies of persons with AIDS as well.

To mitigate the challenges inherent in this relationship between representation and power, Treichler insists that

what AIDS signifies must be democratically determined: we cannot afford to let scientists or any other group of “experts” dismiss our meanings as “misconceptions” and our alternative views as noise that interferes with the pure processes of scientific inquiry. Rather, we need to insist that many voices contribute to the construction of official definitions—and specifically certain voices that need urgently to be heard. (68)

For Treichler, the democratically determined signifier mitigates the legacy inherent in the power structures that surround naming and discourse. In “Testimony,” Timothy F. Murphy suggests that the AIDS literature proposes a means of participating in this discourse. Murphy argues that testimony narratives—writing that pays homage to the life and/or death of a loved one—create a “counter discourse to the stereotyping and stigmatizing uses of AIDS” (310), humanizing the person with AIDS and therefore overriding the otherwise loaded signifiers attributed to them. For Murphy, testimony literatures “put a face on the epidemic and offer a counter literature to the discourse both of medical journals... and of the media” (310). But as Glück and others have noted, language and representation coexist in a paradox of visibility. As James Dawes puts it, “[i]f the diseased cannot be seen they cannot be treated; but if they are seen, they are reduced to the *merely* treatable” (40). Visibility, then, falls into the same trap as articulation.

Importantly, however, Glück recognizes both the failure to adequately *articulate* loss and the resounding absence felt within his community—that is, one absence brought on by another—and so wishes to exceed a merely narrative response to this battle over meaning. Instead of simply changing the face of the AIDS crisis, he seems to suggest, we need new parameters for expressing, understanding, and preserving the affective register, including narrative practices that both reflect and script the affective depths of community loss. Implicit in Glück’s critique, then, I also read a latent fever: language’s failure is also an archival one, which Glück seeks to address, at the very least, by naming and outlining the ways in which it fails. Like Derrida’s “*mal d’archive*,” this is a desire for articulation itself, an “irrepressible desire to return to the origin” (91) where the archive is constructed and consigned. Glück’s response to the HIV and AIDS crisis, however, raises an important question: if “no language can express so great a feeling” (“HIV 1986” 235), how can we articulate or preserve it?

Crucially, at the heart of language’s failure is an inability to recognize the affective networks and corporeal and relational intimacies inherent within communities. To mitigate this, Glück aligns the affective with the somatic. “It’s easy to show that the world is distant, life is distant, we have the vocabulary for that: disjunction and pastiche,” he writes, “[b]ut a touch is itself, a meeting place for the body and the sublime. It disregards language that wants to generalize, negotiate” (238). Here, Glück cites the body as a location of affective articulation, rather than merely the narrative or the semantic. Language’s failure to articulate loss stems from an absence: it cannot capture the specificity of the body, nor can it approach the “community sublime” (238), that which is totalizing beyond the individual. Conversely, though, a touch becomes relational, a “meeting place” (238) or an encounter between an individual and another that captures, performs, and becomes affective resonance. As I explore

below, New Narrative writing seeks to draw the body into text so as “to invoke ... relation itself” (“Long Note on New Narrative” 13), and the corporeal comes to stand in for that which is beyond language, that which cannot be captured, archived, or articulated.

Shifting scales to the question of genre, this chapter explores the body as it appears in both text and performance as a means of investigating questions around recuperation, performance documentation, and ephemerality. Here, I expand on groundwork laid in the preceding chapter, where I, like Glück, figure the body as *presence*, described first as material, and in performance as surrogate. This chapter pivots from bodily presence to the question of ephemerality as it arises in relation to performance, methodology, and the archive. At the same time, following Glück’s supposition that “each death is beyond language” (“HIV 1986” 238), I consider the performative dimension through which a text might articulate loss and absence. Asking what remains when the material body is absent, I explore two texts that frame community in terms of the corporeal and textual *encounter* while simultaneously addressing absence and loss. With an eye toward futurity (which in this context also speaks to the issue of re-performance), I consider the questions, How do we think about intimacy when the other is gone? and, in an archival context, What remains when the relational body is absent?

This line of inquiry extends to a generic question at the heart of this project: how can we engage with site-specific performance when working from script? If, as Peggy Phelan suggests, “[p]erformance’s only life is in the present” (*Unmarked* 146), how do we address what is ultimately absent outside of the time and space of the event? Or, in other words, how do we work *only* from language? For Phelan, who argues that performance “occurs over a time which will not be repeated” (146), any re-performance or citational documentation can only be derivative: a performance “can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as

‘different’... an encouragement of memory to become present” (146). This speaks to one of the primary difficulties of this dissertation: can we read an archive that ultimately fails in articulation?

Following Glück’s turn toward the body, I argue that performance also works to reify certain archival dimensions of text. In hybrid genres such as poets theater, the very act of performance creates a type of “absent-presence” (Carter 223) that simultaneously gestures toward its own future absence and actively recuperates aspects of that loss. Archivist Rodney G. S. Carter names and discusses the “absent-presence” in “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences and the Power of Silence,” where he uses the term to describe instances in which “what is present in the archives is defined by what is not” (223), often signifying systems of gender-, class-, or race-based oppression. While I borrow this term from Carter, who uses it to discuss archival silences similar to those articulated by Glück in the wake of the AIDS crisis, I re-interpret it to point toward the *relational* absence. If the New Narrative writing project sought to “to invoke... relation itself” (“Long Note on New Narrative” 13), what happens when the body is removed from the encounter? In terms of the tension between intimacy and absence, the absent presence exists in the corporeal performance of being *outside* relation, rooted in a body that is simultaneously there and not there.

Locating this discussion of corporeality in work from the New Narrative movement, a writing community historically situated at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, reveals an unstable and unreliable body that both grounds a community archive and simultaneously threatens to disappear. In “HIV 1986,” Glück suggests that alongside the lie of language, there is also a politicized “public impulse to silence that affects everyone” (238) at

the level of both visibility and policy.²⁹ Reading these two types of absence or silence together, in concert with three texts from this period—Dodie Bellamy’s *The Letters of Mina Harker*, Bellamy and Sam D’Allesandro’s co-written epistolary novel *Real: The Letters of Mina Harker and Sam D’Allesandro*, and writer Aaron Shurin and dancer Ney Fonseca’s collaborative performance piece, *Turn Around*—I read the body as liminal, both present and absent within a situated archival context that seeks to simultaneously correct the imposed silence and move beyond language itself. As an archive, Bellamy and D’Allesandro’s individual and collaborative work utilizes the intimate, relational form of letter-writing to catalogue and showcase social connection and affective networks while also *performing* relation. Shurin and Fonseca’s performance work lends a material body to the relational poetics of the New Narrative movement and engages with the narrative imperative of the archive to address how “each death is beyond language” (238). Considering the ways in which language and narrative resonate within the body, I suggest that the New Narrative corpus becomes a way of both grounding and performing relation.³⁰ At the same time, I acknowledge that the performative—and often missed—encounter inherent in these texts also outlines and preserves the presence of absence itself, through its engagement with the body in (and outside of) relation.

When the body is *not* present, I argue, we are given a new type of archive, one that moves beyond the spatial narrativity of locational memory toward the ephemeral. Here, I return

²⁹ Ronald Reagan’s failure to address the growing AIDS epidemic of the 1980s has been well documented. As Glück puts it, “Reagan won’t associate himself with homosexuality or a disease... how language lies in articulation, Reagan lies in silence” (238). For more information on political responses to the AIDS epidemic, see Jennifer Brier’s *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis*, particularly the chapter entitled “What should the federal government do to deal with the problem of AIDS?: The Reagan Administration’s Response.”

³⁰ The term “corpus” signifies doubly here: I wish to address the New Narrative focus on corporeality in terms of both the physical body and the textual body, as it exists *across* texts and communities of texts.

to Bellamy and D'Allesandro's *Real* as it unravels around the actual death of Sam D'Allesandro from an AIDS-related illness in 1988, and to Shurin and Fonseca's collaborative performance *Turn Around*, which directly engages with the absent body through a complex negotiation between embodiment and text. Using these two texts, I argue that narrative, or the act of performing or imposing a narrative, helps to relocate the absent body as well as correct the wider "public impulse to silence" ("HIV 1986" 238). In accessing the archive, the departed body becomes an absent presence, recuperated and brought into the present tense through performance. While this body still remains effectively absent, its absence is felt as a performed and affective presence, a missed encounter. This ties into a larger discussion of re-enactment that draws together disparate chapters of this dissertation.

Finally, while this chapter focusses on the strategic use of absence across three spatially and historically proximal texts, it also more broadly considers the body as a pivotal point of connection between page and stage. In this way, the aforementioned texts' treatment of death and absence extends into metaphor, mapping the specific body onto a generic one. Phelan's suggestion that performance cannot exist beyond the moment of its inscription ignores the recuperative potential of performance itself. If a text, in turn, tries to capture something that is already gone, this absence aligns with and reflects on the generic absence at the heart of re-performance. This dynamic remains pivotal to discussions of poets theater, and particularly to the *study* of poets theater as it moves across spaces, times, bodies, and iterations.

Writing Relation: Textual and Archival Practice in New Narrative Writing

Most accounts trace the origins of the loosely defined New Narrative movement to a series of free writing workshops organized by Robert Glück and held at the Small Press Traffic Literary Arts Center in San Francisco between 1977 and 1985. Attended by writers including

Steve Abbott, Michael Amnasan, Dodie Bellamy, Bruce Boone, Sam D'Allesandro, Kevin Killian, and Camille Roy, the workshop series developed into “a kind of New Narrative laboratory” (Glück “Long Note on New Narrative” 22) focused on merging the seemingly disparate spaces of identity and formal experimentation. It developed from a type of social and artistic occlusion that, particularly in relation to Language poetry, excised subjectivity from both the writing process and the poetic product. For Glück, Language poetry relied on “a luxurious idealism in which the speaking subject could reject the confines of representation,” but it could not account for “whole areas of [his] experience, especially gay experience” (14). As such, New Narrative writing worked to privilege subjective experience while simultaneously “subverting the possibilities of meaning itself” (16). As Bellamy and Killian put it in the co-written introduction to their recent anthology, *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977–1997*,

The question was how to reproduce the sensations of ordinary life while subverting the totalizing narratives that had stymied and withered our lives.... Narrative was basically corrupt, or so we gathered from our attendance at the readings of Language poets, and absolute narrative corrupts absolutely, and so the stratagems of all the modernisms were dangled in front of us with a take it and try it on shrug. (ix)

But where Language poetry “interrogated the semiotics of meaning and the materiality of language at the level of the sentence, the word, the phoneme” (Burger 9), New Narrative writing interrogates subjectivity and identity formation as it coalesces around social and political narrative. Mary Burger perhaps puts it best when she writes,

Narrative meant that you could be a person having experiences and you could admit and affirm in writing that you, the writer, had experiences and thought about them and the meaning of them; that personhood itself, if a fiction, was no less useful for not being “true”; that in fact its very artifice made it a fruitful literary conceit.... And, though personhood might be avowedly fictional, narrative was not the same thing as fiction, which insisted on wholesale invention (with resemblance to person living or dead etc. etc. ritually denied); it was not the same thing as autobiography or memoir, with their adherence to what was (again, troublesomely) “true.” (9)

This aligns closely with both Glück’s critique of language around the AIDS crisis and Marjorie Worthington’s recent discussion of autofiction in her 2018 monograph *The Story of “Me”: Contemporary American Autofiction*. Worthington suggests that “[a]utofiction occupies a liminal space between fiction and nonfiction” (151), in which “readers embrace narratives depicting ‘true’ experience while at the same time recognizing the impossibility of language to convey the whole truth of any experience” (160–161). Like autofiction, New Narrative writing operates within the liminal space between disclosure and invention, softening the boundaries between reality and invention while at the same time capturing the “real.”

Importantly, New Narrative’s engagement with the real is inextricably linked to the community experience. In “Long Note on New Narrative,” Glück cites Georg Lukács’ *The Theory of the Novel* as foundational to his understanding of New Narrative writing as it develops into a community project:

The epic and novel are the community telling itself its story, a story whose integration becomes increasingly hard to achieve. *Theory of the Novel* leads to

ideas of collaboration and community that are not naïve—that is, to narrative that questions itself. It redistributes relations of power and springs the writer from the box of psychology, since he becomes that part of a community that tells itself its story. (19)

Indeed, much New Narrative writing and scholarship consists of first-hand testimony from a community of authors theorizing the development of their own work. Equally, as noted above, most accounts locate the origins of the loosely defined New Narrative in a community event—the SPT writing workshops—and a series of social, historical, and artistic anchor points. Thus the origin and history of the community is set alongside the conditions of its material production. Within this scalar dynamic between self and community, in which the writer engages with and shapes the story of their own community while simultaneously reflecting on the conditions and artifice of the narrative itself, we see a softening of the boundaries between the individual, community, and text. This, in turn, is reflected in the writing itself.

Examples of this type of collaborative work are rife throughout the New Narrative oeuvre, which draws heavily on community in terms of both content and form, and where “[t]he action of writing and reading work[s] two ways... [where] the writing [i]s fed by the community” (“New Narrative Beginnings” ix). Bellamy and Killian, for example, recall how “Steve Abbott, his energies flagging under the siege of AIDS, turned to his friends and asked them to write a chapter of his last published novel, *The Lizard Club*. The writing was done by committee” (xiii). Similarly, influenced by the textual appropriation of writers like Kathy Acker, much New Narrative work borrows from other sources. One notable example includes “a review in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* [that] praised Dodie’s novel *The Letters of Mina*

Harker by quoting a passage lifted without acknowledgement from [fellow New Narrative writer] Gail Scott” (xii). “Happily,” Killian and Bellamy recall, “Gail took no offence” (xii).³¹

At the same time, New Narrative writers were “thinking about autobiography... the act of writing... the self as collaboration” (“Long Note on New Narrative” 18). In this way, New Narrative writing seeks to blur the lines between fact and fiction, drawing equally on “real life” and fantasy, as well as on the narrative of community, or what Glück calls the “spirit of collectivity in authorship” (“Caricature” 93). Both individual and community identity are implicated in artistic production and process, determined equally to the extent that they are framed in and engaged with through language. We see this most prominently in what Bruce Boone has called “text-metatext,” a stylistic hallmark of the movement in which this porous relationship between self and community maps on to the acts of reading and writing:

a story keeps a running commentary on itself from the present. The commentary, taking the form of a meditation or a second story, supplies a succession of frames. That is, the more you fragment a story, the more it becomes an example of narration itself—narration displaying its devices... the metatext “asks questions, asks for critical response, makes claims on the reader, elicits comments. In any case, text-metatext takes its form from the dialectical cleft between real life and life as it wants to be. (“Long Note on New Narrative” 17)

The question of “life as it wants to be” (17) points toward the performativity of the text-metatext exchange, in which the writer and reader (who are not necessarily mutually exclusive)

³¹ Part of Dodie Bellamy’s *The Letters of Mina Harker* also developed out of this community spirit in writing when Glück asked “friends and students to provide lists of body sensations that he subsequently shifted into his novel on Margery Kempe.... Dodie took the challenge and ran with it, writing one of the letters in *Mina* by way of response” (*Writers Who Love Too Much*, xii). See *The Letters of Mina Harker* page 137.

become caught in a relational short circuit rooted in text. Notably, Glück expands on this in his essay “Caricature” by pointing toward the anti-theatrical elements of this performed relation between writer and text (or writer and reader): “[a] simple narration can put the reader on the far side of the proscenium arch. The metatext cuts naturalistic illusion” (94). As with metatheatricality (which I explore more thoroughly in Chapter 1), text-metatext points to the artificiality of a life in language.³² Additionally, within this temporal collapse, the text, as well as the act of writing, mediates between the real and the imagined, the community narrative. Crucially, though, even within the space of imagination there is a very *real* performance of relation: the act of writing turns the stable text into a performative text in process—enacted by bodies embedded in spaces, writing between and in response to each other. This process, which acts among some combination of reader, writer, and community, creates a type of intimacy at the site of textual production and reception.

A pivotal agent in this exchange is the body. In the essay “Truth’s Mirror is No Mirror,” in response to Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage,” Glück characterizes writing’s relation to a larger community:

If I write about the historical constructedness of this mirror self (history of subjectivity, the personal as political) I am in “metatext”—the story of the world. If I focus on the body my subject becomes a member of a species, which happens when I describe how it feels to breathe or sweat. (49)

My reading of New Narrative writing is situated in the productive overlap of these two scalar frameworks: the writer remains in metatext with the text as it is written, a performative act

³² Here I am reminded of both Spicer’s work and “a brief tableau” included in Glück’s short essay “Caricature” that gets at the heart of this performative engagement with artifice: “you are standing here and life is standing over there. ‘Please get into my writing, Life.’ ‘I’ll come closer and flirt but I’m not going all the way’” (85).

termed “text-metatext”; yet, the body also remains central to the text and the experience of writing and reading. Admittedly, I have chosen a misleading section title: in his example, Glück wishes to be *before* metatext, central to his own story and writing. At the same time, New Narrative writing actively strives to summon the particularity and specificity of the living, desiring body to the text by making the author and their body central to narrative. As such, New Narrative writing combines fantasy, autobiography, and the critical approach in a way that “approaches performance art, where self is put at risk by naming names, becoming naked, making the irreversible happen—the book becomes social practice that is lived” (“Long Note on New Narrative” 20). As a site of both collaboration and exchange, this type of writing becomes an example of a performative poetics emboldened by collapsing the space of the body, the reader, and the writer at the site of text. Yet, the idea that “*I am in metatext*” (49 emphasis added) also speaks to the notion of being in productive relation to a community. Camille Roy describes this link as a dynamic in which “the minds of the reader and writer are bound through the eroticism of the story. In the moment of reading, during that act of holding attention, a ghost is present” (*Biting the Error* 8).

This situated sense of self and collective addresses the emphasis on relationality central to the New Narrative literature as it develops. Across Glück’s writing, too, there is an insistent focus on language and community. For example, his three essays “My Community,” “HIV 1986,” and “Truth’s Mirror is no Mirror,” all of which appear in *Communal Nude: Collected Essays*, share an “interest in the way we exist for each other in language” (“Truth’s Mirror is No Mirror” 44).³³ But as noted above, to exist in language is complicated by the way language

³³ These three essays represent a brief cross-section from Glück’s prolific career. According to *Communal Nudes*, “My Community” (originally titled “The Maker”) was first published in the first edition of *Dear World: Queer Art & Lit* in 1991 and then republished in *Discontents: New Queer Writers* in 1992 (*Communal Nudes* 36); “Truth’s Mirror is No Mirror” developed out of a lecture given at St. Mark’s Poetry Project in 1985 and

often fails to adequately represent lived and affective experiences, particularly in terms of how we relate to each other. The New Narrative movement, whose writing seeks to hold space for itself as a community while simultaneously critiquing its own linguistic systems of representation, works to refocus the reader and writer's attentions on the body, both as a materially unique site of individual identity and experience and as an affective geography. In the unequivocal connection between community and language, the body becomes integral because of the ways it both mediates and houses affective resonance. A focus on the body grounds us in our unique, individual ways of relating to the world. According to Janet Neigh, who sees New Narrative work as centering on a "subject's ability to locate herself in a place through a sense of community or connection with those around her" ("Soft Links of Innovative Narrative in North America"), the act of writing becomes a way of both grounding and articulating the act of being in relation. The geography of the body, in its radical and grounding specificity, allows New Narrative writers to locate their work, at least in gesture, both materially and relationally.

New Narrative's Relational Archive

In many ways, narrative can be read as a tactic for both imposing and revoking community identity. In the battle for self-representation and community visibility, then, narrativization becomes one of the archive's most pressing and troublesome imperatives. As Marlene Manoff explains in "Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines," the archive itself is always already incomplete: "a reconstruction—a recording of history from a particular perspective; it thus cannot provide transparent access to the events themselves" (14). Heavily

was later published in *Poetics Journal* (no. 7) in 1987 (*Communal Nudes* 52); and "HIV 1986" first appeared as "HTLV-3" in *City Lights Journal* (no. 2) in 1988 and was later reprinted in *Personal Dispatches: Writers Confront AIDS* in 1989 and *Sulfur* (no. 17) in 1990 (*Communal Nude* 240).

tied to narration, then—as both a condition and failure of archival work—the archive becomes a performative, self-actualizing space where, according to Harriet Bradley, “one may pluck out from these multiple forms and other versions a repeated connective sequence of archive—memory—the past—narrative” (108). In this way, there is always a latent shadow-archive behind the constituted one, shaped by its potential exclusions and inclusions. Like Manoff and Bradley, Rodney G. S. Carter argues that the archive has a doubled power, consisting of “the power to allow voices to be heard” as well as the “power to exclude,” which subsequently brings with it “distortions, omissions, erasures, and silences” (216). But Carter reads these archival silences—“the ‘gaps,’ ‘blanks,’ ‘void regions’” (217) of the archive—as equally doubled: representative of either oppression and exclusion or resistance and empowerment. Both carry different sets of problems and protocols for the archivist, and Carter concludes his article by noting the ways in which silences should be treated either with respect or with intervention. Following Carter, this chapter tries to build its analysis around a respect for and acknowledgement of the intentional silences and absences of the New Narrative archive.³⁴

In part, New Narrative writing, which draws heavily on personal and lived experience, gossip, and fantasy, resists larger forms of social and political erasure by voicing narratives that do not make it, or have not made it, into the archival reconstruction, even if that archive is only a metaphorical one. As Glück has noted, the failure of language can exist as either an articulation or a refusal. This is also a failure of the archive. New Narrative writing works to

³⁴ Fittingly, Carter uses the examples of the Canadian Women’s Movement Archives and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, which were established as a corrective to the exclusion of gay and lesbian histories from the national archive. While in a different national context to that considered here, this example points to both the importance of the counter-narrative as a means of combatting social erasure in spaces of state power (like the archive) and the state-sanctioned erasure of marginalized communities, including queer communities.

counter both sets of problematics by creating both a textual archive that works to move beyond language and a community narrative.

When considered alongside the historical context of the New Narrative movement, the archival impetus of New Narrative writing can be read in relation to community trauma. As Ann Cvetkovich notes in *An Archive of Feelings*, “trauma forges overt connections between politics and emotion” (3). Of the AIDS crisis in particular, Cvetkovich, whose work interrogates the intersections between trauma and queer worldbuilding, notes that “[t]he AIDS crisis offered clear evidence that some deaths were more important than others and homophobia and, significantly, racism could affect how trauma was publicly recognized” (5). In relation to this trauma, which “can be unspeakable and unrepresentable... because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation” and therefore resists traditional methods of documentation and by definition “often seems to leave behind no records at all” (7), Cvetkovich argues for the recognition of “an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma’s ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral” (7). As such, Cvetkovich posits an archive of feeling, “an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (7). The New Narrative texts surveyed here work toward such an “unusual” ephemeral archive.

One example of this dynamic is Dodie Bellamy’s epistolary text *The Letters of Mina Harker*, a reinvention of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* consisting of a collection of letters written by Bellamy as the hybrid persona of herself and the fictional character of Mina Harker, which performs a real-time, social version of text-metatext between author, text, and community. Over a fixed period, Mina/Dodie wrote to fellow writers within her community and, while their

responses are not included in the published version of the text, the recipients of Mina’s letters responded either as themselves, as characters from *Dracula*, or as characters of their own invention (*Real i*).³⁵ As correspondence, then, *The Letters of Mina Harker* walks the line between fact and fiction while also working toward capturing the intimacy of being in relation. The epistolary performance that makes up the material conditions of the text’s construction is real. Some of the content, too, blends seamlessly with the writer’s lives and experiences—Mina describes the early stages of Bellamy’s relationship with her husband, Kevin Killian, for example. In this sense, we get a sort of one-sided archival corrective—simultaneously articulating, performing, and mapping a community’s intimate networks of exchange and camaraderie. Despite this inclusion of real relational dynamics, there are also fiction, fantasy, poetic license, imagination, and alter egos that obfuscate the straightforward archival quality of the text. Yet, Bellamy’s epistolary collection maps the authors’ relationships to each other, individually and as a collective. By including members of her own community and world in an act of exchange, Bellamy’s text extends beyond the page and *performs* relation in the tracing of an intimate social network. The text at the same time “mak[es] it real” through the performative demands of the epistolary genre (*Real i*).

Building on the affective network set up in *The Letters of Mina Harker, Real: The Letters of Mina Harker and Sam D’Allesandro* is an offshoot of Bellamy’s larger project, collecting both sides of an epistolary chain between Bellamy and fellow New Narrative writer Sam D’Allesandro. Engaging with each other through the fictional personas of Mina Harker and SX (proxies who possess the living bodies of Bellamy and D’Allesandro and engage with their shared lived experiences through writing), and also as themselves, Dodie and Sam, *Real*

³⁵ Bruce Boone, for example, wrote to Bellamy as Dr. Van Helsing (*Real i*).

also displays extra-textual relations by mapping Sam and Dodie's material world and community, sharing anecdotes of their daily lives, gossip, and fantasies.

Significantly, both texts also use intertextual reference as a way to map their community. Made up of borrowed, plagiarized, and regurgitated text, both *Real* and *The Letters of Mina Harker* consume writing from within their own social network, hardening the overlap between writing and being in relation. As such, letter-writing and intertextual reference become part of both writers' performative and archival practice. Bellamy's individual work, as well as her collaborative work with D'Allesandro, captures the important social connections and affective bonds within her own community while also controlling (and therefore preserving) the community narrative.

Playing Dead: The Absent Present Body in Narration and Performance

How do we distinguish the self from the social when both are community constructs? Here, the body itself begins to resonate between the intimate landscapes of the individual and the community. In "Notes toward a Politics of Location," Adrienne Rich interrogates "how a place on the map is also a place in history within which... [she] is created and trying to create" (212). In order to explore how subjectivity is negotiated across scales, Rich grounds her understanding of both herself and the world within the body: "[h]ere at least I know I exist," she writes, "that living human individual" (212). According to Rich, to start with the body is to start with something specific: "lived experience, particularity... scars, disfigurements, discolorations, damages, losses [and pleasures]" (215). Set between two scales, the body becomes a site of both individuality and intimacy, particularity and relation.³⁶ While our bodies

³⁶ Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner curate a selection of essays dealing with the issue of scale and intimacy in *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in our Time*.

change over time—and can come to mean many different things³⁷—they always assert their material presence: they exist within spaces, they take up space, and they change space; they present themselves on a sensory plain to be seen, felt, or heard; they get noticed, they get touched. At the same time, bodies can be overlooked, ignored, and subject to violence, and in these cases also need to be read in the context in which they are disregarded.

How the body operates in the world can be read as parallel to how it asserts itself on stage. In “The Actor’s Body,” David Graver explores the different registers in which the corporeal body discloses its presence on stage. For Graver, actors are simultaneously “characters, performers, commentators, personages, members of socio-historical groups, physical flesh, and loci of private sensations” (222). Each role brings with it different artistic and performative resonances. While a performer’s body is often cloaked under other performative and corporeal modes, what Graver terms the “fleshy body” (230) is easy to miss. Yet, the fleshy body is the body at its most present:

The exterior of the fleshy body is simply skin and hair. The interior is muscle, fat, blood and warmth—the physical insides that we sense as separate from the mind and sensation, the heated mass permeated by other forms of being but separate from them. The skin glows with the warmth of the fleshy interior and separates this body’s physicality from the rest of the physical world. (230)

I quote this description of the fleshy body at length because Graver seems to unknowingly touch on two additional corporeal assertions of the performing body: intimacy and relation. While much gets in the way of our seeing the fleshy body (all those other forms of corporeality that layer onto it make it difficult discern it), less gets in the way of us *feeling* it, either

³⁷ For example, Rich’s body is “a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist” (212).

physically or affectively. Graver argues that “flesh is really only a small part of the corporeal presence established on the stage” (231), but he misses how the body works *in relation*. The image of the “heated mass” that permeates and is “permeated by other forms of being” not only “separates” but, crucially, brings the body *into contact* with the physical world (230). Thus, the permeating warmth of the fleshy body allows for a sort of spatial stickiness between our bodies and others. In part, Graver acknowledges this potential in his analysis of the sensing body. This “is predominantly an invisible body,” he writes, “hidden by flesh but capable of asserting an interiority of overwhelming power.... The body of sensation always participates in performance in some way, but it is rarely overtly on display” (232). Yet, by figuring the sensing body as strictly individual, Graver does not consider the sensation of sharing space, or the sensations of the audience in that shared space. To be in proximity with the warm, fleshy body triggers our own sensing ones. Or, as José Gil writes, “[t]he space of the body is the skin extending itself into space; it is skin becoming space—thus, the extreme proximity between things and the body” (Gil 22). Notably, for Rich, it is also the act of writing the body that affirms its corporeality. “To write ‘my body’ plunges me into lived experience, particularity,” Rich writes. “I see scars, disfigurements, discolorations, damages, losses, as well as what pleases me” (215). Even in simply writing the body, the body itself is distinct in its corporeality—its *presence*.

Within the New Narrative writing community, the body can be read as archival because of the way it houses affective resonance and mediates between the intimate landscapes of the individual and community. If New Narrative writing performs a type of affective, relational archive, how then, does it change when the object in relation disappears? As both *Real* and *The Letters of Mina Harker* demonstrate, New Narrative writing strives to draw the body into

text, in both its specificity and its liveness. Bellamy and D’Allesandro swap visceral stories—they write about their fantasies, sexual encounters (real and imagined, often indistinguishable), and their bodies—achy, sweaty, and desiring. And amidst this intensely intimate subject matter, form also lends closeness. Through letter-writing, *Real* signals intimacy between the sender and the receiver, but also creates that intimacy, with the reader acting as voyeur and active interloper. In this moment of the epistolary exchange cracked open—that is to say, opened to us—our bodies are thrust into relation in our experience of the text. In this sense, the text itself becomes a study of what is *between* Bellamy/Mina and D’Allesandro as Sam/SX, as well as ourselves: a complicated performance of being in relation that triangulates the reader—pivotaly—within the story. But reading *Real* as relational performance also permits us to access new facets of the text. Already, Bellamy and D’Allesandro’s work creates a social archive, drawing on material from their everyday lives and continually referencing friendships, rumours, and encounters within their poetic community. As with *The Letters of Mina Harker*, where we witness Bellamy as Mina entering into relation with poetic pen pals who, under pseudonyms, engage with her on the fictive plane of text, these exchanges build a sense of the community to which both authors belong. While strictly textual, this performative poetics works, as Cvetkovich notes, to “creat[e] publics for bringing together live bodies in space, and the theatrical experience is not just on stage but also about who’s in the audience creating community” (9).³⁸

³⁸ When presenting a version of this chapter at a conference at the University of British Columbia in 2018, I had the uncomfortable and more palpable experience of public engagement when discussing a particular passage relating to the extramarital affairs of an unnamed Vancouver author. When questioned about the passage by an interested audience member looking for me to name names, I found myself thrust into the real world, wondering if the anonymous author might in fact be in the audience themselves, in ear shot, or about to find out about my own complicity in furthering the community archive.

But when writing the body begins to stand in for a physical presence, how can we address its ephemerality? In “HIV 1986,” Glück outlines the body under a new set of conditions. Within the context of the AIDS and HIV epidemic, his body becomes part of a narrative lost to futurity. In this way, Glück’s relationship to his body is forced to change in response to a new capacity for loss, and he must learn to read his body differently: now, he must “listen to [his] body for distant alarms” (238) but also imagine a possible future for his body in which there is no future at all. Of course, this threat also jumps scale: not only is this loss experienced on a personal level but it is also an interpersonal loss, altering the make-up of queer life and communities. Echoing the New Narrative imperative connecting text and community, Glück suggests that queer social activities and ways of being in relation to one another now include

read[ing] the obituaries in the gay newspapers instead of the sex ads. Stories about AIDS patients and treatments are passed around, traded, repeated.... They are the very matter that creates community, gives it its character, its form and being. (239)

The connection between body and community is reframed in terms of a new “community sublime” (238). But, importantly, the body also shifts from a stable, grounding entity—formative in its narrativizing, relational capacity—to a volatile and unstable one, constantly under threat. Under these conditions, the importance of reifying and preserving the body and therefore also the community becomes even more important. The question of corporeal presence shifts to one of absence: if New Narrative practice is predicated on a corporeal primacy, whether textual or actual, what happens when that body disappears? And what comes out of a relational gap?

i. ***Real: The Letters of Mina Harker and Sam D'Allesandro***

Real explores the relational gap by continuing the text after D'Allesandro's death in 1988, when his/SX's correspondence with Mina/Bellamy is cut short and their epistolary enactment of relation ends abruptly. At this time, Mina's final letter integrates D'Allesandro's writing into her own: "*one of us is bleeding into the other: SX: take the death as a lover and sleep with it and eat it and purge it and suck it back in quick*" (98). This particular line is taken from an earlier short story written by D'Allesandro, entitled "Nothing Ever Just Disappears," which follows "S", the narrator, in the days surrounding the death of his partner, "J," who dies from an unnamed illness. Framing memory as a function of both narrative and archive, S wrestles with the way his own memories rearticulate themselves after the death and subsequent absence of his partner. In this context, absence is voiced at the levels of both content, through the loss of J, and form, through the narrative holes which begin to form in S's articulation and narrativization of those memories. While the loss of J reframes S's own archive of memories, it also creates a deep affective and relational echo chamber, in which "every move [S] make[s] echoes because J's not there to absorb [him]" (22). In this sense, the absence itself—present in both what goes unnamed and the stilted articulation of memory and remembrance—becomes a way of aestheticizing absence-in-relation through redaction and rearticulation. As S concludes, even in death, "nothing ever really just disappears" (22). As Mina consumes D'Allesandro's prose and blends it with Bellamy's experiences of loss in the days following D'Allesandro's death and funeral, the text embodies this notion of writing as "fed" by the community, as well as D'Allesandro's own articulation of relationality and absence.

While, on one level, *Real* traces the textual and social networks of a community and thus acts as a sort of community archive, it also turns toward a performed and enacted one by

moving beyond the literal exchange, stopped short by Sam's death. This first archival gesture builds on the intimacy of sharing space—albeit textual. The second operates through narrative to seize and fix D'Allesandro's death and absence within the community archive. Despite D'Allesandro's real absence, he remains present in the text: "I never imagined," Bellamy writes, "that playing dead could make you feel so alive" (*Real* 100). It is the *playing out* of Sam's death—the act of narrating it and the space beyond it—that fixes his felt presence in space. Here, the doubled meaning of "you" also points toward the archival moment of access. Bellamy, in "playing" at Sam's death, is able to draw him into the present. Yet, there is still a surplus of absence that, toward the end of the text, spills over into new meaning in the loss of Sam, both for Bellamy and, as we know from the text that follows and precedes it, for the community as well. The relational archives resonates and fixes this loss by ending the epistolary chain—Bellamy's letters receive no response. Sam's body becomes conspicuously absent and (at the point of his death) we are left with a call but no response. In this moment, *Real* makes a performative gesture toward a resonant archive built around absence.

After a final letter from Sam, dated July 5, 1987, Bellamy and D'Allesandro's epistolary exchange ends. Sam's last letter is followed by his short story "Travels with My Mother," which Bellamy "transcribed from a [real] tape [that the real] D'Allesandro had made two months before his [actual] death in January 1988" (61). A lengthy footnote by Bellamy reads as follows:

In this piece we get to hear the writer's process, constructing fiction out of available facts and time. The tape is spliced often, as the voice breaks in with new, undeveloped thought, always to improve the story, to take it in new directions, to reveal or confine, or conflate—I've surrounded these breaks with

parentheses for clarity. Thus there's a "you" in the story unlike the usual second person, a heroic "you" hounded both by HIV and by the narrative imperative. Although AIDS isn't mentioned in "Travels with My Mother," it haunts the piece like a revenant, right down to the sudden faint that "ends" the story in a comic shadow of death itself. (61)

As Bellamy describes, D'Allesandro's vocalized story grounds the New Narrative notion of text-metatext in the body, voicing for the tape. Bellamy's transcription also archives—for the reader—D'Allesandro's writing process, including each splice and comment. On another level, the inclusion of "Travels with My Mother" in *Real* foregrounds D'Allesandro's death and reminds us of the work he will no longer be producing for his community to consume.

It is not until twelve pages later, with the conclusion of "Travels with My Mother," that Sam is ultimately gone. At this point, Bellamy disrupts the text with a replicated notice reading "Memorial Service for Sam D'Allesandro, February 13, 1988" (73). In the text's most obvious archival instance, this piece lies in *Real* unexplained and seemingly unaltered: a transcription of the day's events, followed by an invitation to an open house to be held after the service (74). It is a heartbreaking document. Plainly factual, we see D'Allesandro, whom we have come to know differently, as Sam/SX, laid bare to a simple articulation of readings, eulogies, and musical choices, as well as a splattering of names we recognize from his letters: Kevin Killian, Dodie Bellamy, Robert Glück. We are reminded "that each death is beyond language" (Glück 238).

After this archival interruption, *Real* concludes with a final section consisting of one last letter to Sam from Mina. Written years later in 1993, the letter reads: "You know Mina doesn't like to be kept waiting" (77). The weight of these words is affectively so heavy that it

is difficult to keep reading. We know, as perhaps the fictionalized Mina does not, that Sam is gone. Yet, Sam's presence is fixed in form, because of the way his absence breaks the performance of relation. Without a response, D'Allesandro's death enters the community narrative as a palpable absence that is felt. The breakdown of the text's structure following his death and the subsequent narrativization of his absence through the persistence of Bellamy's final letter create a new fiction. The eponymous words of D'Allesandro's short story, "Nothing Ever Just Disappears," echo throughout *Real*, both literally, as intertextual material, and in its archival resonances. Both *Real* and *The Letters of Mina Harker* tether themselves amongst a series of community anchor points, capturing an affective but foundational network. When one anchor point drops away, *Real* begins a new type of archive, one which gestures toward a present and future absence.

ii. Turn Around: Movement, Absence, and Text



Figure 6. Stills from Shurin and Fonseca's *Turn Around*, October 2, 1992. DVD. Image used with the permission of the copyright holder.

As I have explored above, New Narrative writing sought to centralize the body within the writing and reading process, not merely as a medium but as a grounding creative agent. The writing discussed above both blends and navigates a physical, bodily intimacy and a performed one. Yet within the context of the AIDS crisis, the material body also becomes unstable and often absent. In this new dynamic, the intimacy of the relational text—which in many ways is also grounded in the body—becomes diffuse. If we consider absence to be a space of disconnected intimacy, that is to say, a space where intimacy is no longer held against another, we are left with a space in which the sticky resonances of closeness are lost to posterity. As I have illustrated with *Real*, this loss is mitigated through the use—or performance—of narrative, which helps relocate the absent body while also serving as an archival corrective to the silenced affective losses of the wider community. For example, in *Real*, D’Allesandro’s role within the community is foregrounded in the ways the text performs being in relation. After his death, his absence is fixed in the textual reconstruction that takes place around it.

Yet while *Real* builds a relational archive through textual practice, this dynamic also extends to the spatial quality of the performed text. I locate an example of this dynamic in Aaron Shurin and Ney Fonseca’s collaborative performance piece *Turn Around*, which was first performed in 1992 at the Artaud Theater in San Francisco.³⁹ The piece bears witness to the loss of the artists’ shared friend, John B. Davis, who died of AIDS in the same year as the piece’s production. Subtitled “a solo dance with voice” (Shurin 44), *Turn Around* interrogates

³⁹ In *Unbound: a Book of AIDS*, Aaron Shurin notes that *Turn Around, a Solo Dance with Voice* was first performed by Ney Fonseca for Juntos Dance on October 2, 1992 (44). In *The Skin of Meaning: Collected Literary Essays and Talks*, Shurin adds that this performance took place at Theatre Artaud in San Francisco (116).

spaces of absence and mourning through the embodied and diegetic practices of dance and storytelling. The performance, which is broken into three sections, creates a scaffolded, site-specific experience that both demonstrates and interrogates intimacy and narrative within the framework of loss. Returning to the question of intimacy and absence, Shurin and Fonseca's collaboration articulates the fraught space of dissonance that arises when the intimate subject is no longer *in relation*. In what follows, I consider the scripted and performed versions of *Turn Around* in tandem. The first is included in Shurin's collection *Unbound: A Book of AIDS* (1997), and the second is a remediated copy of a live performance from 1992, videotaped in real time and transferred from VHS to DVD to a digital copy.⁴⁰ Considering these texts together elucidates qualities of absence that develop around issues of remediation and live performance, as well as the limits of my methodology, given that I could not locate any reviews or first-hand audience accounts of the performance.⁴¹



Figure 7. Stills from Shurin and Fonseca's *Turn Around*, October 2, 1992. DVD. Image used with permission of the copyright holder.

⁴⁰ I am thankful for the kindness of Ney Fonseca, who generously contributed a video recording of the 1992 performance of *Turn Around* to this project.

⁴¹ While this is a fraught distinction, it is nonetheless a useful way of framing the issue of re-performance in relation to site-specific performance and the *absence* of the performing, archival body. The differences between the scripted and performed versions of the text are emblematic of the generic trouble of reading the "felt" text outside of its moment of relation.

The first tension of the piece arises immediately, with a moment of discord between the script and the performance. In performance, *Turn Around* begins with a brief dance by Fonseca, while the scripted version commences with an “Offstage Voice” narrating the story of John’s death. Fonseca’s body acts as a precursor to the text, foregrounding the body. The subsequent act of narration—which in performance is provided by Shurin—turns John’s absence into a shared story between performer and audience, as it is preceded by an articulation in movement that foregrounds the presence of the material body, in this case Fonseca’s. Then, the disembodied voice begins: “John looked down at himself lying there: sunken cheeks, the shaved skull, the thin light body curled on its side in bed” (44). Despite the fact that it is Fonseca’s body that accompanies Shurin’s reading—and mimics the movements described in text—John’s body remains textually present: “the curves and hollows of his boned-on muscles, the blooming fluid in his skin” (44). The intimacy and corporeality of this textual image, along with the presence of the dancing body, creates a sense of connection between Fonseca’s performing body and John’s ailing one. Building on this comparison, Fonseca parallels the text briefly, getting on his hands and knees and gazing downwards, as if at himself.

But Fonseca ultimately resists the narrative imperative: he almost turns to curl on his *own* side but extends the movement up and outward. In an act of further resistance, he pivots back and forth, bringing his hands to his face, shielding his eyes, refusing to “look down at himself” (44). Then, he interrupts:

Ney: I hate this story!

Voice: It’s a true story.

Ney: I’m sick of it.

Voice: He was a friend of yours.

Ney: It's the same story.

Voice: Well, each one is different.

Ney: The same one!

The same goddam same one fucking same one shit same one!

(Turn Around 44–45)

As Fonseca pounds the floor in protest against the pervasiveness of stories like John's, both text and movement articulate the breadth of loss felt within the gay community and the residual feelings of frustration and anger that remain. Crucially, though, it is Fonseca's living body that protests John's death story, corporealizing the interruption with his own voice and punctuating that protest with a sharp smack on the floor. In this way, Fonseca is able to resist the narrative offered by the disembodied offstage voice while also standing in for John's lost body. His own body, then, becomes a site of both absence and presence.

In this moment of transference—switching the narrative subject from John to Fonseca's body—we see both the metaphor of loss (the corporeal absence of John's own body, which needs the surrogation of Fonseca's), and the absence of John himself, an absence experienced by both Fonseca and Shurin in performance that is, in turn, experienced by the audience as well. But Fonseca's body can never supplant John's. Each movement and utterance from Fonseca echoes with this absence. Reflecting, then, on how Fonseca's physical body becomes a conduit for John's ghostly presence forces us to consider that the body in space foregrounds the conspicuous absence of John and his body. Conversely, the presence of Fonseca's body on stage grounds the performance in the present and brings John's absence to the forefront.

Gesturing toward this moment of absolute intimacy, the voice responds to the dancer's interruption by offering a new story: "Ney Fonseca looked down at himself lying there. He floated above the tiny body that seemed to float on the bed, brittle and frail" (45). Now with a narrative of its own, Fonseca's body in performance, which has come to stand in for John's in its absence, becomes a simultaneous site of vulnerability, a focal point for the loss of John, and emblematic for the vulnerable, sick body of the AIDS crisis. We are reminded of Glück, who describes how his relationship to his own body is forced to change in the context of the AIDS epidemic. But the specificity of Fonseca's body is in tension with the universality of the story and is also continually in tension with the idea of making something "past." Shurin's use of past tense to describe Fonseca's living, performing body points toward a sort of artifice in language and narrative. Here, too, Fonseca protests in the present, turning John's absence into something lived.

As the piece continues, Fonseca (now marked by narrative) continues his protest. But the disembodied voice articulates the thesis of the piece: the story needs to be told, because it is in the *act of telling*, the moment of narrative intimacy in the act of exchange, that we begin to understand and see the affective loss. This is articulated, again, through the disembodied voice:

This is a story about becoming a story. It has to be *told*. It has to be put in the past.... It's a story about becoming the past.... It has to pass through. Telling turns it around. It doesn't disappear.... (46-47)

The articulated pairing of "past" and "pass through" here, points toward the performative tension at the heart of the piece. Fonseca's performance of John's body can drive the narrative forward but it cannot fully capture the absent body, with "the heat and the sex and even the

dance washed from [it]" (47). In telling and retelling the story of John's death, Fonseca and Shurin are able to both reify an important community narrative and fix a felt absence. Fonseca's "playing dead" makes John feel "so alive," or at least makes John's absence felt.

This is formalized in Part II of *Turn Around*. The disembodied voice speaks a series of casual addresses from offstage as Fonseca dances to Chopin's "Berceuse" performed by Rubinstein, in the measured time of "20 second intervals over the music" (48), illustrating how intimacy, when aligned to the scale of the body, becomes something that is *between*. The disembodied voice tries to hail John: "Johnny-Pie, are you going to the lake party tomorrow? Hey, Doll, did you talk to Jeffrey? We're going to see Cocteau's *Orpheus* on Wednesday? Hey John, wanna go to Opera in the Park with me and Weissman and Adrian?" (48–49). Between each utterance there is 20 seconds without speech. In these moments, Shurin's voice penetrates Fonseca's performance, but his dancing body seems unresponsive. Fonseca's surrogated presence fails to accurately account for John's own presence, and the lack of response to Shurin's language highlights his absent body. However, unlike in *Real*, there is a concrete presence, an actual body experiencing the loss of John's. Like a haunting, this spectral relationship both signifies the ephemerality of performance and troubles our concept of the archive. But it also gestures back to the ephemeral archive. In this way, John performs his own absence in the very act of non-presence.



Figure 8 and 9. Still from Shurin and Fonseca's *Turn Around*, October 2, 1992. DVD. Images used with the permission of the copyright holder.

This absence is spatialized by Fonseca's performance. In Part III, which is described in its scripted form only as "[w]ordless movement, ending with spins" (50), language fails completely and nothing but the body remains, not outside of articulation or relation—since it comes into contact with a new audience and a new set of relations in the shared space of performance—but beyond the limits of linguistic representation. As with the death of D'Allesandro's character in *Real* and the end of that epistolary exchange, Fonseca's body has nothing to echo back against. To a new musical score—notably, "Gabriel's Oboe, On Earth as it is in Heaven," performed by the San Francisco Gay Men's Choir—a concert of voices representing the wider community, Fonseca's body enters a new context. Without language, the dancer must articulate something beyond story. At the same time, though, Fonseca's distinct, recursive movements (turning and turning) present a metaphor for the process of becoming a narrative as a way of archiving, preserving, and honouring the past in the present.

Shurin's text, which emphasizes this importance, creates a resonant distance between the articulated absence and the absence of that story in the embodied, performed space of Fonseca.

As such, there are two types of intimacy here: first, the intimacy of content and of form (the way in which the text lays bare the private sphere of mourning); second, a spatial intimacy provided by the performance itself. But the site-specificity discussed in this chapter is not necessarily what we would think of as traditional site-specificity. Rather, *Turn Around* is site-specific in its relationality—its *betweenness*. Its intimacy comes from what Ryan Fitzpatrick describes as a form of address: a way of “performing a reciprocal microethics of engagement that pitches and rolls with the intimacies of life” that becomes a question of how “we receive each other” (“Notes on Receptivity and Listening”) rather than how close we are.

According to Carter, an “audience cannot be passive in the face of an active silence: they must investigate, interrogate, and attempt to understand the contexts that gave rise to the silences” (230). As such, John's (and John's through Fonseca's) silence opens the performance to interrogation. The audience (and the reader) are asked to listen carefully for the silences and gaps in what Shurin and Fonseca, in their unique modes, articulate. While this chapter opens by asking what is missing from articulation, I conclude by suggesting that absence itself can form its own type of meaning. *Turn Around* and *Real* both showcase how relation can be built and felt through real and fictional acts of exchange, as well as how the sharing of narrative—the importance of “a story about becoming a story” (*Turn Around* 46)—contributes to our understanding of history and memory. This works to correct the archival absence by building a new archive based on absence.

For Shurin and Fonseca, as well as for D'Allesandro and Bellamy, the question of memory and the act of remembrance are fixed by the ways in which narrative performs, reifies,

and preserves. When Mina exclaims, “*I never dreamed that playing dead could make you feel so alive*” (*Real* 100), we see the need to perform the narrative, to act out the memory, to make it real. Like narrative—like performance—the archive fixes the past and brings it into the present. As Manoff puts it, “the archive affirms the past, present, and future; it preserves the records of the past and it embodies the promise of the present to the future” (11).

Coda

While this chapter focusses on the textual and performative presence of the body in one specific socio-historical and literary context, I want to simultaneously attend to a larger consideration of the body as a pivotal point of connection between page and stage. As discussed more thoroughly in the previous chapters, spatial practice is an essential component of the archival poetics of poets theater because of how it softens the boundaries between text and audience, allowing the relational text to be projected across spaces and times. But there are also ways in which spatial practice itself can enact the ephemeral archive, signaling an absent presence to which the body was, at one time, tethered through intimacy. That is to say, spatial practice enacts the different ways in which the body is absent from text.

In my own fever, I have sat in the archive and tracked performances through reviews, interviews, and scripts. But I do not get to share space with this historical body. I do not get to feel the tensions of the room, track the improvisations, or sense the performer’s “sensing body” near my own. I will never have direct access to the social space in which the historical body has performed, nor to the historical body itself. It could be argued that in this sense, poets theater is always lost to posterity because it exceeds the parameters of the page: it is responsive, relational, embodied, and located.

Yet, in a recorded version of a performance of *Turn Around*, I can see how Fonseca's body troubles the stage directions provided in the script, either by becoming more than language or by responding to or subverting it. Faced with the unruly archive of the body in performance, we must ask ourselves: where is the body in Shurin's text? And where is my body in relation to it? In New Narrative writing the body is summoned like a ghost, but in Shurin's text we have a surrogate body too. At the same time, I have my own corporeal experience with the piece as I view it, listen to it. My bodily experience, though, is cluttered in its mediation. As I watch this particular recording of the performance, I am brought into relation as well: I hear and see the performance (though the sound crackles and buzzes), I watch Fonseca's body dance and turn, and I feel the absence of his physical body in performance and proximity in relation to me. As I watch the video of Fonseca's body, I am reminded of how his body, in the moment of performance, is absent from mine, lost to time and remediation. And then, I am reminded of how John's body is absent as well.

When I visit poets theater's lost archive, I worship at this altar of absence. This re-enactment, mediated or not, asks us to think about the absent body and then fixes that absence in perpetuity. Yet, this project seeks to find something recuperative in the moment of loss when the socio-historically located performing body is gone. What I want to suggest, and what ultimately I have tried to suggest across the preceding chapters, is that in poets theater, what is absent is actually recuperative. It produces the *ephemeral* archive, and it captures past feeling in its absence.

Coda: A Methodology of Mourning: Memory, Documentation, and Trace in American Poets Theater and Scholarship

Over the course of researching this project, I have realized that, even from its inception, this has been a dissertation about loss. Writing in the years following the death of my sister, I have searched for ways to hold tight to certain memories, and to restage them. I have thought about what communities, even small ones, lose when they become outside relation.

Now, as I finish my research and draft my conclusions, I am also pregnant with my first child—very aware of the new potential and possibilities that the future holds. What has struck me most about this pregnancy has been the dreams: for the first time in years, I dream of my sister. We have experiences together that are not available to us in waking life, experiences that have been erased from both of our futures. I can only imagine that this promise of a future is, in part, what O’Hara, Adam, Bellamy, and others felt when they scripted their communities for posterity. In this way, poets theater becomes a methodology of mourning: a way of carrying on, of acknowledging loss, and of continuing to build community around what is absent.

In this dissertation I have argued that poets theater is a type of atypical archive that developed from the documentary poetics of communities in the United States after 1945. I have called this a living archive because of the way the poets theater performance reactivates the archival text through shared spatial practice, and in turn allows its many and varied archivists to relive the experiences of past communities, as well as to build on them. In this way, I have suggested that poets theater should be framed as a form of re-performance, in which each iteration is tied to an historical event, as well as to those performances that came before it and those that might come after. As my chapters have illustrated, this might work to

extend the boundaries of coterie across decades, forging new community connections and welcoming new members across times and spaces; it might also allow the author of the archival object to critique, rework, or undercut lived space within the archive itself, creating new spaces and new potentials at every moment of access. I traced both these dynamics through the work of the first- and second-generation New York School poets, who used the theatricalization of everyday life to create a dynamic spatial palimpsest, replete with both an insight into and the opportunity to re-write the past.

Poets theater's living archive might also mean recognizing the ways in which the body's specificity can move across times, the ways poetry can draw on the real, and the way bodies, voices, texts, and communities linger in each re-performance of the theatrical event. This was showcased in the work of both Jack Spicer and Helen Adam who, in different ways, both created and traced poetic community through poetry and performance. Finally, poets theater also reminds us that the body, as well as the textual referent, are ultimately absent from the living archive at the moment of access, recreated but never original. Yet, the absent presence left behind does a form of archival work on its own. It develops into a type of affective presence, a resounding echo of loss. New Narrative writers working at the height of the AIDS crisis taught us this lesson.

Building on these insights, I have tried to imagine poets theater as an intimate space that allows us to punctuate our present experiences with the imagined, the lost, or the dead, each performance becoming a "memorial sit[e] in public space.... [where] history becomes memory through the feelings that memorials inspire in their viewers" (Johnson 3). Pivotaly, this space also allows the past to be lived again. The poetics of this act shift across communities: Spicer and Adam would have called this a form of magic; for O'Hara, it is the

intimacy of the personist telephone; Bellamy and D'Allesandro see this poetics of recuperation as a way of "*playing dead*" (*Real* 100); and Notley might consider poets theater a form of "fucking... across decades" ("*Songs for the Unborn Second Child*"). In casting poets theater as a form of re-enactment, I have also illustrated the important work that poets theater does within communities as both a form of documentation and a form of community-building, as well as how that work transfers and shifts across spaces and times. Most importantly, considering poets theater as re-performance demands that we acknowledge those feelings of loss and mourning that accompany reproduction.

Of course, this project has also been recuperative. While tracking the way poets theater operates within poetic coteries and beyond, I have joined a community of my own: a small chorus of voices aiming to broaden the field of poets theater scholarship, including Kevin Killian, Heidi Bean, David Buuck, and Laura Hinton, through their efforts to define, document, and theorize a genre that has remained on the periphery of both poetry and theatre studies. While building on the foundational work done by this collection of poets theater scholars, collectors, and practitioners, my principal contribution to the discourse has been to embrace the loss that I have found at the centre of the genre and to make that loss a point of departure for both this project's methodology and critical framework.

At the same time, the central methods of this project have allowed me to follow my own fever. I have spent countless hours in various archival collections, seeking forgotten texts and breathing in their dust. This did not always yield promising results, but the primary materials gathered in this dissertation are still mostly new to scholarship. Some were found through archival research, and some were already in print, but none, with small exceptions, have ever received sustained scholarly attention.

Embracing this method has taught me that poet theater's archive is anything but transparent: it is messy, it is lost, and at times it is deceptive. Yet, it serves an important function within literary and scholastic communities. As such, the strengths of this project align with its weaknesses: it acknowledges the essential absence of poets theater, even from poets theater scholarship, and it tries to find a productive, absent presence within that void. In doing so, I hope I have offered a framework for revisiting, restaging, and re-performing poets theater for contemporary audiences, as well as for understanding the important social and critical role that poets theater can play in forming, maintaining, and extending poetic and scholarly community.

Despite these inroads, this dissertation still has many exclusions and there is great potential for this study to be broadened. I have situated the development of poets theater in relation to the first- and second-generation New York School of poets, the San Francisco Renaissance, and New Narrative writing, because of how the genre reflects key aspects of their community poetics. However, poets theater itself is a varied form and poetic communities outside the purview of this dissertation have undoubtedly contributed to the genre's development. Bean's dissertation, for example, focuses on poets theater in the context of Black Mountain, the Language poets, and the Black Arts Movement. Yet, there is still much work to be done. In the future, I intend to broaden the scope of my research to include a more diverse range of American poetic and performance communities.

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