

RURAL AVANT-GARDE: MAPPING CONTEMPORARY U.S. POETRY
COLLECTIVES OUTSIDE THE METROPOLIS

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Rural Avant-Garde is a study of modern and contemporary avant-garde poetry collectives based in the rural United States. Against the unspoken consensus that urban centers alone have shaped avant-garde and modernist discourses, I foreground a variety of material practices rooted in rural geographies—small presses, D.I.Y. reading series, anthologies, and email listservs, among them—and emphasize their interpellation through region, infrastructure, and the university. My study begins with the so-called “small press revolution” of the 1960s and ends in the pre-COVID-19 2010s, narrating the effect of the internet, academic creative writing programs, and the neoliberal turn upon rural poetry communities. My case studies include the following: Ithaca House, a small press that operated in Ithaca, New York from 1969 to 1986; the contemporary cult following surrounding Frank Stanford, an Arkansas-based poet who produced a oeuvre of surrealist poetry in the late 1960s and ‘70s; Lucifer Poetics, an email listserv for experimental poets in central North Carolina during the 2000s; and Open Mouth and Trobar Ric, two contemporary poetry reading series respectively based in Arkansas and Mississippi. The broader aims of my dissertation are twofold. I argue, first, that a study of rural poetic collectivity necessarily foregrounds the material entities that enable any avant-garde practice, whether rural or urban (in

particular, my project foregrounds the mediating role of the university, an influence often elided from narratives of small press subcultures). Secondly, by centralizing collectives that employ the rural as a site of collaboration and interchange, I work against monolithic, pastoral conceptions of the country, instead disclosing the complexly networked, heterogeneous characteristics of contemporary rural life.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Marty Cain grew up in Marlboro, Vermont. He holds a B.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies from Hamilton College, where he was a Senior Fellow, and an M.F.A. in Poetry from the University of Mississippi. He is the author of the book-length poem *Kids of the Black Hole* (2017) and the hybrid text *The Wound Is (Not) Real: A Memoir* (2022), both from Trembling Pillow Press, as well as a chapbook, *Four Essays* (Tammy, 2019). In Oxford, Mississippi, he co-edited *Yalobusha Review* and helped organize the Trobar Ric Reading Series. In Ithaca, New York, he co-edits Garden-Door Press with Kina Viola, and was formerly an organizer for the Party Fawn Reading Series. Beginning in Fall 2022, he will be a Postdoctoral Associate within Cornell's Humanities Scholars Program. He lives in Ithaca, New York with his spouse and daughter.

For Kina Viola and Mae Magnolia Viola-Cain,
and in memory of Matthew Henriksen (1977-2022)

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INTRODUCTION: APPROACHING A RURAL AVANT-GARDE

“Fuck moving to Brooklyn
Because we’re enough”

- Wingnut Dishwashers Union, anarcho-punk artist
from southern Vermont

“There is no world until all our friends arrive there”

- Matthew Henriksen, *in memoriam*,
poet and poetic organizer in Arkansas and Brooklyn

This project grew out of my personal experiences with avant-garde poetry and collaborative literary organizing in northern Mississippi and upstate New York. As an editor and reading series curator in these geographies, I became witness to a highly collaborative poetic community that had strikingly complex relationships to both literary institutions and avant-garde history, and that, rather than attempting to legitimate itself in accordance with the values of metropolitan poetic centers, seemed to derive a poetic agency from its own regional particulars. I remember attending a poetry reading at the house of a creative writing MFA student in Oxford, Mississippi. The headliner was the rural North Carolinian poet Tim Earley, and he closed with a poem that felt to me, at the time, like manifesto for a rural avant-garde: he simultaneously theorized an Appalachian poetics; drew upon his childhood experiences with violence and poverty in western North Carolina; critiqued the patronizing and classist characteristics of academia; and ended with a not-so-subtle “fuck you” to the two urban centers most often cited as the birthplaces of modern small press poetry:

DALE EARNHARDT HEALS THE SICK, you fucks, my brother lost 50 pounds
after Dale was killed at Daytona he was so depressed... Whistle Pig, peaked, job it

with a stick, job that shit with a stick, caught that tree frog, I knowed to thow it back,
Jesus face, Sissy Holler, we is just folks and these is just some cultural interstices,
“the absence of teeth and the compromised nature of the gums give the tongue freer
range and indeed create an almost limitless field for linguistic play and invention.
Teeth have everything to do with the Lord and social Darwinism and distract the poet
from his orphic emptiness,” gum it up in the Berkeley, gum it up in the New Yorks
City, POETRY! POETRY! POETRY you subhuman fucks. (43)

In the moment of this reading, hyped up on youthful idealism and boxed wine, I felt like I had witnessed something akin to Allen Ginsberg’s first reading of *Howl* at the Six Gallery. But like any good avant-garde manifesto, the bombast of Earley’s poem raised more questions than certainties: was “subhuman fucks” merely a reference to the dehumanizing gaze through which bourgeois U.S. culture has historically viewed Appalachian populations? Or was it in fact directed at its audience—an affront to the putatively bourgeois nature of small press poetry and its historic capitals, the Bay Area and New York City? If the poem expressed a hostility to both metropolitan poetic centers and the rarefied nature of academia—the latter of which Earley parodies through lines such as “we is just folks and these is just some cultural interstices”—how did that square up with the fact that Earley’s work was intertwined with the structures of both academia and urban publishing? After all, his work was championed within Brooklyn-based publications and distributed through the Berkeley-based Small Press Distribution; additionally, he was employed by the University of Mississippi and was reading in a college town to a room full of graduate students. Even while the rhetoric of his poem apparently longed for a kind of autonomy, the material context of his work was inextricably linked to the cultures it sought to

subvert.

Rural Avant-Garde is a study of modern and contemporary avant-garde poetry collectives based in the rural United States. I foreground a variety of material practices—small presses, D.I.Y. reading series, anthologies, and email listservs, among them—and emphasize their interpellation through region, infrastructure, and the university. My study begins with the so-called “small press revolution” of the late 1960s and ends in the present, narrating the effect of the internet, academic creative writing programs, and the neoliberal turn upon rural poetry communities. On one hand, the impetus behind this dissertation was pragmatic: I wanted to make the vital work of contemporary rural poetic subcultures legible to a broader audience, documenting the complex methods through which nonmetropolitan poetic scenes have historically sustained themselves within a capitalist culture that does not derive much economic value from poetry. On the other, I believed that it might reveal something essential about postwar and contemporary poetic avant-gardes in a larger sense.

Rural avant-garde seemed like an apt signifier for the phenomenon I wanted to discuss, but given the strong associations between avant-gardes and the metropolis, it might appear on the surface to be a paradox. For Raymond Williams—arguably the most influential scholar of rural literature—the modernist avant-garde originated towards the end of the 19th century and was a radical response to two intersecting cultural forces: first, “the greatest changes ever seen in the media of cultural production” (*The Politics of Modernism* 33)—the invention of photography, film, radio, and so on; and second, the rise of the Western metropolitan centers of Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London, and New York. These urban spaces, Williams argues, tied avant-garde practices to a cosmopolitan, transnational sensibility—the metropolis became the locus for an “art without frontiers... an art made by the restlessly mobile émigré or exile, the internationally anti-

bourgeois artist” (*The Politics of Modernism* 34). Indeed, much of U.S. literary modernism (whether avant-garde or not) can be read as a response to immigration, migration, and the generally disorienting nature of transnational urban life—from the figure of the *flâneur*; to Eliot’s “unreal city”; to Walter Benjamin’s arcades; to the Futurist preoccupation with urban infrastructures. Given the inherently cosmopolitan, anti-localist nature of many avant-gardes, the term *rural avant-garde* might appear to be something of a contradiction in terms.

On the other hand, “rural” and “avant-garde” share an important correspondence: both are notoriously intractable concepts, largely because they tend to be characterized in opposition to something else. In the case of the former, *rural* is defined, as the sociologist Paul Cloke argues, through its “oppositional positioning” to the urban:

While cities are usually understood in their own terms, and certainly without any detectable nervousness about defining or justifying that understanding, rural areas represent more of a site of conceptual struggle, where the other-than-urban meets the multifarious conditions of vastly differing scales and styles of living. (18)

This oppositional characterization of the rural is pervasive within numerous sociopolitical arenas, including federal classification—the United States Census, for example, has no empirical definition of “rural,” simply characterizing it as “what is not urban” (Ratcliffe et al)—as well as within English language and literature. For Williams, the oppositional framing of the rural is a trademark of numerous literary genres—e.g., Classical pastoral, the country house poem, and the regional novel which, he suggests, envisions an “autonomous” rurality uncontaminated by the forces of industry (*Writing in Society* 231). But as Williams famously argues in *The Country and*

the City, pastoral representations of the rural have an ideological function within the context of industrial capitalism. As he wrote of Jane Austen's work, the "idealizing abstraction" (113) of the rural—cleansed of any of presence of labor or sociopolitical conflict—mystified the real forms of dispossession and class struggle that characterized rural 19th century England. For Williams, then, the cultural tendency to view the rural as oppositional—as a place "over there," separated from the forces of industry—is representative of both bourgeois ideology and capitalism's historically extractive approach to rural space. If hegemonic cultures tend to both abstract the rural and define it against the urban, it is a term whose meaning is contingent upon a specific temporal and spatial context.

On the surface, "avant-garde" is a more stable concept, particularly if one subscribes to the fixed notion of a "historical avant-garde," as coined by Peter Bürger—that is, the avant-garde as a specifically early 20th century project that attacked the institutionalization of art within bourgeois culture (Bürger 32-34). Primarily concerned with Dada, Russian Futurism, and early Surrealism, Bürger largely frames the avant-garde as a response to Aestheticism; in this respect, his definition is spatially and temporally closed. But if we approach "avant-garde" in a more transhistorical and global sense, it becomes much more challenging to pin down. If the avant-garde is merely a European critique of the bourgeois institutionalization of art, how might we account for a decidedly avant-garde writer such as Aimé Césaire, whose work relied upon surrealist registers to critique the French colonization of Martinique? Or the Chilean group Colectivo Acciones de Arte, which employed avant-garde public art actions as a form of protest against Pinochet's dictatorship? Or the Stockholm Surrealists, who specifically critiqued the cultural conditions of the late-20th-century Swedish welfare state? If we opt for a more holistic understanding of the avant-garde, viewing it as a transhistorical response to mainstream culture

and the institutionalization of art, the subject of its critique is revealed to be a continually shifting entity.

I view both “rural” and “avant-garde,” then, not as static or closed concepts, but rather, as terms that, perhaps *because* of their plurality and messiness, might unsettle the dominant narratives and naturalized assumptions that characterize histories of small press poetry. In an essay on modernism written towards the end of his life, Williams wrote of a need to theorize the “imperial and capitalist metropolis as a specific historical form”:

It involves looking, from time to time, from outside the metropolis: from the deprived hinterlands, where different forces are moving, and from the poor world which has always been peripheral to the metropolitan systems... [One] level has certainly to be challenged: the metropolitan interpretation of its own processes as universals. (47)

While *Rural Avant-Garde* emerges from a distinctly different cultural and temporal context from that of the modernist canon Williams critiques, it is fueled by a similar belief that an analysis of the spatial periphery—in this case, the rural as a site of avant-garde poetic activity—unsettles dominant cultural narratives. This dissertation argues, first, that a study of rural poetic collectivity necessarily foregrounds the material entities that enable any avant-garde practice, whether rural or urban. (In particular, *Rural Avant-Garde* foregrounds the mediating role of the university, an influence often elided from narratives of small press subcultures.) Second, by centralizing collectives that employ the rural as a locus of collaboration and interchange, I work against monolithic, pastoral conceptions of the country, instead disclosing the complexly networked, heterogeneous characteristics of contemporary rural life.

What Is the Rural?

At least in the United States, “the rural” tends to carry a familiar set of cultural associations: it is typically coded as white, politically conservative, heterosexual, Christian, and working class. Particularly during and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, “Rural America”—especially the South and the Midwest—took on a pervasively ideological form, serving as a kind of rhetorical skeleton key for understanding the motivating factors behind the election of President Trump. (The historian Elizabeth Catts has a name for this kind of mainstream news coverage, which often particularly emphasized Appalachia—the “Trump Country” genre [22].) Depending on who you asked, the rural U.S. was either a hotbed of reactionary whiteness, or, a stronghold of a “forgotten America” whose turn towards authoritarian populism was motivated by economic anxiety. In either case, the cultural associations between rural geographies, whiteness, and conservatism became codified in the form of the “Trump voter,” obscuring the myriad possibilities of rural life that fell outside these categories—excluding, to name just a few categories: Native American reservations; predominantly Black rural areas such as the Mississippi Delta region; the presence of people of color in majority-white areas; and the lived realities of LGBTQIA populations throughout the rural United States.¹

“Country life,” as Williams writes, “has many meanings” (*The Country and the City* 3). Given the myriad forms that contemporary rural U.S. culture takes, this dissertation makes no attempt to theorize a totalizing “rural poetics,” an endeavor that, even if limited to a U.S. context,

¹ See, for example, the important body of work building off Jack Halberstam’s notion of *metronormativity* (36-37), of which Scott Herring’s *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (2010) is a particularly representative example.

would be as much of a fool's errand as theorizing a totalizing urban poetics. While I refer to a variety of rural locales throughout this dissertation, my primary case studies focus on literary practices in the following places: Ithaca, New York; Fayetteville, Arkansas; various locations in and around the Research Triangle in central North Carolina; and Oxford, Mississippi. One might observe a set of shared tendencies among these locations: all could be characterized as college towns; most are in the U.S. South; and several have tangible evidence of large-scale urban development. Much of the Research Triangle, for example, is indisputably metropolitan—Raleigh is, after all, the capital city of North Carolina. All of the collectives I explore, however, even when they overlap with the urban, are shaped by some adjacency to low-density, low-population geographies isolated from urban infrastructures. Further, their practices are shaped by an acute awareness of the fact that they occupy regions outside the historic metropolitan centers of U.S. avant-gardes.

In his discussion of the “conceptual struggle” surrounding the rural, Cloke argues against approaching “rural” and “urban” as definitionally discrete categories. Rather, he calls for a methodology that considers them through a relational, hybridized lens, examining the “urbanization of the rural and (albeit to a lesser extent) the ruralization of the urban” (19). The former category, Cloke suggests, includes both the migration of urban citizenry into rural locales, as well as the way in which print, broadcast, and internet media have linked rural spaces to global networks; as Cloke argues, “the all-pervading messages of Hollywood, MTV and Google mean that the idea of rurality as an isolated island of cultural specificity and traditionalism has become anachronistic” (19). He refers to a British context, and while I would argue that few rural U.S. geographies shaped by colonialism and industrial capitalism could truly be characterized as “isolated islands,” Cloke usefully foregrounds the networked nature of contemporary rural life—

a tendency that, I will later show, can be traced back to the origins of Cold War infrastructural logics. *Rural Avant-Garde* explores its chosen geographies through a similarly hybridized lens, partially for the tangible reasons that Cloke observes, and partially because it focuses on collectives rather than individuals—literary groups intertwined with small press networks that, by their very nature, are transgeographic. This is not a study of hermetic, isolated “rural savants,” but rather, of the interplay between rural cultural production and the infrastructures and institutions that enable it.²

For many of the collectives that *Rural Avant-Garde* explores, the university plays a critical role. Collegiate culture itself draws a critical mass of individuals interested in poetry—and, in a “hybridizing” fashion, forms a site of cultural interchange, putting “locals” in dialog with more ephemeral residents drawn in by the university. As the sociologist Blake Gumprecht observes, the U.S. college town is at once “transient” and “cosmopolitan” (10-13). For many rural avant-garde poets, however, the academic creative writing program is an enabling if not problematic entity: on one hand, it provides a form of financial support (however tenuous) and creates spaces for poetic discourse; on the other, it serves as a stand-in for the forces of hegemonic consecration, often appearing to be at odds with the anti-institutional aims of the avant-garde poet. While this complicated relationship to the academy is particularly palpable in rural or rural-adjacent college towns where a university might have an outsized influence, it is, I argue, representative of the complex historic ties between avant-garde poetry and academic institutions more broadly—a narrative which I will take a moment here to describe.

² While his study takes a different methodological approach and is less focused on contemporary U.S. poetry, Ross Hair’s excellent *Avant-Folk* similarly observes that rural poets rely upon “networked poetry community” (2). One of his primary case studies, for example, is the Wisconsin-based Objectivist Lorine Niedecker, who—not unlike Frank Stanford, who I will go on to discuss—is frequently overdetermined by her rural “outsider” status. But Niedecker’s work, Hair observes, “is defined by, and responsive to, a poetic network that claims no geographical centre” (2).

The Institutional Parasitism of U.S. Poetry

As numerous critics have observed, prior to the Great Depression, U.S. modernist poetry largely relied upon the support of aristocratic patrons. However, following the stock market crash of 1929, modernist poets in search of financial sustenance scrambled towards bureaucratic institutions—the government, universities, and nonprofit foundations, all of which, Evan Kindley has argued, served to “[protect] modernism and modernists from an unregulated free market” (5). As Kindley suggests, the self-reflexive “poet-critic” had already been a trademark figure of literary modernism, but it went on to reach its apotheosis in the university, with New Critics such as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and William Empson becoming the most visible academic interlocuters of modernism.

Importantly for our purposes, modernism’s absorption into the academy also amounted to a reorientation of its geographies. If urban metropolitan centers had served as the primary sites of poetic sociality, academic institutions began to contest the dominance of these centers. Ransom mentored poet-critics such as Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks at Vanderbilt University, where he was instrumental in the foundation of the Vanderbilt Fugitives—a group that, far from the cosmopolitan, internationalist imperatives of modernists in the previous decades, took a specifically localist tack, fetishizing the agrarian antebellum South as “the core of unadulterated Europeanism, with its self-sufficient, backward-looking, intensely provincial communities” (Ransom 5).³ When Ransom left Vanderbilt for Kenyon College in 1937, he had

³ The conservative historian Richard Weaver—a student of Brooks, Warren, and Ransom—similarly situates Southern rurality as a counterpoint to modernity, cosmopolitanism, and internationalism. Weaver begins with the anecdote of a “Kentucky mountaineer” whose culture, once exposed to “radio and

largely abandoned his agrarian commitments (Graff 156-157); nonetheless, he and his former students were responsible for the foundation of several publications based in the South and the Midwest—the *Kenyon Review*, the *Southern Review*, and the *Sewanee Review*—that would go on to be significant fixtures within the academic institutionalization of poetry.

Contemporaneously, of course, was the foundation of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which, Mark McGurl suggests, saw “regionalism’s celebration of the particularities of place” (149) as foundational to its mission. Seizing upon a cultural moment in which Midwest regionalism could lay claim to a distinctly American literary tradition, the Writers' Workshop, McGurl argues, drew equally from progressive educational ideals of self-expression and the kind of disciplinary rigor exemplified through Brooks' and Warren's anthology *Understanding Poetry* (McGurl 129-134). By the midcentury period, the South and the Midwest were, in one sense, the institutional centers of U.S. poetry. While these developments can be traced back to the legacy of the New Critics, they were also facilitated by a more powerful but interrelated force. As Eric Bennett has argued, the New Critics and early creative writing programs “fed from the same abundant trough” (63); that is, from the Rockefeller Foundation—the philanthropic wing of Standard Oil—which, beginning in the 1940s, poured abundant sums of money into these emergent literary institutions. The Iowa Writers' Workshop, as well as *The Kenyon Review* and *The Sewanee Review*, were among the largest recipients (Bennett 63). The Humanities Division of the Foundation, Bennett shows, was comprised of individuals who sought to affirm a populist literary culture, “[raising] the ambient level of literary and civic and moral intelligence” (Bennett 62); in the context of the Cold War, these imperatives took on nationalist, anti-communist valences, and the Rockefeller foundation went on to work hand-in-hand with the State

television,” is destroyed (109), and goes on to argue that “an international culture is a contradiction in terms. *There are no international roots*” (111-112, italics are Weaver's).

Department (Bennett 69).

Even while the New Critics are often credited for the institutionalization of modernist poetry—fueled, of course, by cultural Cold War endeavors—one could hardly describe them as champions of an avant-garde. If, following the conventional understanding, we view *Understanding Poetry* as the apogee of modernism’s pedagogical implementation via New Criticism, we might consider the politically and aesthetically radical writers it excludes. In a 1956 essay in *The Nation*, for example, Lawrence Lipton faulted *Understanding Poetry* for “blacklisting leftists” such as Louis Zukofsky and Kenneth Patchen who, of course, would go on to be deeply influential for later avant-garde poets (Filreis 176). The New Criticism, Lipton argued, was just as “class-angled” as any communist cultural production (322). Perhaps in response to the atomized, institutionalized nature of midcentury poetry, the next generation of poets and critics frequently argued for the autonomy of avant-garde collectives by attempting to distance them from academic discourses.

An avant-garde distrust of the academy, of course, is nothing new—consider, for example, the Futurist Manifesto’s designation of universities as “cemeteries of wasted efforts” (Marinetti). Within the context of the emergent ‘60s U.S. counterculture, however, which often situated itself against an amorphously defined “establishment,” this distrust took on particularly divisive terms. In the introduction to his period-defining anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, for example, Donald Allen suggests that the one shared characteristic of the coterie he foregrounds (the Black Mountain poets, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Beat Generation, and the New York School) is “a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse” (xi). In a similar vein, Daniel Kane has shown that the Lower East Side poetry scene in the 1960s—a space in which the divergent schools of *The New American Poetry* collided,

collaborated, and evolved—propagated an “outsider” identity by pitting their positionality within a “marginal neighborhood” against formalist academic poetry culture. In opposition to the New Critical tendency to emphasize the poem’s status as a solitary object, the ‘60s Lower East Side scene fostered a poetics intertwined with countercultural sociality. Within this environment, Kane writes, “the word *academic* was transformed into a pejorative term” (3).

Academic affiliation, nonetheless, in some way facilitated these aesthetic groupings. If, as Kindley has argued, modernism grafted onto the “architectonic supports of bureaucratic institutions” (15), the challenge of finding poetic autonomy continued through the postwar period. Black Mountain College serves as the most obvious instance of academic institutionalization, but beyond this, numerous progenitors of these postwar avant-gardes originally met in universities (John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O’Hara, of the New York School, met at Harvard; many of the Beat writers met at Columbia). As Kane points out, the Lower East Side scene had interlocutors in the academy, and a number of its best-known poets ultimately took on tenure-track jobs (4). Further, the success of many poets who became intertwined with the radical social upheaval of the 1960s—with writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov serving as representative examples—is inextricable from on-campus student activist culture. The best-known U.S. poetic avant-garde after *The New American Poetry*—Language writing, or, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, as it is sometimes stylized—maintained an even more complicated relationship to the university. The vast majority of its figureheads were poet-scholars, and its poetic projects were often inseparable from its critical interlocutions. Today, many of the movement’s original gatekeepers, such as Charles Bernstein and Lyn Hejinian, maintain tenured positions at elite universities. Nonetheless, Language writing drew influence from poets who were squarely outside the realm of academia—Bernadette Mayer, for

example, who was working class, and Hannah Weiner, who was disabled—and as some poets and critics have argued, these “outsider” poets have not been fairly compensated for their contributions. (In a recent conversation regarding Mayer’s work, for example, the poet CAC Conrad argues that “men who [went to Harvard] stole her ideas” [Leland].)

For many of the rural poetry collectives I foreground in this dissertation, the university does not necessarily serve as an impediment to their aesthetic projects; nor, in the fashion of New Criticism, is the academy the sole agreed-upon entity that confers value. (On the contrary, most of the poets I study have yet to receive any substantial academic attention.) The university is, for better or worse, an entity that has actively shaped the direction of poetry after modernism, and—especially for poets in rural locales, who might otherwise be isolated from creative communities—it often serves as a connective technology through which poetic sociality can be formed. Particularly in light of the neoliberal turn and its effects upon the academy—breeding precarity, business-oriented administrative practices, and an emphasis on contingent labor—the university often functions less like a replacement for an older form of patronage, and more like a failed infrastructural system upon which poetic collectivity can be built.

The Avant-Garde as Provisional D.I.Y. Aesthetic

Given that *Rural Avant-Garde* chronicles avant-garde activity but follows a trajectory intersecting, in part, with the institutional legacies of modernism, some clarification here is necessary. I invoke literary modernism as a capacious term for a primarily 20th century movement with several well-documented, generally agreed-upon characteristics. To name just a few: the codification of the line between “high” and “low” art, as well as a broader reevaluation

of the relationship between art and institution (Rainey 1-5); an aesthetic response to the rise of the transnational urban metropolis (Lyon 689); a representation of human subjectivity influenced by psychoanalysis (Frosh 116); and an internalization of emergent new media forms (Williams, *Politics of Modernism* 33). I view the early 20th century European avant-garde movements—Dada, Surrealism, Vorticism, and so on—as parts of a specifically anti-institutional, radical subset of modernism that often sought to critique the role of art within bourgeois society, and did so by employing collaborative practices and revolutionary rhetoric.

Contemporary small press poetry, certainly, carries numerous characteristics that can be traced back to modernism, both of the avant-garde variety and not. To name just a few: a complicated relationship to institutions and systems of patronage; a focus on the material attributes of the textual form;⁴ and the centrality of the “little magazine” (which, in the context of contemporary poetry circles, is usually just called a “journal”). On the other hand, the poetry collectives I discuss in *Rural Avant-Garde* share deep connections with literary and artistic movements that may not be modernist, but are most definitely avant-garde. While the “small press revolution” of the 1960s (which I explore in Chapter 1) is perhaps the most obvious antecedent for the communities I discuss, many of them are also heavily indebted to punk culture—specifically, the anti-institutional, “do-it-yourself” ethos pioneered in the late 1970s and ‘80s by bands such as Black Flag and Fugazi in the U.S. and Crass in the U.K. In a decidedly avant-garde vein, these artists viewed punk not just as a form of music, but as a broader material practice that encompassed production, distribution, and discourse; as Mike Watt, the bassist for

⁴ See, for example, Jerome McGann’s important *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton UP, 1993). McGann historicizes a lineage of a highly material, communal literary ethos that, he argues, begins with “the explosion of fine-press printing in the late nineteenth century” (7), extends through modernism, and reaches its contemporary form within small press publishing that “is necessarily imagined as part of a social event of persons” (113).

hardcore punk band the Minutemen once stated, “Punk was about more than just starting a band... it was about starting a label, it was about touring, it was about taking control” (qtd. in Azerrad 6). To Watt’s list, I would also add the flyer and the fanzine, the print media of punk rock—which, in the same way that the early small presses were fueled by the mimeograph, were enabled by the cheap accessibility of the Xerox machine.⁵ (And certainly, the “small press revolution” directly intersected with punk on more than one occasion, with Ed Sanders serving as the most obvious example.)⁶ As Christopher Beach observes, small press poetry is deeply intertwined with ideas of “alternative” and countercultural communities (7), and like D.I.Y. punk, its communal methodologies extend beyond the page; in Chapter 4, for example, I discuss the culture of poetry performance and house readings, which directly borrow from the practices of nomadic punk rock touring cultures.

Within this dissertation, I define the avant-garde as an artistic mode that challenges the dominant values of institutional consecration—and especially, the normative practices associated with the production, publication, and distribution of literature—within a given spatial and temporal context. In this respect, *Rural Avant-Garde* enters dialog with an emergent body of scholarship that reassesses the historic tendency to view avant-gardes as monolithic, autonomous projects. An outstanding recent example of this turn is Sophie Seita’s *Provisional Avant-Gardes* (2019), which, using the little magazine form, argues against the critical tendency to frame

⁵ In a similar vein, Kaya Oakes draws a lineage from early small press activity in the Bay Area to the zine cultures of the ‘80s: “[while] zines may appear to be somewhat less strictly literary than small press poetry and fiction, they take many of their motivational cues from the writers who stood at mimeograph machines making journals and hauled printing presses up their front steps in the sixties and seventies” (89).

⁶ Of obvious relevance to punk, avant-gardes, and rurality is the song “Country Punk,” performed by Ed Sanders’ band The Fugs: “He tried to get religion on a Sunday dare / they wouldn’t let him in the church with mohawk hair... They came to build a nuke plant near the town / the country punk went crazy and he burned it down.”

avant-gardes as fixed practices assigned to the past; rather, Seita theorizes an avant-garde that extends into our contemporary moment through heterogeneous “networks of affiliation rather than rigidly demarcated groups” (3), and that “emerges from material objects... and publishing contexts” (2). Seita’s materialist framing allows for a view of the avant-garde that maintains provisional, complex relationships to institutions—a important intervention for studies of modern and contemporary avant-garde poetry, given the intertwined relationship between poetry and the university that has long characterized U.S. poetic culture. Similarly, the introduction to the inaugural issue of *Avant-Garde Studies* calls for a definition of the avant-garde that accounts for its status as a “sociological category”—that is, as a practice that seeks to reconfigure the relationship between art and its publics, “[creating] *alternative venues and spaces of aesthetic activity*” (Hjartarson et al 4).

To a certain extent, these theoretical approaches to the avant-garde represent a turning away from definitions of the term that primarily centralize oppositional, “either/or” aesthetics—a critical tendency that, in the context of late-20th and 21st century U.S. poetry, is perhaps best embodied through the designation of “official verse culture,” a term first coined by Charles Bernstein and later made ubiquitous within Language poetry discourses. For Bernstein, “official verse culture” referred to a subgenre of U.S. poetry that, bolstered by “hegemony in terms of major media exposure and academic legitimation and funding” (248-249), was defined through its aesthetics of bourgeois individualism and its tendency to

“restrict the subversive,
independent-of-things nature of the language”
in the name of the common voice, clarity, sincerity,

or directness of the poem, & specifically
in the highly problematic equating...
of the “irrational”
and the “artificial” (46)

For Bernstein, this disavowal of the “artificial”—that is to say, the obscuring of the poem’s self-consciously formal, material attributes—was a particularly pernicious characteristic of “official verse culture.”⁷ While Bernstein defined the term through both its aesthetics and its material, institutional apparatus—it referred to the kind of poetry, he suggested, that appeared in publications such as *The New Yorker* and *American Poetry Review* (Bernstein 93)—its legacy is complicated by at least two factors: first, the fact that Language poetry is now thoroughly canonized within academic circles and pedagogical texts such as the Norton Anthology of *Postmodern American Poetry*; and second, the fact that avant-garde small press communities from the Cold War period to the present have frequently maintained intertwined relationships with large-scale “official” institutions—academic, non-profit, and federal (a phenomenon I discuss at length in Chapter 1). Referencing in part the institutionalization of Language poetry, Ron Silliman argued for the obsolescence of the term “official verse culture” in 2009, writing that “some (not all) of its institutions have shifted toward recognizing greater diversity than previously had been acknowledged. The journal *Poetry* pointedly has had features on vispo & on the conceptual-flarf alliance in the past year” (“[Is poetry written]”).

In this vein, many of the poetic collectives I discuss are not unified by shared aesthetic

⁷ In *Radical Artifice*, Marjorie Perloff critiques a quote by Philip Levine that succinctly represents this tendency of so-called official verse culture: “In a curious way, I’m not much interested in language. In my ideal poem, no words are noticed. You look through them into a vision of... just see the people, the place” (qtd. in Perloff 43).

affinity so much as by the shared occupation of regional and institutional geographies. This is not to say, of course, that aesthetics are insignificant to the collectives in question. Rather, because these rural avant-gardes are rooted in geographic spaces lacking large masses of individuals interested in poetry, they are driven less by aesthetic dogmatism, and more by localized practices and collaborations. If a hallmark of Seita's "provisional avant-garde" is a tendency towards aesthetic heterogeneity (2), this becomes a necessity in remote geographic spaces where forming literary coteries around a coherent aesthetic program—say, for example, conceptualism or Flarf—is more or less impossible. For the projects that *Rural Avant-Garde* discusses, which often attempt to create alternative venues for poetry within the context of highly localized systems of value and institutional legitimation, the binary imaginary embedded within a term like "official verse culture" is insufficient.

Both Rooted and Not

Rural Avant-Garde progresses in a loosely chronological fashion, beginning at the cusp of the "small press revolution" of the late 1960s, and ending in the 2010s prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. It foregrounds the intertwined economic, infrastructural, and technological advances from the Cold War period to the present, emphasizing the way in which these historical developments shaped rural avant-garde poetic practices. As a project that explores, in part, the confluence between regionalism and the digital, *Rural Avant-Garde* enters dialog with a strain of media studies scholarship critiquing the pervasive ideological belief that the internet presents an immaterial release from geographic space. As critics such as Tung-Hui Hu, Nicole Starosielski, and John Durham Peters have suggested, the internet does not represent an epochal break from

the past. On the contrary, it is rooted within both the cultural logics and material technologies of the Cold War period, and as Hu has argued, internet mechanisms were literally “grafted” upon older infrastructural technologies. The materiality of the internet is largely invisible to the general public (Peters 31-32); Starosielski, for example, has critiqued the contemporary rhetoric of cloud computing, arguing that it “[directs] our attention above rather than below” (5). However, comprised through transgeographic fiber-optic cables and server farms, the internet is far from “placeless.” Rather, its logistics are shaped by regional geographies and “territorial politics” (Starosielski 12).

What does this mean for studies of contemporary poetic avant-gardes? Consider the below quote from Marjorie Perloff’s *Unoriginal Genius* (2010) which, in its attempts to account for the digitization of the poetic avant-garde, directly frames internet technologies as a release from regionally specific community:

Under these circumstances, communication is likely to shift from a specific geographic location (for example, the New York of Frank O’Hara) or one’s particular local circle (e.g. the Beats) to those, wherever and whoever they are, who share a particular set of interests and allegiances. The word *community* thus takes on an entirely new meaning: the community now exists on particular websites or in the blogosphere. (4)

Following a kind of logic that animates Perloff’s earlier works,⁸ *Unoriginal Genius* argues that

⁸ See, for example, Perloff’s *Radical Artifice*, which largely frames Language poetry as a reaction to the rise of the commercial cultures and new media forms that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century—particularly television, video, computers, and “the advertising media” (15).

poetry by contemporary conceptual writers such as Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place represents the apogee of the cultural logics of the internet—its tendencies towards pastiche, relentless citation, and the destabilization of individual authorship (1-7). Echoing early myths of the internet’s supposed immateriality—and indeed, even earlier, Marshall McLuhan’s conception of the technological global “village” (5)—Perloff invokes an image of a simultaneously transnational and placeless digital avant-garde:

the notion of a “new American poetry” restricted to those who dwell and work in the United States seems increasingly anachronistic. Where poets actually live is much less important than what they do, and mobility—whether of texts, now eminently movable, or of their authors—is the status quo. (6)

While the emergence of the internet of course had radical effects upon the nature of poetic production and sociality—effects that were heightened, I argue, in the context of rural geographies—Perloff’s narrative risks oversimplifying the dynamic relationship that modern and contemporary poetry communities have always had with geography, infrastructure, and institutional networks, both before and after the rise of the internet.⁹ “Where poets actually live,” I argue—not to mention their adjacency to geographically specific sites of institutional power—is, rather, extraordinarily important, and has tremendous bearing upon how they economically, socially, and artistically subsist. Further, “mobility” and locality are not mutually exclusive

⁹ The problems with this dematerialized approach become increasingly clear as Perloff’s argument progresses. The final chapter, for example, focuses upon Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Traffic* (2007), a text directly concerned with traffic infrastructures; Perloff argues that the text, following digital logics, “transforms the intersection of time and space into a wholly surreal situation” (161); she ignores, meanwhile, the tangibly spatial, material infrastructure of the internet—which, in fact, was derived from the same kinds of Cold War network models as the U.S. interstate system.

qualities; rather, they in fact embody the dialectical tension that animates poetic sociality and production in the digital age. Poetic collectivity, *Rural Avant-Garde* argues, is at once transgeographic and fundamentally rooted.

Chapter 1 discusses Ithaca House, a small poetry press that operated in Ithaca, New York from 1969 to 1986. I situate Ithaca House within the histories of counterculture and activism that characterized the late 1960s and 70s, and especially, the way in which the small press revolution was interpellated through these forces. While narratives of the small press revolution tend to be overdetermined by its origins in New York City and San Francisco, I argue that the compressed geographic scale of Ithaca's locality—a space in which the tensions between the academic “establishment,” activism, and counterculture played out dramatically through the ‘60s and ‘70s—makes legible the negotiations between subculture and institution that have motivated avant-garde poetic production from the Cold War period to the present.

Chapter 2 explores the work and legacy of Frank Stanford, an Arkansas-based poet who produced an influential corpus of surrealist poetry through the late 1960s and ‘70s. While Stanford has often been framed as a kind of lone-wolf rural savant, disassociated from the institutional networks of post-1945 poetry, I emphasize the material basis of his work from two standpoints. First, through a close-reading of his book-length poem *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*, I argue that his poetry directly narrates the effects of Cold War infrastructural projects upon the rural U.S. South—specifically, the relationship between rural locality, race, and media networks. Second, I explore the process through which Stanford's work—which went through periods of being out-of-print—reached its eventual consecration in 2015, the product of both academic legitimation and a devoted fan subculture.

In the second half of the dissertation, I turn towards poetic collectives operating in the

age of the internet, and that respond, in part, to the effects of the neoliberal turn upon academic and collegiate culture. Chapter 3 focuses upon Lucifer Poetics (Lucipo), an email listserv that operated in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina from 2004 to (roughly) 2010.

Originally intended as an organizational tool for the disparate poetic scenes of central North Carolina, the listserv grew into an active space for poetic discourse drawing participants from across the United States. Contra Perloff's suggestion that poetry community primarily exists within the "blogosphere," however, I argue that Lucipo serves as a persuasive example of how regionalism continues to maintain a hold in the digital age: numerous discussions on the list circled around questions of rural and Southern identity, and following a variety of interpersonal disputes, the founders of the list eventually restricted membership to North Carolina residents.

In Chapter 4, I discuss a creative form whose existence is predicated upon digital, transgeographic discourse networks, but whose embodied practice is rooted within specific physical localities: the college town poetry reading series. I begin with a theorization of the poetry reading series as a literary practice more broadly, and then turn towards an examination of series based in Fayetteville, AR, and Oxford, MS; foregrounding the regional and economic landscapes of these geographies, I argue that the college town reading series is shaped by the logics of academic infrastructures and collegiate culture, while simultaneously seeking to provide an alternative to the value systems of academic legitimation.

If *innovation* and *experimentation* are the supposed hallmarks of avant-garde poetry—materializing most famously, perhaps, in Ezra Pound's "make it new" dictum—*Rural Avant-Garde* explores an avant-garde ethos less invested in a perpetual search for novelty, and more so in *innovation* as a condition of survival for small press poetry. Through their communal practices—and their often-fraught relationships with the infrastructures and cultural politics of

larger institutional systems—the rural avant-garde collectives I discuss are relentlessly creative in their approaches towards building space for poetry.

CHAPTER ONE: ITHACA HOUSE, BETWEEN SUBCULTURE AND THE ACADEMY

“no finer is the sun
that poaches Ithaca”
- Kenneth A. McClane
(*Moons and Low Times* 40).

“It wasn’t that I didn’t like Ithaca. I loved Ithaca.
I just wanted to get out while I was still ahead”
- Aaron Cometbus (*Despite Everything*).

While independent and D.I.Y. publishing practices have always been characteristic of poetic avant-gardes, the 1960s and early ‘70s were marked by an explosion in U.S. small press publishing. During this period, Michael Basinski estimates, the number of small presses and little magazines doubled, creating a transgeographic, “decentralized” poetic culture of “outlandishly titled” publications (v): from Ed Sanders’ *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts* on the Lower East Side of Manhattan; to Nathaniel Mackey’s *Hambone* in Santa Cruz; to Lee Chapman’s and John Moritz’s *Tansy* in Lawrence, Kansas, a wave of hundreds of new publications emerged, carrying on the radical literary traditions that emerged under the banner of *The New American Poetry*. Often referred to as the “mimeograph revolution”—or simply “the small press revolution,” because in addition to mimeo, many of the small presses employed letterpress, offset, and xerographic technologies—this new strain of poetic activity internalized the myriad upheavals of its cultural moment. As Todd Gitlin argues, the 1960s were characterized by a contradictory tension between “communitarian” and “libertarian” impulses (xviii). In its reckoning with mainstream American values, the youth movement became increasingly divided between “the radicals and the hippie gurus” (Gitlin 208): the latter group, exemplified through the psychedelic, quasi-libertarian individualism of figures like Ken Kesey and Timothy Leary, advocated for

“free love,” distrusted authority and organization, and sought to “overturn repression in the name of the id” (Gitlin xviii); the former group, under the banner of the New Left, variously protested the Vietnam War, campaigned for Civil Rights and Black Power, championed feminism, environmentalism, and Gay Liberation, and questioned the values of Western capitalist hegemony. These contradictory, sometimes overlapping forces swirled through the medium of small press poetry in complex ways, explicitly politicizing the D.I.Y. publishing ethos. At the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965, for example—an event which Steven Clay identifies as “the flash point of the mimeo revolution” (27), and which assembled luminaries such as Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley, among others—Jack Spicer gave a talk that drew a direct connection between poetry and the emergent youth counterculture, and espoused, moreover, an abstract distrust of authority:

What’s I’m trying to talk about is for you people who are poets and want some idea about how the strategy is for you to become poets who both write good poetry and also don’t sell out to the bosses. There are bosses in poetry as well as in the industrial empire and everything else... When I get upset by reading about Vietnam and what we’re going to do there, and so forth and so on, it hurts me as a poet. (“California Lecture”)

Spicer goes on to conceive poetry through a grandiose, anti-establishment rhetoric—the poet should be opposed, he argues, to “systems of power”—and he frames the small press poetic field as a locus for a culture war between artistry and capitalism: “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... I

don't believe in the society that [*Poetry Magazine*] creates" ("California Lecture"). In a similar vein, in her influential *Revolutionary Letters* (City Lights, 1971), Diane di Prima ascribes a radical politics to independent publishing—"Power to the people's mimeo-machines!"—while also foregrounding the limitations of art as a means to effect change: "the best thing to do with a mimeograph is to drop it / from a five story window, on the head of a cop" (146). If poets such as di Prima and Spicer invoked a collision between avant-garde literary practice and activism, this tension was mirrored via a revolution within cultures of alternative literature more broadly. Contemporaneously, for example, was the rise of the feminist bookstore movement; early feminist bookstores such as the Oakland-based ICI: A Woman's Place, and the Minneapolis-based Amazon—both founded in 1970—became resource centers for lesbian and feminist activism (Hogan 4-5). New systems of distribution, such as the Berkeley-based Serenity Book Distribution (which originated in 1969, and is now known as Small Press Distribution), peddled formally and politically radical works alike; meanwhile, the National Endowment for the Arts provided funding to the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, which in turn funded a range of small presses and little magazines.

Perhaps because of the anti-establishment sentiments of the '60s and early '70s—paired with the hegemony that New Critical approaches enjoyed in the university in the midcentury period—the small press revolution has been historically situated against an abstract academic bogeyman, a sentiment that arguably originates with Donald Allen's designation of *The New American Poetry* as a "total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse" (xi).¹⁰ In his preface to *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side*, an influential narrative of the mimeo

¹⁰ The Ithaca-based editor John Gill, who I mention later in this chapter, takes this opposition to the "academic" a step further, taking issue with the kind of poetic "schools" that appear in Allen's anthologies: "the mere word 'school,' at least to American ears, has a dirty sound... Schools imply a congregation all facing one way" (vii).

revolution, Jerome Rothenberg echoes Allen's focus on autonomy, arguing that small press publishing entailed a response to the "unremittingly reactionary" nature of both midcentury poetry (in its New Critical incarnations) and "McCarthyite political retrenchments" (10). Intertwined with this narrative are assumptions of the small press revolution's urban, countercultural geographies; Rothenberg goes on to argue that the small press revolution's "two American centers—as everybody also knows—were New York and San Francisco, with links to other places large & small" (10). Folded into this "other places" is a generalizing geographic sweep, "stretching all the way to Highlands, North Carolina, & Kyoto Japan" (10).

While my intention is not to question the obvious significance of New York City and San Francisco to avant-garde small press histories, I argue that a historical focus on the "other places" of small press poetry might reveal the enabling entities of literary community—whether they be infrastructural, technological, or institutional—in a way that its presumed urban centers might not.¹¹ Postwar U.S. avant-garde poetry did not, as popular accounts have frequently suggested, entail a decisive break with the "reactionary" academicized poetic spaces built in the wake of New Criticism. First, the collegiate culture of the '60s was essential to cultivating an audience for small press publishing—as Loren Glass argues, college campuses were part of the "circuits through which experimental and radical literature were distributed... the seed bed of the counterculture" (12). Second, as Libbie Rifkin has observed, the postwar avant-gardes that grew out of *The New American Poetry*—contrary to their vocally "anti-establishment" stance—were shaped by a professionalizing impulse, building "new institutions, new relations of production

¹¹ Further, as Nick Sturm notes, U.S. poetic avant-gardes of the '60s and '70s, even when identified with a specific urban locale, are rarely geographically static. The New York School, for example, was connected to a "dispersed geography... a national network of affiliations," with many of its associated poets maintaining provisional relationships with towns and cities as Bolinas, CA, Tulsa, Chicago, and Iowa City, among others (1).

and reception” (27). Even while these poets questioned the allegedly hegemonic values of “academic poetry,” their eventual consecration often relied upon an engagement with academic entities such as university archives (Rifkin 11).

From the cusp of the small press revolution to the present, avant-garde poetic community has neither fully divorced itself from the academy, nor openly accepted its role as a legitimating institution. Rather, it has entailed a complex engagement with academic structures, variously challenging and reinscribing their values. Within rural geographies where universities often provide the most viable infrastructures for poetic organizing, this is doubly the case. The focus of this chapter is one “other place” of small press poetry: Ithaca House, a small press that operated from 1969-1986 in Ithaca, New York—a town in the Finger Lakes that serves as the home of Cornell University and that was, at the time, a hotbed of activism and counterculture in its own right. Ithaca House was started by Baxter Hathaway, a Cornell professor who also edited the university-affiliated literary journal *Epoch*. During its 15-year span, Ithaca House published over one-hundred books. It is not remembered with the same reverence as some of its now-defunct small press contemporaries (e.g., Burning Deck, Black Sparrow Press, Tuumba); nor did it go in the direction of attaining more mainstream legibility (in the fashion of Graywolf Press, Copper Canyon, or Toothpaste Press—now known as Coffee House Press). Nonetheless, Ithaca House was an early member of Serenity Book Distribution (a Berkeley-based precursor to Small Press Distribution), and for a time, was a prolific participant in burgeoning small press cultures. Its books received reviews in numerous little magazines of its day, and amidst many poets who have now been forgotten, Ithaca House published a number of writers associated with Language poetry—Tom Mandel, Ray DiPalma, David and Maria Gitin, and the first books by Bob Perelman, David Melnick, and Ron Silliman—as well as a book by Maxine Chernoff, and works

by the important Black avant-gardists C.S. Giscombe and Kenneth McClane.

Based upon this list of authors, Ithaca House might sound similar to many of the highly curated avant-garde small presses and little magazines that emerged in the wake of *The New American Poetry*. But while many of its best-known authors had some adjacency to the Bay Area Language writing scene, Ithaca House's broader archive of published works had a much broader representation of the diversity of work being written through the 1970s: it published books of metrical verse; works of Robert Bly-esque "deep image" poetry; feminist confessional poetry; numerous books from across the aesthetic spectrum by poets local to Ithaca; and several books of fiction, to name a few examples. Despite the fact that it published poets from across the United States, Ithaca House held visible ties to its local community. During the majority of its existence, it maintained a storefront in Ithaca—initially on Forest Home Drive, near Cornell, and later on Plain Street in downtown Ithaca. Run by Sherry Hathaway, Baxter Hathaway's spouse, the Ithaca House storefront contained the press's printing equipment, but also a silkscreen studio and a gallery for local visual artists that sought, in Baxter's words, to present the Ithaca visual arts community with an alternative to the "conservative establishment" ("A Statement"). Additionally, the Ithaca House storefront housed a small press bookstore called the Poets' Corner; selling a host of literary journals and poetry collections, it boasted "one of the finest collections of small press publications in the county" ("United Arts Fund").

Like many of the avant-garde poetry projects that arose in the second half of the twentieth century, Ithaca House was enabled by an adjacency to academia. But by virtue of the fact that it occupied a geography that was spatially isolated from major metropolitan centers, this adjacency was especially complex. Ithaca House had a curious relationship to Cornell. On one hand, it had no technical affiliation with the university, and in fact, Hathaway often framed it as a

response to an institutional lack: Cornell University Press had ceased publishing poetry, deeming it to be unprofitable, and Ithaca House was founded with the specific intention of “[filling] the vacuum” that the university press left behind (“Dear Friends”).¹² On the other hand, Baxter Hathaway was ensconced in academic institutionalism. In addition to being a professor in the Cornell English department, he was—like his peers Paul Engle and Wallace Stegner—an early outspoken advocate for the academic creative writing program, and was largely responsible for founding the Creative Writing M.F.A. at Cornell. Nearly all of the Ithaca House staff, as well as a significant number of the authors it published, were current or former students of Hathaway. Towards the end of ‘70s, Hathaway became increasingly sick with emphysema, and in the early ‘80s, John Latta—one of Hathaway’s former students, who had intermittently lived in his basement and worked for him as a property manager—took over leadership, and continued to run the press for two years after Hathaway’s death in 1984 (Latta).

While many of Hathaway’s students were aligned with countercultural ideals and interested in the forms of radical literary experimentation that grew out from *The New American Poetry*, Hathaway was of a different generation. Born in 1909, he was a scholar of rhetoric, grammar, and 16th century Italian philosophy, and his own aesthetic tastes trended towards the formal verse revered in the academy during the midcentury period. Nonetheless, as one of his former students argues, Hathaway’s pedagogy was shaped by an “extreme openness to any form of experimentation... I remember as a student being frustrated with the absence of a doctrinaire position we could pit ourselves against” (Hewitt 11). As an editor, Hathaway believed in an approach driven not by aesthetic curation so much as by non-hierarchical collaborative

¹² See also Messer, “Ithaca House: An Outlet for Creative Writers,” which discusses in greater depth the relationship between Ithaca House’s genesis and Cornell UP’s choice to cease publishing poetry; as Hathaway writes, “We thought, there’s a lot of people around here who should get published, and if they’re not going to do it, let’s do it ourselves” (9).

practice—with “no division of labor into those of hand and head, front office and factory, intellectuals and workers” (22 May 1982). Anyone interested in taking on the labor of publishing books was given an equal editorial vote, participating “in the advising and decision making” (“Dear Friends”).¹³ This ethos, John Latta writes, was the main reason behind Ithaca House’s heterogeneous aesthetic:

Everybody did everything at Ithaca House. That was the goal. If you wanted to read manuscripts, you were expected to do some printing, etc. There were always odd trade-offs in the editorial decision-making that went on--if David McAleavey wanted to do Silliman's *_Crow_*, then we'd have to do a book by Hathaway's old buddy Ralph Salisbury. A both-and situation that leads to a kin [*sic*] of incomprehensible mish-mash of a list, (or one could characterize it more charitably as "eclectic.")

If the avant-gardes of the small press revolution are characterized through a set of recurring assumptions—that they were autonomous from “academic poetry,” in both an institutional and aesthetic sense; that they predominantly arose from urban countercultures; and that they were shaped by coherent aesthetic programs—Ithaca House functions as a case study in which these ideas break down. Its avant-gardism—which arises most clearly in its decidedly D.I.Y., collectivist approach to publishing—involved a negotiation between sets of seemingly contradictory characteristics: between academic institutionalism and subcultural practice;

¹³ While most Ithaca House volunteers were Cornell-affiliated, there were some exceptions. Ithaca House offered “internships” to students at other universities in exchange for academic credit, and at one point, it partnered with local social workers at the Educational Opportunity Center, who sent “unemployed teenagers” to work on books (Hathaway, 22 May 1982). It is unclear from Hathaway’s letter whether these individuals had any editorial sway.

between small-town localism and national small press networks; and between cutting-edge aesthetics and “old-guard” academic verse. Ithaca House not only represents a crucial (and largely forgotten) instance of non-metropolitan avant-garde activity, but exemplifies the interplay between subculture and institution that characterized small press production during the late ‘60s and ‘70s. Following Mark McGurl, I argue that the academic creative writing program—an entity with which Ithaca House was directly intertwined—served as crucible for the disparate churning influences of counterculture, New Left political imperatives, and an institutional legacy that could be traced back to New Criticism. Ithaca House’s rural avant-garde, I argue, discloses the intertwined relationship between the subcultural “small press revolution” and the institutions that enabled it.

Ithaca House as “Mid-Form”: Small Press Poetry and Scale

Poetry of the small press revolution, fueled by emergent distribution systems and growing networks of little magazines, was at once local and national. As Ron Silliman would go on to argue, poetry’s political economy is shaped by a dialectic tension between spatially specific *scenes* and transgeographic poetic *networks* (*The New Sentence* 28-29). He notes that neither of these categories ever exist in a “pure form” (29), and that unlike scenes, networks are contingent upon access to financial capital. While Silliman does not provide an extensive definition of either of these terms, “scenes” appear to rely more upon in-person sociality (he cites the example of a reading series), whereas the “network” is more likely to materialize in a print format (e.g., via a literary journal or an anthology). Ithaca House, certainly, blurred the line between scene and network—despite maintaining a storefront in Ithaca and deriving the majority of its labor from

the local community (i.e., its “scene”), it published authors from across the United States and received reviews in national publications (its “network”). While Silliman’s scene/network framework helps to abstractly conceptualize the way that poetry community occupies space, it mostly ignores the connective, spatializing role of infrastructure and institutions, and flattens the complex local/transgeographic tensions that arise in individual locales. In Ithaca, for example, as in many college towns, *locality* is hardly a static entity. Despite being relatively geographically isolated—more than 200 miles from the major metropolitan centers of Toronto, New York City, and Philadelphia—Cornell is an internationally networked institution, and looms over the rest of Ithaca from atop a hill.¹⁴ While Cornell is its largest employer, Ithaca’s cultural histories both are and are not defined by that academic institution. A popular local bumper sticker opines that Ithaca is “ten square miles surrounded by reality,” ostensibly referring to Ithaca’s left-leaning politics and histories of counterculture, in opposition to its far more conservative environs. Ithaca’s cultural identity, however, is in fact produced by this precise town/gown tension between supposedly “real” rural locality and the inherently transregional space of the university.¹⁵ While virtually any representative of the “small press revolution” internalizes this dichotomy between locality and transgeographic networks, in this section I show that Ithaca House—by virtue of its occupying a rural geographic space—stages this tension in a particularly dramatic fashion, through both its practices and the books it published.

Throughout its fifteen years of existence, Ithaca House published numerous books from

¹⁴ Not to mention its satellite campuses, labs, and affiliated professional centers, which occupy a range of geographies from New York City to Qatar.

¹⁵ Even in the early ‘70s, local radicals were challenging the notion of Ithaca as a supposed haven for progressivism. A column in an alternative newspaper from 1971, for example, focuses on the necessity of political organizing in Trumansburg, NY, a smaller neighboring town that largely depends upon Ithaca’s economy, and that, at the time, was more politically conservative: “Trumansburg can no more become a sanctuary of peace and freedom without radical change in Ithaca, than can Ithaca without a transformation of the larger empire” (Hoffman 2).

across the aesthetic spectrum, and as such, it can be difficult to make coherent statements about the precise kind of poetry it championed. That said, the geographies of Ithaca and rural upstate New York—and in particular, their relationship to considerations of regional scale—are recurrent themes across its catalog. A particularly notable example is Kenneth McClane’s *Moons and Low Times* (Ithaca House, 1978). McClane, who completed his B.A., M.F.A., and PhD at Cornell, directly evokes a tension between Ithaca’s locality and its networked relationship to a range of external cultures, histories, and geographies. If Ithaca itself is a site of confluence—in the horizontal center of New York state; at a geologically anomalous intersection of gorges and multiple creeks flowing outward from the southernmost point of Cayuga Lake; at the precise tension between local rootedness and international networks via Cornell—these confluences arise directly in McClane’s text, which observes Ithaca as a medium through which history and culture move, forming “partly a chaos, partly / a system” (25). In his poem “Ithaca,” for example, he begins by situating the reader within the titular rural landscape, while simultaneously juxtaposing it with a momentum that extends elsewhere:

Curiously things behave
as jazz flown I walk
in the wiry, exfoliated
windrows of pine (39)

While this poem begins and ends with a mention of Ithaca, jazz serves as a discursive mode that connects it to other geographies: “the music / a dark crater... / it is the pithy exodus sending it / free—an extravasation or hemorrhage / like Harlem, or in this / wildflower” (39). In one sense,

the juxtaposition of these references is jarring: Ithaca has no notable relationship to jazz history, and the references to “extravasation” and “exodus”—invoking both the Black Diaspora and Harlem’s status as a historic African American cultural capital—feel at odds with a predominantly white geography like Ithaca. In another sense, however, they reflect McClane’s own biography as a Black, Harlem-born writer who has spent the majority of his life in Ithaca. The poem, further, pushes against pastoral ideologies that sequester the rural; the “wildflower,” like Harlem, is associated with networked movement through disparate spatial contexts. In a different poem in the same collection—the three-page “Driving to Romulus”—McClane specifically confronts the networked historical relationship between Ithaca and colonial violence. The poem chronicles a 30-mile drive northwest from Ithaca to Romulus, a small town between the Cayuga and Seneca lakes—a former stop on the Underground Railroad, but also the site of a munitions storage facility and a prison:

Out near Ithaca
and Cornell
beyond the great lake
and Taughannock (falls, the
Indians called: “great in the woods”)
Out: beyond all this
beauty and out beyond
the seamless world margins
(the universe is bound
in the shrift of leaf

and the charity of stone & fireweed

and further in the pointy

coolings of lovers)

and there is Romulus

US Army base

big in the hills

and bigger than the hills (12)

In this passage, textual form collapses into the world (*margins* are “seamless” and the universe, like a book, is *bound*), and pastoral beauty collides with the violence that undergirds it—here, specifically, histories of militarization and colonization. McClane depicts colonial dispossession in a sense local to Ithaca and its surroundings—as he writes later, “the Indians... called it in a language / that took / a rifle to sniggle it out” (13), and further, the mention of Cornell invokes its own institutional relationship to settler colonialism via the Morrill Land Grant Act.¹⁶ Upon this local space, however, McClane superimposes a more transhistorical form of colonial violence, juxtaposing the small New York towns of Romulus and Rome with their more-famous Classical empire namesake (12-13).¹⁷ The formal attributes of McClane’s poem—its floaty, prosaic and unpunctuated lines broken up by abrupt enjambments—mirror a historical argument that it goes on to make:

¹⁶ See Lee and Ahtone.

¹⁷ Classical names are hardly an isolated occurrence within upstate New York; within a stone’s throw of Ithaca, for example, are the towns of Ovid, Ulysses, and Homer. The history behind this naming is itself a vestige of colonialism—an imposition of Classical “republican idealism” onto American frontier ideologies (Koch).

lasting is what the world is about
and Romulus, Rome and Wounded-Knee
all a mid-form, a stopping

McClane alludes in this passage to one of the greatest overriding values of both capitalism and imperialism—a steadfast belief in infinite, ongoing “progress”—but curiously, he inverts this mythology. In the vast expanse of time throughout the “seamless world margins,” instances of colonization represent historical *interruption*, rather than *continuity*. Continuity, McClane concludes, is the domain of his own poetics, which he situates against colonization, preserving the spaces “that need not be filled”:

THE WAY OF THE WORLD IS DOWNWARD

and all I speak of the little
and all I speak of the meek
and all that churns us

there are some stillnesses, some places of absolute
quiet
that need not be filled (14)

The above enjambments gesture, once again, towards a collision between locality and an infinite,

transhistorical and transgeographic rootlessness—a juxtaposition that, using McClane’s term, we might refer to as a “mid-form”: “I speak of the little / *and all*” (italics mine).

In one sense, McClane’s poem was prescient: the Romulus “US Army base” he refers to—the Seneca Army Depot, which during the Cold War, held the largest number of nuclear weapons in the United States—continued to be a site of social confluence and collision. Several years after *Moons and Low Times* was published, the Army Depot became a battleground of environmental protest. On August 1, 1983, 2,000 women—as part of the Seneca Women’s Peace Encampment—assembled to protest the base’s deployment of nuclear weapons to NATO bases throughout Europe. The protest wedded anti-militarism with feminist imperatives, attempting to create a model of “non-hierarchical, life-sustaining, female communities” (Costello and Stanley 34), and culminated in mass arrests and clashes with the predominantly conservative local population. While it no longer serves as an active military base, the former Seneca Army Depot has continued to be a site of unusual confluence. When the Depot was originally constructed, it had fenced in a small herd of deer—some of which carried recessive genes that gave them entirely white coats—and it serves today as the world’s largest conservation site of white deer. At the southernmost point of the former Depot is a prison. I have driven past the conservation site more times than I can count—slowing down alongside the long expanse of chain-linked fence and barbed wire, hoping to catch a glimpse of a white deer through the trees. In precisely the fashion that McClane illuminates, a locale of almost unreal pastoral beauty rests—quite literally—atop a history of militarization, violence, and exclusion, limned by a prison, a living technology of white supremacy.

McClane’s description in this passage (as well as the broader material history of this locale) resonates with many of the claims I make about the rural United States throughout this

dissertation—specifically, that rural locality is both heterogeneous and networked—and this tension carries across many of the Ithaca House books written by residents of Ithaca and its environs. Consider, for example, John Latta’s “Ithaca” in *Rubbing Torsos* (1979)—a poem that, elliptically describing a phone call, evokes a turn towards infrastructural connectivity in its final lines:

I become conscious
of the noise of the splitting of your skin.
Like the even humming of a long wire
that sags under the weight of lies and ice
along a hard-packed road out of here. (23)

Or consider C.S. Giscombe’s “A Song for Leaving New York State” (*Postcards*, Ithaca House, 1977), which echoes this tension between locality—specifically figured through the body—and infrastructural networks:

Get along
home home
the closed network of veins
like interstates
in my one good arm (38)

Consider, perhaps, David McAleavey’s anti-pastoral depiction of Ithaca in “Red-Tail at Monkey

Run” (*Shrine, Shelter, Cave*, Ithaca House, 1980)—the title of which refers to a popular hiking trail near the Cornell campus:

make point

the whirl, make place

come free for us

a hawk flew from the pines
the way water might flow over an old appliance,
smooth deep fast enough to swirl down
in a funnel towards the creek bottom...

you would see the limit of seeing (5)

While McAleavey invokes a neo-Romantic lyric impulse—specifically, the observation of the natural world as a springboard towards epiphany—he does not assimilate rural space into a pithy statement. Rather, it is a *whirl*, a site of confluence that precisely tests total human or poetic knowability. (And from the standpoint of a local reader, these philosophical inquiries take on more life-or-death connotations—Fall Creek, which intersects with Monkey Run, is a notorious site of accidental drownings.) If McAleavey fixates on the wooded, “natural” aspects of Ithaca—that is to say, its decidedly “rural” elements—Karen Hanson’s poem “Woolworth’s” (in *Spine*, Ithaca House, 1971) depicts it from the opposite end of the spectrum. Written on the occasion of a Woolworth’s opening in Ithaca, Hanson directly evokes the tension between

regional scale and urban development in her local context:

Oh I love the new Woolworth's.

The style so absolute and unashamed.

The moment I enter I am surrounded

pervaded

diffused

(This is the biggest in the country.)

I am a telescope.

I am a microscope.

I am a robot. (54)

Woolworth's, a now-defunct chain, was emblematic—alongside its competitors such as Walmart and Kmart—of the rise of discount department store chains in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁸ In the context of Ithaca, however, it represented something more specific:

Woolworth's was constructed through Project One, a large-scale urban renewal project that derived funds from both Cornell and the federal government (Crandall). Attempting to revitalize Ithaca's downtown area, Woolworth's was intended to be a "traffic generator," accommodating the midcentury trend towards automotive consumer culture; its large geographic footprint, however, necessitated the shuttering of several local businesses and residential properties, and as

¹⁸ Woolworth's, importantly, also has strong associations with the Civil Rights movement—a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina was the site of a historic sit-in in 1960. While Hanson's poem does not explicitly engage with this history, it closes with an image of anthropomorphized plastic flowers "cut off and planted in a counter" (54), perhaps drawing a connection between Woolworth's particular brand of post-Fordist capitalism and the kind of white supremacist dehumanization that led to the Woolworth's *counter* becoming a political battleground.

such, its construction was met with controversy (Cowan). This local historical context directly informs the above poem—the Ithaca Woolworth’s was, indeed, the “biggest in the country” at the time of its construction, and through her glib tone, Hanson characterizes it precisely as a threat to locality: the individually located subject is at once obliterated (“diffused”) and, anticipating an ideological fantasy that would later come to be associated with neoliberalism, given absolute autonomy via consumption. In the final lines, Hanson evokes tensions of regional scale in a strikingly literal sense: the poetic speaker is simultaneously a “microscope” and a “telescope,” embodying both microscopic localism and a cosmic, networked space.

At various points throughout this dissertation, I narrate a collision between rural locality and transgeographic, post-Fordist networks that can be traced back to Cold War logics. Hanson’s poem, certainly, resonates with the kind of juxtaposition in scale that Frank Stanford draws between rural Mississippi and the rootless culture of mass media in *The Battlefield Where the Moon Say I Love You* (which I discuss in the next chapter). But while this crisis of regional scale was in one sense ubiquitous in the post-Fordist, small-town United States, it took on a heightened form in Ithaca where, by the end of the 1960s, Cornell had already become a heavily international institution—in 1970, it opened an International Living Center (“International Residence”), and by 1973, 20% of Cornell’s graduate enrollment was comprised of international students (“Number of Int’l Students”)—and as an elite university, it had of course drawn a student body from across the United States for decades. Accounts of Ithaca House, on the part of outsiders as well as of its own editorial participants, frequently rehearse this geographic tension: between the supposedly rootless, “placeless” nature of Cornell and the regional locality of Ithaca. In his descriptions of Ithaca House, for example, John Latta tends to distance the press from Ithaca and its cultural community, seeing it more as an institutional fixture of Cornell (it was

primarily staffed by graduate students and, Latta reasons, graduate students “aren’t really locals” [personal interview]). On the other hand, outside readers of Ithaca House’s books would sometimes discuss them in such a way that elided their relationship to Cornell completely, instead associating them with Ithaca’s surrounding rural geography. “The Book Shelf,” for example, a poetry radio show on the El Paso-based station KTEP-FM, featured a segment on two Ithaca House books by C.S. Giscombe and Peter Fortunato (both of whom were, at the time, Cornell graduate students), classifying them as “country” poets:

The country writer is different from the city writer... There is, in both Fortunato and Giscombe, an almost fantastic insistence on the part played by nature in their daily poetic lives. They see, with the country person’s keen eyes, the flowering of the russet sunset. They bring us to the sounds and sites of a more subdued rural past (4)

The review goes on to close-read a poem from C.S. Giscombe’s *Postcards*, eventually proclaiming that “it is so obviously country that it could never have been written by a city person” (5). (A bizarre interpretation of Giscombe’s text, given that it also focuses on numerous urban geographies.) In a similar vein, an article about Ithaca House in a local Ithaca paper casts it against an abstracted notion of urban publishing, describing it as a press “for writers who dislike editors in skyscrapers” (Freedman). These interpretations may have been a result of how Hathaway himself framed and advertised Ithaca House; on multiple occasions, he was wont to play up the “regional” aspects of the press, situating it against an urban context. In a 1972 essay, for example, he writes that poetic culture “can be made in Harlem, in Detroit, in San Francisco, even in Ithaca, New York, that idyllic Shangri-La, that has, however, for several years now been

fortunate to have about as high a concentration of poets per square yard as can be found about anywhere” (“Ithaca House and Its Poetry Series”). Like the geography it occupied, Ithaca House was characterized as both *regional* and not.

Quantifying Ithaca House

As I show above, close-reading individual publications by Ithaca House can provide one sense of the press’s complex geographic relationships. But if a trademark of these poems is a fixation on geographic scale, I mirror this variation in scale in a methodological sense, turning here from the locality of individual poems to a zoomed-out, quantitative reading of Ithaca House’s regional relationships. As Richard Jean So and Hoyt Long show in their pathbreaking article “Network Analysis and the Sociology of Modernism”—which relies upon computational network analysis techniques to visualize the social structures of literary modernism—empirical approaches can usefully foreground “aspects of social structure visible at a large enough scale to observe the ‘strict, nonrandom regularity’ that small-scale random phenomena tend to create in their collective action” (155). For So and Long, the “small-scale random phenomena” in question are individual publications in modernist little magazines, and through their network visualizations, they show how a variety of canonical modernist poets overlapped and diverged in their publication habits. Below, I attempt to visualize Ithaca House’s relationships to local and national literary networks. Like So and Long, my data is comprised of individual journal publications—specifically, the journals that appear in the acknowledgements page of each book

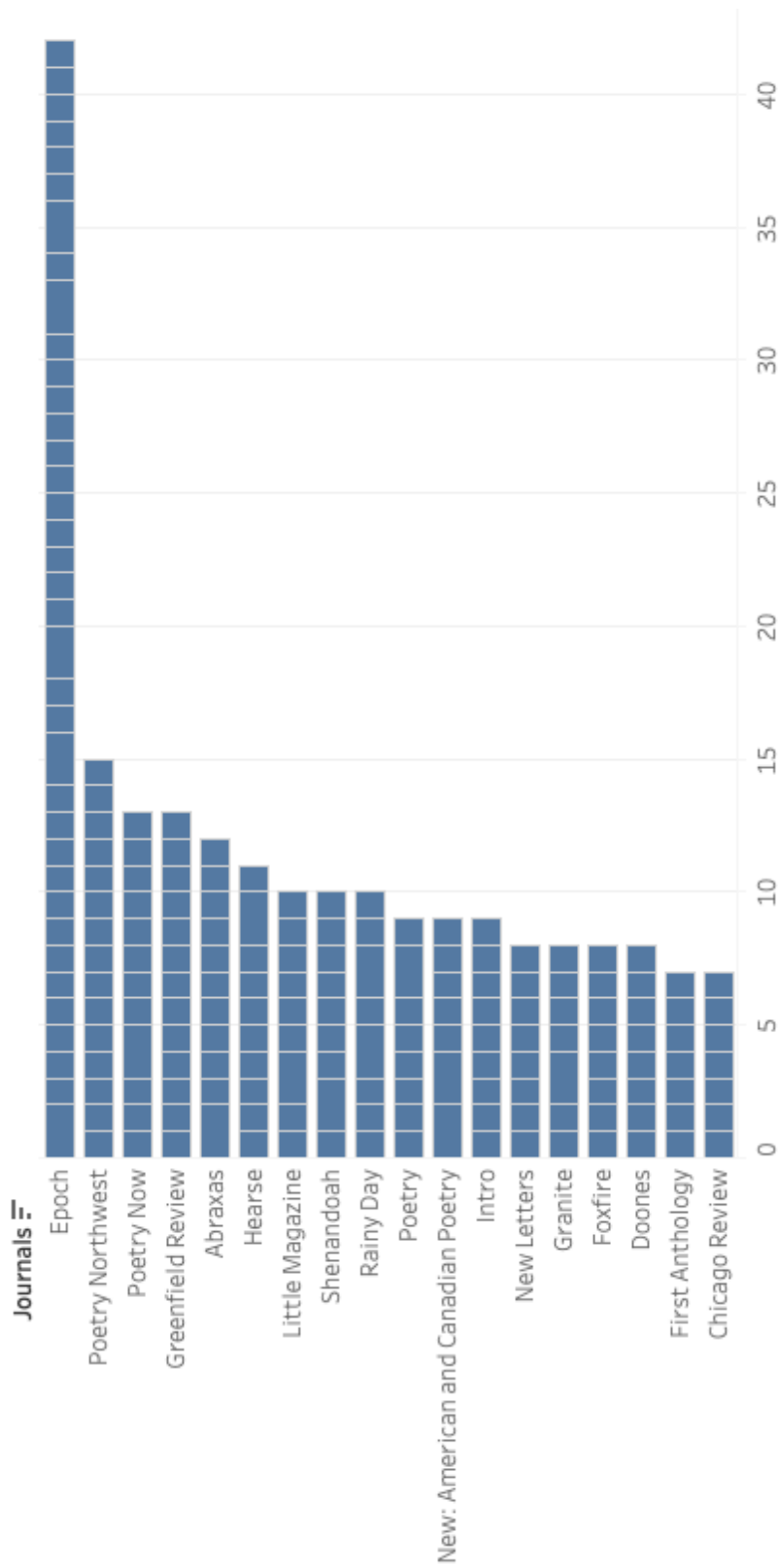


Figure 1.1
Periodicals in which Ithaca House poets most frequently published.

that Ithaca House published. (With a few exceptions, nearly every Ithaca House book contained work that was previously published in journals or anthologies.) In Figure 1.1, the Y-axis displays the periodicals and little magazines in which Ithaca House poets published most frequently; the X-axis, meanwhile, measures the number of individual times that each of these publications appeared in the acknowledgements page of an Ithaca House book.

The periodicals can be split into three categories: journals which were published from within the Ithaca and Cornell community; journals which were published outside of Ithaca, but which had some kind of loose affiliation with Ithaca House (e.g., publications edited by former students of Hathaway, or publications edited by former Ithaca House authors); and journals with no apparent connection to the Ithaca literary scene. Included within the first category are *Rainy Day* (an undergraduate-run Cornell journal); *NEW* (a letterpressed journal published by John Gill of The Crossing Press); and *Epoch*, the Cornell-affiliated journal which Hathaway edited that—unsurprisingly—frequently published Ithaca House poets. *Doones* and *The Greenfield Review* were both edited by former Ithaca House authors (respectively, Ray DiPalma, out of the Bay Area, and Joseph Bruchrac, out of Saratoga Springs, New York), and the mostly Madison, Wisconsin-based *Abraxis* was edited by Warren Woessner (a Cornell alumnus and an Ithaca House author) and James Bertolino (a poet who went on to pursue graduate studies at Cornell and worked on Ithaca House).

Of the category of journals that had no connection to Ithaca, some were simply well-respected, longstanding publications that catered to a range of aesthetics—e.g., *Poetry Northwest*, *Poetry*, *New Letters*, and *Chicago Review*—and in this respect, their frequency is unsurprising. Others, however, provide more questions than answers. *Hearse* and *Poetry Now* were both Eureka, California-based journals edited by E.V. Griffiths. Griffiths (who, oddly

enough, is best-known today as the first publisher of Charles Bukowski) had no apparent connection to Cornell, Ithaca, or Ithaca House. He did, however, appear to be a fan of Ithaca House—he included many of its collections under *Poetry Now*'s “Recommended Titles” section, and the very first issue of *Poetry Now* listed Ithaca House as a representative example of contemporary small press publishing that deserved press coverage (2).¹⁹



Figure 1.2

The spatial distribution of periodicals in which Ithaca House poets published.

In Figure 1.2, I visualize Ithaca House’s relationship to periodicals spatially, drawing from a dataset of every journal that appears in an acknowledgements page more than five times. The spots reflect the locations where the journals were published; the larger the spot, the greater number of individual journal publications came from that area. Ithaca, for this reason, is the largest: between *Epoch*, *Rainy Day*, and *Intro* (publications all based at Cornell), Ithaca-based journals appear in the acknowledgements of Ithaca House books 79 times. Twenty-five locations

¹⁹ *Poetry Now* also published Frank Stanford (who I discuss in Chapter 2) during his lifetime. See *Poetry Now*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1975), p. 35.

appear on this map, and 13 of these are areas with fewer than 50,000 residents; many of these lower-population areas are college towns (for example, Bowling Green, OH, Geneva, NY, and Hanover, NH) but not all of them. If we view this map as a reflection of Ithaca House's spatial networks, it reveals a strong bias towards the eastern half of the United States and, despite being transregional, exemplifies the intertwinement between small press poetry and academic infrastructures: many of Ithaca House's regional distributions can be traced back to Cornell's networked influence—in particular, the cluster that appears in Wisconsin, where Cornell alumni and Ithaca House authors Woessner and Bertolino were based.

My methodology diverges here from that of So and Long in a crucial way. Whereas they understand little magazines to be “institutional sites through which an expanding market for avant-garde poetry was stratified and differentiated” (158), my analysis of Ithaca House foregrounds the fact that *institution*—particularly after the rise of the creative program—is a capacious, multiscale concept, encompassing not only literary publications, but the universities that enable poetic practice. Academic institutions, of course, do not necessarily function in the same way as literary institutions—e.g., presses or journals—but often have determinative effects upon poetic sociality and production. (And, of course, university creative writing programs frequently fund literary journals, as was the case with *Shenandoah* and *New Letters*, to name two examples that appear frequently in the acknowledgements of Ithaca House books.) Borrowing terms from relational sociology, So and Long draw a distinction between “brokerage” and “closure” (162-163); whereas *closure* refers to a tendency for poets to only publish within their own aesthetic cliques, *brokers*, with Amy Lowell and Countee Cullen serving as representative examples, published within a broader range of little magazines, linking “otherwise disparate and unrelated poetic circles” (163). In the context of Ithaca House, this notion of “closure” takes on

different associations. The press was, after all, elliptically affiliated with an Ivy League university that was, by definition, exclusionary—its cliquishness, however, was driven more by shared institutional affiliation than aesthetic affinity. In the context of Ithaca House’s extended literary network, Cornell’s creative writing program itself served as a kind of broker, pulling together myriad aesthetically diverse periodicals ranging from *Poetry* to smaller scale, avant-garde magazines. (And Hathaway, apparently, saw the networked institutional influence of Cornell as a positive force—in a document describing the origins of *The Cornell Review*,²⁰ a short-lived journal he edited which primarily featured writing by Cornell alumni, he opined that “the whole world is in a sense the extended campus of Cornell University” (“[In the beginning]”).

By virtue of its simultaneously local and transgeographic nature, Ithaca House serves as a persuasive example of how Silliman’s distinction between “scenes” and “networks” might insufficiently account for poetic culture after the rise of the academic creative writing program. When poetic production and sociality are shaped by transgeographic influence—in this case, the centrifugal pull of Cornell’s creative writing program—and when they occur in-person as well as on the page, scenes *are* networks, and vice versa. Academic institutionalism accounts for Ithaca House’s paradoxical relationship to geographic scale; as I show in the following section, however, it also had a determinative effect upon the press’s publishing practices.

Small Press Patronage and the Cold War University

In *The Program Era*, Mark McGurl argues that the ideological apparatus of the creative

²⁰ Not to be confused with another Cornell campus publication also titled *Cornell Review* which is, in fact, a conservative newspaper whose staff once included Ann Coulter.

writing program is driven by a dialectical tension between *self-discipline* and *self-expression*. The former category—materializing in the workshop dictum “show, don’t tell”—derives from the institutional legacy of New Criticism, with its focuses on impersonality, close-reading, craft, and “the independence of the reader’s interpretation from the author’s intentions” (McGurl 134). *Self-expression*, on the other hand, derives from the progressive education movement of the 1920s and ‘30s, which theorized “creative writing” as a pedagogical practice that could “minimize the slavish dependence of student writing on the ‘arbitrary authority’ of established opinion” (McGurl 86).

During the 1960s, these characteristics of the creative writing workshop took on different valences. First, with the revival of the progressive education movement—conjoined with projects of multiculturalism—*self-expression* in the creative writing classroom evolved towards “the now ubiquitous pedagogical imperative to ‘find your voice’” (McGurl 147). Second, the U.S. culture of the ‘60s was often characterized by a tension between institutionalism and absolute individualism. In the view of the ‘60s radical, McGurl argues, the war against the “establishment” often resembled not so much a “rejection of the capitalist status quo,” but rather, a quasi-libertarian resistance to the “regulatory bureaucracies of the still-hegemonic liberal welfare state” (186-187). Within the context of the post-G.I. Bill university—which, McGurl points out, had a vested interest in pleasing its “young customers” to maintain its enrollment numbers—this tension materialized in a “confused dialectic of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’” (197).

McGurl’s focus, of course, is postwar fiction, and he traces the way in which individual texts internalize these historical influences. For poetry of the “small press revolution,” which often explicitly framed itself as a countercultural force against academic consecration, the conversation is somewhat different—the supposedly “confused dialectic of ‘insiders’ and

‘outsiders’” fueled not just the poetry, but an entire community of poets who saw themselves at odds with academia while being simultaneously enabled by Cold War collegiate culture. Ithaca House—by virtue of the fact that it was directly fueled by the culture and infrastructures of Cornell, but simultaneously sought to build creative spaces outside it—is emblematic of this tension.

Ithaca itself, which the Ithaca House poet James Bertolino once referred to as the “Berkeley of the East” (“Light Industry”), was a site of counterculture, activism, and political upheaval in the late ‘60s and ‘70s. Most famously in 1969, at the apex of a series of racially motivated on-campus conflicts—including the burning of a cross in front of a dormitory for Black women—a group of Black Cornell students occupied Willard Straight Hall in protest and, after enduring harassment and threats of violence from white fraternity members, they took up arms (Dancis 246-249). This event had multifarious effects: substantial backlash from white faculty and trustees; the eventual resignation of President James Perkins; the erecting of an Africana Studies and Research Center; and a restructuring of numerous university policies.²¹ As a column in a local alt-newspaper from 1971 observes, however, this on-campus activism was accompanied by a belief that “broad, permanent social change cannot be achieved without the involvement and support of large segments of the (non-student) community” (“Alternatives” 1).

Outside Cornell, Ithaca was the locus of numerous activists, artists, and countercultural communities. Smedley’s, a Marxist-feminist bookstore, was founded in 1976 and operated for nearly two decades, bringing luminaries such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde to town for

²¹ At the time of this event, Hathaway appears to have been out of the country; his student secretary wrote to him, updating him on the news and expressing her support for the Black protesters: “No doubt you’ve heard about the commotion here. A distorted picture, too probably... It is unfortunate that many of the ivory-tower professors around here made their decisions based on the news they read in the N.Y. Times rather than simply attending a meeting here to find out what happened” (Johnson).

readings (Moore). Moosewood, one of the most famous vegetarian restaurants in the U.S., was founded in 1973. In 1977, the Grateful Dead played in Ithaca, with students, locals, and itinerant counterculturites alike flocking to Barton Hall on the Cornell campus to witness what would go on to become the “most listened to” Dead show of all time (Connors 8). In Newfield, NY, just up the road from Ithaca, was the now-infamous gay and lesbian commune Lavender Hill (which served as the inspiration for Larry Mitchell’s cult classic *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*). Local radicals ran a “free store” in downtown Ithaca in the early ‘70s (“Is This Any Way”). In nearby Trumansburg, John and Elaine Gill operated The Crossing Press, which published such foundational works as *The Male Muse* in 1973 (the first published anthology of gay poetry in the U.S.) and *Come To Power* in 1974 (the first published anthology of Native American poetry). Richard Fariña’s novel *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me* (1966)—a classic ‘60s countercultural campus novel—uses Ithaca as the setting of its psychedelic bildungsroman.

This was the context against which Ithaca House was cast, and its relationship to this countercultural background was not simple. While it published many poets who viewed avant-garde aesthetics as an extension of radical politics, Ithaca House perhaps looked a bit stodgy compared to its local context. For example, there appears to have been zero correspondence or collaboration between Smedley’s and Ithaca House, despite the fact that they certainly had occasional aesthetic and ideological overlap, and had storefronts literally blocks apart. According to a local publication, Ithaca House was “attacked as an establishment-oriented operation” (Freedman), and in a letter, Baxter Hathaway similarly complains that Ithaca House had been criticized as “elitist” for its “seeming connection to Cornell” (22 May 1982). Then, of course, there was the matter of Hathaway himself. In the face of Ithaca’s emergent counterculture, he

was—as John Latta puts it—an “old man” (personal interview). If the editorial work of Elaine and John Gill epitomized the countercultural wing of small press publishing within the context of Ithaca, Baxter Hathaway was on the other end of the spectrum—a vestige of midcentury poet-academia that the new “anti-establishment” generation supposedly aimed to subvert.²² Ithaca House, I argue, directly staged a form of this dialectic tension—between subculture and establishment, individual and institution. As I show in this section, Hathaway served as a kind of intergenerational interlocuter, creating—intentionally or not—a space for avant-garde literary production.

While he was a lifelong advocate for small press publishing, Hathaway was acutely aware of the fact that its activity through the ‘60s and ‘70s was inseparable from anti-institutional countercultural ideals, and that his age and professional status placed him at odds with these imperatives. As he wrote in a 1982 letter detailing the history of Ithaca House,

Around 1963, Esquire magazine ran a big graphic centerfold portrayal of “the literary establishment in America” in which they were good enough to me to include my name and Epoch’s in what they called “the red-hot center”... But by 1963 it was already unsafe to have anyone identify you with an establishment and it got worse as the Vietnam war developed along with dropout cultures, campus riots, communal living, LSD. (22 May 1982)

Further, Hathaway understood that his own aesthetic inclinations—including those of many of the poets he personally championed via Ithaca House—were, in his words, “no longer in

²² It should be pointed out that John Gill had a connection to academia as well—he was, for a time, an Assistant Professor of English Literature at Ithaca College (“John Gill Modern Poetry Collection”).

fashion” (“Foreword”). In his foreword to an Ithaca House book from 1982—a retrospective collection of work by Roy Marz, a formalist poet who was mostly active during the ‘50s—Hathaway situates Marz’s work in a historical context:

By hindsight we can see that it was the coming on of the Beat poets that provided the *terminus ad quem* for Roy Marz’s poetry... [His] poetic styles seem out-of-date. By 1960 the Controversy of Poets was in full swing. The Donald Allen anthology competed with the Hall-Simpson-Pack anthology. The New Criticism and well-wrought urns were giving way to gurus, “sincerity,” and deep images. Drugs and mind-expansion led to a subjectivism that permitted only hazy recognition of objective situations. (“Foreword” 2-3)

While Hathaway goes on to disparage the Naropa Institute, home of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, he also admits that Marz “was the master of the kind of poetry my generation had been brainwashed to love” (3).

Poetic figures such as Allen Ginsberg, Diane di Prima, and Gary Snyder, certainly, exemplified the hold that both radical politics and countercultural lifestylism—e.g., New Age practices and drug culture—had upon various pockets of small press poetry in the 1960s and ‘70s. As the above passage suggests, Hathaway had a mixed relationship with these influences. On one hand, in his descriptions of Ithaca House he frequently employed a kind of craft-based anti-industrialism echoing the ideas of William Morris—as publishing with a “human face” (“About Ithaca House”), as opposed to the forces of “big business” and “mass production” (“Ithaca House”). On the other, he proclaimed in 1972 that Ithaca House “does not necessarily

represent a counter-culture. To the contrary, if there is any live culture around we brashly assume we are a significant part of it” (“Ithaca House and its Poetry Series”). In notes for a 1968 talk he gave at a conference on little magazines, Hathaway describes small press culture—perhaps half-glibly—as an “underground” with its own systems of social capital, “moles creating a network of interconnecting tunnels” (“Notes on conference paper”). Like underground film and theater, Hathaway suggests, the “literary underground” carries associations with counterculture—“new kinds of form or formlessness, and sometimes of social rebellion of dropping-out of middle-class society”—as well as with radical politics, “[because] of the long association of the term ‘underground’ with political activism, bomb-throwing anarchists, and secret-agents.” This adjacency to a countercultural underground, Hathaway argues, harms the coherence of the literary underground:

I am not going to say anything about the “hippie” syndrome, because I don’t understand it even though I have known well some of the earliest, best, and most fragrant of them... and because the “hippie” underground overlaps the cultural or art underground but confuses it. We were better off in the old days when artists were merely bohemians and absinthe-drinkers. (“North Carolina Paper”)

Elsewhere, Hathaway claimed that long hair and hippie affectations were “the new badges of conformity” (Hewitt, “[During the past decade]”). It would be tempting, perhaps, to pass off Hathaway’s remarks as those of a crotchety geezer—least of all because his arguments here, and in his forward to Marz’s book, are ahistorical. Most obviously, he ignores the anti-bourgeois politics that often accompanied older “bohemian” literatures, and further, while he

suggests that the waning of New Criticism in the '60s was merely the result of “hippies” and a generational divide, arguments surrounding radical aesthetics had been happening for decades. (Hathaway’s *own* generation, for example, was characterized by what Al Filreis refers to as a “cold war in poetry” in which arguments for and against modernist experimentation took on political, often anti-communist valences [182].)

But read alongside his remarks in other writings, Hathaway’s problem with the youth cultures of the 1960s and ‘70s appears to have been mostly unrelated to New Left politics—he was an advocate for on-campus freedom-of-speech issues, for example, having once defended the right of a student publication to run allegedly obscene material (Hewitt, “Writers and Teachers” 11), and on multiple occasions argued in favor of decriminalizing drug use. Rather, Hathaway appears to have specifically taken issue with the way in which “anti-establishment” sentiments, whether championed by hippies or radicals, villainized the university. He was, after all, the founder of one of the earliest academic creative writing programs in the United States, and was, in the words of the poet Geof Hewitt, a “tireless defender of the creative artist within an academic structure” (“Writers and Teachers” 11). The university, in Hathaway’s view, was not opposed to the “literary underground”; nor was it representative of the “systems of power” that Jack Spicer viewed as hostile to poetry. Rather, the university could serve as a technology that facilitated poetic collectivity. In notes for an (apparently unpublished) essay, Hathaway writes:

Universities can provide continuity, physical existence, perhaps subsidies for magazines.

Universities have in general become part of the underground, the separate kingdom.

And in general this underground is surfacing. We are not at odds here with the sciences or social sciences -- maybe. C.P. Snow's two cultures.

College of Arts and Sciences vs. Engineers. Hotel, Veterinary Medicine.

Health of university activity demands decentralization. Enclave theory. But thank the gods for New York and San Francisco. ("The University and the Writer")

While Hathaway's notes specifically reference the supposed cultural centers of small press poetry—e.g., the probably-sarcastic “thank the gods for New York and San Francisco”—he also evokes the changing role of humanities within the Cold War–era university, both in a general sense, and at Cornell specifically (the third paragraph lists off several of Cornell's individual colleges). Consider, for example, Hathaway's invocation of the British novelist C.P. Snow. In his lecture *The Two Cultures*, Snow argues that the ideological division between scientists and “literary intellectuals” (4) is symptomatic of a British cultural decline; in the latter half of his talk, Snow turns towards what the historian Guy Ortolano has termed a “technocratic liberalism” (11), evangelizing the progressive role that science and technology could play in an international context. Snow's lecture was met by a now-infamous ad hominem attack from the literary critic F.R. Leavis—a critique which Leavis reiterated during talks at numerous universities throughout the '60s and '70s, including Cornell in 1966 (Ortolano 2). While this intellectual dustup responded to cultural concerns that were to some extent specific to Britain, it is not difficult to understand why Hathaway might have likened it to a U.S. context—one in which the U.S. university, at the height of the Cold War, had increasingly prioritized technology

and the sciences at the expense of the humanities.

While Hathaway's designation of universities as "part of the underground" seems in one sense absurd, it resonates with a comment he makes elsewhere in his essay—that, in the '60s, the arts and humanities represented an alternative for young people to the "inhumanity of the Government's pressure on them to dedicate themselves to the sciences and to technology after the Great Sputnik Scare" ("The M.F.A. and the University"). For Hathaway, creative writing presented an intellectual alternative to the "technocratic university of the Cold War" (McGurl 201); moreover, he later described creative writing as the best chance "for keeping the humanities alive" within a disciplinary context that, to his dismay, had begun to increasingly emphasize critical theory—or, as he derisively termed in it a letter, "the fashionable criticism of criticism" (16 Nov. 1978). If the academy—perhaps more specifically, the academic creative writing program—was the site of a cultural "underground" for Hathaway, Ithaca House served as its logical extension for his students. Embodying a highly Deweyan, pragmatist ethos, Ithaca House facilitated a kind of "learning by doing" (Dewey), exposing students to forms of small press literary production and sociality beyond Cornell and Ithaca. According to John Latta, Hathaway "wanted to provide an opportunity for people. It was almost like it was a pedagogic thing: get involved, do what you can, learn what you can" (personal interview); in a blog post, Ron Silliman echoes this assessment of Ithaca House, describing it as a "funky little operation... as a means of instructing students in what the poetry world was really like" ("[I almost never think]").

Beyond his direct pedagogical aims, Hathaway also saw Ithaca House as a way of bolstering the reputation of Cornell's creative writing program. In a letter to the chair of the Cornell English Department in September 1975, summarizing his research activity over the

summer, Hathaway frames Ithaca House in precisely this way. Having spent his entire summer typesetting books, he writes,

the value of the whole activity lies in its enhancement of the Cornell and Ithaca image as a hot center of literary vitality as well as in the actual educational value involved in linking up the kinesis of bookmaking, editing, and publishing with the act of literary creation, I could argue that the work I did there this summer was spent for Cornell and not for myself (16 Sept. 1975)

As Hathaway's letter suggests, there were clearly periods in which nearly all of his energy was devoted to Ithaca House. Accounts of Hathaway's direct involvement in the press's day-to-day operations, however, differ significantly. While Latta—one of Hathaway's favorite students (Hathaway, 22 Nov. 1974)—likely received a more immediate form of mentorship, this was not necessarily the case with other Ithaca House authors and editors. Silliman, for example, describes Ithaca House as “a student-run press bankrolled (oh, more like piggy-bankrolled) by Baxter Hathaway” (“[My comment here]”). Given that it was a publishing collective, Ithaca House authors who were local to the region appear to have often been expected to take the initiative to print their own books. David McAleavey, for example—who was both a Cornell doctoral student and an Ithaca House editor—writes that while Hathaway solicited and funded the publication of his first book, *Sterling 403* (1971), he ended up having to do “about 75% of the typesetting & printing” (“RE: Ithaca House”).

Bob Perelman relays a similar story with regards to the publication of his first book, *Braille* (1975). He submitted his manuscript to Ithaca House on Silliman's recommendation, and after being offered publication, coincidentally took a short-term teaching job at Hobart and

William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, only 45 miles from Ithaca. By the time Perelman had arrived in Geneva, *Braille*'s publication had been significantly delayed, and Hathaway, apparently short on labor, wrote to Perelman, offering to get his book "moved up in the queue" if he helped print it himself (Perelman). Eager to get *Braille* into the world, Perelman obliged, but ended up receiving very little guidance from Hathaway or anyone else—as he recalls, he did not "talk to anybody who seemed to have read the book or had something to say about it." After being given a 45-minute lesson on how to use the letterpress machine—which, at the time, was only half-functional—Perelman printed the entire book himself, but "only two-thirds of the pages were useable" (personal interview). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ithaca House's catalog varies significantly with regards to production quality; while some of its books are beautifully designed and meticulously typeset, others have poor bindings or pages that are cropped sloppily. Kenneth McClane, for example, states that during the book signing for his first collection with Ithaca House, all the bindings began to fall apart (personal interview).

Even if Hathaway occasionally took a laissez-faire approach towards production, he was directly invested in Ithaca House's reputation within broader small press circles. Shortly after *Braille* was released, a reviewer in *Northeast Rising Sun* described it as "a wretched example of sloppy bookmaking" (Hathaway, 15 Feb. 1976). An enraged Hathaway wrote directly to the journal, blaming "austerity budgets" and urging "attitudes of greater civility." Ithaca House, he pointed out, was "not a commercial press" and had a limited budget; further, Hathaway asserted, "Ithaca House has never pretended to be an art press. We like to have our books be as well done as possible. But our bias is for the art of poetry" (15 Feb. 1976). (The *Northeast Rising Sun* went on to double down on its criticism, with a reviewer describing a different Ithaca House book as "the most hideously produced book I've seen in years" [Michael Scott Cain 34]).

Anecdotes such as Perelman’s reflect not only the precarious, haphazard nature of small press publishing, but broader questions about the relationship between poetic “legitimacy” and institutional affiliation. Upon his manuscript being accepted by Ithaca House, Perelman recalls thinking that he had hit “the big time,” a sentiment that—particularly since it was his introduction to the small press world—oddly clashed with the rather unfortunate experience of having to print the book himself:

[I was] thinking that, “Oh, I’ve sort of begun to be a real poet, a real press is publishing my work,” etc.... And at the same time, it’s just me trying to work this machine [that] isn’t in very good condition and needs all sorts of adjustments... The combination of feeling, “You know, this is sort of the *big time* and the actual *small time*” (personal interview, italics mine).

Echoing a debate that has existed from the origins of small press publishing to the present (what, after all, constitutes a “real press”?), Perelman’s experience with Ithaca House runs dangerously close to self-publication. If Perelman printed the book himself and received no payment and virtually no editorial input—and if, for most of its existence, Ithaca House did not handle its own distribution—what *were* they providing their authors?²³ First, access to printing resources and funding for materials,²⁴ and second, a symbolic level of prestige—Ithaca House was, after all,

²³ For a more contemporary iteration of this debate around small presses, vanity presses, and self-publication, consider the example of BlazeVOX, an experimental poetry small press that, in 2011, became the subject of widespread controversy when it began asking its authors to financially contribute to the publication of their own books. See Shivani.

²⁴ Ithaca House alternated between offset and letterpress printing. Within the context of small press poetry—both then, and now—letterpress printing is often employed for self-consciously aesthetic purposes, invoking earlier histories of print technology and a tactile, “handmade” quality in opposition to the supposedly impersonal nature of mainstream publishing. As Hathaway’s claim that Ithaca House was

run by an editor affiliated with an elite university creative writing program. If, to return to McGurl's formulation, the academic creative writing program is interpellated through the competing tensions of *self-discipline* and *self-expression*, Hathaway facilitated the latter in a perhaps paradoxical fashion: by occasionally *not* being present. While he was by all accounts a rigorous instructor in the classroom, it was precisely his willingness to relinquish creative control over Ithaca House—while simultaneously serving as a kind of patron figure, leveraging his wealth and institutional prestige—that enabled the press to publish formally challenging and often politically provocative work. While an anecdote such as Perelman's might give the impression that Hathaway's hands-off approach stemmed from apathy or incompetence, it embodies, rather, Ithaca House's D.I.Y. avant-garde ethos. Hathaway understood, perhaps, that his role was—in part—to step aside. In a letter, Hathaway describes the “spartan” lifestyles that some of his former students pursued to devote the majority of their time to Ithaca House—such as Latta, for example, who worked nights as a custodian so that he could print Ithaca House books during the daytime. As Hathaway argued, “there is where you will find the real heroes of the small press revolution--those young people who are willing to give up careers and live on very little in order to get the books out” (22 May 1982).

While Hathaway's statement here is intended to give credit to the underappreciated young poets who enabled Ithaca House's practices, he also invokes a kind of “starving artist” trope that ascribes a heroism to living in poverty—an uncomfortable statement coming from Hathaway, perhaps, given his degree of financial stability and job security as a tenured Cornell professor. In one sense, Hathaway's sentiment feels dated. John Latta states that in the early

not “an art press” suggests, however, his reasoning behind using letterpress technologies had less to do with aesthetics and more to do with money (while letterpressing is deeply time-consuming, it would have been much cheaper than offset printing).

'80s, when he devoted the majority of his time to Ithaca House, he was living in a rooming house in Ithaca's Collegetown, and "it was possible, but getting less possible, to support yourself with a part-time job or with very little money" (personal interview); numerous other small press editors during this period—many of the poets associated with the second-generation New York School, for example—lived similarly vagabondish lifestyles. At least in the context of Ithaca, however, this seems nearly inconceivable today: Collegetown, the neighborhood where Latta lived, is now one of the highest-rent areas in New York state, increasingly filled with luxury high-rise apartments that are more likely to house wealthy undergraduates than countercultural artists.

If we understand Ithaca House as an operation relying upon the labor of "starving artists," paired with Hathaway's leveraging of his own wealth, it begins to sound curiously similar to older forms of the avant-garde that critiqued bourgeois culture while simultaneously relying upon its patronage. On the other hand, none of Hathaway's students were supporting themselves through their editorial practices (as its financial reports show, Ithaca House often took on staggering financial losses),²⁵ and the closest entity to a "patron" for Ithaca House's young editors was Cornell itself, via the stipends it administered to graduate students. The relationship between Ithaca House and Cornell, in this respect, exemplifies the simultaneously central and diffuse role that academic institutions played for small press subcultures during the Cold War period. While the university enabled small press publishing, it did so on a spectrum. On one end, there were literary scenes that merely emerged in proximity to academic circles (e.g., the cluster of influential presses and little magazines that operated in Iowa City in the '70s),²⁶ or poetic groupings that engaged with aspects of collegiate culture or academic structure (e.g., the

²⁵ In 1978, for example, Ithaca House lost \$1122.33 ("Ithaca House 1978"); in 1980, it lost \$595.11 ("Ithaca House Treasurers Report 1980").

²⁶ Toothpaste Press is one particularly notable example. See Peterson.

Chicago-based Alternate University Poetry Collective, or the workshop-based activities at the St. Mark's Poetry Project). On the other end of the spectrum were presses with direct financial ties to universities, of which Ithaca House—as a press personally funded by the founder of the Cornell creative writing program—was a particularly dramatic example. If Cold War small press culture intersected with a kind of lifestyle counterculturalism, as Hathaway's "real heroes" comment implies, it also directly responded to the political concerns of the New Left. I explore this latter category in the next section.

"Categories of Interest"

In 1974, *The Ithaca New Times* published an article showcasing three local small presses: Ithaca House, The Crossing Press, and Stonemarrow Press (an operation started by Ithaca House author and editor Jim Bertolino). The writer of the article placed a particular emphasis on the role that small presses could play in "publishing minority-group writers," and on the subject of Ithaca House, she wrote the following:

Ithaca House is only interested in publishing good literature that will stand the test of time. "We are not interested in propaganda pieces for Gay Lib, not that we would object if the writer is homosexual," comments Hathaway. Ithaca House would like to publish more minority-group writers however and is particularly interested in publishing more women poets. (Freedman)

Given the reservations he expresses elsewhere about poetry as a mouthpiece for activism,

Hathaway's casual homophobia here—specifically, the supposed division between identity-based “propaganda” literature and allegedly neutral, “timeless” literature—is unsurprising. As both a professor and editor, he actively supported the work of poets who were not white, male, or heterosexual, but did so in a way that often encouraged an assimilation into the values of white, bourgeois culture, a fact that his personal papers make clear. In a letter of recommendation for one of his Black students, for example, he praises him for being “gentle” and “well-integrated into the middle class American society” (19 Feb. 1975); of a different Black student, he writes, “[although] he has a strong conscience for the needs of underprivileged Blacks in our society, his outlook and bearing are more cosmopolitan than parochial” (“Career Center Placement Bureau”).

The fact that a white male Ivy League professor born in 1904 would hold reactionary attitudes towards race, gender, and sexuality is no revelation. However, the specific separations that Hathaway's language invokes—in particular, between supposedly “parochial” Blackness and “cosmopolitan” whiteness—are suggestive of frictions within both the small press field and U.S. culture at large. If the small press revolution grew out of the radical social upheaval of the 1960s, the identity-oriented wings of the New Left—e.g., the Black Power movement, the American Indian movement, Gay Liberation, and second-wave feminism—played a crucial role in cultivating audiences for small press writing. As Ithaca House author James Bertolino wrote in an essay, “small presses are a natural place for minority interests to find expression” (“Light Industry”). By virtue of the fact that these “minority” groups were underrepresented in mainstream publishing, they often occupied the same landscapes as small press literatures that, while not specifically “identity-oriented,” were unprofitable and geared towards niche readerships—because they were aesthetically radical or, as was the case with Ithaca House, simply because they published poetry.

Consider, for example, the below document held within the Ithaca House archives (Figure 1.3): a questionnaire distributed by Angst World Library, a Seattle-based service that distributed publishers’ promotional flyers to the “growing list of people interested in the small press movement” (Carlisle). Its “categories of interest” cover a broad swath, ranging from region, to identity, to form and genre. While these categories were merely intended for marketing purposes, they disclose the kinds of slippages that surrounded “identity” as both a coherent cultural category and an emergent site of commercial potential. From the standpoint of small press marketing—which, by definition, attempted to derive profit from “marginal” categories—fields such as “poetry” and “homosexual” occupied the same discursive plane.²⁷ (And within

CATEGORIES OF INTEREST: (Where you want us to send your flyers. Please indicate order of preference by numbering the appropriate space from 1 on up)

A. REGION

<input type="checkbox"/> Northeast USA	<input type="checkbox"/> Canada
<input type="checkbox"/> Southern USA	<input type="checkbox"/> GREAT BRITAIN
<input type="checkbox"/> Midwestern USA	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
<input type="checkbox"/> Western USA	

B. TO PEOPLE WITH AN INTEREST IN:

<input type="checkbox"/> Literary	<input type="checkbox"/> Women-general	<input type="checkbox"/> Women-liberated
<input type="checkbox"/> Prisons	<input type="checkbox"/> Blacks	<input type="checkbox"/> Chicanos
<input type="checkbox"/> Third World	<input type="checkbox"/> Homosexual	<input type="checkbox"/> Poetry
<input type="checkbox"/> Novels	<input type="checkbox"/> Others _____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Sci-fi	<input type="checkbox"/> Others _____	

C. RETAIL MARKETS:

<input type="checkbox"/> Bookstores-regular	<input type="checkbox"/> Libraries
<input type="checkbox"/> Bookstores-university	<input type="checkbox"/> Review sources (newspapers & mags)
<input type="checkbox"/> Bookstores-sympathetic to us	

Figure 1.3
A questionnaire for a small press promotional service (Carlisle).

²⁷ Small Press Distribution still categorizes the titles on its website in this fashion; its descriptions of books typically begin by listing the genre (e.g., “Poetry”), followed by any relevant identity category—which, presumably with pedagogical purposes in mind, it yokes to specific academic fields (e.g., “Queer Studies,” “Latinx Studies,” etc.).

individual identity categories, there were further ideological fracturings—consider, for example, that the ad differentiates “Women-General” from “Women-Liberated.”) In an introduction to a recent edited collection, Jean-Thomas Tremblay and Andrew Strombeck argue that within the context of the widespread social and economic crises of the 1970s—the hamstringing of unions and social services, economic inequality, mass incarceration, and so on—“minoritarian” art and radical aesthetics collided in response to “institutional exclusion” (9). The collision between “marginal” literatures and avant-gardism, however, is hardly new; as James Smethurst has persuasively argued, for example, the white countercultures that incubated literary modernism were heavily influenced by the rise of urban “black bohemia” in the wake of the Great Migration (113). The emergence of identity as a marketable “category of interest” during the ‘60s and ‘70s, however—the proliferation of “code words such as ‘cultural diversity’ and ‘pluralism,’” to use Sylvia Wynter’s language (12)—can be traced back to the significant systemic upheavals that occurred in the wake of New Left and Civil Rights protest. With the discourses surrounding affirmative action serving as merely one example, the Cold War period was rife with conversations about institutional inclusion. In the context of literary representations of identity categories, the genesis of public arts funding played a particularly crucial role.

We might consider the most significant funding source for small presses during the Cold War: the National Endowment of the Arts, which was established by Lyndon Johnson in 1965. From its inception, the NEA funded avant-garde art, a decision that numerous critics have associated with Cold War-era attempts to bolster U.S. cultural nationalism.²⁸ Its funding of small press publishing, however—which, in its 1971 annual report, it deemed “a tradition of publishing unique to this country” (“NEA and NCA”)—occurred in a rather circuitous fashion. Today, the

²⁸ See, for example, Frances Stonor Saunders’s argument that Jackson Pollock’s work served as a cultural stand-in for “anti-Communist ideology, the ideology of freedom” (254).

NEA provides funds to individual poets and presses; prior to Ronald Reagan’s presidency, however, it provided large blocks of funding to the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, an organization that distributed the money to individual presses, poets, and journals of its own choosing. As Matvei Yankelevich has shown, the CCLM board was not comprised of bureaucrats, but rather, individuals who were directly involved in radical small press activity—poets such as Lorenzo Thomas and Ishmael Reed (who were involved with the Black Arts Movement), and Anne Waldman (who had ties to both the second-generation New York School and the Beat Generation). As a result, the CCLM distributed NEA funds to an array of small presses and little magazines that were not only aesthetically radical, but politically leftist in nature—it had an Ad Hoc Committee on Black Literary Projects, for example, and provided funding to Black Arts Movement publications such as *Nkombo* (Yankelevich).²⁹

While the NEA serves as the most obvious example of newfound funding for “minority” writers in the small press field, this phenomenon occurred on multiple scales. While Ithaca House never successfully received a grant from the NEA, over the years they received on-and-off funding via the New York State Council of the Arts. After being denied funding one year, Hathaway complained in a letter,

I suppose that what NYSCA means is that we cannot show as well as some of the special interest groups can (feminists, gays, blacks, prisoners, etc.) that there is a big enough segment of the public out there that needs us. (26 Feb. 1982)

²⁹ This is quite a distinction from NEA funding practices today. Rather than giving money to D.I.Y. little magazines, it tends to prioritize “legitimate” small presses—those with 501c3 nonprofit status, offices, and paid employees (e.g., Copper Canyon, Graywolf Press, Milkweed Press, etc.).

Hathaway's language here is of course contradictory: he suggests that "feminists, gays, blacks, prisoners, etc." are niche "special interest groups," while simultaneously being of interest to a large "segment of the public." His comments, however, are indicative of his own philosophies towards funding and the value of art itself. As his writing on Ithaca House elsewhere suggests, Hathaway subscribed to the liberal notion of art and literature as representative of an inherent cultural good—one that was necessarily at odds with the forces of commercialism and "the main economy of mass distribution" ("A Catalogue" 1). In a mass letter sent to the Ithaca literary community requesting "patron-subscribers," Hathaway argues that Ithaca House was oriented towards an objective notion of aesthetic quality; it was "not encumbered by adherence to images responsive to other things. The aim was to create an excellent series of books of poetry without restrictions from a priori notions of what excellence is in a poem" ("Dear Friends"). Given the wild aesthetic variation across Ithaca House's catalog—a product of not just Hathaway's personal taste, but that of the many different graduate students who accepted manuscripts—the idea that it was curated towards some coherent idea of literary "excellence" seems absurd. It does, however, explain Hathaway's personal bitterness towards the supposedly preferential treatment for what he calls "special interest groups" (26 Feb. 1982)—precisely because it places art in dialog with historical, cultural, and economic concerns, thereby challenging his abstracted view of literary "excellence." Further, it suggests an incommensurability between "excellence" and work driven by identarian and politically radical imperatives—and the latter category, of course, was embodied through many operations of the small press revolution, with The Feminist Press, Third World Press, and Dudley Randall's Broadside Press serving as just a few obvious examples.

Hathaway's comments can undoubtedly be read as an instance of white male resentment,

but they also speak towards the sometimes competing imperatives of radical activism and avant-garde aesthetics, a tension embedded within so much of the small press activity of the '60s and '70s. And while this was a central problematic for the small press revolution in general, its stakes were particularly legible within the limited scale of Ithaca—a space pervaded by the visible influence of institutionalism (in the form of Cornell), and where a representative of art-as-activism (such as the Marxist-feminist Smedley's Bookshop) could be literally down the street from Ithaca House, an entity which often viewed literature to be at odds with political activism. Ithaca House, in any case, published work by members of so-called "special interest" groups, and ironically, it received positive attention for doing so on more than one occasion; for example, a poem from *Indian Mountain* by Joe Bruchac, a Native American writer, was reproduced in a state-funded textbook for a course on "Composition and Native Indian Literature" (Williamson). Additionally, poems from *Indian Mountain* were reproduced in *Come to Power: Eleven Contemporary American Indian Poets* (The Crossing Press, 1974), as well as in an anthology of Native American poetry published by Harper & Row and funded through a nonprofit initiative (Bruchac).

But Ithaca House's approach to publishing authors from historically marginalized groups differed significantly from many of its peers in the small press field. The Crossing Press, for example, specifically developed its reputation by publishing literary anthologies oriented around singular cultural identities. While The Crossing Press was considered the more "countercultural" literary operation in Ithaca, its practices more closely mirrored those of the mainstream publishing industry. Unlike Ithaca House's "patron-subscriber" model, which invariably involved losing money, The Crossing Press was an actual business that generated income—and by their own estimation, the Gills succeeded largely because of their ability to capitalize on

“minority-group writers” in anthology form, filling a niche that, Elaine Gill argued, mainstream publishers were not “tuned into” (Freedman). If Hathaway’s publishing philosophy was supposedly driven by conservative notions of objective aesthetic quality, The Crossing Press took the opposite approach, subordinating aesthetics to identarian representation. The editorial preface to *Come to Power*, for example, explicitly states that it has no aesthetic agenda whatsoever:

I do not consider this book to be “representative” of anything... These eleven poets were chosen not because I see any trends, leanings, developments, etc.; but because, as I have implied above, I think it’s time attention is paid to contemporary native people and their culture, and because, as a poet and editor, these are eleven poets whose work I like. (Lourie 9)

The editor, Dick Lourie (who is white), goes on to write that the anthology is characterized by a “great diversity in style... which will prevent scholars from drawing any general conclusions whatsoever” (9). (And yet, here I am, attempting to draw a conclusion!) Depending upon one’s degree of cynicism, we might approach anthologies such as *Come to Power* as significant contributions to social movements or, alternatively, as attempts on the part of white editors to monetize them. In either case, the split between Ithaca House and The Crossing Press—both of which ultimately form clumsy attempts on the part of white editors to grapple with questions of representation—discloses the specific challenges that poets from historically marginalized groups faced during the small press revolution.

Various texts in the Ithaca House catalog directly tackle the problem of representing

identity without being pigeonholed into commodifiable identarian categories. *In My Own Dark Way* (Ithaca House, 1977), written by the Black poet William J. Harris, is a particularly representative example. The previously published poems in this collection appeared in a set of periodicals that are evenly split between “general” literary publications (e.g., *The Antioch Review*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Chicago Review*, and so on) and publications that specifically anthologized Black poets (e.g., a text titled *Jam To-Day: Nine Black Poets*, and the Harper & Row anthology *The Poetry of Black America*). Within the poems, Harris situates “the poetry business” as a viable alternative to the career paths presented by bourgeois capitalism (e.g., the imperative to “be president of a bank / or the United States” [8]). But simultaneously, “the poetry business” demands the Black poet to perform identity in manners prescribed by white audiences and Black militant readers alike—either by assimilating to uplift narratives demanded by mainstream whiteness (as Harris writes sardonically in one poem, “I have Ph.D.’s in law and astrophysics / and am terrible civilized” [33]), or by serving as a legible stand-in for Black “authenticity”:

You say I must
have
more for-real black
images
from my authentic black past
in my poems (34)

Harris goes on to describe the “images” that might be expected of the Black poet:

“African warriors / in blue tennis shoes / throwing / militant bricks thru / counterrevolutionary store windows” (34). Compared to the “civilized” expectations of bourgeois white society, these lines read as a specific critique of white counterculturites and, perhaps, their tendency to fetishize Black militancy. Harris mocks the cliché poses of the militant radical—within the poem, throwing a brick through a window is not a symbol of structural critique, but rather, an affront to a “counterrevolutionary” window—and in the final lines, Harris weaves together pop culture references and histories of colonial violence. As a poet, he provides “no certified black images,”

Only Flash Gordon
singing a cowboy
song
to my little sister
who has Indian high cheekbones
& olive skin (34)

The cultural artifacts to which Harris refers invoke divergent histories of racist Americana: the East Asian -coded villain of Flash Gordon, “Ming the Merciless,” is frequently cited as a cultural representation of “yellow peril”; meanwhile, the reference to “cowboys and Indians” of course brings up associations with the often-racist and pro-colonialist attributes of the American Western. The final three lines raise crucial questions: is the speaker’s sister actually Native American? Or are “Indian” physical features merely part of an amalgamated otherness—a form of the racialized specter that arises within pop cultural artifacts such as the Western? In the context of a poem that challenges notions of racial “authenticity,” this ambiguity is perhaps the

point: Harris resists giving easy racial legibility to the reader.

Given Hathaway's apparent belief in a timeless, stable notion of literary excellence—or, as he writes, a poetry “not encumbered by adherence to images responsive to other things” (“Dear Friends”)—it is in one sense surprising that Ithaca House published a text such as Harris's, which can be read in part as a critique of the expectations of white small press poetry audiences. (Harris's text, after all, is *quite* responsive to so-called “other things”—that is, to the historical and cultural conditions of the literary field in which he operated.) We might guess that this was another byproduct of the fact that Hathaway, ultimately, did little in the way of editorial curation or oversight—perhaps one of Hathaway's students was responsible for acquiring this manuscript. But in another sense, if Hathaway was biased against politically radical and/or identitarian verse, Harris's poem responds to this precise tension: after all, it employs a first-person subjective standpoint while simultaneously resisting the tendency to be instrumentalized towards larger political imperatives.

In spite of Hathaway's reactionary sentiments, Ithaca House published numerous texts that similarly engaged the tension between art and activism.³⁰ While it would be a mistake to suggest that Ithaca House itself was in any way a politically radical literary operation, its catalog was interpellated through a collision between multiple cultural forces: youth counterculture and New Left political imperatives; the influence of academic institutions which, during the Cold War period, were undergoing significant cultural changes; and Hathaway himself, who to some extent embodied the old guard of literary academia. Rather than approaching Ithaca House as a project with a coherent aesthetic or ideological vision, I view it as an open conversation—one

³⁰ And while Hathaway may not have been responsible for all of these texts, he was at least responsible for some of them; Kenneth McClane's books, for example, which generally eschew personal narrative but simultaneously form an outspoken critique of systemic racism, were directly solicited by Hathaway (McClane, personal interview).

that emerged from a complex material context and a set of fervent, often competing ideas about the societal role of subcultural art.

Coda: Entering the Cat Show

In an essay on the poet A.R. Ammons—who, contemporaneously with Hathaway, was a crucial fixture within the Cornell creative writing program—Kenneth McClane writes:

Once a colleague in the English Department came up to him and asked him in a group of poets if he had read a new book on Wallace Stevens. [Ammons] looked at this self-satisfied critic who, I guess, thought he was making good conversation, and said, with a twinkle in his eye, but not without a touch of anger, “We do not get paid to read books. We get paid to write them. You read us.” (83)

While the university is arguably the most dominant cultural and economic force within the context of contemporary poetry, McClane’s anecdote is a reminder of the fact that the academic institutionalization of poetry has rarely been without friction. To be a poet in the university—particularly the contemporary neoliberal university, shaped by austerity and an intensified push towards professionalization—entails a continual defense of the validity of one’s own practices. (And Ammons’ statement that poets in the academy are “paid to write” speaks, ultimately, for a minority—the vast majority of poets, outside of the occasional grant, honorarium, or paltry MFA stipend, are never truly paid to write.) In spite of his advocacy for academic creative writing programs, Hathaway echoes the opposition that often exists between poets and the university:

If artists were Siamese cats they would resist masking themselves as Persians in order to gain entrance into cat shows. The artist in the university is usually in no mood to put on a disguise in order to enroll himself in a humanities department. (“The MFA and the University”)

Hathaway’s analogy is apt: Siamese cats, like poets, are notoriously outspoken and annoying; Persian cats, like literary scholars, are strange-looking and aloof. But to distill this tension to a dispositional difference between poets and scholars is perhaps misleading. Particularly after the academic institutionalization of creative writing, the university represents for the poet not just a localized form of hostility, but rather, a microcosm for an entire culture that demands that poetry legitimate itself to larger systems, whether capitalist or nonprofit. The university, in other words, is merely the visible tip of the iceberg—and particularly for the poets I discuss in this dissertation, who do not occupy metropolitan geographies with other viable sites of cultural community or consecration, forming a provisional working relationship with the university is often a necessity. As a poet and doctoral student at Cornell, many of the challenges that Ithaca House faced are familiar to me; similarly, I have been involved with poetic practices that have rarely received direct support from my institution, and I have often felt a pull between the sometimes-insular space of the academy and a broader small press subculture, in Ithaca and beyond. In some respects, Ithaca House is exceptional within the small press field—few presses published as prolifically while occupying the same triangulated relationship between academic affiliation, ‘60s and ‘70s counterculture, and regional orientation. On the other hand, it directly represents the challenges that avant-garde writers and artists have long faced, attempting to

cultivate liberatory space for creative freedom—yet intertwined, simultaneously, with the precise structures they seek to undermine. As McClane tells us, poetry is a negotiation:

I speak to readers, publishers, freaks, anyone who will listen...

THE DANGER IS:

TOO CLOSE TO THE FIRES

OF ARTISTRY AND THE MUSE

COOLS; TOO NEAR TO THE GRISTLE OF PROFUNDITY

AND THE INTELLECT...

STOPS SHORT

ULTIMATELY THE POEM

DOES NOT GET WRITTEN (*Out Beyond the Bay* 54)

CHAPTER TWO: THE MEDIATED AFTERLIVES OF FRANK STANFORD

“this is a map that no one can follow
it is a map I can’t even read”
- *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*
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During the Cold War, a variety of new media technologies and infrastructural projects radically reshaped lived experience within the rural U.S. South, providing new forms of transgeographic connectivity. Most significantly, Eisenhower’s Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 began to unroll the Interstate Highway System, heralding a newly mobile rural consumer-subject and exacerbating the decline of local, small-town economies (Vance and Scott 154). As the historian Aniko Bodroghkozy argues, the Interstate—as an organ of urban modernity—“threatened regional sensibilities, power structures, and sense making if they conflicted with those in the national market” (7). This tension between rural, Southern regionalism and a homogenizing “national culture,” Bodroghkozy suggests, was also facilitated by a different “technology of modernism”: network television, which, particularly throughout the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, formed newly mediated publics in otherwise isolated geographies (7). Concurrently, post-1945 art and literature attempted to grapple with these new technological developments. Postmodernism, as Fredric Jameson famously argued, was symptomatic of the “emergent priority” of media (68), and for Marshall McLuhan, technological media provided a utopian promise of transgeographic connectivity, “abolishing both space and time” (3). No post-1945 U.S. avant-garde poet, perhaps, stages this tension between mediatic networks and rural Southern geographies more directly than Frank Stanford. An Arkansas-based poet who produced a substantial corpus of surrealist poetry through the late 1960s and ‘70s, Stanford is best-known for *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You* (Lost Roads Press,

1977), a 542-page stream-of-consciousness epic poem depicting the journey of Francis Gildart—Stanford’s 12-year-old alter-ego, who was raised in a levee camp on the Mississippi Delta—to discover his familial and spiritual origins. Deeply embedded within the material conditions of the post-Fordist U.S. South, *Battlefield* primarily takes place in rural, Jim Crow–era Mississippi, and evinces a complex investment in the relationship between rural geographies and mediation.

Beyond this, Stanford's writing and its legacy were produced in relation to geographic, institutional, and infrastructurally mediated forms of sociality, both via Stanford's direct associations (e.g., his epistolary relationships, the journals to which he submitted, and his proximity to academic institutions), as well as through the subcultural poetic communities that have worked to preserve his legacy. Stanford committed suicide at the age of 29, and in the decades since his death, poets have organized public events around his work (numerous marathon readings of *Battlefield*, and multiple Frank Stanford festivals),³¹ circulated Xeroxed copies of his manuscripts, and queried presses to publish his out-of-print books. As one posthumous appraisal of his work argues, Stanford’s work and legacy have been subject to “a circumflex oral history. His books, now long out of print, are handed down like copies of *Howl* into the sacristy, cherished texts that have drawn a cult-like following” (Dewitt 95-96). In the 2020s, while perhaps not "canonical" in a strict sense, Stanford’s work has finally begun to receive the recognition that his friends and advocates have long believed it deserved. In recent years, notable venues such as *NPR*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Times* have written profiles of his work,³² and in 2015, Copper Canyon Press released *What About This*, his collected poems, a publication that generated the most attention that Stanford's work has received since his

³¹ The Frank Stanford Festival occurred in Fayetteville, Arkansas in 2008 and 2018, as well as an event in Buffalo, New York in 2018 to celebrate the release of the anthology *Constant Stranger: After Frank Stanford* (Foundlings Press, 2018). See Ryan, “Constant Stranger.”

³² See Stern, Deshpande, and Garner.

death. This was followed by a companion text, *Hidden Water: From the Frank Stanford Archives* (Third Man Books, 2015), an anthology of archival materials relating to Stanford, and *Constant Stranger: After Frank Stanford* (Foundlings Press, 2018), an anthology of critical and creative tributes to both Stanford and the communities that arose through his work, “to a curate a chorus of those who’ve sung with and of Stanford, in his presence, and in his absence” (*Constant Stranger* 12).

As a poet who lived in the rural South for nearly his entire life, the discourse surrounding him has often framed him as a kind of “lone genius,” disassociated from the material entities and literary communities that enabled his work.³³ And further, while Stanford’s cult following is an essential aspect of his work’s broader significance, his writing is often overdetermined by his persona, largely because any introduction to his work is usually accompanied by a retelling of his unusual, mythic-sounding biography, an abbreviated version of which goes as follows: Stanford was born in 1948, somewhere in Mississippi. He was adopted as an infant but didn't learn this fact until he was 20 (Wright, Preface to *Battlefield*). Stanford on one hand enjoyed an economically comfortable, white, middle-class lifestyle, attending private schools (Walton 8); on the other hand, his father was a levee engineer, and Stanford spent much of his youth living in levee camps with Black families on the Mississippi Delta (Preface to *Battlefield*). At some point in his youth, he began seriously writing poetry. He enrolled at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville in 1966 (Shugars 12); while would later drop out and begin working as a freelance land surveyor, he was quickly embraced by the town's literary scene, and his professors were so impressed with his writing as an undergraduate that he was allowed to enroll in graduate

³³ Additionally, Stanford has often been read through the lens of the "tortured male artist" trope—one particularly cringe-inducing article in *Men's Journal*, for example, refers to his suicide as his “last poem, written in blood” (Donahue).

workshops (Stokesbury x-xi). He developed a reputation for being intense and enigmatic, and reportedly once shot a hole in the ceiling to liven up a dull party (Christian). He wrote prolifically; he corresponded with literary luminaries such as Allen Ginsberg and Alan Dugan; and he began an extramarital affair with the poet C.D. Wright, and allegedly, the country singer Lucinda Williams (Dewitt 95).³⁴ With Wright, he co-founded Lost Roads Press, a small press that sought to "reclaim the landscape of American poetry" (Preface to *Battlefield*). In 1978, just short of his thirtieth birthday, Stanford shot himself three times in the chest (Stokesbury xi). At the time, C.D. Wright, as well as Stanford's wife—the painter Ginny Crouch Stanford—were both in his home (Thomas).

Against the tendency to read Stanford through an individualistic, mythologized lens, this chapter foregrounds his work's relation to geography, infrastructure, and academic institutions. Further, I show that his work went on to fuel a communal ethos, serving as a model of a specifically rural Southern experimental poetics—one that, rather than attempting to legitimate itself in relation to metropolitan avant-gardes, derived a form of provisional autonomy based upon its own local particulars. His work, as well as the dynamic communal practices that arose in its wake, echo Sophie Seita's argument that the avant-garde "emerges from material objects... and publishing contexts" (2). The avant-garde of Frank Stanford and his following was interpellated through the material context of rural geographies—spaces often separated from the unspoken entities that have historically facilitated avant-garde practices in metropolitan locales. Further, the legacies that Stanford's work animated—both its subcultural following, and the eventual publication of his collected poems—exemplify the relationship between avant-garde practices, academic institutions, and processes of consecration in a contemporary context.

³⁴ Lucinda Williams' 1985 song "Pineola" is an elegy for Stanford: "We drove on out to the country / His friends all stood around / Subiaco Cemetery / Is where we lay him down."

Levee Community and Stargazing Poetics

Midway through *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*, Frank Stanford places the reader in a space that is unmappable; not within a “dark wood,” as in the beginning of Dante’s epic, but in a locale that similarly occupies an intermediary, marginal state: on a levee, gazing at the screen of a nearby rural drive-in theater through a telescope. Francis Gildart and three of his companions, we learn, ended up there after attempting to attend an “all night picture show marathon” (7,379) at the drive-in, the night before Easter Sunday. Because the showing culminates in a church service, however, Francis’s friends Charlie B. and Tang, who are Black, are not permitted to enter. In frustration, the four friends drive up to the nearby levee to loiter. The group then has the idea of watching the film from afar through Francis’s telescope, which he brought along, but the lens is cracked; caught by inspiration, Charlie B. drunkenly breaks into a nearby Army Corps of Engineers office, raiding a recent shipment and stealing a replacement lens. The group then returns to the levee, taking turns viewing the movie screen through the telescope:

we sat up there on the levee like four generals looking at a battle

Charlie B. said these here is what I call box seats hey Jimmy

these is the white man’s bench alright Tang said

the two negroes and the white one Jimmy and myself sat in the balcony

of the delta

we were like four noblemen in the loges at the opera (7,995-8,000)

This passage, which extends for several hundred lines, explicitly gestures towards the formative racial, geographic, and mediatic tensions that drive the rural poetics of *Battlefield*. Though written in the 1970s, the poem primarily takes place during Stanford's childhood on the Mississippi Delta during the late '50s and '60s. While the emergent Cold War-era mediating technologies of this period promised new forms of transgeographic access for rural Southerners, their advent chronologically overlapped, of course, with the Jim Crow laws, inscribing these mediated publics in specifically racialized terms. The drive-in in *Battlefield*, then, serves as a site of sociality that coalesces around the consumption of media, but does so in a racially exclusionary way. In response, Gildart and his friends take to the levee and form, I will argue, a model of a provisional, regional community that, first, derives agency from its marginal status, and second, reflects the increasingly networked nature of rural Mississippi, juxtaposing this locality with a broader geographic scale.

The image of the levee itself serves an important function in *Battlefield* and within Stanford's larger oeuvre. Most obviously, it signals the regional specificity of the Mississippi Delta, while also invoking the levee's status as a historic symbol of racialized violence. Largely in retaliation towards Reconstruction efforts, blocs of cotton planters on the Mississippi Delta fought to retain economic and racial hegemony via the plantation economy after the Civil War (Woods 76). In 1879, they lobbied Congress to form the Mississippi River Commission, which funded the large-scale construction of levees via the Army Corps of Engineers; this effort streamlined the river as a trade route, and further, enabled agricultural access to the fertile land on the Delta. While planters had attempted at partial levee construction for decades, this large-scale effort was a massive infrastructural project—one which relied upon the labor of convicts, freed slaves, and poor Irish American populations (Woods 76-81). As its frequent appearance

within Delta blues songs suggests, these labor conditions were dangerous, and the potential collapse of the levee posed a constant threat. In the above scene, however, Stanford inverts this violent history, conjuring the levee, first, as a space of racial equality—where Tang and Charlie B. are able to sit on the “white man’s bench”—but also, as a space that, despite its literally marginal status, allows for a form of dignified agency; a space where Gildart and his friends simultaneously become “generals,” “noblemen,” and opera attendees. Further, excluded from the conventional positionality of the audience, the peripheral status of Gildart and his companions privileges them to a more transgressive form of visual experience. The group, Stanford goes on to tell us, watches several films, “but after a while our eyes started aching” (8,017). The movie screen—the original reason they decided to use the telescope—becomes less interesting, and they instead turn the telescope on the drive-in audience itself, witnessing fights and, in one lengthy section, a woman masturbating alone in her car:

her eyes were closed now

and her arm looked like it was trying to find something lost somewhere

it was like she was blind and feeling around for something

it was a matter of life or death

Charlie B. screamed loud as a man got stabbed

she opened her eyes and her mouth at the same time like she was going under

water

and she knew it and she aimed to get one last breath

before she drowned

and that is when the figure appeared on the screen

...

I saw the girl bring both hands to her eyes I saw the mute scream

I was use to reading the lips by then (8,166-84)³⁵

In one sense, this passage fairly literally depicts the male gaze—a group of men, eliding their own subject positions, reduce a woman to an objectified spectacle. But importantly, this moment also functions as the climax of the drive-in scene, in both a sexual and narrative sense—an ecstatic moment in which established forms of ontological and epistemological stability collapse. Narrative primacy disappears—in a kind of literalized *jouissance*, a fictional, onscreen death in *Dracula* (the film playing in this moment) collides with the real-life orgasm that the men witness—and further, Stanford frames the erotic as precisely a failing of both language (a “mute scream”) and visibility (“hands to her eyes”). Importantly, this ecstatic experience occurs while the group occupies a state construction (the levee) and wields a tool of the state (the lens). There is no “outside” of the all-reaching forces of capitalism, the state, and the way both territorialize the state’s subjects. This scene, however, signifies a means through which state infrastructures might be instrumentalized as provisional sites for both community and visionary experience.

Importantly, Stanford frames the levee as a site that challenges both bourgeois legibility and the discourses of property. As a material infrastructure, it is illegible in both a tangible and more broadly cultural sense—to the tourist driving through the Delta, the levee is mostly invisible from the road and is more or less inaccessible by foot; further, as John Durham Peters writes, infrastructure is often characterized by its concealment and forgettability—its placement in “the background” (35). But as Katherine McKittrick argues, spatial illegibility can also be

³⁵ *Battlefield* contains numerous typos and misspellings, which I retain in my direct quotes from the work.

recalibrated into a form of agency—particularly in the context of a capitalist, colonial spatial logic in which ownership and dominance are contingent upon *knowability*. In one representative example of this form of illegible agency, McKittrick cites the hiding space described in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the attic garret where the pseudonymous Linda Brent spent seven years before escaping. The attic, like the levee, is imbricated with capitalist geographies (in Brent’s case, private property); however, McKittrick affirms, it manifests a tenuous form of safety rooted in its precise illegibility—in the narrative, Brent is “unseen while being able to see within and across the planation—[she] quietly critiques and undoes traditional geographies” (43).

To occupy the invisible geography of the levee, then—a historically marginal space—is to call into question normative spatial logic altogether. In addition to challenging the forces of colonial legibility, Stanford stages a contested relationship between rural locality and globalized networks, and in doing so, unsettles the geographic ideations of centers and peripheries. The beginning of *Battlefield*, for example, opens with a passage that—within the very first five lines of the poem—enacts the characteristic move of triangulating the subject in relation to both the local and the global:

tonight the gars on the trees are swords in the hands of knights
the stars are like twenty-seven dancing russians and the wind
is I am waving goodbye to the casket of my first mammy
well that black cadillac drove right up to your front door
and the chauffeur was death (1-5)

The opening line refers to gar, a variety of prehistoric-looking fish that appear frequently in Stanford's poems, and that are common in the Mississippi River. Gar had great significance to the Creek and Chickasaw tribes of the Mississippi River region; perhaps largely for this reason, the historian Mark Spitzer argues, gar grew to be hated by European colonizers for their "savage... pagan wildness" (119) and attempts at depopulating these fish were concurrent with the Trail of Tears. In the first line, Stanford pivots from this image, with its connotations of both local cultural importance and genocidal, colonial violence, to an image with more familiarly mythic connotations, medieval knights; and then, punning on "knights," shifts to the night sky in the following line, and to an image that perhaps connotes Russian ballet. In the following three lines, Stanford juxtaposes a racist Southern archetype associated with Confederate nostalgia (the "mammy") with an embodied figure of Death, invoking Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for death"—and perhaps, given that Stanford had an affinity for European art-house cinema, the personified Death of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*.

The above references share the commonality of having mythic, allusive connotations, but arise from divergent geographies and cultural traditions. They embody Stanford's stargazing poetics—his mediation of the global, the foreign, and the "out-there," and the superimposition of these entities onto a local geography. Within the realm of *Battlefield*, gazing at the stars yields knowledge, but stars themselves can take many forms. Shortly after the above passage, Stanford writes, "I got a zero on the test a big F with a red circle around it the question was / what do you know about current events" (213-214). From there, he gives the reader an epistemological manifesto, using a formal motif to which the text often returns—the anaphoric riffing of phrases beginning with "I know," followed by a series of "facts" that range from personal experience, to overheard anecdotes, to knowledge of canonical literature, and especially, to Classical

Hollywood cinema—a punning on *stars*:

I know Elvis Presley lives up the street ten houses

I know my sister's godmother is Louise Fazenda

I know mother stayed in Hollywood with her and Hal Wallis a long time ago

I know she secretly is an actress

I know she went to the Rose Bowl with Clark Cable and Carole Lombard

...

I know morocco mati hari lives of bengal lancer sgt york the mark of zorro

the gaucho we saw it in a tent

I know streetcars of desire and all the Tarzan

moby dick gunga din midsummer's night dream was like me

I know I have read all those mens' books that we had

I am a fugitive from a chain gang the crazy piano player red slippers

...

the sleep in the tree daddy makes us live like the crew in a shack or a tent

I know about the history and culture of Europe and America

I know how the carpetbaggers and the scaliwags brought the colored people to town

head down over a horse

I know the rich are the only ones that had any good old days (215-241)

In the fashion of the earlier passage, moment here allude to the local—to the South and its historic colonial violences, and to concrete historical facts of Stanford's own life. Others,

however, appear to emerge from a different reality altogether, particularly as the anaphoric run goes on to descend into surrealist fantasy: “I know the houses with the furniture like ghosts / I know the octopus in my dreams the messages of light I receive from the stars” (288-289).

Untangling the real from the mythic in this passage is challenging, largely because the formal characteristics of the passage discourage us from doing so—the anaphora enacts a parallelism between distinct statements, suggesting that all occupy the same plane of significance. He creates, in effect, a space where ontological primacy does not exist—where the consumed fictions of literary and cinematic works are indistinguishable from lived experience. What is striking, further, is Stanford’s materially specific depiction of mediatic objects: Melville and Shakespeare are significant not because of their canonical importance, but rather, because they were “all those men’s books *that we had*” (italics mine); films such as *Mata Hari* and *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* are not significant as documents of the golden age of Hollywood cinema, but because they were consumed in a levee tent. Stanford, by virtue of his race, class, and upbringing, *did* have access to normative storehouses of canonical knowledge—he attended, for example, a year of university, as well as a private Jesuit academy in Arkansas, privileges that would have been out of the question for most of his childhood companions on the Mississippi Delta. In this passage, however, he indexes textual objects to their point of access in rural Mississippi; in doing so, he shows that geography mediates epistemology—in the rural South, compared to metropolitan centers of mass cultural production, cultural access is often not a guarantee. And beyond this, he foregrounds a fundamental capacity of mediatic forms: their ability to serve as intermediaries between divergent geographies and bodies of experience. In *Battlefield*, the telescope—the mechanism that drives stargazing—is not a neutral entity. Rather, its lens is either cracked, or state-owned and stolen. Unlike, for example, the transcendent gaze

of the Emersonian “transparent eyeball,” Stanford’s mediation is directly imbricated with the webs of capitalism and the state—it enacts, to use Raymond Williams’ language, a “process in which the form of the mediation alters the things mediated, or by its nature indicates their nature” (*Keywords* 153).

As it documents an increasingly mediated rural Mississippi, *Battlefield* is rife with vast fluctuations in regional scale. In this respect, it might be considered within a lineage of modernist writing that tackles the supposed anachronisms between local specificity and a cosmopolitan, global consciousness. Faulkner, for example, to whom Stanford frequently likened himself, has often been framed in relation to this tension, particularly with regards to literary form—between, as David A. Davis writes, “literary experimentation and lagging social provincialism” (88). In a famous, possibly fabricated quote, Faulkner alludes to this question of scale explicitly: “to understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi.”³⁶ Within Stanford’s work, it is not difficult to view this triangulation—between the self, the regional, and the global—as evocative of an economic, technological context in which globalization appeared to threaten the regional specificity of the South. It maps directly onto the drive-in scene, for example, where Gildart faces both the local drive-in public, and the technology of the film itself, linked to a global network of capital via its production and distribution. Within 20th century Southern literary canons—most obviously, within the writing of the *Fugitives* and *Southern Agrarians*—critiques of industrialization frequently implicate modern technologies and the mediation of Southern regional culture. In his essay in *I’ll Take My Stand*, for example, John Crowe Ransom gestures towards the perceived “ambiguous dignity” and

³⁶ This quote is frequently attributed to Faulkner, and is reprinted relentlessly upon tourist t-shirts in Oxford, Mississippi. However, William Griffith, the curator of Rowan Oak (Faulkner’s former home) believes it to be entirely fabricated (“William Faulkner’s Home”).

“glamor” of Southern culture (1-2), and moreover, the “Lost Cause”—likely echoing popular commodifications of Southern identity such as *Birth of a Nation*—and goes on to suggest that the agrarian economy of the South preserves the distinctly European qualities of U.S. culture. Importantly, these qualities are characterized by isolation from transregional networks of both commerce and culture—as rooted, “self-sufficient, backward-looking, intensely provincial communities,” distinct from the contemporary “mobile American life... in a condition of eternal flux” (5).

Ransom, of course, overlooks the fact that the economy and cultures of the antebellum South were never “self-sufficient,” nor “isolated”—they were, rather, predicated upon the dehumanizing economy of the transcontinental Atlantic Slave Trade. Stanford’s work, on the other hand, does not enact these kinds of ideological separations, nor does it place technology at odds with the fantasy of a provincial, isolated South. On the contrary, technology—taking the form of film, a telescope, or a levee—serves as the connective hinge of Stanford’s poetic mechanism that shifts between the local and the global. Technology, in his work, enacts *mediation*, in the sense that it serves as a dynamic intermediary between individual (rural, otherwise isolated) subjects and broader systems—entailing, to use Raymond Williams’ language, an “active process... an act of intercession” (*Marxism and Literature* 97). To suggest, as I am suggesting here, that technology and infrastructure mediate rurality, is to push against capitalism’s broader imperative to disassociate entities from their material origins. Moreover, in a rural context, foregrounding this mediation shows that the “rural” and the “urban” are not disparate, monolithic categories, but rather, are enmeshed and co-constitutive. To foreground rural media and rural infrastructure *as media* is to view the relationship between rural geographies and the urban metropolis dialectically.

Race and “Outsider” Epistemologies

“I would rather have been Muhammad Ali than T.S. Eliot”
- Frank Stanford, *What About This* 727

Given how long it took for *Battlefield* to garner the attention of institutional tastemakers, the critical discourse surrounding the text is relatively new. In the coming years, a frequent point of interest will surely be the text’s complex engagement with race and racialization—both within the context of the Civil Rights Movement and the Jim Crow South, which the text consistently evokes, and beyond it. It would be an understatement, perhaps, to call *Battlefield* a racially troubled text: it rivals *Absalom, Absalom!* in its gratuitous use of racial slurs; it frequently shifts into Black English—sometimes in the context of narrative dialog, and sometimes not; and while it vocally takes an anti-racist stance, often depicting scenes of violent retribution against white supremacists, it frequently conjures whiteness into an essential monolith from which Stanford often appears to be exempt. But as with Faulkner’s work, to reject it wholesale for these qualities alone would risk eliding the text’s complicated, occasionally brilliant commentary on race relations in the rural U.S. South. In particular, *Battlefield* reveals media access to be a process contingent not only upon geography, but also upon racialization; in doing so, we might read the text as a critique of sweeping narratives of the *modern*. If, as numerous scholars have argued,³⁷ modern consciousness and aesthetics are in part shaped by experiences of media and mediation, the relationship between individual subjects and media is not a neutral one. Rather, myriad characteristics—chiefly in *Battlefield*, race and geography—influence and delimit the consumption of media, as the scene at the segregated drive-in shows. Race and geography,

³⁷ See, for example, Fredric Jameson’s argument that postmodernism is shaped by the “emergent priority” (68) of *media* as the dominant terminology for conceptualizing the relationship between communication and culture.

further, shape what *seeing* itself looks like:

you ought to hear the folks making fools out themselves
honking their horns and telling
poking their head out and laughing
just listen to them
there I am there I am they'll say...
it's sickening
I believe if a hick was to walk in front of a huge mirror in a museum.
all he'd see was hisself
they make these so-called racial pictures that cause a lot of controversy
these dumb rednecks the fucking idiots don't even know what they're about
they just go looking for their face on the screen (7426-7436)

In this passage, which occurs shortly before the beginning of the drive-in scene, Stanford refers to production companies filming on-location in “right to work” states in the rural South, a documented phenomenon that some film scholars have termed “Hixploitation cinema.”³⁸ The filmmakers would rely upon local residents as “actors,” and would then screen the films locally. As Stanford points out, because “they can get free acting and won’t have to build no props” (7420), the films were economically beneficial, and people would attend showings to witness themselves onscreen. As Stanford suggests above, this desire, on the part of the white film attendees, is driven by narcissism. For Black viewers, however, the ritual takes a different form:

³⁸ See David Church, *Grindhouse Nostalgia*, pp. 29-72.

colored people like to go see themselves too
why not they're just like everybody else
they carry on too when they see themselves but it's a different from white people
course there's always some jive cat yelling
but the nodding and humming like they do like they was in church
well it's different as if they was listening to what the pitchu is meaning
as if they was looking for real at what the people were doing
like they identify with the character of course they bound to do that sometimes
cause it is them
I want you to know they ain't paying no quarter just to see theirself
I know that (7443-7453)

In these lines, Stanford inverts the viewing of oneself into a spiritual experience—"like they was in church"—rather than a narcissistic one; in this way, it resonates similarly with the moment in which he describes the levee as the "loges of the opera." And as with the levee scene, the dignity ascribed within this passage runs counter to initial purpose of the film altogether. It is, after all, *meant* to be exploitative—a "sure fire money [maker]" (7421), as Stanford writes—and if Black viewers are not "paying no quarter just to see theirself," they are perhaps subverting the intended expectation of the Hixploitation filmmakers. If, as Stanford suggests, the white audience viewing itself is akin to looking into a "huge mirror," the Black audience consumes the film within a dialectic between disassociation and identification. Stanford distances the viewers from their onscreen depictions by referring to them abstractly—as "the people"—while

simultaneously affirming that they *are* those people onscreen. “[What] the pitchu is meaning,” Stanford appears to suggest, perhaps has something to do with the communicative gap between lived experience and the produced, commodified version of that experience; it has, in other words, something to do with mediation. Within the final two lines of the above passage, Stanford enacts two uncharacteristic formal moves. First, he relies upon a second-person address—“I want *you* to know”—presumably to a white readership, establishing himself as a kind of interlocutor for the Black film viewership he describes. Second, the above passage ends with an unusually short line that functions, on one hand, as an affirmation of his previous statement; additionally, however, it abruptly returns to a focus on the narrator’s own subjective, epistemological experience: “*I* know that.” In these two lines, Stanford alludes to the complex relationship between race and mediation in the filmic scene he describes, but they also might be read as an evocation of the racial tensions within the broader project of *Battlefield* itself—a triadic relationship between the white author (“I”), the Black community he speaks for, but is distanced from, by virtue of his apparent whiteness (“they”), and the text’s readership (“you”).

Moments like this, in which Blackness is associated with a proximity to mediation—and relatedly, ecstatic experience, as the drive-in scene shows us—are suggestive of the broader way in which Stanford theorizes race. In the Jim Crow South, Blackness functions as the antithesis of white bourgeois life, a milieu towards which Stanford clearly feels disdain. In this sense, his identification resonates with a form of appropriating Blackness that is typical within histories of white avant-gardes and countercultural formations—from the “primitivism” of abstract expressionist painters, to the racially coded posturing of the “slumming,” beatnik hipster. Beyond this, however, is a perhaps a kind of projection particular to Stanford’s own experiences and genealogy. *Battlefield*, as some critics have suggested, might be read as a response to

Stanford's adoptee status—his literal lack of knowledge about his own racial makeup, and, more metaphysically, “his perpetual quest for identifying origins” (ii), as Walton puts it. Often, Stanford articulates his alienation from his own familial lineage in relation to Blackness. In one scene, for example, he conjures a narrative of Gildart running away from his orphanage; this leads into a lyric riff in which Stanford writes, “when they ask me who was I tell them a stray” (6680), and he goes on to describes his fictional twin brother—a figure who recurs throughout the text. In the final pages, during a passage in which Stanford describes Gildart in the third person, he describes his brother in terms of Blackness, oblivion, and death: “this is the sleep of the Lord of the dream / of oblivion his brother knows the twin the Negro who he calls his death” (14,613-614). In another orphanage scene, one that directly precedes a discussion of whiteness, Gildart describes himself as a “seafarer / without a sea I said I am a wanderer with a place I want to abide in / ... / an iceberg in a great black sea where there was / never light only the stars to keep us warm” (9007-9013).

Stanford's articulation of his own “outsider” status, however racially fraught, foregrounds the contingency of mediation—the way in which its functions are shaped by complex social and material relations. Outsider “provincialism,” Stanford's work suggests, is correlated with an uneven relation to media access—but rather than serving as a deficiency, this uneven access translates into a radical, outsider form of epistemology, a tendency which arises in the drive-in sequence, and, perhaps even more explicitly, in the figure of Gildart's friend Sylvester, an older Black man, who, during the first third of the text, is falsely accused of raping a white woman—a situation that is worsened by a local journalist who writes a story with falsified information, leading to Sylvester's eventual lynching. The lynching itself serves as a formative moment for Gildart, and after his death, Sylvester continually appears in the form of a character named The

Black Angel. Sylvester, importantly, is semi-literate, and claims that his body of knowledge derives from three sources—“motherwit the Bible and the Memphis newspaper” (3640)—a line that highlights the primary forms of knowledge accessible to Sylvester, a poor Black man in rural Mississippi: those embedded within intuition, personal experience, and ritual (“motherwit” and “the Bible”); and the forms of media access shaped by his proximity to the nearest metropolitan center (“the Memphis newspaper”). Initially, Sylvester’s supposed ignorance yields derision from the comparatively worldly and well-read Gildart, particularly in a long passage which depicts a misunderstanding between the two. I quote it here at length:

I might say to [Sylvester] what you reading
he say I’m reading bout these here border wars
we’d be in the shade
outside the liquor store hey Sylvester
whose war is it this time
mexicans shooting it out again he said
which mexicans I said
them ones way on down there got another border war he said
any our business I said
maybe it is and maybe it ain’t he said
got any more wars this week any on them [*sic*] ended yet I said
got a whole slew of them got them all over he said
who is winning I said
reckon the gorillas is he said

must not be dropping any bombs I said
yea they dropping lots of bumbs he said
must not be on target I said
them fly boys is hitting the bull's eye he said
then them bombs ought to be killing them guerillas I said
what you talking bout boy he said
you ain't making no sense I said
...
I don't know what the fuck you're talking bout I said
I'm deep as a well he said
you're deep alright about as deep as a pile of shit I said
you ain't got no call to talk to me like that
you don't even know what you are saying I said
I'm saying won't no bumb kill a gorilla he said
then you don't know nothing about the Korean War or the Second World War
...
you must have a brain like a dill pickle Sylvester I said
here you is one of my best and favorite blood brothers and you is crazy
nah its yo book learning done gone bad he said (3554-3648)

The homophonic misunderstanding during this scene, “gorilla” against “guerrilla,” continues for hundreds of lines; while it is of course humorous, it also gestures towards the way in which race differentiates Gildart’s relationship to experience and bodies of knowledge from

that of Sylvester. Sylvester's misapprehension, most obviously, stems from his own less-than-perfect literacy—of course a product of his race, his class, and the geographic region in which he lives. Beyond this, however, the distinction between “gorilla” and “guerilla” is specifically racialized. In one moment, Sylvester claims, “ain't but one thing kill a gorilla and that's a white woman” (3622)—a statement which alludes to the racist animalistic identification of Black men and also foreshadows the circumstances of Sylvester's eventual death. Further, it likely also alludes to *King Kong*, a film whose racial politics are notoriously fraught, depicting—depending on how one interprets it—a metaphorical “large-scale lynching” (Frazier 186), or, more abstractly, the incommensurability of industrial modernity with the “primitive.” (And it gestures, again, to the way in which a medium like cinema shapes bodies of knowledge.) Moreover, Gildart argues, “a gorilla is an animal that comes from one certain place/and a guerrilla is a man that can be anywhere” (3935-3936). Within this statement, Stanford frames the guerilla/gorilla binary in a manner which invokes the tension of geographic scale I refer to in the previous section, and further, gestures towards the relationship between race, region, and mobility; while Sylvester's poverty and Blackness make his experiences more likely to be coded as “regional,” Gildart experiences more mobility (in a literal sense), as well as the privilege of wielding a white, “universal” form of knowledge. While this passage begins by merely foregrounding difference, and the failure of language to properly convey meaning, Stanford eventually shapes it into a critique of white, bourgeois epistemology:

I guess you is right Sylvester the world is a piano and we ain't got a finger on
those chickenwire words ain't gone hold this hound in he said
I feel like a spotlighted deer and the world is a pickup full of toothless hunters

got a nice ring to it he said (100)

If the gorilla/guerrilla schism signals a semiotic failure, it also translates into a challenge of epistemic primacy—which is, of course, a crucial facet of Stanford’s poetics. “Outsider” forms of knowledge—those which do not map smoothly onto white, bourgeois experience—are directly interwoven with Stanford’s surrealist ethos, and his unwillingness to assign ontological or epistemic stability to his depictions of rural Southern life. In the following scene, this tendency goes a step further; Sylvester nails Gildart inside a coffin, yielding a long, fugue-like lyric passage in which death and alienation are associated with poetics itself:

I staggered like a stabbed man with an empty bottle in his hand at his breast
there were enough bloody feathers for a thousand poets
to sign their names to make their ingenious inscriptions to carve
their epitaphs into my soil
...
in the dead water where my tongue is held captive
if it is to be silent it will be silent in my mouth
where darkness and the scent of roses come out like smoke (4100-4119)

I close this section by analyzing the final extended narrative sequence in *Battlefield*—a passage which, I argue, serves as the apotheosis of Stanford’s broader critique of urban-centric narratives of U.S. modernity. In the final 5,000 lines of the poem, Gildart inadvertently ends up on a bus full of Freedom Riders, and the text slips in and out of a temporally coherent reality,

often devolving into anaphoric, Whitmanesque lyric runs. If, as I argue earlier, the highway plays a crucial mediating role within rural spaces, that is especially the case within this passage, which stages a historically, geographically rooted event—the Freedom Ride itself—juxtaposed against the road as a vehicle for encountering entities that seem foreign, othered, and outside of a temporally or geographically coherent frame. The most obvious instance of this latter category is Stanford’s character Vico, who becomes something of a spiritual guide for Gildart in the final phase of *Battlefield*. Like Gildart, Vico is a participant in the Freedom Ride, and the two become friends after Vico buys him a meal (9,599). Much of what follows is an extended relaying of Vico’s biography. He shares his name with the 18th century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, whose historiographic critique influenced myriad thinkers essential to the development of “modern” consciousness—Karl Marx, numerous counter-Enlightenment figures, and James Joyce, to name a few.

Vico is significant to Stanford’s own theorizations of space and time, but on the surface, the version of Vico in *Battlefield* shares few biographic similarities with his historical namesake. Stanford’s Vico, rather, serves as an archetype of the kind of “outsider” status that drives *Battlefield*: Vico is biracial, of both Greek and African descent (9,586-87); he was born in Italy (9,481-82), orphaned and deaf; he grew up in a monastery (10,523); he robbed a bank (9,532) and fought in a war, during which he “murdered more priests and professors than soldiers” (11,105); and he was a renowned castrato, until being struck in the throat with a piece of shrapnel (9,576). During their roughly 1,500-line interaction, Gildart interacts with Vico exclusively in sign language—a fact which initially brings tears to Vico’s eyes (9,460-9,466). While the Vico within *Battlefield* is a fictional character, Stanford’s allusions to Giambattista Vico are unmistakable. Within his most influential work, *Scienza Nuova* [*The New Science*],

Vico argues that history is “reconstructive” (Greenham 122), made through a process of creating meaning from prior experience. In Vico’s formulation, history is not absolute, but rather, relative.³⁹

Within the context of *Battlefield*—a work shaped by vast alternations in geographic and temporal scale, and that explores, in part, how modernity maps unevenly onto rural Mississippi—the implications of a relativist history and, accordingly, a relativist theory of geography, are significant. For numerous critics of the modern, Viconian history has presented a way of reconceptualizing static relationships to place, time, and language. Edward Said, for example, relied upon Vico in his critique of the ideological formation of the Orient, writing that “men make their own history... and extend it to geography” (5). Raymond Williams, further, cited Vico as an antecedent for his analysis of language’s constitutive relationship to human culture; Vico, he argued, showed that “we can understand society because we have made it... [and] the activity of language is central in this process” (*Marxism and Literature* 23). *Battlefield* envisions a geography in which community and sociality are *made*, in a Viconian fashion, rather than being merely indexed in relation to unspoken, hierarchical centers. Towards the end of the text, Stanford presents a model of what a regional, provisional community might look like:

you got to have a good

reach even if you can’t always get a hold you grab hold the rough lumber

³⁹ Vico’s vision of history directly refuted many of the conceptual underpinnings of Enlightenment thought. Against, for example, the ideals of Cartesian rationalism—the vision of natural science as a means for deducing certainty—Vico rooted his theory within the Classical supposition that meaning is developed through rhetoric. Summarizing Aristotle, for example, Vico writes, “the human mind does not understand anything of which it has had no previous impression” (110). His version of history, then, is cyclical; humans develop meaning through a dialectical structure he terms *corso* and *recorso*—from imagination and myth to language; from *mythos* to *logos*.

what you see and then you build a big church meeting place
how you think Yeats done it he listened he said the visible
world is no longer a reality and the unseen world is no longer a dream (14,996-
15,000)

Within a space where connectivity cannot be taken for granted; a space historically rendered invisible by capitalist, colonial violence; a space deemed backwards, abject, out-of-time, filled with hicks—how do you make community? You “grab hold the rough lumber,” the regionally specific resources at your immediate disposal, and you use them to form innovative sites of sociality. You work within systems of power, turning the instruments of these systems against their intended uses: a levee becomes a safe haven; a telescope becomes a tool for both vision and visionary experience; a church, a space designed for an institutionalized form of ritual becomes, more abstractly, a “big church meeting place.” In the following section, I discuss the way in which Stanford’s work would go on to yield a provisional, subcultural following that, in many ways, mirrors this precise version of community that Stanford theorizes.

The Afterlives of Frank Stanford

The experience of viewing Stanford’s archival materials, housed in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, is a strange one. A reading room, under video surveillance, at an elite northeastern university—a university that, like many elite universities, feels remarkably alienated from its own geographic locale—is perhaps an unlikely home for a Southern poet who, during his lifetime, found a readership in a grassroots, regionally specific

community. On the other hand, it speaks precisely to the relationship that exists between rural poetry communities, infrastructure, and institutions: one of remediation and geographic dislocation. Like many rural, "outsider" poetry communities, Stanford's was contingent upon infrastructural access and the resources associated with moneyed institutions. (And this provisional relationship to institutions, Seita argues, has long been characteristic of avant-gardes more broadly, contrary to fantasies of "opposition" and total autonomy [9]). In this section, I narrate a material history of the entities that enabled Stanford's work during his own life, and consider, further, the two divergent initiatives that led to its eventual consecration: on one hand, a dedicated subculture that circulated his work privately, instrumentalizing it as a jumping-off point for new forms of literary community; and on the other, an effort, via more institutionally recognized avenues, towards ensuring the legacy of Stanford's oeuvre.

During Stanford's life, the academy served as a crucial, provisional infrastructure for his access to a broader poetic community. While he never completed his degree, the University of Arkansas functioned as an important social node at which Stanford met his first poetry contacts. Arkansas's M.F.A. program in Creative Writing, founded in 1966, is one of the oldest in the country, and provided Stanford access to a poetry community that extended beyond his immediate locale. Today, Fayetteville is fairly accessible for travel, largely because of its proximity to the airport in Bentonville, Arkansas, the founding place of Walmart. In the 1960s and '70s, however, when Walmart was still primarily a regional chain, Fayetteville was infrastructurally isolated, relative to other major Southern universities. It was, nonetheless, just over three hours from both Oklahoma City and Kansas City, and the English department was able to bring well-known poets to campus.

First, Allen Ginsberg visited the University in 1968, meeting Stanford when he was

twenty years old; Ginsberg described Stanford's poems as "electric" (qtd. in Walton 2). Stanford, along with other poets in Fayetteville, traveled briefly around Arkansas with Ginsberg during the time that he was writing his book *These States (Hidden Water 187)*, and Stanford continued to pursue a brief correspondence with him. Two years later, the poet Alan Dugan visited campus (Walton 11); he and Stanford corresponded for years, and Dugan became his friend and professional mentor, reading and responding to drafts of his work. Dugan, a remarkably well-connected poet—a Guggenheim fellow; a faculty member at the Providence Fine Arts Work Center; and the recipient of a Pulitzer, a National Book Award, and the Yale Younger Poets Prize—encouraged him to submit *Battlefield* to the Academy of American Poets' Walt Whitman Award. When the judges refused to consider the manuscript, citing its excessive length, Dugan wrote to the Academy on his behalf, telling them they had made a "mistake," and that, like Whitman, Stanford "should be encouraged in his amplitude" (qtd. in Walton 78).

While these professional connections played a formative role in the emergent legibility of Stanford's work during his lifetime, perhaps the most important agent in his posthumous consecration was C.D. Wright. Months before his death, Stanford had applied for a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts to support *Lost Roads* (one of the small presses that, to this day, keeps Stanford's work in print). By the time the request was granted, Stanford had already committed suicide. In a letter to an NEA representative, sent mere days after Stanford's death, Wright states:

I have sat in front of this [typewriter] so long I am cold. I just can't look in that hole this morning. Frank was 29, a poet for 21 years. The thousands of poems he left and dozens of stories are his legacy. He was a complete poet and he felt

completed as a poet. His wife Ginny is a painter. His roommate, I, C.D., am a poet. She will paint. I will write. And we have inherited the responsibility of his work. Of getting it out and read the way it deserves to be. We hardly have time to grieve, and we know we will never stop grieving. (19 June 1978)

Until her death in 2016, Wright was about as successful as an experimental poet can possibly be in the contemporary United States: she taught at Brown University, and for a time was the Poet Laureate of Rhode Island; she was the recipient of a MacArthur grant, alongside grants from the NEA, the Guggenheim, and the Whiting Awards; and her work was admired by an array of poets from across the aesthetic spectrum. Relying upon the broad platform she eventually developed, Wright spent much of her career as a poet fulfilling what she described as her "responsibility" to Stanford's work: she relentlessly submitted his poems to a bevy of high-profile literary journals, leveraging her personal and professional contacts to provide his work a readership; she took the helm of *Lost Roads* immediately after his death; and she worked with academic libraries in the hope of archiving his papers.

If, as I argue, rural avant-garde poetry discloses the logic of the literary field more broadly—its infrastructural and institutional contingencies, as well as its centers of consecration—in her letters advocating for Stanford's work, Wright's language often frames the tension between avant-gardes and institutional centers in specifically regional terms. In a 1980 letter to the New York City poetry publication *Parnassus*, for example, Wright critiques a review-essay on small press releases for mentioning Stanford's book *Crib Death* without contextualizing it within his larger body of work:

I can't help but droop a little bit when a poet such as Frank Stanford is "introduced" as though he had no literary history... [When] I see a review which bars a comprehensive appraisal of his work or an appraisal in the context of a corpus of work—which most authors command when they have a lot of work before the public—I don't lose heart. Unless the vehicle for this slight is New York, and established. (4 Apr. 1980)

Wright goes on to relate the marginalization of Stanford's work to that of small presses more broadly. Stanford, she suggests, was an outlier—a position that small presses themselves occupy, championing unusual, generally unprofitable work that would be too financially risky for a trade press to publish. (And further, she places this "outlier" status in specifically geographic terms, situating New York as the hegemonic center of publishing.) In a letter from the year before to the NEA, requesting funds for *Lost Roads*, she relies upon a similar rhetoric of regional dislocation, couching her request within the necessity of both "publishing the extraordinary [*sic*] work of Frank Stanford" and preserving the only small poetry press in Arkansas: "[We] are still pulling weeds and piling rocks down here in Arkansas—trying to clear enough so those guys with New York plates on their Lincolns can see the beautiful wild poets we grow from the road" (3 July 1979). Even the name of the press—*Lost Roads*—is suggestive of the tension between rural literature, regional dislocation, and infrastructural connectivity.

While Wright framed the significance of Stanford's work in relation to its geographically marginalized status, her ability to ensure its consecration was in large part due to her own institutional accolades, and especially, her status as a faculty member at Brown University, where she began working in 1983. Through the 1980s, Wright continued to publish Stanford's

work through Lost Roads, while also querying new potential platforms for his work: journals where individual poems might be published, but also large publishing houses that could provide a broader distribution for his work than Lost Roads. Additionally, Wright began the task of attempting to find an academic archive that could house Stanford's papers. While she considered attempting to place the papers at Brown, she instead wrote to the libraries at Oberlin College, because *FIELD*, the university's well-known literary journal, had been an early supporter of Stanford's work during his life (16 Mar. 1983). Oberlin's libraries declined the request, explaining that they were not equipped to accept archival materials (*FIELD Magazine*). In 2012, however, Stanford's papers wound up in the Beinecke, but only because of Wright's own literary recognition and institutional acclaim—the current poetry curator, Nancy Kuhl, wrote to her in the hopes of obtaining her papers. Along with that acquisition, Wright donated archives relating to both Stanford and Lost Roads Press (Kuhl).

To only emphasize findings within a formal archive like the Beinecke, however, defines the legacy of Frank Stanford solely within one epistemic register: the parameters of canonical legibility. Avant-garde poetry—for the necessity of its own survival within an economic context that often views it as worthless—is produced and sustained through subcultural communal practices. In the case of Stanford's work, these communal practices emerged in the immediate aftermath of his death. In one 1982 letter, for example, a woman named Sylvia Huot—now a professor of medieval literature at Cambridge—wrote to Lost Roads, requesting a copy of *Battlefield*:

I became acquainted with this epic poem this past summer through a group reading in Princeton, NJ. It had quite an impact on a small circle of poets there. I

tried to get a copy of it at the Gotham Book Mart in New York City but they were sold out. So please send me one without delay. I would like to spread the good word around Chicago. (Huot)

The Lost Roads archives reveal scores of letters like the above—often less pleasant, and more confrontational—demanding access to his works and information about his life. The most telling aspect of the above letter, however, is its mention of a group reading—which, given that Huot pursued her Ph.D. at Princeton, was likely with other graduate students, and almost certainly occurred outside the classroom, given the low likelihood of *Battlefield* having been an assigned text in the early '80s. Huot's description, of *Battlefield* having "quite an impact on a small circle of poets," feels similar to my own introduction to his work, which I also first encountered as a graduate student. Reading Stanford's writing, especially prior to the publication of his collected poems, felt—however puerile—like being part of a club. During the second year of my M.F.A., my spouse and I drove to Subiaco, Arkansas, the location of a Jesuit academy that Stanford attended as a child, as well as the site of his grave, as shown in Figure 2.1. I knew many poets who had made the same pilgrimage. When we pulled into the parking lot of the cemetery, across the street from the school, we saw a young woman walking away from a gravestone; we made eye contact with her for a moment, and then she got into her car and drove off. When we arrived at Stanford's grave, we saw that clementine peels and flowers had been left behind, along with a note placed underneath a brick. I wish I'd written down what that the note said, as it is unfortunately illegible in my photograph.



Figure 2.1

Frank Stanford's gravestone in Subiaco, AR, adorned with objects left behind by visitors. Photo by author.

Moment like these—where the poetry itself becomes inextricable from the geographically rooted, communal sociality surrounding it, even when it takes the form of a missed encounter—exemplify the collaborative ethos that has arisen through Stanford's writing, and through small press poetry culture more broadly. The publication of Stanford's collected poems, *What About This* (Copper Canyon, 2015) served as the most obvious marker of institutional legitimacy in his work's history. Beyond this, it thrust Stanford's work into the center of contemporary poetry conversations. While the posterity of Stanford's poetry can be traced towards tangible efforts towards canonization—the publication of his posthumous writing, as well as the literal archiving of his papers—it is also, I argue, the product of literary practices that have social, communal ends, rather than merely canonical ones. In other words, Stanford's work, rather than functioning as a mere monument, becomes a generative site for collaboration. Stanford's poems are unique,

the poet Jack Christian writes, in producing an "overarching feeling of kinship" ("Can a Myth Grow Up?"). The most obvious example of this tendency lies within the practice of group marathon readings of *Battlefield*. The first instance of this practice, C.D. Wright suggests in the forward to the second edition of the text, had its roots within a desire to increase exposure towards Stanford's work:

At Brown University... I initiated a course on the new long poem primarily as an excuse to introduce the poem to a handful of others. A few avid students organized a marathon reading of it on campus. They rented a tent, a mike, and gained clearance with campus security to read through the night. The reading began at sundown and ran until nine or ten the next morning. A cold, hard rain set in... The students were there for the duration, one of those so-you-could-say-you-had-done-it events. (*Battlefield* iv).

Wright's language indicates that she taught *Battlefield* for ends that were productive towards the project of canonization, intentionally increasing exposure to his work. In a chain of events that feels like a microcosm for the afterlife of Stanford's work more broadly, however, Wright's students organized a group reading. On the publicity materials for this event, shown in Figure 2.2, *Battlefield* is advertised in a way that legitimates its status to those who are unfamiliar with the work—as a "neglected american epic." On the other hand, a marathon reading—particularly this rather inaccessible one, which occurred in the middle of the night—feels inimical to "productive" canonical, archiving practices. Instead, it feels ritualistic, geared towards the communal experience of a group. (Akin, perhaps, to the historic oral traditions long

sponsored in part by the graduate writing program



**the battlefield
where the moon says I
love you**

friday, april 20th, 1990
beginning at six o'clock pm

from sundown to sun-up

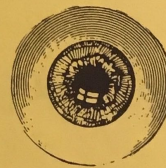
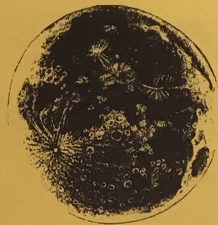
a marathon poetry reading
under a tent
on the main green of brown university

of

**a poem by
frank stanford**

bless the polished blades the fingers of the blind mirror makers
the plum the drunk the koto
with the breathing of meditative animals the knives that are dreamt
the moon is a death place that is dreamt by snake doctors
the whisky corks bobbing at eleven-thirty and my dreams
like a samurai's sword my soul of aged wood under way
of sleeping fish
I sleep I wake I sing I am the last gift to the cities of loneliness

if you would like to read part of this
neglected american epic
sign up for a half hour slot in blistein house



for more information call 272-9668 or 861-3623

Figure 2.2

A flyer advertising a 1990 marathon reading of The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You at Brown University.

associated with the epic mode.) The "marathon reading" became a recurring practice at Brown. The practice extended beyond this institution, though, as the letter from Sylvia Huot suggests, and its most formalized iteration was the Frank Stanford Festival in Fayetteville, Arkansas, in 2008. Organized by the poets Matthew Henriksen and Adam Clay, the event drew approximately 80 writers from across the United States; it included readings, panel discussions (such as "Frank Stanford's Influence on Experimental Poets" and "Frank Stanford as Poet & Friend"), and a screening of Stanford's film *It Wasn't a Dream, It Was a Flood*, introduced by Irving Broughton. The festival culminated in an all-night reading of *Battlefield*, followed by a brunch reading the following morning, where participating poets read their own work ("Frank Stanford Literary Festival").

While projects like the Frank Stanford Festival may not have the explicit project of canonization in mind, they often end up functioning as an informal archive. *It Wasn't a Dream, It Was a Flood*, for example, wasn't digitized until 2019; up until a reproduction of the film was uploaded to YouTube, the only individuals I knew who had seen the film had been attendees of this festival.⁴⁰ Further, the festival was multigenerational—while it was organized and mainly attended by poets in their twenties and thirties, it also featured panelists such as Broughton, Stanford's first publisher, and Bill Willett, Stanford's best friend during his life. In this way, the festival was not merely a celebration of his work from an aesthetic standpoint, but rather, an event wrapped up with personal histories, as well as with the geographic landscapes where Stanford wrote. It was, in other words, a testament to poetry culture as a material practice.

In 2018, Henriksen helped organize a ten-year anniversary follow-up to the first Stanford Festival. This iteration diverged from the initial festival in two significant ways. First,

⁴⁰ This film, further, has been subject to its own complicated material history, with battles over copyrights having delayed its digitization for decades (Interview with Ryan).

particularly in the wake of her unexpected death two years prior, the festival aimed to focus not just on Stanford, but on the work and life of C.D. Wright; Forrest Gander (her husband) and Deborah Luster (her long-time collaborator) were both in attendance, and instead of a marathon reading of *Battlefield*, the organizers planned a marathon reading of Wright's *One with Others* (Copper Canyon, 2010). Second, Henriksen and the other organizers expressed an interest in turning away from hagiographies of Stanford. As Henriksen wrote to me in an email, "we want to emphasize women in poetry and mental illness in the poetry community. We think we can celebrate Stanford's work while having honest and open discussions that are relevant to where we are today. We are also talking about Social Justice and poetry (thinking firstly of *Battlefield* and *One with Others*)" (Henriksen).

Many of the panel discussions, accordingly, dealt with these questions, and in general, emphasized the communities enabled through Stanford's work and legacy. For example, on one panel, the academic Murray Shugars stated that a shared investment in obscure writers "creates and sustains discourse communities" (qtd. in Christian). Jack Christian, in an essay about the festival, writes that the

engagement [of] Stanford's poems could be transferred elsewhere... We might do this imagining not only to preserve his legacy but to imagine new paths for ourselves. This is because even if everyone stopped reading Frank Stanford, we couldn't stop reading Frank Stanford. We've practically co-authored him by now. He's like a song you swear you've never heard but already know how to hum. We live his dream. ("Can a Myth Grow Up?")

During the four nights I spent in Fayetteville, I thought about these tensions. Were we celebrating Stanford, or were we celebrating our engagement with Stanford—the communal discourses that we built in his wake? The first night of the festival, the poet Sara Nicholson privately thrust a note into my hand with an address on it; this was the address of the home where Stanford shot himself, she explained.

The following afternoon, I went there alone. It was a fairly non-descript ranch-style house, the kind that are everywhere in small Southern towns (Figure 2.3). I walked up and down the street repeatedly, feeling myself tear up, wondering if the current residents of the home—or for that matter, the neighbors—were aware of what had happened there. I thought about the material space of small press poetry, and its superimposition over normative geographies; the



Figure 2.3
Frank Stanford's death site.

way in which an otherwise mundane street was imbued with a historical significance that, in all likelihood, was known only to the D.I.Y., makeshift archive of a niche subculture. The last night of the conference, I went to the home of an Arkansas M.F.A. student for a party—cheekily titled "It Wasn't a Dream, It Was an Afterparty"—and I was there the entire night, accidentally sleeping through my flight home to Ithaca the next morning. Sitting in the airport terminal, later in the afternoon, I felt a glow about what had transpired in the past few days. The shared, multigenerational experience of inhabiting the same Stanford poems in Fayetteville—in the same multipurpose room, in the same church (or “big church meeting place,” to quote *Battlefield*), in the same town—produced for me an overwhelming feeling of joy and kinship (Figure 2.4). This joy, however, was not rooted within Stanford as a monolithic presence, but rather, within the



Figure 2.4

A poetry reading given in a crowded room at the 2018 Frank Stanford Festival in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

forms of material poetic practice—the readings, anthologies, discussions, and tributes—that gestured towards a kind of utopian, communal possibility embedded within the raw, inert materials at our immediate disposal. If the canonical, institutionally consecrated version of Stanford serves to monumentalize his work—to place it within a teleology beginning with his life and ending with his death—the subculture of Stanford readers forms an afterlife, altogether surpassing Stanford. His grave is not a memorial, but rather, a meeting place (literally, as my earlier anecdote shows). It’s a levee, a place to stargaze: “the visible / world is no longer a reality and the unseen world is no longer a dream” (*Battlefield* 14,996-15,000).

CHAPTER 3: LUCIFER POETICS AND THE DIGITIZATION OF REGIONAL COMMUNITY

“we are in a post-geographic society now. there are no more centers of art that can be located purely through geographic description. any impression thereof is a ghost of some deceased past, a sentimentality and expression of attachment to something that has been deterritorialized and reterritorialized long ago. i don't mean that there is no geography but i am saying there is much much more now than geography. proximity has taken on a radically new form. the world of geography is a ghost world. we inhabit it but the scaffolding has moved on and some of us don't see it. but it's there”
- Patrick Herron, 2009 (“the triangle of the metaverse”)⁴¹

In 2004, North Carolina poets Ken Rumble and Patrick Herron started an email listserv. Titled "Lucifer Poetics"—abbreviated as "Lucipo"—it was originally intended as an organizational tool for the decentralized, in-person poetry scenes of the Research Triangle region of central North Carolina. It described itself as follows:

an affiliation of people interested in contemporary poetry with an emphasis on avant-garde, post-avant, innovative, and experimental poetry. We discuss and share information about contemporary poetry and poetic events happening in central North Carolina. One focus of group efforts is our monthly meeting in which we read and discuss poems we have written and books we are currently reading ("Lucipo -- Lucifer Poetics Group")

⁴¹ Throughout this chapter, I quote all emails in their original form (retaining errors and typos).

Lucipo was hosted on a server at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and for six years, it went on to operate as a vehicle for transregional, online discourse, but also as an in-person collective; the group held readings, organized a tour, and published chapbooks. While Lucipo's membership during its first two years of existence was heavily weighted towards North Carolina residents, it went on to garner members from elsewhere in the U.S., and in some cases, from other countries. In 2006, however, its founding members reasserted the regional impetus of the list, mostly restricting its membership to local residents.

In this chapter, I foreground Lucipo's complex entanglement with material geographies, a characteristic that distinguishes it from many of its online contemporaries in the 2000s. Within small press poetry communities, the mid-1990s and aughts are colloquially referred to as "the blog era," a period of time shaped by the rise of the internet, but mostly predating the hegemony of large-scale social media platforms like Facebook. During this period, the primary venues of extra-institutional poetic commentary were blogs and email listservs. The blogs themselves blurred the lines between spaces for personal reflection and public discourse—a tension which catalyzes, perhaps most obviously, in the form of Ron Silliman's infamous blog, a paracritical space in which Silliman's posts about poetry and culture would spark animated, often confrontational conversations in the comment sections. Poetry email listservs often had a corollary function, responding to or building upon the blog conversations; the Buffalo Poetics List, for example—perhaps the best-known poetry listserv—frequently intersected with conversations on Silliman's blog.

Relatively speaking, poetry listservs have received a fair amount of critical attention: to name a few instances, the Buffalo Poetics List has been the frequent subject of scholarly work, and Roof Books published an edited collection of selected emails from the list; an anthology of

poems by Wom-Po (the Women's Poetry Listserv) was published by Red Hen Press; and Flarf, a late-aughts avant-garde movement whose practices relied heavily upon the discursive space of listservs, collectively performed at the Whitney Museum of American Art.⁴² Comparatively, Lucipo has received less attention—a surprising fact, perhaps, given that several of its founding members (in particular, Joseph Donahue, Evie Shockley, and Tony Tost) went on to receive critical acclaim and professional success, and its later members included such notable poets as Anne Boyer, CAConrad, Brandon Shimoda, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis.

Lucipo, however, is not a significant project because of the institutionally legible success of some of its participants. Rather, it serves as a representative example of how poetic communities adapted to both academic institutionalization and the transregional space of the internet. As a group that built community by grafting onto a preexisting institutional apparatus—and that, as I will show, sought to preserve its own version of an archive—Lucipo might lend credence to Stephen Voynich's claim that poetic community is intertwined with "the structures that enable organized collaboration" (19). Lucipo's discourse was conditioned by its enabling structures in multiple ways. First, by the economic context of the contemporary neoliberal university (and especially, the apparent inability of the university to sustain poetry community on its own), and second, by the socially determinative effects of digital technologies themselves—to use the language of Lisa Gitelman, by the *protocols* of email listservs and the internet more broadly, their associated "normative rules and default conditions" (7). My analysis in this article works, chiefly, against two pervasive myths that arose in the early days of the internet: first, that the internet would entail a release from a geographical, material origin; and second, that it would somehow liberate social spaces from gendered and racialized inequality. Using Lucipo as a

⁴² See *poetics@*; *Letters to the World: Poems from the Wom-Po LISTSERV*; and Bruno.

representative example, I argue that the regional locus of poetry community does not go away in the age of the internet. Rather, it is subject to more complex forms of transgeographical mediation, resisting a static, rooted relation to place. As member Brian Howe once expressed, Lucipo was united less by a coherent "aesthetic principle," and more so by participation and a set of shared material practices ("Indifference"). Its avant-garde, in this sense, involved adapting to the institutions, technologies, and strategies available at its immediate disposal. While Lucipo, in one sense, succeeded in demarcating a provisional avant-garde community within (and against) its original institutional and geographic context, it also entailed a continual engagement with the socially determinative aspects of the listserv medium.

A Geographic Archive / A Grafted Community

In the only sustained scholarly analysis of Lucipo, Tessa Joseph Nicholas, an early member, places the group within the lineage of U.S. modernist community formations, presenting it as a kind of digital salon; a "contemporary incarnation of the avant-garde poetic community," linking literary production to process and communal discourse ("Imagining Community" 151). Contrary to historically significant, geospatially specific art salons—such as, for example, the gathering of U.S. modernists in Paris—Nicholas argues that Lucipo allows for a "[release] from the burden of geographical community and influence" (123). But as I hope to show, it is precisely Lucipo's unusual relationship to geography—the collision between its initial regional impetus, to provide a space for experimental poets from the Triangle of North Carolina, and the supposedly non-spatial realm of the internet—that makes it worthy of study. Lucipo's name, in fact, references a line from Ezra Pound's *Canto LXXIV*, juxtaposing the group's

regional orientation with a High Modernist cosmopolitanism: "You who have passed the pillars and outward from Herakles / when Lucifer fell in N. Carolina" (3). Lucipo's collaborative endeavors, I will show in this section, were explicitly shaped by academic structures—by both the territorializing thrust of the university, and by its associated forms of institutional legitimation.

Importantly, many of Lucipo's members had some affiliation with universities in the Research Triangle—for example, Tony Tost, Amy Sara Carroll, and Joseph Donahue were affiliated with the English department at Duke; Patrick Herron was a graduate student in Information Sciences at UNC-Chapel Hill; and Chris Vitiello was employed by North Carolina State. Further, the group's primary founders, Herron and Rumble, ran two prominent local poetry events (the Carrboro Poetry Festival and the Desert City Reading Series, respectively), as did Tony Tost (the Open Eye Reading Series). Initially, the Lucipo community arose from semi-regular meetings in the homes of various members, where they would often share meals and have poetry-related discussions. In the earliest Lucipo emails, the listserv allowed the members to agree on a time and place for meetings, but also as a kind of "supplement" to the in-person meetings; a space where in-person conversations could be summarized and expounded upon online. For example, during the first week of Lucipo's existence, a group of its members gathered at the farm where Rumble lived to film a 15-minute conversation/reading, to be played at "An Othered South"—a day-long event in Atlanta, Georgia dedicated to discussions of Southern poetics and regional identity. The next day, Rumble wrote to the listserv with a summary of the gathering:

For those that missed out, we had lights, burning bugs burning in the lights, cameras,

wine, cheese, beer with lime... Evie gave a wonderful opening statement about the South which laid out her vision of what an "other" south might look like... Amy also opened with an eloquent appraisal of "southernness" as well and read two poems (again two favorites) "Kith and Kin" and "Secession"? -- the breakneck pace of her first reading was in evidence, but with a healthy set of pipes, the june bugs thought it was 'cane season; Tessa confessed (as did Joe and I) to being a transplant, but a transplant with an eye for the perils and positives of regionality ("Lights, Camera, Actoin!!")

The listserv, thus, became both an extension of in-person community, and eventually, a community in itself—one that could intersect, for example, with broader networks in the U.S. South and elsewhere. The list opened itself to poets residing outside of North Carolina as early as the first week, when Tost invited Aaron McCollough to the group, a former North Carolina resident (Rumble, "Old Posts??").

Shaped by the protocols of its technological medium—and, perhaps, by the cultural milieus of institutional, academic consecration—Lucipo was driven by a specifically archival impulse. The listserv was both hosted and archived on the servers of *ibiblio*, a digital library at UNC that, among other archives, houses Project Gutenberg. (The director of *ibiblio*, Paul Jones, is a poet and co-founder of the North Carolina Writers' Network [Jones].) In the fourth email on the list, Rumble asked to archive Lucipo-related messages prior to the institution of the official listserv: "I'm thinking of the original attempts to plan the meeting... reading announcements, etc. It'd mean a higher influx of mail from the list for a little while, but then it'd all be archived for eternity, posterity, felicity, posteriority, and buffy" ("Old Posts??"). Shortly after the beginning of the listserv, Rumble proposed the idea of a Lucipo chapbook containing work by its members

(20, at the time) to distribute at the Carrboro Poetry Festival (“Fence Flap”). The poets sent work to the list as attachments, and Rumble compiled a proof of the chapbook (eventually titled *The Displayer*), sending it back to the list for approval. It was made and sold cheaply, and Rumble specifically requested that copies be put aside for the “archives” (“Chapbook Money”). In a later email, Marcus Slease suggested sending a copy of the chapbook to Ron Silliman: “Maybe he’ll review it on his blog (then we might be famous and who doesn’t secretly want to be famous)” (“Chapbooks”). This language of posterity—of both a physical and digital archive—might be considered in relation to Jeremy Braddock’s focus on curatorial, collecting impulses in 20th century literature, both in the sense of the aesthetics of individual artworks, as well as through anthologies and museums. The modernist collection, Braddock argues, manifests a “provisional institution... a means of intervening in and reforming cultural practice” (7). Lucipo, of course, differs from this form of collection by virtue of its intangibility: unlike a museum collection, it resists physicality or a singular geographic locale; unlike some anthologies, Lucipo resists the closure of a singular “text”—not only because its archive is long and nearly unreadable, but more so because its in-person activities (its readings, meetings, and chapbooks) are inseparable from the textual archive.

In an effort to model the diverse forms of influence that shaped Lucipo, I make a distinction between two separate (though overlapping) networks that undergird Lucipo’s practices: the *institutional* network, and the *communal* network. The first is comprised of the academic institutions with which Lucipo’s founding members had some form of affiliation (Duke, NC State, and UNC); smaller institutions and programming associated with these universities (most importantly, ibiblio, which hosted Lucipo); and finally, the industries, geographic landscapes, infrastructures, and cultural milieus that both shape and are shaped by

these academic institutions. I holistically consider the term "infrastructure" as a form of connective media, in the vein of Paul N. Edwards' definition of the term, as "large, force-amplifying systems that connect people and institutions across large scales of space and time" (221). If the "nodes" of Lucipo's institutional network are the universities, the infrastructure might be considered their connective threads—most prominently in this case, the highway system and forms of public transit serving to geographically connect the institutions, as well as the servers and underground fiber optic cables allowing for the dissemination and archiving of digital data.

Lucipo's *communal* network, however, palimpsestically overlaps with this institutional network, while using a different set of non-institutional nodes providing sites of community formation and meaning-making. While the communal network would eventually stretch far beyond the confines of North Carolina (and the South), in the first year of Lucipo, the most significant communal nodes were the spaces where in-person activity took place—for example, Ken Rumble's home in Pittsboro, a rural area thirty minutes outside of Chapel Hill; the Open Eye Cafe, and Internationalist Books (both located in downtown Chapel Hill); and Marcus Slease's home in Greensboro, NC (about an hour west of Durham). To borrow language from Tung-Hui Hu—used to describe the way that internet networks build upon and grow from pre-existing structures of communication—Lucipo's communal network is *grafted* upon institutional networks (7). To model Lucipo's relationship to institutional networks, we might consider the influential Cold War-era network theories of Paul Baran, who proposed three models of communication structures: the centralized network (where nodes are all connected to a singular center); the decentralized network (a model more like a "tree," with multiple centers); and the distributed network (where all nodes are connected, and all have equal power and importance).

While Baran's networks were militaristic in nature—seeking to present a "highly survivable system" of communication—they remain useful, too, for modeling sites of institutional power and influence (Baran 4).

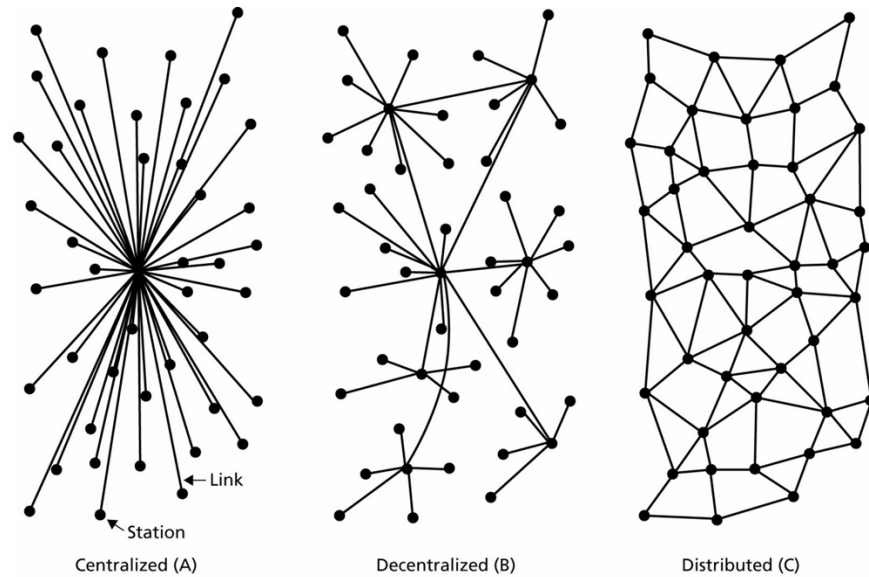


Figure 3.1
Paul Baran's network models (Hu).

Lucipo's institutional network, for example, might be something akin to Baran's decentralized network, with each major university serving as a different center, connected to its own off-shooting set of individual nodes (for example, *ibiblio*'s connection to UNC). Lucipo's communal network, then, might be closer to Baran's distributed network; grafted upon the preexisting institutional network, it provides new nodes of contact, attempting to find communal meaning outside academic institutions and systems of capital (Figure 3.2). As Nicholas argues, citing an interview in which Rumble expresses a dissatisfaction with specifically academic literary communities, Lucipo sought to build a "new, self-selecting and perfectly self-regulated life outside of the academy" ("Imagining Community" 140).

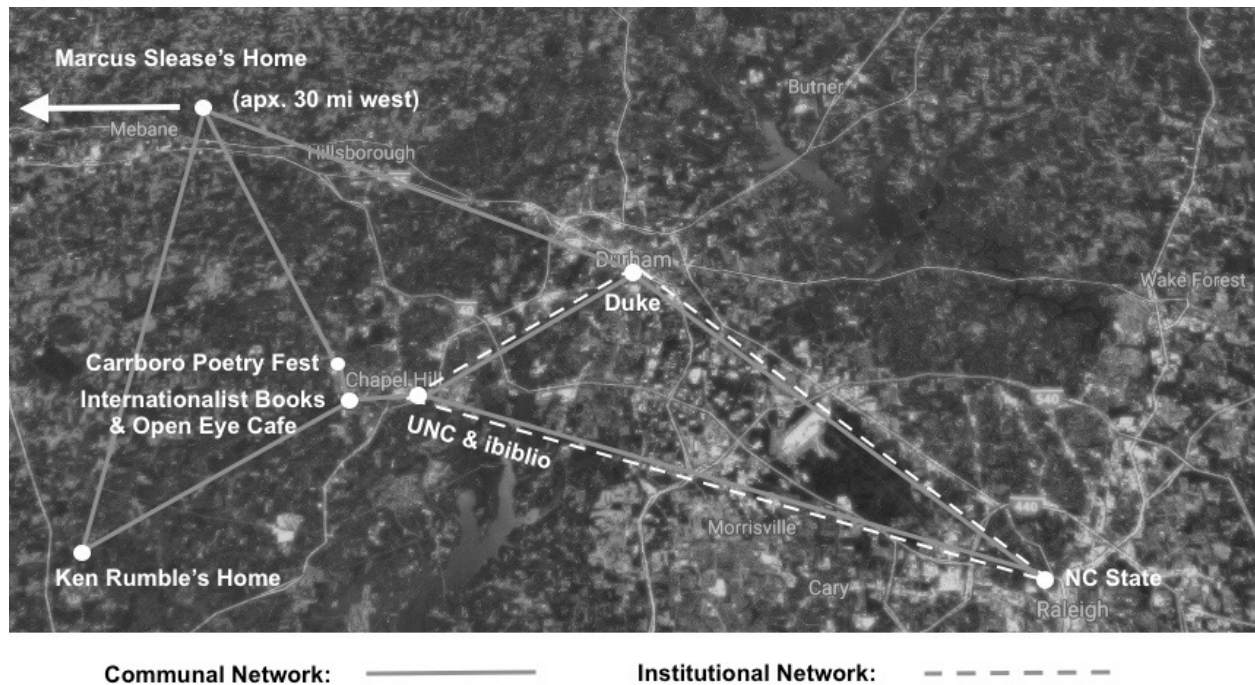


Figure 3.2
Lucipo's networks.

This is not to imply, however, that Lucipo somehow transcended institutionality. The history of the listserv technology itself—which I will discuss further in the following section—is imbricated with its early usage in academic contexts. Willard McCarty, for example—the founder of *Humanist*, one of the earliest humanities-specific email lists, which began in 1987—framed his listserv in utopian terms that are remarkably similar terms to the early aims of Lucipo, describing it as an "e-seminar,"

a kind of long conversation, convened by a single person but conducted by everyone for mutual enlightenment. Its purpose is not so much to convey facts as to further understanding of its subject, to train the minds of its participants, and so to help create a community of scholars. It is a pedagogical structure in which every member is both teacher and student. (207)

Beyond the deterministic nature of the technology itself, conversations on Lucipo frequently broach the precise tensions between art, academia, and capitalism. In 2005, for example, various members of the list discuss writing a proposal for a conference panel on Lucipo and building literary communities outside of academia; the proposal acknowledges, however, that Lucipo "[synthesizes] the strengths of a graduate education with the demands of a post grad school life," suggesting that its model of community is imbricated with the modalities of academic institutions (Rumble, "AWP Panels"). Several weeks later, the list began a discussion on chapbooks, a form that many members argued foregrounds the material status of the book, and further, the friction between literary community and capitalist society. As Jonathan Minton writes,

I may get a great deal of satisfaction from circulating my poetry on listservs, flyers, chapbooks, blogs, and my online poetry journal. Hell, I might even change the world doing so. But if I'm to gain tenure, I'll have to publish a "book" through one of those major university presses. All my brilliant, dazzling chapbooks won't do and it would be dishonest of me if I were to list them as "books" on my CV. ("on chapbooks")

Responding to Minton and others, Ken Rumble adds, "I've been thinking that the drive to publish so as to get a job, get validation, etc. is negative, that writing for those reasons or writing within that framework is harmful to art making. Of course, I'm being idealistic -- we need to eat" ("Career vs. Art Making"). These comments by Rumble and Minton gesture not only to the tension between artistry and careerism—between personal sustenance and economic survival—

but further illuminate the paradox that characterizes Lucipo, a group resisting academic institutionalism while relying upon its infrastructural platforms.

Importantly, however, Lucipo's networks were not exclusively confined to the institutional contexts of the Research Triangle universities, and they connected poets across a variety of different landscapes. While Raleigh and Durham are decidedly urban spaces (with approximate populations of 500,000 and 250,000, respectively), Chapel Hill is significantly smaller (through the aughts, its population hovered around 50,000 residents), and many Lucipo members chose to live in rural spaces. Ken Rumble, for example, lived in Pittsboro, NC, a town with a population under 3,000. Despite the fact that its institutional network outlined a predominantly urban area, numerous frequent contributors to the list grew up in or inhabited rural areas (Rumble, Tost, and Tim Earley, to name a few); the list was used to organize and publicize events in rural areas (such as, for example, a multimedia poetry and art event in Cedar Grove, NC [Rumble, "Amy White's Show"]); and finally, considerations of rurality—its relationship to art, and to the urban—frequently seep into the group's conversations.

For example, Patrick Herron frequently foregrounded the benefits (and problems) of rural geographies as sites of artistic production. He suggested in 2008, for example, that "being a poet in an urban center must be oppressive," citing lower costs of living, fewer distractions, and increased personal space as benefits of living and writing in rural areas ("dogs puffing cigars"). Chris Tonelli, a poet who then lived in Boston, responded to Herron, writing, "i've been having some anxiety about moving from boston...but in listening in on this list has been a comfort. there are FAR MORE readings and community events on this list than in all fo boston" (Tonelli, "dogs puffing cigars"). He went on, however, to express concern about a lack of public transportation in rural North Carolina. In a different email, Patrick Herron attempted to consider the urban-

centric histories of U.S. poetry culture in relation to the digitized present moment of Lucipo. In a long, digressive message beginning with the lyrics to the LCD Soundsystem song "Yr City's a Sucker," he wrote,

Is the urban center dying as the perceived center of contemporary american poetics, or is it more vital than ever? ... the access to cultural resources is still geographically-centered and therefore economically based, and those serve as legitimizing forces, but those urban centers sure are steeper than ever in terms of rent, economic access. the Internet--for all of the legitimate concerns it raises--also functions to decenter thought. the internet has an inherently distributive function.

in a bizarre and perhaps inaccurate way i perceive a sort of disintegration of cultural centers in poetry...one that oddly enough seemed rurally located for a brief time as a cohesive center--Black Mountain College--and then the Black Mountain diaspora sort of splits into groups of poets centered around San Francisco and New York. Those two centers--San Francisco and New York--have remained centers of poetic "power" (I use that term loosely since the amount of power is arguably small) to date. yet the presence of the internet seems to have made it less important than ever to find acceptance as a poet by living in those two locales. it seems you can be ok while having absolutely nothing to do with either metropolitan area. ("my city's a sucker")

On one hand, Herron gestures towards the ability of the internet to redistribute cultural power,

problematizing the supposedly "peripheral" status of the rural. He goes on, however, to suggest that the overdetermining mythologies of (Southern) rural spaces—their marginality; their transience; their distance from "reality"—still retain a material and cultural hold, despite the presence of the institutional network:

I remember as an Honors Program student at UNC way back when, many of my peers in that program--kids who turned down Ivy programs in order to enjoy the lighter-hearted and more beautiful realm that is Chapel Hill--saw the Triangle merely as a stopping place on their road to success. "Reality lay elsewhere" was a predominant sentiment. Most did leave North Carolina for places like DC, Atlanta, LA, NYC, Boston... I can understand that if you want to be a stock broker or a marketing analyst or an accountant or biochemist or some other professional then the best opportunities were indeed and continue to be in those big metropolitan centers. The facilities are there... But in the digital age, this doesn't explain why poets would need to follow the same sort of path. It seems to make less sense than ever to feel a pressure to see the big cities as the centers of American poetics. And in a way they haven't been so unimportant since Black Mountain College. ("my city's a sucker")

Herron's emails foreground the precise tensions that characterize the relationship between Lucipo and regionalism. As a communal network grafted onto an institutional network, it on one hand distributed across space the intellectual resources that may have once been confined to a singular institutional locale like Black Mountain College; on the other, it defined its own identity (both in

its conversations, and in the self-description of the list itself) in relation to a regional orientation. In this sense, it affirms local identity while simultaneously resisting what Wendy Wolford and Marc Edelman describe as the "disciplinary" margins of the rural (967). Lucipo subverts the tendency to view the rural as necessarily isolated from the cultural (or economic) currents we might typically associate with the urban. Rather than representing a pastoralized rurality, Lucipo manifests Paul Cloke's notion of rural hybridity, which entails an "urbanization of the rural" (19). In the case of Lucipo, this "urbanization" takes the form of the institutional and infrastructural resources of the Research Triangle itself, as well as its connection—through the infrastructure of the internet—to individuals and poetry communities elsewhere in the South and beyond.

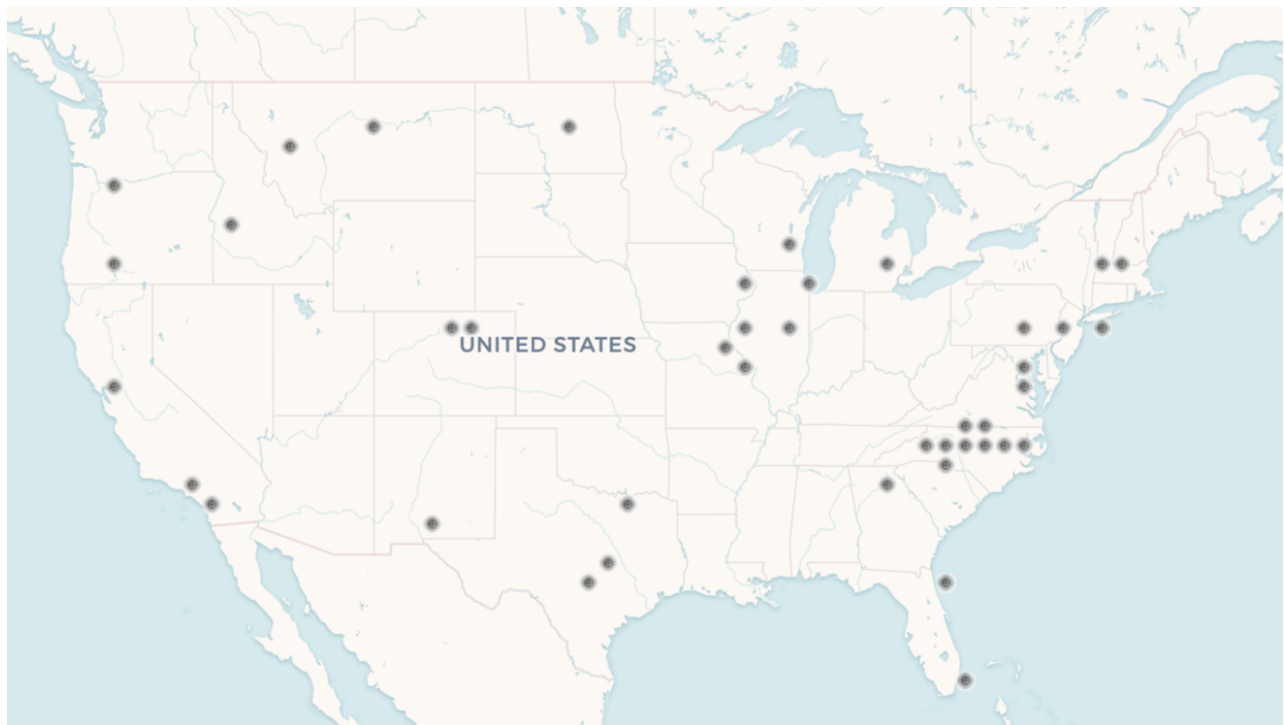


Figure 3.3

Lucipo's geographic spread by March 2006. Each mark refers to a participant who identified their location in an individual email.

Gender, Geography, and Deterministic Media

By 2006, Lucipo appeared to have reached an impasse. After the group's appearance on Ron Silliman's blog—and, in general, following the increased collective awareness of poetry scenes in the Triangle more broadly—its subscriber list grew exponentially, receiving an influx of members from outside North Carolina and the South (Figure 3.3). The conversations increasingly circled around a recurring set of tensions: flame wars continually arising from the antagonisms of a specific group of male subscribers; the onslaught of self-promotion from otherwise silent members; the sense that the regional orientation of the group had faded; and the sense that the list had become increasingly male-dominated, causing a number of women members to unsubscribe. Further, Tessa Joseph Nicholas suggested that the list had "strayed from its original aims" ("goings on"), and earlier in the year, Tost had claimed that the original community the list had arisen from had become secondary: "maybe this list USED to be a sanctuary, but it's a different place now" ("WHAT?"). In this vein, list members frequently foregrounded a disjunction between the older, regionally specific Lucipo, and its newer, transgeographic iteration. In January, for example, Rumble writes:

I think one of the "regulating" influences on the list is that fact that people that join are subjected to a certain amount of "hey, where are we going tonight?", "anybody want to go watch a baseball game?" etc. I imagine that can get sort of annoying and folks might not find it worth it to be on the list if all they want is discussion.

Granted, as the list has grown, that sort of discussion has decreased some. Calls for

meetings still go out and dinners and Lucipo readings, but I think (??) that the presence of so many observers has changed the way the locals see the list: we're not exactly alone in our living room anymore.

Part of my reaction to those thoughts (and perhaps those thoughts are just mine?) is to simply reassert in my own use of the list the function of it as a tool for local organization. (“Managing the List: Community Not Marketplace”)

Lucipo, I argue, raises the question of what a regional literature *is* in the era of the internet. As media studies scholars have frequently argued, however—beginning, perhaps, with Marshall McLuhan's famous assertion that "the medium is the message"—media technologies shape the form and content of discourse. In an effort to better understand the relationship between Lucipo's group tensions and the nature of the medium itself, we might briefly consider the technology's history.

The email list, in fact, predates the modern internet itself. Like many early digital technologies, it originates within a context shaped by both Cold War–era militarism and university research. Electronic mail was one of the earliest uses of the pre-internet platform ARPANet, which began as a decentralized communication network for the U.S. Department of Defense in the late 1960s (Abbate 36-37) and went on to be instrumentalized for research and university use through the 1980s (183). On this platform, users saw the beginning of USENET, a digital bulletin board that functioned as a kind of proto–email list. Additionally, rival digital networking platforms were introduced for academic researchers—such as BITNET in 1981 (201-202), and the Computer Science NETwork in 1982 (184). While email lists predate the rise of the

capital-I internet, the discourses surrounding these technologies echo many of the utopian promises that characterize the early internet: a virtual escape from geography; from social hierarchy; and from normative institutional structures. For example, in a 1994 article, Zane L. Berge praises the ability of email lists to "[bring] together persons with similar interests regardless of geographic distance" (102). As late as 2003, Avi Hyman refers to the listserv as the "great equalizer" within an academic context (17). Unlike the "forbidding and hostile" hierarchies of traditional academic realms, he suggests that listservs might present an egalitarian space where participants, regardless of academic affiliation or social position, might interact on the same plane (22). Hyman cites one study that juxtaposes the listserv with Marshall McLuhan's influential vision of the "global village," suggesting that it is "neither global nor a village" (Rafaeli et al 266); rather, the study argues, listservs unite individuals based upon common interests rather than a shared geographic locale. Interestingly, the study typifies the listserv in specifically geographic terms—as a "virtual neighborhood."

In a similar vein, Willard McCarty intended for the *Humanist* listserv to be a radical experiment in liberating intellectual discourse from both geographic, institutional, and identitarian differences; it would produce a transnational "electronic polis of ideas" (216) and further, bolster those who were marginalized by the academy—e.g., "non-academic staff, Ph.D.s without academic employment, and untenured faculty" (209). In reality, the list was almost immediately populated by individuals with significant institutional authority, such as "tenured faculty, [and] directors of computing centres" (209). And despite his grand, post-geographic visions, McCarty notes that while the list featured members from nearly every world continent, it mostly defaulted to discourse in English. Further, while North American and European individuals were able to participate in *Humanist* cheaply, access to email was often expensive for

members elsewhere; at one point, participants from New Zealand and Australia had to resign for this reason (208).

If the early days of the internet were construed through ideologies of immateriality and placelessness—and, as Lisa Nakamura has shown, the neoliberal promises of “color blindness and nondiscrimination” (5)—these myths formed the central tensions with which Lucipo struggled, especially during the peak of its membership in 2006. If Lucipo, in other words, was grafted upon historically, materially specific institutional technologies, its discourse was mediated through the cultural politics of these technologies, particularly regarding identity and geography. The listserv, at least viewed through a strictly statistical lens, was an overwhelmingly white and male space. Out of the ten most active participants—ranging from Tony Tost, who sent 487 emails over the course of the listserv's history, to Ken Rumble, who sent 1,588—eight were men, two were women, and with the exception of frequent participant Evie Shockley, all were white. A glance at the list of every individual who ever participated (some 300 different users) reveals a comparatively more diverse grouping of poets, but generally, the bulk of the discursive space was taken up by men—leading the poet Anne Boyer to write, in one email, that “the lack of women's voices here is hard to take” (“Aesthetics Over”).

Misogyny during the “blog era,” and more specifically, the dominance of men in online poetry conversations, was not exclusive to Lucipo. Similar concerns arose, for example, on the Buffalo Poetics List. In a 1995 email, Ron Silliman noted that there had been no women participants in ten days, writing, “What gives? It feels like the shower room at a men's health club... Here's a question or two for (primarily) the non-males who read this list? Why do you lurk without posting? What would it require to change this?” (“Boy Talk”). The scholar Kali Tal responded by noting, first, that her emails often received little engagement from the

predominantly white and male listserv: "I've been active on the internet for a while, and I don't take nonresponse personally, but it *does* generally seem to conform to a pretty gendered (and racialized) pattern." Tal goes on to observe, however, the specific ways in which the listserv medium—despite the early utopian myths of its supposed neutrality—continued to reify patriarchal imperatives:

email is one of the few environments in which anyone and everyone can 'pass' as white, heterosexual, and male unless he/she speaks/writes out *against* that normative body. Now, there are advantages to being able to "pass" in this manner... The advantages are clear for women—no more sexual harassment, no more being ignored, no more being marked as "other." But the disadvantage is that passing requires adopting the language and interests and *style* of the folks you are passing *as*, and so concerns and questions and styles that might be significant to a woman *as a woman* become unspeakable. ("RE: Boy Talk")

Building upon Tal's emphasis on the gendering of style, the poet Nada Gordon writes that discourse on the listserv is often characterized by "a public 'war' voice"—one that is decisively argumentative and "rational," in specifically gendered terms: "I like this list best when information ideas observations parodies accrue, not when it sounds like a dogfight that needs hosing down" ("Where the Boys Are").

This notion of the "war voice" certainly reared its head within the context of Lucipo, especially during 2006, when, for example, the poet Kent Johnson would bully other subscribers for not responding quickly enough to his threads. Like Buffalo, Lucipo was shaped by the

cultural politics of its medium, but the two listservs were marked by some significant differences. First, while nearly every participant on Lucipo was either a poet or a poet-scholar, there were more participants in the Buffalo Poetics List who were strictly academics, and as such, the discourse of the Poetics List was more liable to default to a traditionally academic, critical tone—a rhetorical register with its own set of entrenched politics. Further, while many of its participants were not affiliated with SUNY at Buffalo, the listserv—and especially its legacy—is far more wrapped up with the aura of the university's Poetics Program, an institutional centrality that Lucipo did not share. Most importantly, the specifically geographical impetus of Lucipo—its emphasis on Southern, and especially North Carolinian poetry spaces—never truly disappeared. At its peak membership in 2006, after Lucipo appeared on Ron Silliman's blog, the list struggled with two separate, though perhaps interrelated problems determined by the medium itself: first, the centralization of white male perspectives in the guise of neutrality; and second, the slow drift away from the group's material embeddedness in North Carolina poetry communities. In response, Rumble sent an email stating that he intended to remove all non-North Carolina residents from the list. He framed his reasoning mainly in geographic terms, arguing that the list's growth had negatively affected the local community in the Triangle. Rumble's choice appeared, however, to resolve—or at least improve—the oppressively male atmosphere of the list. In 2009, for example, Ken Rumble wrote to the list asking another (male) member to post less frequently:

Those of you who have been on the list may recall the spring of '06 when between G. Gudding, K. Johnson, J. Behrle, and others, the list was distributing some 30 or so posts a day -- many of them quite lengthy. I recall that many previously active,

engaged, and interesting people checked out during that time, and it was quite too bad. I also know that (on this list and others) there has been a perception that list activity (amount and length of postings) can be correlated to gender -- that lengthy, frequent posting is something "men do" ("Participation...")

The conversation went on to resolve itself in a fairly amicable way, and at one point, the poet kathryn l. pringle wrote, "i have to say that, recently, i feel less and less that LUCIPO is a 'boy.' and i have to say... that's felt good. when i first got here... i felt slightly distressed re: the lack the female voices. i think more women are speaking up" ("Participation...").

From the standpoint of an outside reader, Lucipo certainly became a friendlier space following Rumble's decision, and in many ways, the "late" Lucipo, with its North Carolina-specific focus, feels perhaps truer to the list's original intentions. The antagonisms of 2006, however, are a necessary part of Lucipo's story, and underscore a crucial tension between one vision of Lucipo and another—the list as a vehicle to unite a (geographically dispersed) in-person community, as opposed to the list as an online community in itself:

It may be hard to understand for those of you that never visited the Chapel Hill/Carrboro area, but being a part of the Lucifer Poetics Group for many of us locally (and some from further afield), being a part of Lucipo /really/ meant something. Many of us, myself included, put "member of the Lucifer Poetics Group" in our bios. I remember being quite proud and pleased when my issue of effing #3 came and I saw that I was the first contributor, Marcus was the last, and Tony was somewhere in the middle. (Rumble, "An Explanation of Sorts")

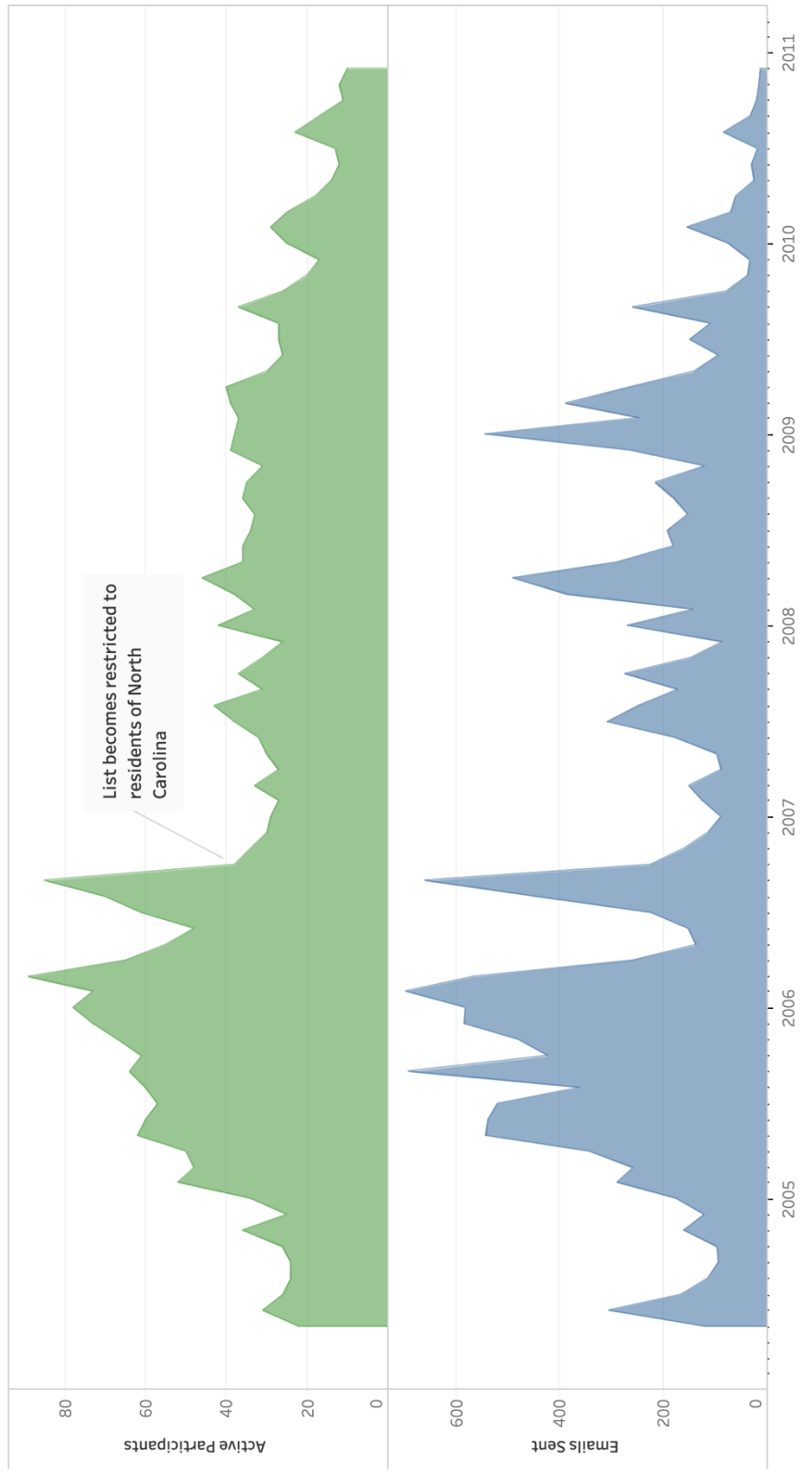


Figure 3.4
Charting Lucipo's communications over time.

The history of Lucipo is a narrative of shifting attachments to territory—a fluid regionalism. In its regionally specific origins, however—even as early as December 2004—the members expressed interest in connecting with a broader network outside North Carolina, eventually participating in several multi-state tours of poetry readings as "the Lucifer Poetics Group." When the group was invited to read in Philadelphia in February 2005, Ken Rumble sent an email to the list inviting any member who expressed interest to come along; the group ended up renting a van, reading in Philadelphia, as well as in Washington, D.C.—a three-hour reading where they were greeted with a lyrical, ecstatically strange introduction by Lucipo member and DC resident Adam Good, who proclaimed Lucifer Poetics to be "a straightforward discipline expanding the literary criticism of leaderless aliens mentioned in poetics journalism... a theory hailed not so much as science but as an oedipal underwater lamp composed in the shadow of an extraordinary text" (Good). In the summer of 2005, Lucipo organized a longer tour, with stops in Baltimore, New York City, Ithaca, and Philadelphia ("Reading in Ithaca, NY?"). Since the tours were often comprised of upwards of ten or more poets from the list, the group was forced to work outside the traditional constraints of the standard, three-to-five-person poetry reading. During an email discussion where members planned out the second tour, Rumble writes,

One thing that is important to me (and I think many of us) is presenting the community, our poems, and poetry generally in an unusual way. This emphasis may mean that folks collaborate on poems, that someone presents something visual instead of auditory, that we work to de-emphasize the identities of the individuals, etc. With these readings, we have a great opportunity to present an alternative to the tried/true format of "the poetry reading" ... The point of these readings isn't so much

to provide everyone with a stage on which to present and promote themselves individually. For me (and I think others), the idea is present an evening of poetry by people who are all part of a community. So the jist is that we (whoever decides to be a part of this) arrange aspects of the performance in advance, practice, then hop in the car, drive to the first stop, read, sleep, drive to the next stop, read, sleep, etc. etc. Live like rock stars and die loving Jesus. ("question about June trip")

Lucipo's method of performing, thus, destabilizes the normative notions of authorship embedded within the traditional poetry reading. Their intention was not to showcase the work of individuals poets, but rather, a poetic community with regional ties. Lucipo made its regionalism both mobile and permeable; removed from its original space, the group (and its poems) were recontextualized in different locales with different audiences.

As I will argue in the next section, Lucipo presents a space where the provisional, material influences that shape a poetry community—in this case, geography, institutionality, and infrastructure—are disclosed, allowing us to view the poetic text in relation to networks of production, discourse, and dissemination.

"Opens and Devides"

In the early stages of my research, I write down a question: *what are the limits of an archive? What does it hold, or fail to hold?*

In this section, I close-read a portfolio of poems by Lucipo. In doing so, I consider the question of how we might conceptually understand a poetry collective that, by its very nature,

had a messy, indeterminate relationship towards geography, institutional affiliation, and group coherence. As a poet and scholar who is too young to have participated in Lucipo, reading through its archive of emails—which comprises around 36,000 PDF pages—often yields various competing emotions. On one hand, the archive gives a sense of validation, a warm feeling of historical kinship between Lucipo and my own efforts to organize arts communities in rural, outlier spaces; on the other, it feels uncomfortable and voyeuristic to study a text that, despite having been a public archive at various points in time, often strikingly resembles a corpus of private emails. In either case, however, reading Lucipo foregrounds poetry as an art form that continually builds structures for its own survival, existing because of (and in spite of) its rhizomatic relationship to economic, geographic, and institutional conditions. It suggests that, in contrast with the Oedipal, confrontational narratives of critics like T.S. Eliot and Harold Bloom, poetry not only requires community, but *is* community, a continual mediation of its own economically marginal status. Reading the Lucipo archive, especially in conjunction with the poetic work its members produced, gives a feeling of incompleteness—that a truly material reading of a poetic archive (in relation to its specific temporal, embodied experience) is to approach a vanishing point. It is in this disconnect between what the archive holds, and what it fails to retain, that I see possibility; a blueprint for a more empowering, accessible, and generative method of reading, writing, and organizing literary collectives.

This article has primarily focused on the formation of the material community of Lucipo. To study specific poems by group members (whether disseminated on the listserv, or elsewhere) points towards a tension between individual aesthetic creation and a broader sense of group identity. In 2008, *Fanzine* published a portfolio of work by Lucipo, and the introduction—written by member Brian Howe—gestures towards this precise problematic. Howe emphasizes

Lucipo as an expansive space where the line between "poetry" and "discourse" is blurred, suggesting that the poems alone do not holistically represent the group:

As a member of the Lucifer Poetics Group, I find myself amid an astonishingly diverse array of writers and artists—some of the finest in the country right now, as far as I'm concerned... [North Carolina is] the sort of crucible in which artists can find one another, stretch their legs, thrive.

This is important because, while writing often unfolds in solitude, it's only an emulsion. Poetry is an act of life that goes on 24/7—you can't just be a poet when you sit down with your notebook or computer, you have to be a poet all the time... Reading through the work here, you'll notice a vast array of style and content, with connections that have less to do with any dominant orthodoxy than with organic inspiration—you'll notice, for instance, how two of Patrick Herron's poems take the form of a dialogue with fellow Lucipoet Chris Vitiello. This is a prime example of how poetry sifts out of lived experience, and how interaction with other strivers is a crucial facet of lived experience. As much as I like the work that emanates from the group, I often find myself more inspired by the people themselves—how they live their lives, and how they construct themselves in words, fearlessly and potent with will. ("Lucifer Poetics: The State of NC Part 2")

Howe goes on to highlight the various paradoxes that characterize Lucipo. Some of these are aesthetic; Howe writes, for example, that while the group leans towards the "post-avant," many

of its members express interest in more "traditional" approaches. Elsewhere, he affirms the group's paradoxical relationship to regionalism and place, arguing that there are "two Lucipos"—the online community, and the in-person community. Howe goes on to suggest, however, that these anachronisms—the indefinable messiness of the Lucifer Poetics Group—are precisely what make it a powerful, generative space:

For my part, I'm glad Lucipo is impossible to define with any accuracy—that means it lives. IT LIVES! Consider this a snapshot, at one radically specific moment in time, of what's going on in the group (whatever it is), a snapshot that represents only a sampler and not an exhaustive primer of the group's output, let alone the output of North Carolina poets in general.

If a literary group can be figured as "indefinable"—and if this indefinability is in direct correspondence with whether or not the group "lives"—the same can perhaps be said of the poetry in the portfolio. Indeed, the poems range from dense prose poems with Félix Guattari epigraphs; to quiet lyric poems with natural imagery; to documentary narrative poems; to experiments in syntax and diction. If there is a commonality between the works in the portfolio, however, it takes the form of a shared investment in this question of inassimilability, on the level of poetic language—its function as an opaque surface, versus its function as a container for meaning—as well as the role of language in narrative and group formation. Consider, for example, kathryn l. pringle's excerpt from *Right New Biology*:

the NEW HISTORY calling we writes for THEM, having had all story adjusted as

such, teach the peoples what they will KNOWS by rote repeating // no disclaimer
in time it will be not the NEW by THE. we, having drawn taut lines about the
Mindfulness as such GROUP identity, do not escape the FUNDAMENTALS of
who we is, who we is made to be :: one fiscal determinant. THERE being ONE
body we finds it by extension, the true satisfaction ist FINANCIAL IST accountable
to [berate the land // use destructivISMS // charge by sessions] :: wreckage
DISPENSE the factory forward-thinking sanctions dispute against THEY not we
calling all WINDs and CHIMES tunnel beneath fanfare//pipeline eruption.
the shining frustration that we is unsure contagion kultur not building and in wider
white having fury and calling them armed fighting with the WORD as
conquest // as aSERVICE

Both thematically and formally, pringle's writing resonates with the relationship between language, historicity, and hegemony. Juxtaposing capitalized words with prosaic, complex phrases with subordinate clauses (e.g., "we, having drawn taut lines about the Mindfulness as such"), pringle collides a legal-sounding vernacular with an attention to language as a material, sonic entity. The ecstatic capitalizations, in some instances, smoothly align with weighted abstractions (e.g. "NEW HISTORY"); in other instances, however, the reasoning behind offsetting individual words feels more unclear (e.g., "CHIMES"). The effect is a disruptive, textured surface—one which resists the ontological, epistemological orderings embedded in the normative sentence. The poem, however, does not exude a confidence that this subversion necessarily opposes hegemony. Rather, pringle's piece evokes an anxiety about the inability to divest language from state forces—a sense that the language of capitalist commodification

("kultur") and militarism ("armed fighting") is inescapable. "GROUP identity"—the subordination of the individual subject to the monolith; the precise notion of group formation that Howe's introduction opposes—is additionally made suspect. Another work in the portfolio—Chris Daniels' translation of "c:\polivox.doc," a work by Lucipo member Rodrigo Garcia Lopes, from Portuguese—expresses similar concerns about the ability of language to contain identity and history:

On-line. Shhh. "Epic is a poem

including history." Too much.

"What if a Health Plan

Could express

Your individuality?

You're not like everybody else.

Your individuality is something we like

and understand. Mean-

while, false

flowers, carrion, black

snow. "I don't look for what I find."

Language escapes:

Since when is ocean

Sky? Access denied.

Lopes's poem, as its title implies, is seemingly polyvocal in its pastiche of divergent voices and statements, ranging from the epigrammatic and factual (the Poundian "Epic is a poem / including history"); to clichés ("Language escapes"); to moments that feel directly lifted from commercial advertising ("What if a Health Plan / Could express / Your individuality?" or, later in the poem, an affirmative statement about the "power" and "performance" of Dell computers). But while the use of disruptive, decontextualized statements produces a sense of anxiety in pringle's work, here, it strikes a lighter, more playful tone—partially because of the humor in some of the lines (e.g., the later reference to Dell computers), but perhaps more so because of the heavy use of slant rhymes ("Sky"/"denied," "history"/"individuality," etc.), sonically connecting the otherwise disconnected statements.

In some ways, the heavy use of strange quotations, inserted without source or context (for example, later in the poem, "Poetry is the supreme virtual reality, girlfriend") resonates with Fredric Jameson's notion of pastiche—the postmodern tendency to use discordant fragmentation, reifying the ahistorical logic of late capitalism (25-28). In Lopes's poem, however—as in pringle's—the inescapability of capitalist language, and its contaminating logics, is precisely the point. Like Lucipo itself—which, as I have shown, formed by grafting itself onto pre-existing capitalist institutional networks—Lopes's poetics is not one of purity. (By virtue of being a translation, too, the poem literalizes the impossibility of an essential, individual language.) Rather, Lopes imbricates poetic language with the language of capitalism, and by the end of the piece, establishes an unsettling proximity between the lyric—as a site of emancipatory praxis—and the inescapability of capital:

THE EYE OPENS. THE EYE OPENS AND DEVIDES.

Air, to articulate,
like an animal leaving its nest.
Cinema of the Grotesque taught us
to configure an action, *black instant*, not a reflection
of reality
An apple floats in light: this its meaning.
("we accept credit cards")
that moves as one breathes, immediate,
while it looks at spirals Of time, rings Of smoke.
There's no escaping it.

If "the eye"—that Emersonian image of poetic subjectivity and transcendent possibility—both "OPENS" and "DEVIDES," the same can be said of poetry and its communal networks; even as poetic communities form strategies to ensure their own survival—methods of "opening" new possibilities of anti-institutional collectivity—they must mediate the divisive language and systems of capital.

Using Lucipo as a representative example, I have sought to foreground instances of this precise disjunction: between individual and community; between art and network; between poem as insular object and poem as material production; between poetic community and the broader public. Poetry, in the sense of its community and in its status as an aesthetic object, is characterized by a continual mediation of this perpetually shifting gap: poetry *is* community. It is also a fissure.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE COLLEGE TOWN POETRY READING SERIES

“as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place”
- Robert Duncan

In 2012, in an echoing theater in Iowa City, the poet Joyelle McSweeney stands in a neon pink spotlight on a mostly empty stage, limned by a wooden stool with a plastic water bottle resting on top. With her face close to the microphone, she introduces a sequence of poems titled “King Prion”—a meditation, she tells the audience, upon how capitalism’s proliferations of waste change the body: “Your skin, the water you drink, the carcinogens, the genetically modified food, all this stuff that swarms your interface and basically crashes it... But also changes you, and changes the person you are” (“Joyelle McSweeney”). Each poem, McSweeney goes on to explain, will begin with a high-pitched noise—“that’s a spirit coming to me,” she says, “so I can bring it to you.” (“Woo!” shouts an individual audience member in response.) After letting out a shriek, McSweeney launches into her first poem:

Lay in an array of pixels
Fat, simulated proteins
Looks just like nutrition!
Acts just like an avatar!
I just wanted to give my body to
A net of guarine
Gingko-balboa azatine melamine

Camphobacter phylacter nicotine
Which hung like neuron-nectar in a cell...
Fruit for monkeys in a barrel, one fruit per monkey
For a total of fortyseven monkeydays
For a total of twelve hours at a clip
The go-home-and-feed-the-baby milk of it
(*Percussion Grenade 21*)

McSweeney reads at a breathless, breakneck pace—making it challenging to follow the internal logic of the already allusive, relentlessly elliptical poem—but intermittently places her hands on her hips, elongating individual lines (such as the italicized “*Looks just like nutrition!*”) with a sing-songy, burlesque affectation. Mirroring this juxtaposition between lyric intensity and playfulness, the poem revels in sound-play in its litany of chemicals, and at times, verges on silliness—e.g., the absurd “one fruit per monkey... fortyseven monkeydays.” This sense of levity, however, is situated uncomfortably against the real, biochemical consequences of waste that the poem discloses. The title, after all, is a reference to the folded protein that causes neurodegenerative diseases such as Mad Cow, and—particularly given how much of McSweeney’s larger oeuvre deals with pregnancy—the final line of the above quotation reads as an allusion to the ubiquity of toxic chemical traces and carcinogens in breastmilk. As McSweeney’s sequence progresses, it gestures towards a broader tension between art and capitalist violence—poetry itself as a kind of mediation of waste—and links the pleasure of poetic production to the patriarchal hierarchies embedded within Western literary tradition (“Was it for this” McSweeney asks at one point [24], invoking a line that appears most famously

in the opening of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, but which also shows up in earlier texts such as Pope's *Rape of the Lock* and the *Aeneid* [Shore 399-401]).

If McSweeney's reading negotiates, in part, the relationship between artistic practice and the institutional cultures it responds to, this tension was also facilitated by the series itself where McSweeney's performance occurred—Strange Cage, a poetry reading series that existed in Iowa City from around 2010 to 2014. While it was originally started by Russell Jaffe, Lesley Wheeler, and Karl McComas-Reichl, Strange Cage eventually became Jaffe's personal brainchild, seeking to provide an alternative to what he perceived as the “cliquish” nature of the Iowa City poetry scene (Jaffe). Iowa City, of course, is best-known for the Writers Workshop, and in Jaffe's estimation, it was a cultural field in which vibrant but disconnected spheres of literary activity flourished: on one hand, he tells me, M.F.A. students organized numerous independent poetry readings in their homes—spaces which, Jaffe suggests, could feel exclusionary for individuals unaffiliated with the university; on the other hand, there was a longstanding open mic culture for locals who grew up in Iowa City. Strange Cage sought to bridge this gap between these disparate communities, while simultaneously showcasing the work of writers visiting through the Workshop's International Writers Program—a resource, Jaffe argues, that was largely ignored by other local independent reading series. A typical Strange Cage reading, then, might feature poets who were well-respected within U.S. small press circles (such as McSweeney), but also local Iowa City writers and visiting international luminaries, such as the Botswanan performance poet TJ Dema and the Indonesian writer Asma Nadia (Jaffe).

If Strange Cage sought to critique the insularity of Iowa City's academic poetry scene, it extended this critique through its approach to performance. Contrary to the sedate atmosphere that one sometimes associates with poetry readings, Jaffe aimed for Strange Cage to foreground

its own status as performative spectacle. It often relied upon unconventional venues—at neighborhood diners, vegan restaurants, and so on—and once, Jaffe tells me, he attempted (but failed) to organize a reading at a Buffalo Wild Wings location. Influenced by his lifelong obsession with professional wrestling, Jaffe took an over-the-top, high-energy approach to hosting events, aiming to cultivate the atmosphere of a “stadium poetry show” (Jaffe). Within the context of Iowa City, Strange Cage drew a large following, at least as far as poetry readings are concerned—some of the events had upwards of 100 audience members—and at the peak of its popularity, the series held several readings at the mid-size Englert Theater in Iowa City, where McSweeney performed (Jaffe).

This chapter traces the contours of an aesthetic form that is essential to small press poetic culture: the independent, college town poetry reading series, a performative practice that, I argue, stages a tension between institutional consecration and D.I.Y., subcultural activity. In a historical sense, Iowa City and the Writers’ Workshop form a crucible for many of the tensions I explore in this dissertation—between regional locality, transgeographic networks, collegiate culture, and histories of academic institutionalism. If the institutionalization of modernism was accompanied by a regional dislocation, Mark McGurl frames the Writers’ Workshop as the pinnacle of this phenomenon; despite being squarely in the middle of the American Heartland, the Workshop attempted, under the leadership of director Paul Engle, to become a diverse “prestigious *international* center for writers... [forming] a complex palimpsest of cultural geographies” (McGurl 150). In another sense, however, Strange Cage—as a series in Iowa City—is an exceptional example. In the context of “literary fiction,” Iowa City is perhaps the only institutional center rivaling the New York City publishing industry in terms of cultural hegemony, and few non-metropolitan locales can boast a critical mass of literary culture in the

way that Iowa City can. The reading series that I discuss in this chapter, rather, tend to deal with an inverse problem: rather than intervening within a vibrant preexisting literary culture, they aim to create poetic subculture where it might not otherwise exist. *Strange Cage*, nonetheless, presents an example of the way in which the independent poetry reading series—and small press poetic subculture more broadly—might graft onto the resources of academic institutions and their associated infrastructures. In an otherwise isolated geographic space, the university might function—as McGurl puts it—as a “social *technology*, a way of mobilizing human and other resources to achieve external ends” (151). While my case studies take place within the context of our digitally networked present, the independent reading series, I show, often initiates a dialog between locality and transgeographic poetic networks. Poetry makes space and is made by it.

I begin with a theorization of the contemporary poetry reading series, and then trace two incarnations of this form in contemporary rural locales: Open Mouth Reading Series in Fayetteville, Arkansas, and Trobar Ric Reading Series in Oxford, Mississippi. In this chapter, my arguments are indebted to the work of scholars of queer community—in particular, José Esteban Muñoz and Miranda Joseph. In citing this research, my intention is not to suggest that poetry community and queer community are somehow equivalent (though they can of course intersect, and often do). Rather, I draw from the way in which Muñoz and Joseph both refuse to frame community as a static, autonomous entity; community, for them, is interpellated through the material forces that surround it. For Muñoz in particular, performance marks a critique of the present—not a temporal transcendence, but rather, a form of imagining better, safer, and more equitable communities. At its best, I argue, the rural poetry reading series can enact a similar form of utopian imagining.

Forms of Intervention

In *Against the Romance of Community*, Miranda Joseph argues against the idea that “community” enacts a space external to the individualistic logics of capitalism. Rather, her Bourdieuan account suggests, community has an immanent, “supplementary relation” to capital. If value is produced when, in the moment of exchange, a commodity is abstracted from its use value, Joseph argues that *use* itself is a socially and historically contingent formulation. Far from being static concepts, “use” and “utility” are produced through “historically particular and differentiated social formations” (13)—that is to say, through forms of community. Community, Joseph goes on to write, “[seems] to express discontent, a longing for something missing from capitalism” (72), but its presence, nonetheless, is necessary to capitalism’s continual survival. In her argument, Joseph is particularly concerned with the way in which liberal deployments of “community” enact violence upon queer spaces, assimilating them to heteronormative logics. A major focus for Joseph is, for example, the way in which the non-profit industrial complex relies upon Romantic discourses of community. Not unlike the case studies that Joseph relies upon, U.S. poetry has its own industrial complex, in which universities, nonprofits such as Small Press Distribution, and organizations with massive endowments (i.e., the Poetry Foundation and the Association for Writers and Publishers) have a significant influence over what forms of poetry are perceived as legitimate. Within this context, the discursive deployment of “community” can often serve a similarly Romantic function, flattening the uneven historical-material forces that shape aesthetic legitimation. Joseph’s critique of community and, as I will show, her application of this critique in the specific context of performance, informs how I conceive of the poetry reading series in rural college towns, and especially, its relationship to academic institutions. I

begin, however, by providing a bit of background on the reading series as a general phenomenon, and later turn towards a definition of the “college town.”

The independent reading series is a crucial facet of small press material cultures and their economies, directly staging a dialog between poetry communities and broader publics. I define it as follows: a recurring, non-university-affiliated event—with its own name, and often, its own aesthetic identity—at which poets perform their work, and typically sell copies of their books or chapbooks. Reading series are “part of the public network that is a poem” (Middleton 266); as Jason Camlot and Darren Wershler suggest, they are deeply intertwined with material literary culture, “a ground against which writers, collectives, books, magazines and other cultural objects emerge” (“Theses on Discerning the Reading Series”). While poetry has been publicly read aloud for millennia, the contemporary reading series originated, as Toby Altman suggests, “as a radical response to the hierarchical structures of mid-century American writing” (116). Academic, mid-twentieth-century poetry readings, George Economou writes, were “something of a cross between a lecture and a dramatic-reading. Proscenium or podium oriented, they emphasized the distance between the poet and the audience,” and reached their apex in the form of Dylan Thomas’s famous reading tours in the U.S. (655). A variety of mid-century countercultural poets subverted this model: the Beat Generation poets, and especially their interest in jazz and blues (and perhaps most famously, Allen Ginsberg’s initial reading of *Howl* at Six Gallery in San Francisco); various Black Mountain poets who, following the model of Charles Olson’s “projective verse,” expressed a newfound investment in poetry as an embodied practice; and later, Paul Blackburn’s founding of the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church in 1966. These forms of readings, Altman argues, sought to challenge the formalized, academic nature of poetry readings typical of the New Critics (119), and went on to serve as a “blueprint”

for later avant-garde collectives (120). This conception of the modern poetry reading series—as a supposed departure from the values and infrastructures of academia—echoes the kind of narrative espoused by Donald Allen regarding *The New American Poetry*. As I show, however, the contemporary iteration of the reading series, even when unaffiliated with academic institutions, often stages a direct tension between two visions of small press poetry: on one hand, a countercultural approach that, in a long avant-garde tradition, attempts to build an autonomous creative space outside of normative capitalist structures; and on the other, a cultural practice that engages with the rhetoric of institutionally consecrated legitimacy. If the independent reading series, as I argue, *makes space* for contemporary poetry, it does so in two crucial ways: it makes a *discursive* intervention—challenging the epistemological values of dominant literary and academic institutions—as well as a literally *spatial* intervention, challenging the normative logics of capitalist geographies.

While the independent reading series is oriented towards oral delivery, its origins, Economou points out, are inseparable from textuality—from the proliferation of little magazines and small presses in the early and mid-sixties that sought to present alternatives to the mainstream literary establishment (654-655). Textuality continues to form an anchoring role in the context of the contemporary reading series, “bookending” the oral in one sense; typically, poetry readings begin with the host reading the biographies of the performers, listing their book and journal publications, and they end with sales of the performers’ books. This interplay between textuality and orality is essential to the discursive intervention that the independent reading series makes. As the performance studies scholar Diana Taylor has suggested, Western philosophical thought has generally placed a primacy upon writing and textuality, establishing a cultural logic whereby “the dominance of language and writing has come to stand for *meaning*

itself' (25), an emphasis which comes at the expense of embodied practices and forms of knowledge. Performance, Taylor argues, stages this epistemological tension between textuality and embodiment, which she recasts in the figure of *the archive* and *the repertoire*. In Taylor's formulation, the *archive* is an institutionalized collection of written texts that, in its feigning of objectivity, separates "the source of 'knowledge' from the knower" (19); knowledge is presented as transgeographic, disembodied, and universal. Conversely, the *repertoire* is embodied and localized, and is generally associated with "ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge" (20). To rely upon a theatrical example, the *archive* might take the form of a script of a canonical play, whereas the *repertoire* is an individual production, one which relies upon "embodied memory: performance, gestures, orality, movement" (20).

The archive/repertoire relationship forms a useful framework for considering how the independent poetry reading series works. Generally speaking, small press poets tend to read directly from written texts—either from books they have already published, or from manuscripts they hope to publish. Memorization is uncommon. However, following the mid-century Beat legacy, the independent reading is not a mere recitation; good readers know how to perform their work within the localized context of an individual audience, transforming their poetry into a form that is neither purely textual nor purely oral and performative. To exemplify the oral/textual interplay that characterizes the independent reading series, we might consider the work of Abraham Smith. Well-known in small press circles during the late aughts and 2010s for his highly performative reading style, Smith has produced a number of works concerned with rural life—for example, his books *Only Jesus Could Icefish in Summer* (Action Books, 2014) and *Destruction of Man* (Third Man Books, 2018) detail agricultural labor and his upbringing in rural Wisconsin, and an earlier work, *Hank* (Action Books, 2010), entails an experimental engagement

with the life of Hank Williams. Smith's work often takes the form of ecstatic, unpunctuated, passages that follow a sonically digressive logic:

with a cloven signature stray
come now with a voice
like a coffee table to steer
a picaresque with me
people ask where is
easy fingers on eyelids in dreams
twitch junk hills jump
in wars me i only lonely line difference
between that and heartbeats
bird versus fish
fist verse bomb wind

(Only Jesus Could Icefish in Summer 20)

Smith's live readings, however, take on a register that his work, in its textual form, might not necessarily invoke on its own. His performance style has often been described in religious terms. The poet Evan Gray, for example, likens Smith's reading style to that of a Pentecostal Baptist preacher, highlighting "his howling, his stammer, his pigeon-toed and cowboy-leaning stance" ("A Field's Worn in Rows"). Indeed, in his readings, Smith's voice takes on a warbling, rising-and-falling quality, and he often draws out the syllables of individual words and phrases in a half-sung, half-spoken register. He moves his body, meanwhile, throughout the duration of his

readings—he twitches and shakes, taps his feet, and often rhythmically tilts his weight from one side to another. Smith’s poetry enacts a direct dialog between the oral and textual—the archive and the repertoire—and if, following Gray’s observation, we choose to connect Smith’s writing to histories of Pentecostal preaching, we see the archive/repertoire dynamic mirrored in a different register: a tension between individual transcendence (being “saved,” speaking in tongues) and the absolute authority of the religious text—a gnostic “dialectic of rationality and subjectivity” (155) that, the sociologist George A. Thomas argues, reflects a broader “linking of an ineffectual individual to a larger source of power” (142) concomitant with the rise of global capitalism. Smith’s writing and performances circle around the text, in both an aesthetic and more broadly material sense. For Smith, the book serves as a platform of textual stability upon which he can exuberantly improvise during his live readings and, simultaneously, as the primary unit through which his work is discussed and circulated in the commodity form.

If the archive/repertoire relationship points towards a set of recurring binaries—localized versus transgeographic, grassroots versus institutional, ephemeral versus permanent, and so on—these discursive tensions, I will show, map onto the way in which the independent reading series engages with geography and institutional hegemony. The poetry reading series can take various forms, ranging from small-scale, D.I.Y. house readings with no budget, to longstanding events with nonprofit accreditation—in New York City, for example, the Segue Reading Series and the prestigious Poetry Project series at the St. Mark’s Church. As Altman writes, the *recurring* nature of the reading series is a particularly important element of its primacy within contemporary poetry circles, forming “institutions... offering regular sites for poets—and their ideas—to meet” (115). I would argue, further, that the recurring nature of the reading series helps establish and reproduce the *habitus* of contemporary poetry; that is, to rely upon Bourdieu’s

theorization of the term, the “shaping of the dispositions” of the avant-garde cultural field and its complex, invisibly interdependent relationship to institutions. In a Bourdieuan sense, the reading series, not unlike the modernist salon or little magazine, might create a form of symbolic capital, “providing incentives and gratification for emancipatory endeavors” (63).

While my reference to *independent* reading series attempts to distinguish them from university-sponsored readings (which are closer to academic lectures in their conventions), “independent” is, in some ways, a misnomer. As I will go on to show, these kinds of series are interpellated through a variety of institutional, economic, cultural, geographic, and infrastructural contingencies. The poetry reading series, for example, is a spatial practice, and as Peter Middleton writes, it often forms a dependent, provisional relationship with the spaces it inhabits:

Most avant-garde poetry readings take place in borrowed spaces—pubs, bars, lecture rooms, art galleries, halls, and theaters where the readers stumble over stage sets, talk above the noise of drinkers returning from the bar, or try to figure out how best to use a PA system installed for other purposes... Unplanned sound, material objects that insist upon other social purposes, obtrusive failures of attention, and an insistent temporariness, are common features of readings. The result can seem a deficit that might achieve finer results through better funding, organization, and audience behavior. The persistence of these momentary ascendancies of poetry in an everyday world that threatens at every instant to flood back in and reclaim the space for its everyday function suggests another possibility. Perhaps these intruders are really participants. (Middleton 270)

As Middleton suggests, the poetry reading stages a negotiation between subcultural art and the “everyday function” of its ambient space. Within the context of a geography shaped by capitalist logics, the reading series makes an intervention, carving out a space for poetry and poetic sociality—a space that, consciously or not, attempts to form an alternative to institutionally mandated communities. (Additionally, in a cultural moment in which the internet is the primary space through which poets interact, the reading series has a doubly social role, physically introducing poets who may have only known each other within online spaces.) In this sense, the independent reading series shares some similarities with Joseph’s theorization of community as a discursive construction; while it is decidedly imbricated with the infrastructures of capitalism, it contests the way it territorializes space and simultaneously “[longs] for something missing” from it (72). Because of poetry’s often economically precarious status, however, the reading series is frequently ephemeral and forced to use space in unconventional ways, as Middleton points out. Finding a sustainable venue for a reading series can be quite difficult. The most common venues for reading series are houses, bars, and galleries, and each have their own advantages and disadvantages. Houses can be social, intimate atmospheres, but they tend to be less accessible to the general public, and more often feel like private events. Bars can sometimes be sustainable venues—if the audience purchases enough drinks, the series organizers can form a mutually beneficial relationship with the business; however, bars are often too loud for readings, and can also make poets who are sober feel excluded (a significant concern, given the prevalence of substance abuse in poetry circles). Galleries are slightly less common than the other two venues, but can work effectively if the gallery can find a way to monetize the event (e.g., by selling drinks). In their smaller-scale iterations, poetry reading series are rarely able to pay their performers, and poets on tour typically depend on selling author copies (book copies that their

publisher gives them for free). For this reason, bookstores—with the occasional exception of stores with a poetry-specific focus (e.g., Berl’s Brooklyn Poetry Shop, or Woodland Pattern in Milwaukee)—tend to not be good venues for reading series, because they discourage private sales.

If, as I’m suggesting, the reading series stages a spatial intervention, this intervention is mediated by the local particularities of its geography: its population density, its culture, its climate, its economies, and so on. Oxford, Mississippi, for example, where I helped organize the Trobar Ric Reading Series, only had one art gallery, and of the twenty-or-so bars in town, nearly all of them were consistently populated by rowdy undergraduates. In that context, holding our readings in a house or a backyard made more sense. Conversely, in Ithaca, New York, where I ran a series in the production area of a brewery until the beginning of COVID-19, house and backyard readings were more-or-less out of the question; rent and housing prices in Ithaca are expensive and having an entire house at one’s disposal is uncommon for the non-wealthy (and the cold weather, of course, makes backyard readings impossible for much of the year). These variations notwithstanding, the reading series typically follows a standard pattern: three to five poets read in succession, usually for 10-20 minutes each, and the host introduces each reader, who reads their bio aloud (which lists details about their publications, their background, and often, their academic degrees). These tendencies form the standard practices of the poetry reading series, aligning with received cultural values associated with authorship and institutional legitimation. It is not uncommon, however, for reading series to make attempts—whether playfully or forcefully—to undermine these values. For example, members of Lucipo briefly organized a series titled the Mixtape Series, in which participants were only allowed to read poems written by other individuals. Toby Altman cites two different Chicago-based reading

series that aimed to disrupt the unspoken reproduction of poetic *habitus*. First, Absinthe and Zygote (which Altman helped organize) was a series that relied upon shifting, unconventional venues—laundromats, elevators, and the Chicago El, to name a few examples—and in doing so, attempted to “contest the relation between poetry reading and urban space... that often contributes to gentrification and its attendant injustices” (127). The second Chicago-based series that Altman cites, Red Rover, once held a reading at the 2012 Association for Writers and Publishers Conference where 60 different poets read simultaneously; as Altman writes, the room quickly devolved into individual clusters, “[recapitulating] the cliquishness of the conference itself... making it available for reflection and critique” (123).

A reading such as Altman’s Absinthe and Zygote, however—in its specifically self-reflexive relationship to urban space—responds to a different set of geographic concerns than those of my own project. In this chapter, I focus on reading series in locales that, depending upon one’s definition, might either be designated as either “rural” or “small-town” geographies—and that, most of the time, are oriented around a university as their primary locus of economic sustenance. Because college town reading series occupy spaces oriented towards one economically dominant institution, they showcase the tension between supposedly “grassroots” literary production and institutionalism in a highly legible way. But as a subject of study, the college town reading series invites not only an analysis of the intertwinement between subculture and institution, but also of the historic relationship between U.S. universities and rural geographies.

As the sociologist Blake Gumprecht argues, the “college town”—which he defines as a place where the “impact of collegiate culture is concentrated and conspicuous,” and where the number of enrolled college students comprises at least 20% of the population (1-2)—is to some

extent a U.S. phenomenon (16). The U.S. college town is historically intertwined with religious settler colonial imperatives; religious groups were responsible for the vast majority of colleges established prior to the Civil War, and further, “college founders believed that a quiet, rural setting, away from the evils of city life, was the only proper environment for learning” (Gumprecht 18). The college towns I specifically discuss in this chapter, Fayetteville, Arkansas and Oxford, Mississippi, are directly shaped by histories of colonial occupation and capitalist violence: the University of Arkansas, a public land-grant university, occupies “public domain lands” that, beginning with the Morrill Act of 1862, were violently seized from indigenous populations (Lee and Ahtone); the University of Mississippi, while not a land-grant university, was created with the specific intention of preserving the plantation economy (a history I will go on to discuss in greater detail). In our contemporary neoliberal moment, these college towns—along with Ithaca, New York, the home of another land-grant university where I write this dissertation—economically benefit from property tax exemption and lax zoning laws that worsen local housing crises. The college town reading series instrumentalizes the resources and infrastructures that the university, as a “social technology,” can provide—and does so, often, in innovative and subversive ways—but accordingly, it also initiates a dialog, conscious or not, between subcultural artistic practice and institutional histories of colonial dispossession, exploitation, and exclusion.

Making Space in Arkansas

In 2016, I was doing a tour of readings before my first book came out, and the Open Mouth Reading Series was the first stop. At the time, the regular venue for the series was The

Nines, a dimly lit wine bar located off a wooded footpath, housed within a tiny building with sheet metal walls. The bar had mismatched chandelier lighting and a decently sized crowd packed into the space, with many audience members sitting on floor pillows. I was introduced to the two poets who, at the time, were the series organizers—Molly Bess Rector and M.D. Myers, both poetry M.F.A. students at the University of Arkansas. Unlike the standard format of the independent reading series, Open Mouth only showcased one “featured” reader per event (usually a poet from outside of Fayetteville), but paired them with ten local “opening” readers—a kind of pseudo-open mic, with each reader presenting one poem each. (The intention behind this strategy, Rector jokingly tells me, was to ensure that each reading was attended by at least ten people [personal interview].) The space was tight, so rather than setting up a separate merch table, audience members approached me directly after the reading to purchase the broadsides I was selling to offset the costs of my tour. The physical proximity between everyone facilitated conversation and energy, mitigating the middle-school-dance-like social awkwardness that can sometimes arise at poetry readings.

While the intention behind Open Mouth’s “opening reader” feature may have been to draw a crowd—and, as I later learned, it was a strategy that Rector and Myers inherited from Matt Henriksen, a Fayetteville poet who had run several local series previously—it also exemplifies a characteristic of Open Mouth that distinguishes it from many other independent reading series: its explicit investment in building literary community within Fayetteville itself (Rector). While the independent reading series always stages a dialog between the civilian public and the insular transgeographic network of small press poets, Open Mouth did not privilege one of these audiences over the other. Contrary to the impetus that one might assume behind the rural reading series—a mechanism that exposes a supposedly isolated locale to external literary

influence—Open Mouth explicitly aimed to provide a platform and audience for members of the Fayetteville community. As Bailey Hutchinson, a former Assistant Director of the series tells me, “a core value of Open Mouth is that there is merit here already. This region is rich with powerful voices” (Hutchinson). This conviction led towards a free-ranging, heterogeneous aesthetic that other series might have avoided (including, for example, building connections with the long-standing slam poetry community in Fayetteville [Rector]), and further, had a significant influence upon the trajectory that the series would take—which, compared to the many ephemeral reading series run by M.F.A. students across the U.S., is rather atypical.

Towards the end of 2017, about two years after the series began, Open Mouth became a federal 501(c)(3) nonprofit, with the pro-bono help of the nonprofit legal clinic at the University of Arkansas Law School. This gave the loose nature of Open Mouth a more formalized organizational structure, with by-laws and a Board of Directors. This development, Rector suggests, was primarily motivated by a desire to be able to receive donations, and thus, to pay their readers—both as a matter of principle, and also in an effort to broaden the pool of poets they could invite. While low-budget independent poetry reading series are typically restricted to hosting poets who are either regionally located, or on a book tour, becoming a nonprofit allowed Open Mouth to invite readers from across the U.S. for one-off events. Following the origins of its nonprofit status, Open Mouth transformed from an amorphous collective to something more properly resembling a literary institution: the organizers developed a website; they began hosting monthly workshops, as well as the Open Mouth Literary Festival, which has since occurred annually (and virtually, during COVID-19); and they organized summer poetry retreats with well-known poets serving as invited faculty.

In 2020, nonprofit literary organizations became the subject of intense scrutiny within the

U.S. small press poetry world, largely because of widely publicized labor malpractices on the part of two longstanding poetry institutions: in Berkeley, California, a former employee of Small Press Distribution anonymously accused the organization director of wage theft and workplace discrimination (Green); and in New York City, Poets House—a large poetry library and literary center—abruptly ceased operations and laid off its staff members, many of whom have argued that the closure was a response to their efforts to unionize (“Former Poets House Workers”). On social media, these events were the fuel for a broader conversation about the forms of exploitation that frequently arise within the world of literary nonprofits. As one Twitter user wrote regarding the labor malpractices at SPD,

So much of this - the gaslighting, the deliberate isolation, the expectation that you'll put in extra time for "the love of it," the pushing of boundaries, the virtue signaling, the passive aggression - is so familiar from my time in the book industry. Something's gotta be done. (@cheesethesecond)

These critiques of literary nonprofits—which place their supposedly benevolent aims at odds with their often exploitative, capitalistic demands of workers—mirror many of the arguments that Miranda Joseph makes in her critiques of the nonprofit industrial complex, and in particular, her suggestion that nonprofits maintain a “constitutive” relationship to capitalism (100).

Certainly, the state-mandated, formalized nature of the nonprofit model can seem at odds with the kind of grassroots, avant-garde organization I illuminate elsewhere in this dissertation. On the other hand, even supposedly “independent” avant-garde poetry endeavors often form an invisibly interdependent relationship with larger bourgeois institutions. Maintaining nonprofit

status, for Open Mouth, is directly intertwined with the kind of intervention it is able to make within the community of Fayetteville, a geographic space whose cultural field maintains a complex relationship to various kinds of hegemonic institutions—private, academic, and non-profit.

In the time that she lived in Fayetteville and participated in Open Mouth, Hutchinson tells me, “I was watching a place I understood to be a college town in the Ozarks become more commodified and gentrified” (personal interview). In some respects, Fayetteville functions nearly like a microcosm for the disparate tensions that characterize non-metropolitan small press poetry. With a population of just under 100,000 residents, it is the third-largest city in Arkansas, and the largest in the Arkansas Ozarks. It is a space of Southern poetic history, both subcultural and institutional: as I discuss in Chapter 2, Fayetteville is the space where experimental poets Frank Stanford and C.D. Wright first cultivated an audience, founding Lost Roads Press; it is also the home of the University of Arkansas M.F.A. program, one of the oldest creative writing programs in the country. The art community in Fayetteville is poised between two separate (but often interrelated) influences. First, the University, which, like many other R1 state schools, has a powerful college football program upon which the local economy depends. Secondly, Fayetteville is just 25 miles south of Bentonville, where the headquarters of both Walmart and the Walton Family Foundation are located. The latter entity, a nonprofit organization, is perhaps best-known for dumping tremendous sums of money into charter school education. In the last decade, however, the Walton Family Foundation—at the behest of Alice L. Walton, the Walmart heiress—has invested a substantial amount of money into the arts in northwestern Arkansas.

Most notably, perhaps, was the opening of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville in 2011—an institution with an \$800 million endowment, boasting a vast

collection and on-site buildings designed by Buckminster Fuller and Frank Lloyd Wright. Much of the discourse surrounding the opening of Crystal Bridges, both within scholarly and popular contexts, circled around the supposedly paradoxical notion of a world-class art museum located in a rural (and especially Southern, and politically conservative) locale. As Nile K. Blunt, Crystal Bridges' current Head of School Programs writes, "The idea that the first major institution in fifty years dedicated to the vast spectrum of American art was set to open in a town whose population was then less than 40,000 residents scandalized the art world" (148). More recent conversation around the museum has emphasized the racially diverse nature of its collection, with an article in *The Washington Post* proclaiming it as "the most 'woke' museum in America" (Kennicott).

Within Fayetteville proper, the Walton Family Foundation gave the University of Arkansas a \$120 million grant in 2017 to establish a School of Art, the largest donation to establish an art school in U.S. history ("Visionary Gift"). Additionally, the Foundation provided the funding to begin Artists 360, a program that provides grants to artists, writers, and performers throughout northwest Arkansas ("About"). While the Walton family has long been financially involved in the Fayetteville community, numerous locals have expressed to me that the effect of the Foundation's recent investments in the art community cannot be overstated—leading, in particular, to a broader "culture of professionalizing the arts" (Rector). While Open Mouth itself never directly received any money from Artists 360 or the Walton Family Foundation, we might read its decision to become a nonprofit within the context of this broader cultural field.

Becoming a nonprofit—and, more broadly, becoming a legible cultural institution within the Fayetteville arts community—has led to more collaboration and engagement with other art and literary organizations in Fayetteville. Perhaps more importantly, it has provided an infrastructure

for the continued existence of Open Mouth and the accountability of its volunteers—or, as Rector phrases it, “a reason to keep going.” Similarly, Hutchinson suggested to me that Open Mouth “would not still be here if it wasn’t a nonprofit.”

If Open Mouth transformed from a “provisional” institution into a permanent one, it also—though not necessarily antagonistically—situates its own aesthetic and political intervention against the dominant values of the University of Arkansas Creative Writing program, and those of creative writing workshops more broadly. Hutchinson argues that Open Mouth maintained a non-competitive relationship with the University-affiliated reading series, and that “they felt like benevolent coexistent things.” Open Mouth, indeed, organized several book launches for University faculty and staff members and, on various occasions, received monetary support from the English Department for one-off events (Rector). On the other hand, both Rector and Hutchinson directly situate Open Mouth’s communal intervention against the supposedly “podium-oriented” nature of academic readings, destabilizing the vision of the poet as a distant, consecrated figure—aiming to “offer something to the community that isn’t on campus and isn’t exclusive” (Rector), and that allows contact between the reader and the audience. Further, Hutchinson draws a direct correlation between her interest in the independent reading series and her own disenchantment with academic poetry culture at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, where she received her undergraduate degree:

I had such a bad time in workshop... [The professor] didn’t seem to care about us or having interactions with us. Our workshops were never paradigm pushing or challenging. Inevitably all the straight white men took up lots of space... I felt like I was struggling. I was floating. I knew I wanted to be involved with poetry somehow,

but I didn't know where to reach.

Shortly after her graduation, Hutchinson came across a Facebook event for Impossible Language, a Memphis-based independent reading series run by poet Ashley Roach-Freiman, an M.F.A. student at the University of Memphis. Hutchinson attended the reading—headlined by poet Ada Limón—and credits this experience for sparking her interest in becoming directly involved in small press poetry culture (and later, helping organize Open Mouth):

It was life-changing... Ada was not like, "I'm just the one who knows what I'm doing and you're just the audience." It was warm, approachable, discursive. It was different [from] that austere old dead white guy space I'd seen before.

The critiques embedded in this observation—interweaving the exclusive and hierarchical nature of academic creative writing spaces with white, patriarchal values—directly align with the commitments expressed in their mission:

A foundational element of the reading series is our dedication to making poetry inclusive, a communal event shared by professionals and dabblers, those who've been in the game for decades as well as those just starting out. Inclusivity extends also to our mission of equity, and we endeavor to make space for poets of color, queer poets, and any whose voices need to be amplified. ("Open Mouth Poetry Retreat")

These goals, further, are visible within Open Mouth's individual events. Consider, for example, a

2017 reading archived on YouTube, featuring the poets Dennison Ty Schultz and Courtney Fund. While other featured readers during Open Mouth's 2017 programming season included various poets who had received awards and critical acclaim—including, for example, Ashley M. Jones, Rebecca Gayle Howell, and Shira Erlichman—Schultz and Fund, at least at the time of their reading, had received little in the way of institutional consecration. A Google search for Courtney Fund's name yields almost nothing; Schultz, a nonbinary poet from Arkansas, is presently an MFA student living in Kansas City. Rather than each poet reading onstage in isolation—the standard convention of the vast majority of poetry readings, whether academic or not—both poets stand alongside each other in front of the crowd, taking turns reading individual poems. In an effort to informally engage with the audience, the majority of their poems begin with contextual prefaces—one of Schultz's poems, they explain to the readers, is an ekphrastic response to a Félix González-Torres piece housed at Crystal Bridges—and the poets, apparently friends, at one point directly discuss the relationship between their friendship and their poetry. As Fund states, "It's crazy because Dennison and I are such great friends and we edit each other's poems—like, all of them—but our poetics are so different."

The poems they present are indeed quite different: Fund's work takes an explicitly narrative approach, relying upon first-person descriptions of personal experience; Schultz's, meanwhile, is more lyric, elliptical, and allusive (their reading begins, for example, with a sequence of poems comprised of erasures of Classical texts). The primary commonality between the poets is not aesthetic so much as identarian and thematic. Both present work directly engaging with themes of gender and sexuality, a fact that the prefaces to their poems make clear: Fund describes one of her poems as a "coming-out story," for example, and another is a response to the #MeToo movement; Schultz states that one of their works is about "coming to terms with

[their] own gender fluidity,” and another responds to their experience of attending Pride in San Francisco with Fund.

Even while Open Mouth situates itself against aspects of institutional creative writing spaces—attempting to cultivate, for example, a tone of informal sociality, and challenging the centralization of white, male, cishetero perspectives—its programming often directly engages with cultures and practices that would feel at home in academic creative writing workshops. While the reading by Schultz and Fund is far less formal than the “podium-like” nature of midcentury poetry readings, its focus on foregrounding poetry as a vehicle for identitarian representation resonates with McGurl’s claim that academic creative writing and its associated forms (in particular, the anthology) are intertwined with cultural pluralist imperatives—while the academic creative writing workshop has long been criticized for centralizing whiteness,⁴³ the U.S. university, McGurl argues, was also an influential force in building “the symbolic connection of minority writers to a global pluralist space” (331). Beyond this individual reading, Open Mouth’s recent programming—which, in the wake of COVID-19, has shifted online—has increasingly slanted towards pedagogical exercises that arise frequently within academic creative writing classrooms. Their online 2021 Fall Poetry Festival, for example, included readings by individual poets, but also a craft workshop on two poetic forms: the “contrapuntal,” and the “persona poem”—both of which mirror the common pedagogical exercise of learning practicing specific poetic forms in creative writing workshops.⁴⁴ On their social media accounts, too, Open Mouth posts writing prompts that feel directly lifted from creative writing lesson plans—e.g.,

⁴³ See, for example, Junot Diaz’s widely read “MFA vs. POC” in *The New Yorker*, 30 April 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mfa-vs-poc>.

⁴⁴ For example, see Rebecca Hazelton’s essay for teachers, “Learning the Persona Poem” (*Poetry*, 9 May 2014, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70117/teaching-the-persona-poem>): “By focusing class discussion on what employing a persona allows an artist to do, you may find productive conversation about what we think we can do in art.”

“Write a poem while you are eating your next meal. Describe the food in detail: textures, sounds, smells, etc. What does this food remind you of?” (@omliterary).

As a case study, Open Mouth serves as one example of an independent reading series that seeks to destabilize the hierarchical nature of the academic poetry reading, and does so through complex forms of negotiation with institutional entities—academic, nonprofit, and capitalist. Unlike numerous avant-garde projects, past and present, Open Mouth does not feign autonomy from these entities; rather, its survival and legibility is specifically dependent upon its nonprofit status, and, consciously or not, it adopts some aspects of creative writing academic milieus while discarding others. By virtue of its marginal status, poetic subculture, regardless of its geographic locale, always entails an engagement with and against the forces of academia, capitalism, and the state. Within the centralized, non-metropolitan cultural field of Fayetteville, however, the entities that wield capital, whether symbolic or material, are strikingly visible. Open Mouth’s position within this field, further, foregrounds the significant difference between older iterations of the university as a site for poetic sociality—e.g., the postwar, G.I. Bill—era Harvard that incubated the New York School—and the contemporary neoliberal university. Following the turn towards economic deregulation that began in the U.S. with Ronald Reagan’s presidency, the university, Wendy Brown has shown, has become increasingly business-oriented in its administration and cultural values—a stark contrast, she argues, from the supposedly benevolent humanist project of the university in decades past:

once about developing intelligent, thoughtful elites and reproducing culture, and more recently, enacting a principle of equal opportunity and cultivating a broadly educated citizenry, higher education now produces human capital, thereby turning classically

humanist values on their head. (24)

Brown goes on to describe the mid-century postwar university as the “golden age for public higher education” and especially for the liberal arts (180). Various scholars—perhaps most notably, Annie McClanahan—have rightly critiqued this aspect of Brown’s account, arguing that the university has always been subject to the demands of capital and the production of workers (McClanahan 514). (Moreover, the midcentury university was hardly geared towards “equal opportunity” when considered through the lens of race, class, and gender.) For the purposes of my own study, however, Brown’s narrative usefully discloses how neoliberalism has reshaped the university’s occupation of geographic space—a tendency that has significant effects on the kind of poetic activity this chapter theorizes:

New “enterprise zones” [encircle] public universities, where businesses large and small will make direct use of university goods, including research, technology, consultants, and cheap student labor. Not only does this vision pose a striking contrast with the classic university-town ambiance of cafés, bookshops, pubs, and thrift stores, it literalizes as it spatializes the domination of the university by the needs and purposes of capital and spatializes as well the merging of business, state, and academe. (198)

The rise of Walmart forms a classical example of post-Fordist global capitalism, and indeed, for Brown, Walmart’s business practices serve as the gold standard for neoliberal imperatives (211). The University of Arkansas—and, by extension, the town of Fayetteville

itself—maintain a reciprocal relationship with Walmart and its multinational financial interests, exemplifying the “merging of business, state, and academe” that Brown describes. The Walton family, Rector tells me, “has always had a hand in Fayetteville.” It is within this specifically neoliberal context, directly intertwined with Fayetteville’s “culture of professionalizing of the arts” (Rector), that Open Mouth’s intervention should be understood. If the goal for many postwar avant-garde writers, however futilely, was to attain autonomy from both the university and systems of capital, Open Mouth contends with a neoliberal cultural field where these forces are inseparable—where the interests of Walmart and the University are often one and the same. For Open Mouth, the key to surviving and thriving within this context was working towards institutional legitimacy and longevity. In the next section, I turn towards a different case study—my own experience of co-organizing the Trobar Ric Reading Series in Oxford, Mississippi. While Trobar Ric shared similar goals to Open Mouth—in particular, the ideal of forming an alternative to the hierarchical realm of academic readings—its eventual trajectory was strikingly different, veering more towards disorganization and ephemerality.

Making Space in Mississippi

It’s fall in Oxford, Mississippi, football season, and I’m in the third year of my M.F.A. program at the University of Mississippi. I’m in the backyard of the Garden House, a single-family rental home that, for the last decade or so, has been passed down by M.F.A. students. It has three bedrooms, it’s in decent shape, and the rent is only \$1,100 a month—a bargain on the \$11,500-a-year graduate stipends we receive. It’s a ten-minute walk from Rowan Oak (Faulkner’s former home), and a twenty-five-minute walk from the University. It sits at the end

of a cul-de-sac off South 18th Street, a residential street on the eastern side of town, dotted with an array of ranch-style homes with carports—inhabited mostly by families, but also by the occasional cluster of drunk undergraduates who spend their days sitting on their roofs and shouting at passersby. I live just down the street from the Garden House. One of its current residents, Andrew, is an avid gardener, hence the house’s nickname. In the lush, densely overgrown backyard limned with bamboo and pricklers, there’s a massive garden with homemade fencing; a half-working neon sign stolen from the dumpster behind Walmart; a chicken coop; and a shed that Andrew uses as a painting studio, attached to a carport with a dirt floor and a decrepit, sloping roof. It’s October 2015, and we’re setting up a podium and plugging in lamps and Christmas tree lights. This is the venue for Trobar Ric, a poetry reading series that’s been around since sometime in the late 2000s. My partner Kina Viola and I are its current organizers and curators, but the series was originally started by the poet Tim Earley with the intention of providing an alternative to on-campus departmental readings, which tended to only feature mid-



Figure 4.1

A handmade sign and a Trobar Ric performance by the poet Natalie Eilbert.

or late-career poets who had already received institutional consecration (Earley). The name of the series is a term taken from French troubadour poetry that literally means “rich verse” and, according to Earley, was intended to invoke a third way between the discourses of academic legitimation (*trobar clus*, “difficult verse”) and mainstream acceptability (*trobar leu*, “light verse”) (Earley).

Three blurry video clips from an outdoor Trobar Ric reading in November 2013—featuring poets C. Violet Eaton, Sara Nicholson, and Krystal Languell—depict a fairly typical iteration of the series. The poets stand behind the makeshift podium, reading off printer paper in the light of a citronella candle. The audience sits on folding metal chairs, clustered closely together, with the front row just a few feet away from the reader. All three poets employ a deadpan affect, announcing clearly against the loud crickets in the background. Many of the poems they read are driven by declarative sentences teetering between humor and seriousness, punctuated by chuckles or a *hmm* from individual audience members. In the recording of Nicholson, she presents her poem—a pithy rumination on language and death titled “The Republic”—through an informal, self-deprecating affect, beginning by stating, “‘The Republic.’ I don’t know why it’s called that,” a statement that yields laughter from the audience. Similarly, she ends her poem with a jokey, improvised last line—“How it guides me to this valley / How it prances / My horse my horse my horse / Of course,” before stating, “it doesn’t actually end ‘of course.’” Nicholson’s delivery mirrors the tension between self-deprecation and self-seriousness that shapes much of her work, and further, her choice to poke fun at the stilted nature of her poem’s Plato-inflected title feels particularly suited to her audience—a group of individuals who, for the most part, were M.F.A. students or otherwise participants in small press poetry subcultures. Languell’s recorded poem—a rumination on poverty and teaching—similarly speaks

to the shared experiences of the audience members, most of whom were either underpaid graduate instructors or contingent faculty:

Were you ever the poor kid
I'm spending all the ideas about security on nice food
Hothouse flower doing dangerous work, prematurely
A man asks me if I was a schoolteacher
"I'm not sure," I said
He said, "That's what it means"

Moments like this, in which readers attempted to intimately connect with the shared experiences of an attentive, quiet audience, are fairly representative of what Trobar Ric tended to entail. Other readings, however, were sometimes more raucous than this one. On some occasions, there was drunken heckling on the part of audience members; on others, the readers more forcefully challenged the conventions of the literary reading, soliciting audience participation or incorporating bizarre distractions (an audience member, at the request of the performing poet, once set off a smoke bomb during a reading). Sometimes graduate students with no investment in poetry whatsoever would arrive, thinking they were attending a house party; other times, confused undergraduates would show up to receive extra credit for their Introduction to Creative Writing courses. Trobar Ric was a literary event, but unlike Open Mouth, it was much less public-facing, and was more focused on providing entertainment for a specific group of people associated with the University's M.F.A. program and English Department. Further, it lacked the institutional stability or coherency that comes with non-profit

status; there were no bylaws, and there was no written aesthetic program, mission statement, or website. The vision of the series, then, was subject to the proclivities of the individuals who organized it—poets in the M.F.A. program, mostly, with the program’s yearly turnover providing new students who might be interested in helping to organize the series.

During its nearly ten years of existence, Trobar Ric formed a complex family tree: Earley held the first reading at a gallery in nearby Water Valley, MS, and when he moved away from Oxford, he passed on its leadership to the poet Michael Martin Shea, who moved it into a backyard format. Shea would typically invite three touring poets (generally, poets who had already published at least one book), and pair them with a second-year student in the M.F.A. program. Shea graduated from the M.F.A. program and moved away in 2014; Earley moved back to Oxford and regained leadership—this time, with his partner, the poet Jessica Comola. Jessica and Tim moved to Denver in 2015, and then passed the baton to Kina and me. We ran it for a year before we moved to Ithaca, and passed it onto our friends Maggie and Jeffrey; they passed it onto another trio of poets in 2017; the following year, it was passed onto two other poets. The last I heard, its current organizers transformed it into a series specifically for M.F.A. students to showcase their own work, with no outside readers; or, perhaps with the advent of COVID-19, it’s fizzled away completely.

While Trobar Ric had a charmingly unconventional venue, with chickens and dogs running around at readings, there was otherwise nothing terribly unique about its approach to poetic performance. In urban spaces such as New York City or the Bay Area, certainly, there are numerous reading series that rely upon a nearly identical format. As a case study for specifically rural literary organization, however, Trobar Ric *is* exemplary in how it engaged with the conditions of its own geographic locality. First, Trobar Ric placed Oxford poets in dialog with a

transregional, infrastructurally linked network of independent reading series in the surrounding area: to the north in Memphis, there was Impossible Language; to the west in Fayetteville, there was Open Mouth; and to the south in New Orleans was the Blood Jet Reading Series, hosted in a dive bar by poet Megan Burns. When visiting poets organized tours through the South, they would frequently drive down I-55 from Memphis to New Orleans, with Impossible Language, Trobar Ric, and Blood Jet serving as stops along the way; other times, they would read at Impossible Language and then head west on I-40 to Open Mouth Reading Series. With the exception of Blood Jet, all of these series were enabled in some way by academic affiliation (while Memphis is hardly a college town, Impossible Language was run by MFA students at the University of Memphis). As series organizers, we would communicate with each other extensively—there was an active Facebook group, at one point, for poetry readings in the South—and hosts would frequently read at each others' series. Importantly, these series often had little in common in terms of their aesthetic visions. Rather, we were united by our shared regional space, and (in most cases) by virtue of the fact that we ran the only independent reading series in our respective towns. This characteristic distinguishes these series strongly from those in larger metropolitan spaces where, by virtue of there being a greater critical mass of individuals interested in poetry, cliques are able to form, and poets organize readings that cater towards specific aesthetic and/or ideological approaches.⁴⁵

Beyond Trobar Ric's active role in Southern regional poetry networks, its intervention must also be understood in relation to its own local geographic space of Oxford, Mississippi. I

⁴⁵ To name a few examples: the plethora of readings in the Bay Area that specifically cater towards leftist avant-garde poetry (e.g., Small Press Traffic, where New Narrative was incubated beginning in the late '70s); conceptual and innovative writing -focused series in New York City (e.g., the Segue Reading Series, the now-defunct Copula Reading Series at Wendy's Subway, and so on); and longstanding poetry slams in many cities (e.g., the Boston Poetry Slam at the Cantab Lounge, or the regular slam at the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York).

and my collaborators saw the series as an alternative to the ideological values of two larger entities: the University of Mississippi's M.F.A. program, and the University of Mississippi more generally—a institution I will take a moment to contextualize. To non-Mississippians, the University of Mississippi—more commonly known as “Ole Miss”—carries two cultural associations: first, college football; and second, a history of racial exclusion that famously reached its climax in 1962 with the enrollment of James Meredith, the first Black student at the previously segregated university, an event which led to violent riots on the part of white students. While Meredith's enrollment at the University of Mississippi is considered to be a watershed moment within U.S. civil rights history, the institution's relationship to white supremacy is much older—the first university in the state, the University of Mississippi was established in 1841 with the explicit goal of preserving white supremacist, localist, upper-class hegemony. It was originally intended to be a space where the state's elite slave-owning class could send its children to receive an education without running the risk of being exposed to abolitionist ideas at Northern universities (Eagles 15-16). After the Civil War, towards the end of the 19th century, students began to refer to the University as “Ole Miss.” Originally the name of the university's yearbook, *ole miss* is a term of antebellum nostalgia, echoing the nickname that slaves supposedly gave to the wife of the plantation owner (Sansing 118-119). (The University continues to use this name in various official capacities, and as a graduate student, I—like all other members of the University community—had an academic email address ending in @olemiss.edu.) By the 1960s, the historian Charles Eagles writes, the University was more of a “social and cultural institution” than a space of intellectual inquiry (14); as a kind of finishing school for the Mississippi aristocratic class, it aimed to “perpetuate conformity” rather than expose students to new ideas (16).

While the University has undoubtedly gone through significant changes in the decades since Meredith's enrollment, it is difficult not to see a continuity between its present and its explicitly racist, reactionary past. Currently, the University's enrollment is more than 75% white students, despite being the flagship university of Mississippi, the U.S. state with the largest African American population. During the three years I attended the University, it made national news at least three times: first, when members of the football team began shouting homophobic slurs during a theatrical production of *The Laramie Project* (Abad-Santos); second, when three fraternity members placed a noose around the neck of the James Meredith statue that has stood at the center of campus since 2006 (Blinder); and third, when a small group of dedicated student activists successfully rallied to have the then-official state flag—which featured a Confederate insignia in its corner—removed from the University campus (Sanburn), a move that caused aggressive backlash and threats of violence towards the involved organizers. Beyond these large-scale controversies, the University's white, upper-class Greek Life majority tended to perpetuate conformity and racist, heteropatriarchal values in a more ambient fashion; having homophobic slurs yelled at me from luxury pickup trucks was, for example, a daily occurrence.

This was the backdrop of the University of Mississippi's English Department and M.F.A. program, and the majority of our professors—who listened to public radio, drove hybrid cars, voted for Democrats, and so on—saw themselves in opposition to this larger conservative culture. During the time I was in the program, however, the prevailing attitude among poetry graduate students was that while the professors were not outright conservatives, many were guilty of upholding white supremacist, capitalist values, both through the writing that they published and—via an admittedly puerile, Sillaminian opposition to so-called “official verse culture”—through the forms of poetry they perceived as legitimate. The University of

Mississippi's M.F.A. program, at the time, championed aesthetic values that grew out of the postwar inheritors of New Critical ideals, placing a primacy on narrative approaches with a stable, identifiable poetic speaker. The best example of this tendency, perhaps, was the pedagogical approach of Dave Smith, a poet-critic who held a visiting professorship that overlapped with the three years I attended the program. During the fall of 2013, every poet in my M.F.A. cohort enrolled in Smith's graduate poetry workshop, an experience that would significantly influence the curatorial approach we later took through Trobar Ric.

Within the world of creative writing academia, Smith is best-known, perhaps, for his steadfast defense of the M.F.A. workshop. In his 1985 essay "Notes on Responsibility and the Teaching of Creative Writing," he outlines his own pedagogical philosophies and argues in defense of academic creative writing programs more broadly. Smith begins by invoking his background as a high school football coach, and argues that, like effective coaching, the creative writing instructor does not work within the realm of theoretical abstraction: "graphs, statistics, playbacks, diagrams, devices of measurement, or theory," Smith suggests, will "lead only to a hypothetical man, not a man in action" (216). The effective instructor, rather, helps "people see what they were and what they might be, not as the hypothetical average, but as individuals in the living dramatic context" (217). Echoing the old workshop adage of "showing, not telling," Smith asserts that the instructor should not *tell* us about "honoring civilized virtues" but should "[show] them to us" (217). Smith situates the significance of the creative writing program within a long history of mentorship and workshop models, that—beginning with examples such as Michelangelo's apprenticeships (223), pre-Socratic philosophers, and the Scriblerus Club (221)—significantly predates the institutionalized form of the M.F.A. workshop. The majority of Smith's essay, however, is spent arguing for the moral responsibility of the contemporary

creative writing instructor:

In writing one enters into the dynamic and dramatic engagement of life as it rises to representation in art. The good teacher of creative writing is in the position of testing the value and validity of that representation, hence of moral, ethical, social, and cultural values... If the teacher of creative writing does not know what a good man is then he will not know what art is... The good of creative writing is the good of art itself: it creates receptive, perceptive, discriminating critics of what is true and false in the world, and it may result in great images of individual and communal health.

(233)

Even while Smith begins his essay by arguing for the emotive power of concrete particulars, his argument curiously relies upon many undefined abstractions. At one point, for example, he writes that “the end of teaching is to reveal, test, and reaffirm the values by which men have found it possible not merely to survive but to live with dignity” (217).

While Smith never outright states what he means by “dignity,” he provides several examples of what it might look like in the workshop; the teacher of creative writing stands, apparently, against contemporary mass culture (“the shallow and delusionary images perpetrated by television, and movies, and pulp books” [224]), as well as against political radicalism (“the anarchists and polemicists of fringe culture” [224]). He also provides one “prototype” of a successful creative writing instructor: Theodore Roethke, a “demanding, sometimes tyrannical, sometimes doting, always impassioned teacher” (225). This essay, published nearly 30 years before my cohort took Smith’s seminar, speaks towards an earlier moment in the history of

creative writing academia and the humanities more broadly, appearing at a time when there were fewer than fifty M.F.A. programs in the country (compared to the hundreds that exist today). Nonetheless, the beliefs that Smith expresses—in particular, his insistence on the creative writing instructor’s role as “a model for students” (225)—resonate with my own experiences in his classroom. On the syllabus for a 2014 graduate seminar titled “Form, Craft, and Influence in Poetry: Narrative Poetry,” Smith begins by proclaiming that “poems are fundamentally storytelling speech acts”—a statement that echoes his essay’s insistence upon the representational nature of art, as well as the claim of Warren and Brooks that “poetry is a form of speech” (*Understanding Poetry* 1)—and goes on to list twelve assigned collections by the following poets: Elizabeth Bishop; James Dickey; Stephen Dunn; Philip Larkin; Larry Levis; Seamus Heaney; Ted Hughes; Michael Ondaatje; Ellen Bryant Voigt; Robert Penn Warren; and Walt Whitman. As a framing of “narrative poetry,” this booklist effectively displays Smith’s own aesthetic and pedagogical inclinations: it is mostly male and entirely white (Ondaatje was eventually cut from the syllabus); it skews towards postwar poets who directly aligned themselves with dominant (often academic) institutions, and who tended not to align themselves with activism or Cold War–era political commitments (in the way that, say, many of the New American Poets often did); and it displays a strong bias towards writing that relies upon first-person narrative exposition (with Dickey, Dunn, Levis, and Warren serving as the most obvious examples).

The poetry workshop I took with Smith in the fall of 2013 was comprised of six students: myself; the three other poets in my first-year cohort; and two poets who were farther along in the program. For the most part, Smith’s approach to running a workshop adhered to the traditional creative writing workshop structure developed at Iowa: during each class, every student would

workshop a single poem, beginning by reading it aloud; that student would sit silently while the rest of the class provided feedback; and it would conclude with Smith providing his own opinion on the submitted work. Smith's critiques trended towards declarative, binary statements about aesthetic quality—a work was either a success or a failure, a timeless work or a gimmick—and being “a poet,” in Smith's eyes, entailed wielding a level of formal mastery that, as far as he was concerned, none of us had yet to obtain. (On multiple occasions, Smith remarked to me that while I had “written a poem,” I was “not yet a poet.”)

My first-year colleagues and I, as poets who were still figuring out our own aesthetic proclivities, mostly attempted to keep our heads down and make it through the seminar, nodding silently at the feedback he provided. The upper-level students, however, who were interested in historic avant-gardes and reading international surrealist poetry in translation, would frequently challenge Smith's aesthetic assumptions. This resulted in an extremely taxing classroom environment filled with arguments and outbursts, and many students began drinking before class to cope with the stress of Smith's seminar. During this time, an upper-level student named Andrew (one of the residents of the home where Trobar Ric occurred) was working on a series of conceptual poems printed on folded sheets of paper. Even though he submitted a poem to each workshop, Smith never allowed time for Andrew's work be discussed. After about five consecutive seminars of ignoring his submitted poems, one of the other students asked Smith if the class could discuss Andrew's work. Smith obliged, and during his critique, he told Andrew that what he was creating was “not art.” The conversation devolved into an argument about the validity of conceptual practices, and Smith stated that for a work to qualify as art, it had to be repeatable; Andrew said he disagreed, and subsequently stood up and stormed out of the classroom.

While angst and outbursts are not unusual occurrences in creative writing workshops, I read Andrew's choice to leave the classroom as representative of the larger political and aesthetic tensions that motivated Trobar Ric and, more pointedly, as a performative refusal of an institutionally mandated space for creative production and sociality. The moment of Andrew's departure resonates with Trobar Ric's goal of creating an alternative space to the dominant institutional sphere. But like Trobar Ric, his protest did not ultimately result in an institutional refusal—after all, Andrew, after some conversations with the program director, remained in the program and continued to take Smith's workshop—and further, it ultimately reinscribed Smith's precise vision of what the creative writing workshop should be: a laboratory for debating the validity of aesthetic representation in a “living dramatic context” (217). While the conservatism of both the University of Mississippi and its M.F.A. program was stifling, it was also enabling, staging the kind of immanent “self-criticism” that Peter Bürger associated with the avant-garde, wherein supposedly radical art was produced through the conditions of bourgeois culture itself (22). While we saw Trobar Ric as a subcultural response to the dominant institutional culture—to use Miranda Joseph's language, as a kind of “romantic” space external to its logics—the University and the M.F.A. program directly influenced the affect and organization of our series.

In a purely logistical sense, Trobar Ric would not have existed without the English and Creative Writing Department at the University of Mississippi—the M.F.A. program, much like the Iowa Writers' Workshop, served as a “social technology,” creating population of individuals interested in small press poetry. The vast majority of our audience members (which, depending on the evening, could number anywhere from 15 to 60 people) were associated with the English Department in some capacity. Even the advertising for our readings—which attempted to visually represent the supposedly anti-institutional stance of the series—was enmeshed with the

University of Mississippi and academic institutionalism more broadly.

Consider, for example, the flyers depicted in Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3. I threw them together hastily in my shared grad instructor office between classes, relying upon a retro, D.I.Y. punk aesthetic in its construction. I collaged by hand, drawing from the two sources that were on my desk at the time—the alumni magazine from Hamilton College, my undergraduate alma mater, and a brochure for the University of Mississippi’s woefully underfunded counseling center—and covertly duplicated the flyers on the English Department’s photocopier. Both sources reflect my own history of institutional affiliation: the alumni magazine—a visual document of bourgeois elitism if there ever was one—was the source of the collaged face images whose eyes I removed (mimicking the style of a Dead Kennedys poster I had on my bedroom wall as a teenager); the counseling center brochure was the source of the speech bubble reading “be okay with not being okay,” a statement I likely found amusing during a time period in which I was struggling with my own mental health. Much like the readings we organized, these flyers attempted to vocally oppose our institution from within the context of that institution: they were primarily distributed in academic buildings or other on-campus spaces, and their jarring visuals were specifically intended to clash dramatically with the Greek Life flyers on campus bulletin boards. Especially since the vast majority of Trobar Ric attendees would already be aware of upcoming readings, the flyers were more performative than informative, and I made little effort to distribute them in non-campus spaces.

A great deal of Trobar Ric’s aesthetic intervention derived from the conservative, regressive background it was cast against. The downside of this approach was that our series, by virtue of the fact that it relied upon University infrastructures, often reinscribed the real inequalities of the institution. Trobar Ric, for example, was once criticized by a student in the

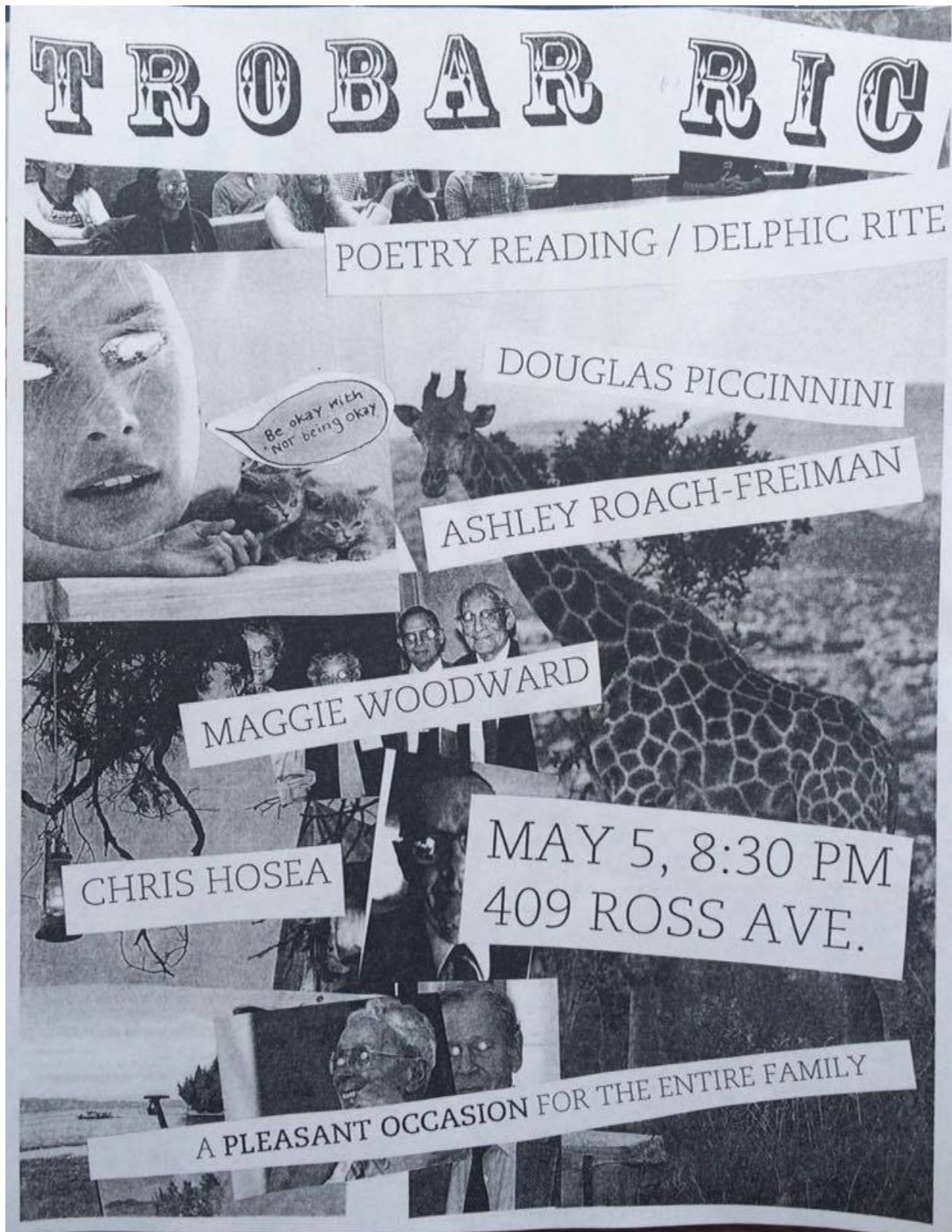


Figure 4.2
A flyer for a Trobar Ric reading in May 2016.

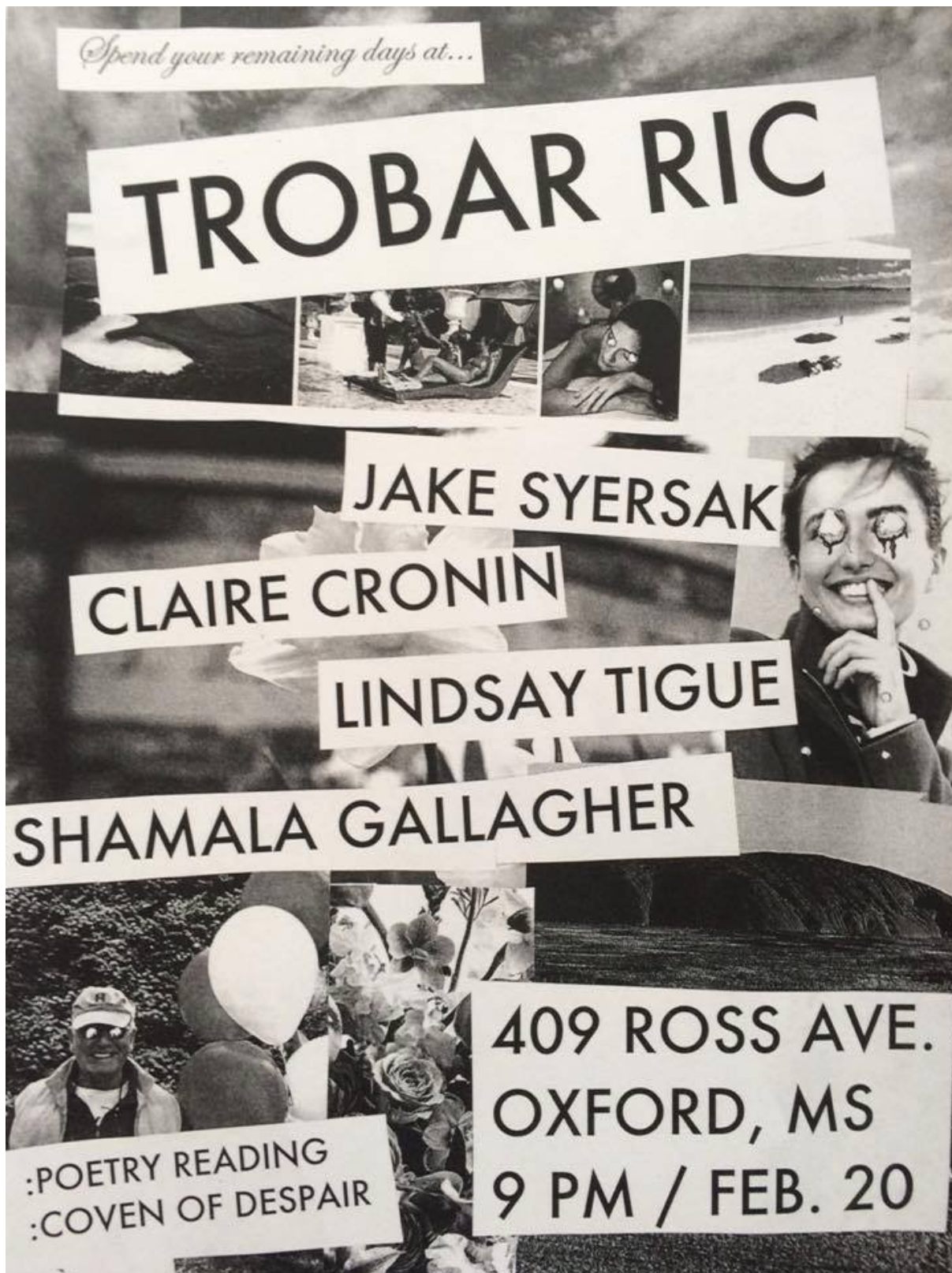


Figure 4.3
A flyer for a Trobar Ric reading in February 2016.

M.F.A. program for being overly white and male in its curation. There was a convenient alibi for this problem: Oxford and the University of Mississippi *itself* were overwhelmingly white spaces, produced through legacies of rampant white supremacy. Or, alternatively, one could blame the culture of small press poetry touring, a practice that, particularly since independent series are rarely able to pay readers, relies upon class, racial, gender, and ability –based privilege. Trobar Ric was least radical—that is to say, least likely to challenge existing inequalities within poetry institutions—when it fell back on defining itself against the culture of its conservative environment. While Trobar Ric indeed operated against myriad structural limitations—we had limited time and capital, and (let’s face it), not everyone wanted to come read in Mississippi for free—it was most successful when it saw these limitations as an opportunity for innovation.

Regardless of whether or not Trobar Ric “succeeded,” as a case study, it discloses the entities that enable literary formation far more lucidly than, say, a metropolitan-based series, or a series at a university with a large budget. All poetic community—urban or rural, official or “grassroots”—is interpellated through institutions, infrastructures, and regional geographies, but rather than mystifying these entities, a series like Trobar Ric (precisely *because* of its monetary limitations and regional isolation) disclosed them. There is no truly “autonomous” reading series, and through a rigidly Bourdieuan lens, this institutional relation can seem bleak; within this purview, the reading series might be read as what Bourdieu refers to as an “anti-economic economy” (54)—an avant-garde formation that, despite its apparent distance from normative capitalist structures, is actually highly competitive, shaped by invisible systems of symbolic capital. Following this chain to its logical end, the reading series—and avant-garde small press culture more broadly—reifies bourgeois logic. As Miranda Joseph shows, a Bourdieuan approach is useful insofar as it highlights the relationship between an economic base and ros-

eyed conceptions of community. While it does leave open the possibility for highly contingent forms of autonomy, it also assumes an individualist ethos towards art-making, and ignores forms of poetic sociality, collaboration, and kinship that cannot be directly indexed to systems of capital. At its best, I argue, the “made space” of the reading series can form a blueprint for future methodologies through which poets—working within the infrastructures of capital—can find community and kinship.

Of relevance, here, is José Esteban Muñoz’s conception of the “utopian performative.” Building off Joseph’s materialist analysis of both community and performance—and her argument, moreover, that “resistance is enabled by (inevitable) participation in the system rather than in escape from it” (67)—Muñoz highlights the dynamic role that audience members play in performance:

In Joseph’s lucid critique we see that performance is a kernel of potentiality that is transmitted to audiences and witnesses and that the real force of performance is its ability to generate a modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging. (99)

A materialist reading of performance emphasizes both its material enabling entities and the consumptive role of the audience. Importantly, however—and here, he turns towards idealism, diverging from a rigidly Bourdieuan approach—Muñoz marks a distinction between possibility and potentiality. While *possibility* is presentist, predicated upon what exists “within a logical real, the possible,” *potentiality* implicitly critiques the present, gesturing towards a utopian futurity that has not yet arrived, and that extends beyond the duration of the performance itself

(99). For Muñoz, queer performance is a “staging” of utopia, in both the literal sense, and in the temporal sense of an in-flux “stage”—a reaching towards “blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility” (97). He goes on to analyze a series of photographs by Kevin McCarty that depict empty, illuminated stages at gay bars and punk venues. These images, he argues, gesture towards a vision of performativity that resists temporal closure:

the anticipatory illumination, that moment of possibility right before an amazing band or performance manifests itself on stage and transforms the world for the performance’s duration and, for many of those in attendance, beyond. The best performances do not disappear but instead linger in our memory, haunt our present, and illuminate our future. (104)

Like the punk venues that, Muñoz argues, evoke a sense of queer utopian potentiality, the independent reading series manifests a critique of the present—of dominant, institutional models of what “legitimate” poetry performance looks like (as well as, perhaps, poetry’s parasitic dependence upon them). In the image shown in Figure 4.4, which was taken in the afternoon before a Trobar Ric reading, I’m raking debris out of the backyard carport that functioned as our venue—transforming, that is, a decrepit space filled with literal garbage into something approximating a stage. In the temporal sense that Muñoz illuminates, this stage was also ephemeral: the performance ends. You wake up the next day and buy groceries; you prepare to teach *Beowulf* to undergraduates; you pay your bills, or fail to pay your bills; you graduate from the program; you move away. But Trobar Ric leaves within me a ghostly trace, and continues to serve as my own model for making poetic space in an arena where it might not otherwise exist.

When Kina and I moved to Ithaca, we started a chapbook press called Garden-Door Press—a nod, in part, to the community of Trobar Ric and the Garden House. We attempted to move that ethos transregionally, forging new communities and new made places.



Figure 4.4
Preparing the venue for a Trobar Ric reading.

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